COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFL REGIONAL TEACHERS

Thesis presented by

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Submitted to the School of Languages
Universidad de Antioquia Medellin in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degree of

MAGISTER EN ENSEÑANAZA Y APRENDIZAJE DE LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

January 2016

Master’s in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFL REGIONAL TEACHERS

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To my beloved daughter.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the support of many people. I really appreciate the help of my advisor, Jorge Hugo Muñoz for his patient and permanent guidance and collaboration through all the stages of this process. Besides, I wish to thank Dr Doris Correa, the academic coordinator of the Master’s Program for her significant comments and support when I required it. Special thanks to the group of teachers who were participants in this study, without their contributions this study it would not be possible
ABSTRACT

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR EFL REGIONAL TEACHERS

JULY 2016

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UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA MEDELLIN COLOMBIA

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EFL university teachers located in rural contexts do not have the same professional development opportunities than their peers in urban settings. Their particular characteristics require professional development strategies adapted to their specific conditions. This case study explored the effects of a Community of Practice implemented through a Social Networking Site on a group of twenty-five EFL university teachers in a regional context in Colombia. Data collected for this study included in-depth interviews, a focus group encounter, samples of the members’ interactions in the Social Networking Site, and the journal of the researcher. Results from this study suggest that Communities of Practice mediated technologically as a strategy for professional development in regional contexts fosters teachers’ empowerment of their role, encourage reflection on their practice, and promote collaborative work to solve problematic situations and the integration of ICT tools to the classroom practices. However, due to the different levels of participation in the Community of Practice not all members obtained the same benefits.
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Introduction

In times where Colombia has conceded a special interest to the term inclusion in education, some public and private universities have opened campuses in small towns far from big cities. This effort has undoubtedly increased the possibilities of access to higher education for these communities, it changed the paradigm in which professionals could only be formed in universities located in the main cities has been reshaped with the presence of higher education institutions in the regional context. Now it is possible for those communities to have professionals educated in their regions with the benefit of knowing better their own context and their needs. In this venture, most universities provide foreign language instruction in order to prepare the new generations to be able to access cutting edge information available for all academic fields, and to communicate with peers from around the world. It is well known that institutions also expect with this attempt to internationalize education and better prepare competent professionals for the current global world.

University programs offered in the regional campuses are generally oriented by teachers who travel from the capital city to these towns usually during the weekends and then return when they finish their classes. One of their goals is to replicate the urban university model with the same quality standards in the regional context. However, the case of the EFL teachers of this public university language program in which this research was carried out was different; most of them lived in the regions where the university has its regional campuses. They worked for public schools and as a secondary job on an hourly basis in this public university. Since they had a signed contract with that university they
legally belonged to the university teachers’ staff but due to long distances, they did not have the opportunity to attend meetings with other language teachers. In the campuses where those teachers worked there were not the same opportunities that the EFL teachers might have in the main campuses for their professional growth. For instance, in the public university in which this study was carried out, most academic events related to languages are programmed in the main campus.

Considering that in Colombia most academic events in EFL are programmed in main or intermediate cities, opportunities for professional development in language learning of that type are very scarce in regional contexts. Besides, universities with academic programs in regional areas usually have their more important libraries and resources in their main campuses located in main cities far away from the EFL teacher located in small towns. As an example of that situation, some of the regional campuses in which this research was carried out do not have a language collection in their libraries. In those contexts, the Internet access is not always granted specially in public universities.

On the other hand, the university academic administrators in the main campus normally have limited information of the academic processes related to English classes in the regional context classrooms. They usually design the syllabus and send it to the teachers in the regions but they cannot easily be aware if these programs work properly for those contexts.

In addition to this, the findings of an unpublished pilot study made in the same context in 2013 by the regional academic coordination of the language learning program (Satisfacción de los estudiantes con los cursos de competencia lectora en las regiones),
showed that the level of students’ satisfaction with the reading comprehension courses in English was very low. A group of students from the eight regional campuses of this public university were interviewed to know their perceptions of the reading comprehension courses. Results pointed out how most students were unsatisfied with the lack of innovation in the classroom. Students expressed in that pilot study that commonly their teachers in the university were the same they had in their schools. As the villages where these public university regional branches are located have a reduced number of schools, it is very common for the students to find their high school English teachers again in the university, therefore some students also expressed to have the feeling of being repeating the same English lessons they had seen in the school.

All the circumstances mentioned above, suggest that there is an urgent need of finding suitable strategies of professional development opportunities for EFL teachers in regional contexts adapted to their specific circumstances. It is important to consider that, factors like infrastructure, facilities, distances, access to technology, teachers and students’ academic and social backgrounds in the regional context are different from the ones in the main campuses in the cities. Context differences between cities and small towns also suggest that probably what academically works for EFL teachers in main cities might not work in small villages in the same way. The particular conditions of EFL university teachers in regional contexts might require professional development strategies that do not merely replicate what it is being done in urban settings, since EFL university teachers in those regions require professional development strategies that respond to their specific needs.
Responding to this problem, this study reports the effects of a community of practice (CoP) implemented through a Social Networking Site (SNS) as an alternative to increase the repertoire of options that foster EFL teachers’ professional development in regional contexts.

In the field of teachers’ professional development, some research studies have reported that the implementation of CoPs as a strategy could be very positive. For instance, Clark, (2009) reported a study that suggested that an online CoP can help raise teacher-practitioners’ competence levels, reinforce their professional practice, and satisfy the need of professional development as well as students’ academic achievement. Tseng & Kuo, (2014) made a study in Taiwan with 321 teachers who belonged to an online CoP which results suggested that interpersonal connection and proactive self-regulation contribute to sharing group resources, formulating working strategies, taking collective action, and promoting organizational performance. Tsai (2012) reported a study in which the main aim was to explore the social nature of membership in an online CoP of preservice and in service teachers in a university setting. The results of this study showed that CoPs could represent a professional development opportunity for teachers. It showed that members’ satisfaction was the only direct factor impacting members’ perceptions of effectiveness. This study also proved that technology acceptance influences members’ social ability, sense of community, and learning satisfaction.

A review of the academic literature in EFL in the four major Colombian journals in the field (Ikala, Colombian Journal of Applied Linguistics, PROFILE, and HOW) reveals that in the last five years have not been reported studies that describe experiences of how
EFL university teachers in regional contexts interact among them or studies that show the difficulties that the EFL teachers in regional context in Colombia could experience and particularly none related CoPs. In fact, information about experiences from EFL university teachers conditions related to education in regions different from the main cities is very scarce. However, two studies have enlightened us about the importance and benefits of connecting teachers’ experiences for their professional growth. Gonzalez & Sierra (2005) reported the findings of a qualitative study in which eighteen Colombian teacher educators describe their professional alternatives to achieve higher standards in their jobs. Among their findings, data showed that networking represent one of the best means to accomplish their professional growth. Farias & Obilinovic (2009), reported a collaborative experience between two groups of EFL novice teachers from Chile and Colombia. The authors explored the potential of a virtual platform and other means of ICT connectivity to create CoPs and communities of interest by engaging in critical pedagogy activities that allowed the trainees to look at their education from a comparative perspective. Their article postulated that immediate feedback from peers and opportunities for sharing with real global audiences would promote higher level thinking, communication skills, and deeper understandings of texts.

These research works have undoubtedly contributed to extending the range of options that EFL teachers can use to explore alternatives that involve connecting themselves to reach a continuous professional growth. However, none of those studies have considered the particular conditions of EFL university teachers in regional contexts to propose a strategy that could help them to foster their professional development. The fact that no studies related to CoPs built around EFL teachers in a regional context in
Colombian universities have been reported so far, implies that the issue could be explored in order to find out the possibilities that the creation of CoPs as a strategy for teachers’ professional growth could offer. Exploring those possibilities could benefit the professional development of the EFL teachers who work in universities located in regional contexts as it could be a suitable, pertinent and valuable option adapted to their specific conditions for its implementation.

The research presented here describes a work experience with a group of EFL university teachers in eight regions of Antioquia interacting as a CoP. Its main goal was to analyze the effects of a CoP implemented through a SNS on a group of EFL university teachers in regional contexts in Colombia. Findings in this research could give EFL university teachers and educational administrators useful clues for the creation of a framework in which the implementation of CoPs could be an alternative that foster professional development for EFL teachers in small villages in Colombia. I hope that the findings of this study may contribute to increase the repertoire of options to support EFL teachers’ professional growth in regional contexts.

In the following sections, the setting in which this study was carried out, the socio cultural environment in which the teachers lived, and the specific constraints these group of teachers usually had will be described. Additionally, the general characteristics of the courses the CoP members teach, the virtual platform used in the construction of the community of practice and how the participants interacted with it will be also described. Then, the conceptualization of the terms CoP and virtual CoP which provide the theoretical framework for this study will be presented. Next, a description of the data collection procedures and how they were analyzed will be provided. Following this section, the most
significant findings and their interpretation will be presented. Finally, this report will present a discussion of the findings and its conclusions in terms of the importance of the research and its contribution to the field and its possible limitations, and implications for further research and teaching.

**Setting**

This research was conducted in the eight regional campuses of a public university in the department of Antioquia in Colombia. Eight EFL adjunct teachers who were in charge of the language learning program on reading comprehension for undergraduate students participated in this study. Three of these campuses were located in medium sized cities of about one hundred thousand inhabitants. The five remaining campuses were located in five small municipalities of less than fifty thousand inhabitants. The programs offered by this university in its regional campuses have been chosen to respond to the local communities’ specific necessities. For instance, the oceanography program is offered in Uraba, a medium sized region located next to the sea. Tourism and Ecology professional programs are offered in regions in which the economy depends on those factors.

These undergraduate programs have organized their classes mainly during the weekends but some classes are given during the week. Although this university holds a history of more than hundred years, its regional campuses have only been opened since the mid-nineties. These regions have been affected in the past and even in present times by violence problems caused by illegal armed groups. The efforts made by this university to open regional campuses have undoubtedly increased the opportunities of getting access to
higher education for its inhabitants. Although this is not usually an issue for the national media, the positive impact of having public university campuses has been widely spread by the local media in those regions.

**Facilities in the Regional Context**

Classrooms in these branches are equipped in most cases with a board and a TV set and an enough number of chairs for the students. There are small libraries in all the campuses but the language learning materials available are insufficient. Very few materials for language learning can be found in those places. All university branches have at least one computer ‘room in which Internet connection is available. However, due to the high demand not all students have granted access to the equipment.

**The University Internal Language Policy**

As part of the language learning policy of this public university, most undergraduate students, except the ones studying translation and the language teaching education program, must certify reading skills in a foreign language as a requirement for graduation. Students should certify their reading competence by taking one of the following three options: approving two eighty hours reading comprehension courses offered by the university, passing one of the internal reading comprehension exams in a foreign language, a third option is taking an international exam such as the MET, the EILTS or TOEFL and obtaining a result above B1 in the reading comprehension session.

Most students take the reading comprehension courses to certify their reading competence in foreign languages as they may not have the proficiency to pass the exams. The main aim of these reading comprehension courses is to provide students with the
linguistic tools needed to read academic and general texts in English. The syllabus is institutionally organized around reading skills, grammar, and vocabulary and discourse knowledge. The evaluation of the course is divided into three main categories, a 50% follow up activities, 25% mid-term exam and 25% final exam. Among the follow up activities prepared by the teachers of the program is common to find reading worksheets in which students answer comprehension questions with the information they find in the texts. Grammar and vocabulary drills are usually part of the course’s development. Teachers are advised to follow these guidelines but it is not mandatory for them to do it in exactly the way is programmed.

The Teachers

In the reading comprehension program in the regional campuses there are about 25-30 EFL teachers each semester. The number of teachers varies according to the number of courses offered to the students. The three campuses located in medium-size cities have a larger number of students and EFL teachers. Five campuses, located in small municipalities have only one EFL teacher for all the reading comprehension courses offered. In this research, I worked with a group of eight of those teachers from all the university campuses who belonged to this CoP and who agreed to participate in the process. Their ages ranged from thirty to sixty approximately. Five of them hold BEd in foreign languages and three have not graduated in language learning but they have experience in the field. All of them have two jobs; they work for either a public or private school and as a second job, they work by some hours in the EFL reading comprehension courses in the public university in which this research was carried out. Teachers’ contracts do not include any payment for
class preparation or attending to academic meetings. They just receive the corresponding amount of money for the hours they are in the classrooms.

Although the number of teachers in the CoP is twenty-five, not all of them participated in the data collection for this research. The eight EFL teachers who agreed to do it voluntarily have been working for the university for more than three years.

The Dynamic of the CoP

This CoP was created in 2012 by the academic coordinator of the reading comprehension in English program who was also the researcher of this study. It had been operating for nearly three years at the moment this study started. Since there were not enough opportunities for those teachers to interact with other EFL teachers and the academic coordination in the main campus, the idea of creating it emerged from the need of finding a suitable strategy that could facilitate and improve the communication. Initially, the purpose was only to connect them. Emails, telephone calls and one face to face encounter with the regional academic coordinator every six months were the only communications channels before this CoP started. Those channels seemed not to offer the appropriate space to discuss academic issues deeply, they were only used to deal with general situations related to the courses like the deadlines of the academic term or any particular situation with the undergraduate students.

Every six months, teachers had a two hours face to face encounter with the academic coordination to discuss issues related to their classes and to discuss an academic topic related to reading comprehension. Teachers received academic articles in those meetings taken form academic journals in the field related to reading comprehension issues
with the purpose of discussing it in the next encounter. Since there was not enough time in those encounters to discuss the academic articles in depth and this group of EFL teachers were located in eight different campuses, the academic coordination proposed to continue working in a virtual space using a SNS. Teachers received a brief instruction in the face to face encounters with the academic coordinator on how to use the platform. The initial goal was only to continue the discussion of the academic articles in the platform. However, interactions to share materials started to take place in a spontaneous way. This group of teachers found that the potential of the platform for their professional development could be expanded. They started to share with their peers the workshops they used for their classes, their doubts related to the program and their needs as EFL teachers. Although the idea of connecting them was proposed by the academic coordinator and his role as leader of the group was to propose the articles, his participation in this platform became secondary. Teachers did not depend only on the coordinator to solve their doubts or needs. Teachers realized that the space in the platform could offer them the opportunity to find support from their peers. Furthermore, teachers started to ask questions such as what material to use to teach a class or what to do in a specific situation in the classroom. Feedback came for their peers to solve their doubts or problems.

Interactions in the platform could be written in Spanish if any of its members considered necessary. However, the use of English to interact was promoted as an opportunity for those teachers to practice. SNS provide a virtual space commonly known as “the wall” in which participants can express themselves. Teachers were invited to use that virtual space to express their doubts, concerns or suggestions to the group. Teacher also used this resource to hold academic discussions based on the academic articles that
teachers previously received in the face to face encounters with the regional academic coordinator. After reading the articles, participants posted their insights in the platform. Since all members had different schedules, there were not synchronic prearranged encounters. However, all contributions could be seen for all members at any time. When one of the members posted something in the platform, any other colleague could reply. Many of those interactions included Questions about what teaching material to use in their classes or how to deal with particular situations in their classrooms which fostered the interchange of resources among its members. As a result, teachers built their own bank of teaching material with the resources they shared.

Communication improved, it became more dynamic; there were more opportunities to interact. Throughout the permanent interaction, these teachers became a group of professionals united by a common goal: the sharing of knowledge and practices. According to Wenger (2002), a group of people with those characteristics could be framed as a CoP.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study reported here is framed in a sociocultural view of language. From this perspective, the development of higher mental practices regards social interaction as the core of communication and learning process. It conceives learning as social in nature where meaning is derived through language use within the social context (Vygotsky, 1978). The sociocultural view of language defines learning as a socially constructed process that does not occur in an isolated way. It is a process that is present within a social environment and it provides opportunities to share knowledge, experiences and expertise with others in that
environment (Borko, Elliot, & Uchiyama, 2002; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Guskey, 1986; Lave & Wenger; 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). In alignment with this theoretical perspective Brown et al. (2011), Greeno (1998), Lave and Wenger (1991) have also stated that learning in a CoP is a social construction, product of the activity, context, and culture in which it occurs; an active, constructive, collaborative and context-bound activity.

In the same vein, Al-Sharani (2014) states that CoPs are expected to promote knowledge management in a way that involves the engagement of people to do actions. Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder (2002), and Zhao & Bishop (2011) citing Lave and Wenger (1991) state that members of a CoP develop the skills required to participate in community activities and they also gain knowledge about the community’s goals, resources, and principles. In this sense, the conception of learning in a CoP is directly related to the concept of learning derived from the sociocultural approach of language; a socially constructed process that occurs in specific contexts that provides opportunities to be shared.

Since the conception of learning in a CoP match with the conception of learning in the sociocultural view of language and the pursuing of learning is precisely CoPs’ main goal, it is relevant to mention that learning is regarded in this study as a socio cultural activity where the context is very relevant to understand how the CoP could affect those teachers’ pedagogical practices.

**Professional Development in Education**

Over the last decades the teaching profession has witnessed the emergence of many approaches to teacher professional development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003). In this sense, Richards and Farrell (2005) stated how education of second and foreign language teachers
is traditionally framed in two particular approaches that have permeated professional
development and in-service education programs: the *training* approach and the
*development* approach. On the one hand, Richards and Farrell (2005) state that the *training*
approach is prescriptive, it is based on the assumption that teachers have deficiencies about
the subject matter or related to skills and competences. From this approach, teaching is
viewed as a matter of knowing rules and principles that stem from pre-existing knowledge.
Thus, teacher training encompasses the implementation of diverse and new strategies to
improve instruction in the classroom, teachers are viewed as technicians and the teacher
educators are the experts who provide the training as well as the ones who decide for the
content to include in the program. For Imbernón (2011), unfortunately, many in-service
education programs are based on this perspective nowadays. This author questions the fact
that the teachers’ knowledge and experience are underestimated; the sociopolitical
dimensions of education are not taken into account nor the context where the teaching takes
place. Imbernón (2014) questions that training programs are to solve “generic problems”
that do not really exist in the complexity of the teaching practice.

On the other hand, Richards & Farrell (2005) state that in the *development*
approach, teaching is an individual and personal response to the different classroom
situations. Therefore, programs are bottom-up and take into account what teachers know
and do in order to provide them with tools to explore their own perceptions, attitudes and
teaching practices. From this perspective, teacher education is an on-going process that
aims to deepen teachers’ awareness, and involves the examination of the different
dimensions of the teachers practice. According to Richards and Farrell (2005), under this
perspective teachers have an active role since they are the ones who decide for the aspects
to know more about as well as for the actions to take related to observation, analysis and/or intervention. In this approach, the teacher educator is more a collaborator, a consultant or a facilitator in the process; so the relationship with teachers is more an interactive one. From this approach, teachers are considered investigators and co-participants of their own professional development. Richards and Farrell (2005) mention diverse strategies that involve teachers’ development. Some of these strategies are reflective analysis of teaching practices, examining beliefs, values and principles; conversation with peers, and collaboration with peers in classroom projects among others.

Different authors concerned with teacher education have stated their insights about the existing approaches. For instance, Diaz-Maggioli (2003) argues critically that the traditional offerings such as seminars, workshops, or training sessions are based on the notion that teachers need to be “fixed” in general. Additionally, the author states that the lack of participation of teachers in the decision making process regarding their education detracts from their ability to develop ownership of these learning opportunities. According to Zeichner (2009), research reports evidence that teachers do not value the traditional forms of professional development because they are not based on their needs and experiences since they are not connected to their workplaces. Similarly, Hargreaves (2010) claims that teachers only really learn when they connect with other teachers and can see beyond the immediate world that surrounds them. (Cochram-Smith, 2004) argues that when programs focus more on constructing knowledge and understanding than in promoting the best practices and teaching techniques, teachers are involved in an intellectual process of asking questions, considering and reconsidering experiences, connecting their experience to larger conceptual frames as well as rethinking theories in
view of their experiences. Sparks (2002) calls for a teachers’ professional development embedded in their daily lives and experiences, as well as in their specific needs addressing issues related to language, culture and pedagogy.

In this study, the CoP’s concept is regarded as a strategy for professional development in an EFL regional context, it is important to locate CoPs in one of the two visions of professional development to understand what type of benefits could be expected from using CoPs as a strategy in the mentioned context. For its characteristics and with evidence collected in this study presented further on, the CoP concept, as a strategy of professional development derives from the development perspective.

**Communities of Practice**

The term community of practice refers to a group of people united by a common goal, usually the sharing of professional knowledge or practices (Wenger, 2002). “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better” (Wenger, 2002). Lave & Wenger (1991), also state that a CoP includes individuals who are united in action and in the meaning that action has for them. This ideal permits a community to persist over time, despite changes in the composition of the community’s membership (Cox, 2005). According to Wenger & Snyder (2000), the term CoP refers to a set of relations among persons, activity and the world in which people are bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise or goal. Two main aspects define a CoP, first, it involves the cultivation of relationships between experts possessing practical knowledge of interest to the group as a whole; second, the socialization of newcomers to the group. The social relationship between these two groups; practitioners and novices, facilitates
the transfer of knowledge and ensures continuity within the community (Jin, Wen, & Gough, 2010). In other words, CoPs are groups of people who have the same set of problems, concerns or even passion for a specific topic and work together in the achievement of a common goal.

Nickols (2003) states that CoPs can be self-organized or sponsored. The first type of CoP is built around a group of individuals interested in sharing knowledge from each other. This transmission of knowledge takes place when the members of the group share their experiences. Sponsored CoPs are controlled and supported by a preexisted organization and the domain of interest is previously defined. Although this research was developed in a public university, the CoP analyzed in this study was self-organized by a group of EFL teachers in its regional campuses. Since there were not possibilities to attend face to face meetings due to long distances among its members, this CoP used a Social Networking Site to interact (SNS here after). SNS are web based applications used to stablish and maintain social and professional connections. Edmodo, the platform used for this CoP to maintain communication is a SNS with educational purposes broadly used to connect teachers and students around the world.

This study is mainly guided by Wenger’s conceptualization of the term CoP. The term was originally used as a practical way to frame the task of managing knowledge in the business industry; CoP’s theory provided a concrete organizational infrastructure for realizing the dream of a learning organization. According to Wenger (2002), “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 8). He also states that CoPs are formed by people who work together in a shared domain to produce collective learning.
According with his definition of a CoP, any social group like a tribe that is learning to survive or a group of engineers working on similar problems has the potential to become a CoP.

McDermott (2000) states that a CoP’s focus could be on a professional discipline, skill or a topic, an industry segment or a segment of a production process. CoPs are loosely connected, informal and self-managed; membership in a CoP depends on participation, not institutional affiliation or reporting relationships (Lin, & Lee, 2006).

To Wenger (2002), learning can be the reason to form a CoP but the learning can also result as an incidental outcome of member's interactions. This author clearly states that not everything called a community is a community of practice. “A neighborhood for instance, is often called a community, but is usually not a community of practice” (p. 2). Three characteristics are crucial in Wenger’s conception of a CoP: The domain, the community and the practice.

First, the shared domain of interest defines the CoP’s identity. “A CoP is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest” (Wenger 2002, p. 2). In this sense, to be part of a CoP requires a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. Wenger (2002) states that the domain is not necessarily something recognized as expertise outside the community. As an example of this situation, the author mentions in his text, the youth gangs that may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain. Not many people outside the youth gangs may recognize their expertise in dealing with what they have to do to survive in the streets but inside of their
group, they give value and recognition of their collective competence and learn from each other.

Second, the *community*: the term community refers to the pursuing of the same interests in the shared domain. Wenger (2002), states what it does a CoP is not merely the conception of group. To clarify this difference, he empathizes that what defines a CoP is the continuous interactions of the members of the community in the pursuit of collective learning. A certain group who share the same title among its members is not a CoP unless they interact and learn together. High school students or employees in a company for instance, may have much in common but yet unless they interact and learn from each other, they do form a CoP.

Third, the *practice*: Members of a CoP are practitioners. “They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice” (p.2). This takes time and sustained interaction. CoPs are different from a community of interest. Wenger (2002) explains this with a series of real examples to illustrate how a CoP implies a practice. For instance, a conversation with a stranger in any everyday situation may be give a person interesting insights about a topic but is not in itself a CoP. It implies as well, a shared practice. It is the combination of these three elements that constitutes a community of practice. And it is by developing these three elements in parallel that one cultivates such a community.

Besides Wenger, other scholars have defined the term. Barab, Makinster & Scheckler, (2004) define an affective CoP as “a persistent sustained social network of individuals, who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history, and experiences focused on common practice and/or mutual enterprise” (p. 55).
Farmer (2004), citing McDermott (2001), agrees with them when he states that a CoP centers its interest on the practices of the workplace. Its main goal is to deal with aspects of practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, it focusses its attention in the things that work and don’t.

This CoP emerged from experimenting a SNS as a communication tool to connect teachers from different locations. The characteristics of a CoP described in the published academic literature helped to understand that the use of an effective way of communication helped this group of teachers to become not only a united group of teachers but a CoP that positively affected their pedagogical practices.

Virtual Communities of Practice

Historically, the most common form of communication used by CoPs has been the face to face encounters, in person interactions, individuals conversing, gathering together to learn from themselves. Nowadays, with the rapid expansion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) around the world, CoPs can use the available different technologies to communicate. In alignment with these advancements, the Web 2.0 concept, considered the second stage of development of the Internet, characterized specially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media has extended the repertoire of options that CoPs can use to communicate. Lewis, Koston, Quartley & Adsit (2010) state that Web 2.0 offers increased collaboration speeds in the virtual, or online, realm, thus enhancing the functionality of CoPs. In their study, those authors also found that the Web 2.0 allows users to transmit knowledge, research, data, and practical experience more easily. Those benefits have facilitated the interactions experts to experts in spite of geographical distances. In consequence, those
tools have also benefited CoPs providing them a rapid and easy dissemination of knowledge.

Although Virtual CoPs as a strategy for professional development in the EFL field is a relatively new concept, some positive pedagogical experiences have been recently reported in the academic journals. For instance, Al-Shahrani (2014) argues to have developed a conceptual model of successful educational online CoP for Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In his study, the author proposed a prototype to develop online CoP in the national educational system of his country to improve educational quality standards. Among its findings, the study suggested that for the implementation of online CoP in that particular setting, seven factors should be considered; network density, culture perceptions, distributed production, knowledge complexity and richness, government enforcement, IT specialist role, and senior members’ role. Using a mixed method study, Vavasseur & MacGregor (2015) examined the way teachers and principals co-participated in discipline-focus online CoP designed to foster instruction improvement in two middle schools. The study revealed an emergent language about learning between principals and teachers and how the scaffolding of knowledge development was supported. It also showed how the participation of principals allowed teachers to gain insights about principals’ priorities, values and beliefs about learning and was found to influence the quality of teacher-developed instructional units and teaching efficacy. Cho (2016), examined an online CoP for bilingual pre-service teachers. The fine-grained details of participants' situated categorization practices in an online CoP for bilingual pre-service teachers were presented in this study. Findings showed how bilingual pre-service teachers utilized community-building features of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and shared repertoire proposed
by Wenger's (1998) CoP framework. The study argues for creating an online CoP for culturally and linguistically diverse pre-service teachers that allows the use of multiple varieties of language, including their heritage language.

The group of EFL university teachers analyzed in this study had all the characteristics previously described therefore, they constitute a CoP. Members of this CoP had periodical in person interactions along with virtual encounters using a SNS with educational purposes. The use of a SNS in the regional context in which this CoP was constructed was a necessary tool of communication, it allowed its members to interact periodically among themselves about their shared interests.

The Platform

This CoP was interacted through a SNS with educational purposes called Edmodo, available at [www.edmodo.com](http://www.edmodo.com). This platform was created in the United States in 2008 by Jeff O’ Hara and Nick Borg (Edmodo, 2015). Although it looks very similar to Facebook, currently the most popular SNS, its purpose is only educational.

Since nowadays most people are familiarized with SNS, their use has become a resource in the learning field. In general, SNS are user-friendly for most people interested in connecting themselves, which is perhaps one of the reason they are widely used around the world. Another remarkable feature of this particular SNS is the possibility for teachers to join academic communities in the same platform. In those groups, teachers have the opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback from peers around the world.

Published academic studies based on pedagogical experiences using SNS are still scarce. Nevertheless, the academic community has already started to explore the possibilities that SNS could bring to education. For instance, Mills & Chandra (2011)
reported a study that suggests that Edmodo strengthened the relationships between students, and led to a stronger classroom community. Recently Al-Said (2015) reported a study on students’ perceptions of Edmodo and the concept Mobile Learning and the real barriers towards them. The findings of that research suggest that students' perceptions of Edmodo and Mobile learning is in general satisfactory. The majority of undergraduate students examined had positive perceptions towards Edmodo and Mobile Learning. Students expressed in that study that learning using Edmodo facilitated the effectiveness in the communication for learning purposes. The study also found that students appreciate Edmodo because it saved them time. Among the barriers of the platform, the study reported that some users had difficulties related to the low mobile battery, and storing large files in their mobile phones, but they do not face any difficulty to enter the information on small screen size of mobile devices.

The use of SNS in education seems to have arisen the interest of many scholars who have started to report pedagogical experiences using SNS with educational purposes in the academic journals in the field. All those studies were made in middle education contexts. Their findings have opened very interesting options to explore the use of technology in education. What those studies reported served as a motivation to start the present study. In the following section, some of them will be presented.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) and Teacher’s Professional Development

The use of SNS for learning purposes is recognized as an important strategy for teacher’s professional development and a useful ICT tool that can favor education (Ellison, 2007). Macià, & García, (2016) citing Ravenscroft, Schmidt, Cook, & Bradley, (2012) stated that online networks and communities offer these teachers the opportunity to share
knowledge and learn with other peers who are located far away from each other. Different strategies of professional development in the EFL field derived from the use of virtual environments have been explored. Thibaut (2015) reports a study based on the use of SNS with learning purposes. In this research, the author explored Edmodo as a new space for literacy and learning in the primary classroom. The results suggest that: the use of SNS opens spaces where teaching and learning repertoires can be expanded, allowing students to engage in digital multimodal literacy practices with an awareness of audience and authorship, as well as to engage in self-directed learning and peer teaching practices.

Subramani, (2015) has recently reported a study whose main aim was to explore the academic usage of SNS by the university students in India. Among his conclusions, the author states that social media creates a platform for one on one interactions for pointed details about the subject and to enhance mastery over a subject. The study also pointed out there is a need to educate the students on the potential use of social media in education. Özmen & Atıcı (2014) report a study on learners' views regarding the use of SNS in Distance Learning. This study was made in a university setting with undergraduate students in a European university. Its findings suggest that the group of students analyzed had positive attitudes towards the use of SNS and distance education applications. Among its findings, this study revealed that the use of SNS in an academic experience positively affected the quality of communication between instructors and students.

Pineda (2014) reports findings from a study that looked into the effects of the implementation of a SNS as a web-based support for a face-to-face course at the university level. The findings of this study show that the implementation of a web-based environment in a face-to-face course can be viewed from five different managerial areas:
logistics management, information/knowledge management, communication management, class work extension management and web-based environment easiness of accessibility. The study suggests that implementation of the web-based environment unveils new roles for teachers and new approaches to design online or blended courses.

Most studies related to the use, benefits and risks of SNS in education have considered the interaction teacher-student. Few studies have analyzed the potential of SNS in the professional development for in-service teachers. However, Kimmons, & Veletsianos (2015) report a study that sought to articulate tensions that arose between professionalization influences and teacher education student participants’ SNS participation. Findings of this study suggest that some expectations of professionalization in SNS cut deeply into participants’ self-concept and that tensions arose surrounding unclear expectations of professionalization and fears related to political and religious expression. The study suggests that teachers need to consider how participation in SNS may impact their identity, understand how moral turpitude is defined in their communities and how their behavior aligns with these standards, and finally, teachers should carefully explore how they can maintain meaningful social connections in online spaces as they pass through new phases of life and seek to become professionals.

The recent dates in which the researches mentioned above were made, reveal the relatively new and growing interest in the academic community to explore the possible uses and implications of SNS with learning purposes. None study exploring the effects of a SNS in the constructions of a CoP among EFL university teachers in regional contexts could be found. Hence, the study to be reported here, could widen the repertoire of possible uses of SNS in education.
Methods

Since this study is concerned with EFL university teachers, their interactions in the world, and their multiple subjective meanings and understandings, this study could be framed in a qualitative paradigm. According to Creswell (2005), a qualitative study is defined as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p.15). Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston (2013) state that qualitative research can enable one tackle sensitive issues to appreciate wider social context of people experiences and to make connections across different areas of participants’ lives.

To analyze the effects of a CoP in a group of EFL teachers who worked in a regional context, a qualitative single case study was developed. According to Yin (2003) “a case study examines a case in depth with its real life context” (p.11). I chose this research design because it was necessary to deeply investigate the details of an academic experience to observe its effects; specifically, in the context of EFL university teachers in regional contexts. The main purpose of the case study design is to provide a detailed description of specific situations in a unit or in a set of units (Richards, 2003). More specifically, Yin (2003) states that one rationale for choosing a single case study is that the issue is representative or is the typical case. The group of EFL university teachers who participated in this study represented a clear example of how foreign language instruction is imparted in regional contexts in Colombia. Since one of the objectives of a single case study is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation or a commonplace (Yin, 2003)
Along with the presentation of the effects of the CoP on this group of EFL university teachers in their pedagogical practices, the study proposed here provides a detailed description of some of the most significant aspects that surrounded the participants during the development of this research. For that reason, the case study design was appropriate for this research. Case studies are considered an exploration of a bounded system or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context (Creswell, 1998). Accordingly, I drew on four different sources of information: in-depth interviews, a focus group interview, the researcher’s personal journal, and samples of the participants’ interactions in Edmodo.

**Data Collection**

Following qualitative research methodology, this study gathered data from different sources of information; audio recordings from three individual in-depth interviews with three teachers from different regions, a video recording of a focus group composed by five teachers who agreed to have a meeting using the video conferencing service *Google Hangouts* (http://hangouts.google.com) as a means of communication, samples from the online interactions that the participants had in the platform for the about four years and, the personal journal written by the academic coordinator of the EFL reading comprehension program in the regions, who is also the researcher of this study. From this point, as it is been stablished that the researcher is an insider in this study, the description of the instruments used to gather information will be described in first person in order to facilitate the description of the process.

**Audio recordings of individual in-depth interviews.** In-depth interviews offer the opportunity to capture rich, descriptive data about people’s behaviors, attitudes and
perceptions, and unfolding complex processes (Turner, 2010). Thus, I selected three
teachers from three different regions to interview during the academic visits that I did
between February 2015 and June 2015. Given that the level of participation in the CoP was
varied, I selected two teachers who actively participate and another who did not. The
purpose of these in-depth interviews was to know to what extend the activities and
interactions in the CoP affected or influenced the teachers’ practices as EFL teachers in
their contexts and what they thought about interacting in a CoP using a SNS. Knowing in
detail the perceptions of those teachers about the CoP was an important source of data to
analyze its effects in their teaching practices.

**Video recordings of a focus group interview.** Krueger & Casey (2000) state that
focus group interview’s main purpose is to make a group of people with specific attributes
provide qualitative data related to the research topic in a comfortable environment, under
the guidance of a moderator, and through group discussions. A group of five out of the
twenty-two teachers who currently worked in the English comprehension program agreed
to meet for a group interview using an online service in which all of us could participate in
spite of being in different places. The main goal of this interview was to gather information
about their experiences as members of the CoP and how they affected their practices as
EFL teachers. The data collected was contrasted with the individual in-depth interviews.
All we agreed to meet on Saturday April 25, 2015 at ten in the morning.

Although some teachers had technical problems when we started the online
meeting, we finally managed to have an hour and half for this focus group interview. I also
wanted to observe in this interview if their feelings about being part of CoP affected the
way they see themselves as teachers. Besides, I also wanted to know what type of
interactions in the CoP they found more useful and what interactions did not work properly for them. The whole interview was recorded, even the technical problems we had at the beginning.

**Samples of the participants’ interactions in the SNS.** Edmodo provides the possibility to keep a record of what members share in the platform. According to Yin (2003), the most important use of documents like these samples or the personal journal is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources. Samples of teachers’ interactions from 2012 to 2015 among the participants were analyzed in order to observe how they specifically responded to the academic discussions, the exchange of teaching material and their personal opinions about different aspects related to the practice and to understand the dynamics of the CoP.

**Personal journal.** Krishnan and Lee (2002) as cited in Jyi-yeon (2008), define journals or diaries as first person observations of experiences that are recorded over a period of time. For those authors, journals are written for public consumption because they are designed to be read by others. Bailey (1983) states that journals are intended to reveal existing phenomenon and generate hypothesis. As the regional academic coordinator of the reading comprehension program that the members of this CoP had to follow and a researcher of this study, I kept a personal journal of my experiences during my visits to the regional campuses. Those notes allowed me to provide a detailed description of the context I witnessed. This source of data was useful to explain the physical and social aspects that could affect the CoP from my perspective given my role as an insider in this study. I also kept record of my own insights and thoughts regarding the interactions in the platform in order to contrast them with the information gathered in the samples of the online
interactions and the in-depth interviews and the video recording of the focus group encounter.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze data, I conducted a thematic analysis following an inductive-deductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998). The first step I took was to transcribe the three in-depth interviews and the focus group encounter video. Then, I transcribed the handwriting of my journal to a digital format to facilitate its reading. The samples of the interactions in Edmodo were already digitalized and available at any time thus, it was not necessary to transcribe it.

After this, I read the data several times to identify themes corresponding to the research question. Then, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994), I started reducing the data with initial described and interpretative codes that emerged from all sources of information. Subsequently, to form categories, I grouped those initial codes under two main categories: gains and problems. In order to refine categories, I kept memos to save emerging insights. Then, I revised the category names again to reconstruct or create new ones as new information or understanding arouse Miles & Huberman (1994). Thus, I grouped the initial codes into more specific types of gains and problems.

The last phase of the analysis consisted in pattern coding that aimed to display similarities among categories and construct interpretations by connecting the parts into a whole (Freeman, 1998). Thus, I grouped all categories into emergent themes and built some interpretation. Although it seems to be the last phase, my interpretation of data occurred during the whole process.
In order to enhance trustworthiness to the study, I triangulated data from all sources which allowed me to check out the consistency of findings generated by different data collection methods, Creswell (2005). I also conducted peer examination as I constantly shared my data analysis with my research advisor and he commented on my interpretation during the whole process. Ethical procedures were followed in the collecting of these data. As suggested by Creswell (2005), data was collected with expressed consent of the participants. It was agreed in a consent form that none of their real proper names will be published and that the information gathered will only have academic purposes. The results of the findings of this study were socialized with the teachers who participated in the focus group and they expressed that they found them plausible.

Findings

This research study intended to examine the effects of a CoP implemented through a SNS with educational purposes on the teaching practices of a group of EFL reading comprehension teachers from a public university in a regional context in Colombia. The data analysis showed that the construction of a CoP as a strategy of professional development had positive effects on this group of EFL teachers’ practices in their particular context. Data analysis also showed how teachers’ active participation in the CoP affected positively teachers’ empowerment of their role, it fostered the reflection on their classroom practices, it presented them new opportunities for working collaboratively and finally it promoted the integration of ICTs in their classrooms. In the following paragraphs, I will describe in detail what the analysis of data showed.
CoP Promoted Teachers’ Empowerment of their Role

Before the creation of this CoP, the opportunities for those teachers to speak in English about academic matters with other university EFL teachers were scarce. Thus, they did not have a community of peers who supported or encouraged their participation in the decision making process regarding the reading comprehension courses they taught and moreover, they did not have the chance to share their classroom experiences either. They had a classroom syllabus they knew they had to follow but the opportunities to discuss it with EFL peers were very rare. As a consequence, some of them felt isolated from the university in terms of connections with other teachers and the academic coordination of the program. In one of the interviews, a teacher expressed how she felt about that situation.

Teacher 3: what happens is I feel sometimes very lonely, very isolated right? But now that you say that we will have more colleagues here perhaps that would be a motivation to have more contact and to be more aware of things and I could help more and I could get more support in my job. “…sometimes I feel very lonely. Sometimes I believe that things are going well, I think. Actually I put a great interest doing my job but I need someone who tells me “see, “do it this way” or “this way is better”, someone who gives me ideas and suggestions that help me to enrich this knowledge.” (In depth interview 3, 14/18/2015)

Data showed how interactions in the CoP gave the teachers a sense of belonging to the university they did not have before. It provided them a space where their voices could be heard and their role as teachers was acknowledged by their EFL University peers. It made them feel important since they realized they were an essential component of the university staff of one of the most important universities in the country and their knowledge was appreciated and worth to be shared. These positive feelings empowered them to assume their role as agents of change who could propose ideas and actions to
improve their practice as teachers in their contexts. In the following excerpts, taken from a focus group encounter, teachers expressed how they felt about interacting in the CoP.

Teacher 5: It is a very enriching experience. In fact, the perspective, the point of view, of most people is that not everybody, not all teachers work with the University of Antioquia, then it is a magnificent opportunity, it is a pride to be a part of this family, this academic community and I felt very well, I have had support from my coworkers and here we are, trying to do things the best way possible (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

Teacher 4: Now we all learn from everyone, now we learn from all and it is great. All these new technologies as it was mentioned by the teacher, one learns much (sic). The teacher is not the absolute owner of knowledge, now we all learn from everyone as it was in the past (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

The CoP connected that group of regional teachers. In their interactions, they had the opportunity to share their competences and knowledge and to ask for academic support that could help them to find different alternatives to solve problematic situations in their classrooms. It allowed them to have personal connections with other teachers who shared the same concerns and obtain their feedback as peers. As a result, they felt empowered to present to the group the workshops they designed, their experiences as teachers in regional contexts, their ideas of how to do it better, their questions and doubts as EFL teachers. They felt empowered to propose new teaching methodologies for the EFL reading courses. Since their peers valued all that useful information and all members could take advantage of it, they constantly interacted in the CoP. In a focus group encounter, one of the teachers expressed how she valued that experience

Teacher 2: It has been a very efficient (talking about interacting in the CoP) in the sense that I have had the opportunity to meet, at least Fredy who is in Urabá, he was doing a master's degree and he has shared much material to me, then it has been very fruitful in this regard. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

My perceptions of this effect was in agreement with this teacher’s opinion. As academic coordinator and member of this CoP, interacting with teachers who felt empowered of their
role changed the perspective from I considered how to promote their professional
development. In the following excerpt, taken from my journal, I noticed the positive
changes.

My perspective of how contribute to the regional EFL program has dramatically
changed since we started to interact as a CoP. I stopped thinking in just how to give
the teachers conferences or lectures related to reading comprehension. I am thinking
now in how to learn from them and how to solve problems together. It has been
very useful and refreshing to receive their feedback when I propose them an idea or
a necessity. (Journal 05/05/2014)

Dunst (1991), as cited by Lyons, Green, Raiford, Tsemunhu, Pate, & Baldy (2013)
states that empowerment enable experiences in an environment conducive for autonomy,
choice, control, and responsibility and affords individuals opportunities to demonstrate
existing competencies and to acquire and hone new competencies to enhance the overall
organization. Therefore, as the persons most closely involved with students, teachers must
be empowered to participate in shared decision making related to instruction (Bryke &
Schneider, 2002)

Data suggested that connecting this group of EFL teachers created a friendly
atmosphere that facilitated interactions in which they could demonstrate and share their
knowledge and experiences. Those interactions allowed them to realize how their own
practices were similar or different to the ones of the other teachers and empowered them to
give and receive feedback from their peers. They could propose ideas to improve the
program not just follow them. They could share and give recommendations related to the
material they use for their classes. Discuss and decide what approach to use to teach
reading comprehension in their classes was also one their main interaction in the CoP.
Hence, they became active participants in the decision making process related to
instruction. This CoP provided teachers with the opportunity of interacting towards a particular topic where they felt valued and important as they had the experience and the eagerness to learn more.

As their voices were heard and they were taken seriously by their peers, their sense of belonging with the university improved significantly and therefore, their will to participate in the CoP. The following excerpt taken from a focus group interaction, illustrates how teachers felt about sharing with other peers.

Teacher 1: Personally I like it (the interaction in the CoP) because it allows me to know other colleagues, beyond space and time. It has allowed me, in the interchange, in the interchange of knowledge, like in the last session we had with you and other colleagues. I like the opportunity to chat with other colleagues in this way. Some time ago, those things were not possible. That arouse in me a kind of affection for the university because it is offering me this chance to use technology to communicate. Those technologies are in Internet but not all institutions are using them. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

My perception of the teachers’ feelings regarding their participation in the CoP was in alignment with what this teacher expressed in the focus group. The following note was taken from my journal and it expressed how I perceived their feelings after one year of creating the CoP

When I observe them participating in the platform, it is very clear that teachers feel proud of working with University as EFL teachers. They usually express gratitude for the opportunity the university has given them but what is more meaningful is that their sense belonging has encourage them to do their best. (Journal, 04/05/2013)

Beyond the positive sense of belonging they felt, data indicated that the CoP empowered them to express their thoughts, beliefs and values. Thomas & Velthouse (1990)
state that a sense of empowerment provides teachers with the motivation and the belief that they can improve their practice by successfully implementing new initiatives. Since they felt confident and empowered to share their knowledge and experiences with the CoP, teachers did not simply interchange resources in the CoP, they selected them critically according to their context and specific needs. They felt confident enough to take actions to improve the program selecting the material they needed, reflecting on the best ways to teach and sharing their thoughts and ideas with their EFL peers. In the following excerpt, taken from the focus group encounter, a teacher narrated how she got benefited interacting with the group and how she felt empowered to select specifically the material she considered the best option according to her context.

Teacher 1: I am very pleased when I entered to the platform to review for example some materials, I search because I always enter with a purpose, looking for something that can I use to introduce a new topic in my school for my students and I have found much interesting material that I liked. At least, I see others' points of view because sometimes I focus just in my point of view and when I read the point of view of another teacher regarding a theme or something and I say to myself I could have done that but I did not have a clue of how to do it. This generates other ideas. I like that part very much. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

In addition, the journal notes of my perceptions as an insider in this study confirmed what teachers expressed in the interviews and focus group encounters; teachers’ attitudes regarding their role as EFL teachers in a public university changed with the interactions we had in the CoP. They felt empowered to take actions to improve their practice, and became active participants in the decision making process related to instruction. It did not happen immediately; it was necessary to experience the process of interacting in the CoP to see the change. In one of the notes of my journal, I recorded the following situation.

Recently we have had complaints related to the work done by one of the teachers in one of the branches. What I have heard from the general administrative coordinator
of this university regional branch is that students are not satisfied with the way the teacher gives instruction, they expressed to him to be bored with the material he used. I have talked to teacher and he seems to be a kind person although very shy. I invited him to tell me how he evaluated his performance and he expressed to be willing to improve all the time but sometimes he did not know how to motivate his students because he considered them lazy, students who just need to fill a requirement but do not want to learn. Since he is a new teacher, he is participation in the CoP has not been very active yet (Journal 03/04/2014)

One of my duties as a regional academic coordinator in this public university was to go to all campuses at least once in each academic term to speak with the students about the current situation with reading comprehension courses. In one of those encounters, after approximately three months in which this teacher participated in the CoP, some of his students told me that they perceived new possibilities for learning after the teacher renewed his teaching material; they noticed positive changes in the activities they developed. As teachers had access to the bank material created for the CoP, they could extent their options of readings activities in the classroom. In this particular case, this teacher surely took advantage of the interactions with his partners who shared their teaching material and gave him suggestions of how apply new ideas for teaching. My journal notes about the same teacher after that period of time were also significantly different. He seemed to be an empowered teacher who was willing to participate more actively in the selection of reading material; he seemed to be decided to learn new ideas and methodologies from his peers to apply in his classes.

It was satisfying to observe how (I omitted his name on purpose) proposed to the CoP to include a grammar review with a game in order to help students who had difficulties. Although many of the other teachers considered a better idea not to focus on grammar but on reading strategies, the fact the he contributed to the discussion was a positive change in his passive attitude. (Journal, 03/07/2014)
These interactions contributed to improve how they felt about their role as teachers in their contexts. It was the empowerment they had as they recognized themselves as a community which allowed them to take actions in their classroom’s context to improve their practice. Thomas & Velthouse, (1990) state that the sense of empowerment provides teachers with the motivation to and the belief that they can improve their practice by successfully implementing new initiatives. Indeed, that empowerment gave them the required confidence and motivation to propose positive changes in the courses they taught. This teacher in particular felt confident enough and empowered of his role as an EFL university teacher not just to follow the program but also to propose ideas to improve it.

CoP Promoted Reflections on their Practice

Reflecting on the practice generally means teachers thinking about their underlying values and beliefs about teaching and learning and comparing these to classroom practices (Farrell, 2008). Activities in the CoP included the discussion of academic issues related to reading comprehension which was the shared domain of this community. In these discussions all members were allowed to participate and give their opinions in an online forum in the SNS. As teachers felt empowered to express their thoughts, values and beliefs, the discussions of academic issues turned into reflections on their practices.

One of the topics discussed in the CoP was the possibility of applying Content Based Approach in the reading comprehension classes at the university. In the following excerpts taken from the interactions made in Edmodo, teachers reflected on their own practices after reading an academic paper about different models of content based approach and the possibility of applying them in their courses.
In the context in which I work, students come to the university with marked deficiencies in grammar, tenses and few vocabularies. The work of the language teacher first of all is to make leveling the students to have a basic level of foreign language, after that some students who persist in deficiencies must attend some extra classes which aim to develop some skills that they need to strengthen. Finally, students study some reading comprehension strategies which allows them to understand the texts that are required in both academic and professional life. (…), I think the model Adjunct courses is applicable here since “model intends to connect a purposefully designed language course with a regular academic course, the target audience being those students who are enrolled in the regular content course but who lack the necessary language competence to progress successfully in the subject-matter proficiency unless some additional aid is provided”. (Interaction in Edmodo, 13/09/2012).

In their reflections, they analyzed their students’ social and academic backgrounds to understand the reasons they could have to explore or not the approach they read about. Hence, the academic discussion was not merely an informative reading; it turned into a reflection of their own practice. They used the knowledge they had about the specific context they worked in and reflected on how to apply what they were learning adapting it to their knowledge of the context. In consequence, some of them felt empowered to decide and express in the CoP that the adjunct model was the best approach to use in their context. As the teachers were recognized by their peers as members of a CoP, they felt empowered to share their points of view and experiences which encouraged other members to do the same. Their contributions benefited their peers with a different perspective of the way instruction could be imparted although not all members were in agreement with applying the adjunct model.

In the same academic discussion about what model of Content Based Approach to use, other teachers had different opinions. In their reflection, they considered the national context instead of the regional one to make their decision of what approach to use. As they
started to become active participants in the CoP, empowered of their role as teachers, they acted according to their beliefs and some of them did not follow the main stream. They took a different option and decided that the best model for him was the Theme Based Model. (See Appendix C)

Teacher 7: Good morning to everyone, according to the question which one of the CBI Models presented do I consider the most suitable to our context. I want to say, that all of the four models are relevant, but according to the Colombian Context where English is not our First Language; the most suitable is "THEME-BASED MODEL", because it provides AUTHONOMY to the teacher. We have in our classrooms Students from many different disciplines, so we have to choose relevant general themes or topics; we are not specialists to give students topics as INSTRUCTORS (Sheltered Courses Model), we are just LANGUAGE TEACHERS. In Content-Based Instruction, Language learning comes from students' encounters with important content, where Teachers have to select it, and have students work to learn about content (Interaction in Edmodo, 27/11/2012)

This academic discussion did not finish with a general consensus of what approach to use because it was not necessary; the program allows the teachers to choose the strategies they consider the best to teach in their context. However, reflecting on academic issues fostered their professional development; it empowered them to make informed decisions related to the courses they taught, the materials they used in their classes and how they used them. That action, repeat it in the time by core members and newcomers maintained the CoP active. This CoP gave teachers an appropriate space to work together and it opened the possibility to compare their practices with peers in the EFL domain who shared the same interests.

My reflections recorded in my journal as researcher in this study and active member of this CoP coincided with the idea that empowered teachers of their role, providing them a proper space where the reflections on the practice could be done contributed to their professional development. The following excerpt was taken from my journal after
analyzing the interactions the teachers had in the learning SNS related to the possibility of applying Content Based Approach in their classes.

I have to admit that the teachers’ participation in the proposed exercise of discussing CBA exceed my expectations. I think I underestimated them when I just expected them to give an opinion. They did more than that, they actively participated in the discussion responding to other teachers’ comments. This exercise could be done on a regular basis. This was the first time since I was working with teachers in regional context that I really have an academic discussion of what to do with the program. In the few opportunities we have had to meet, we just had the time to deal with specific cases related to particular students. In this exercise, I realized the teachers could do even more. (Journal, 5/12/2012)

Academic discussions in the CoP did not attempt to find a general consensus of what approach to use or what methodology to apply in the reading comprehension courses. They rather were used to promote a reflection on the practice aiming at providing a space in which academic issues could be discussed. All contributions made by the teachers in this space, opened the possibility to explore different approaches that could be used as an alternative to traditional ways of teaching. All those discussions made them aware of the teaching and learning conditions to recognize strengths and weaknesses in their practices. This type of interaction was highly valued for the members of the CoP as it was an opportunity to interchange ideas and beliefs about what they considered a convenient way of teaching. It gave them the possibility to consider and reflect on their own practices for EFL comprehension teaching. When asked about his perceptions of this type of reflection done in the CoP, a teacher expressed the following:

Teacher: All that means community is a benefit. I think that, all of us, in one way or another get benefits from either a direct or indirect way because I can reply to a comment and the contribution made by the partner or simply I can take it to myself. When I access to the platform I can interact or I can look at the contribution that it was made for another member and that, in one way or another, it has served us to enrich us continuously. (In-depth interview 1, 11/07/2014).
Before the implementation of this CoP as a professional development strategy, none of those reflections were made by the teachers within a group of EFL university peers. The lack of a proper space due to the long distances, the impossibility of having regular face to face meetings were some of the reasons. The creation of this CoP provided a suitable space in which the reflection on their practice could be done in spite of the distance constraints they have. This ICT tool provided a suitable space to socialize their reflections but it was the active, collaborative dynamic of the interactions what facilitated and encouraged their reflection on the practice. The benefit of having that space in which reflections on the practice could be done was expressed by one of the teachers in the next excerpt taken from the focus group encounter.

Teacher 3: The use of these new tools (referring to the CoP in Edmodo) represents a very motivating aspect as it is an opportunity to exchange ideas with other colleagues, get acquainted, share materials, so it is always a chance that in spite of the fact that, sometimes we can't deny that the time sometimes (sic) plays a major factor, it is an opportunity to strengthen, grow as peers in spite of the distance, because it is a tool we have to shorten distances and we are in a continuous exchange of knowledge when we discuss academic topics in the platform. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

Reflection becomes a process for developing better self-awareness by offering a way to challenge what one knows and how one knows something Wagenheim, Clark & Crispo (2008). Reflecting on their practice based on academic readings and their particular teaching actions with their peers undoubtedly contributed to foster teachers’ professional development. It challenged them to explore different alternatives that could be applied in their classrooms. This CoP empowered them to assume their role as teachers who reflect on their practice and whose ideas and materials were worth to be shared.
CoP Promoted Collaborative Work

Hoffman & Rogelberg (2001) state that one of the advantages of group work in professional development is that it provides participants with an opportunity to improve their social component, which is essential given that we are in the social networks generation. According to the authors, collaborative work give participants the opportunity to acquire new learning, in accordance with their knowledge and experiences and the knowledge and experiences of their colleagues, which otherwise would not be possible. This was precisely what occurred in the interactions of the CoP; teachers improved their social component in the interactions they had in Edmodo. They had the opportunity to work all together in the construction of a learning material bank with the workshops and teaching ideas they shared.

As it was previously described, regional campuses do not have libraries with updated learning materials for the EFL teachers. Data suggested that another benefit of the CoP was the opportunity to work together sharing ideas and materials to improve their classes. Teachers worked collaboratively on creating a bank of materials for their courses that all members could use not only by taking them from the platform but also suggesting and receiving suggestions from other teachers about how to use them.

When teachers needed new material to teach their classes, they wrote in the platform what they required and members of the CoP sent them some options that the teacher could use. Since the materials were posted in the SNS, all members could take advantage of them at any time. All their contributions resulted in a material bank that they could use by simply accessing the platform. The same happened when teachers had doubts of how to teach a specific topic, they posted their questions and other members
helped them with their feedback. Teachers shared experiences, resources and ideas to improve their classes. Those teachers did not know each other personally; they did not have the opportunity to meet in face to face encounters. Nevertheless, the construction of this CoP enabled this type of interchanges that were not possible before its implementation. It gave them suitable support as it was provided it by peers who were working specifically with the same syllabus and similar circumstances.

Although many free teaching material is available on internet these days, sharing it in the CoP provided an extra benefit for its members considering that it was accompanied by the experiences the teachers had with the material. Every time they posted a workshop or a teaching idea, they described how useful it was for them and what they did with it. In the following excerpt taken from the interactions that teachers had in Edmodo, one of them presented a situation he experienced in his context and asked his peers for feedback. It can be seen how members of the CoP interacted among them to interchange material and how they adapted it to their specific needs. (See Appendix D)

Teacher: Hello colleague, Thanks for answering so fast. My proposal is that we all share experiences in how to improve our practices as trainers in reading comprehension. For instance, every single course I start in my town Amalfi, I have to take some considerable time explaining grammatical things that students should have learned in high school. I don’t really know if you also have this problem, if yes, how you solve it. Also, I would like us to share some strategies we are applying in the courses and how. I think it could be helpful. Thanks. (Interaction in Edmodo, 30/08/2013).

Teachers responded to these posts by telling their own experiences in the classroom which helped them to see different perspectives. Some teachers posted some of the workshops they had designed to teach reading comprehension others shared the websites that they found useful. They gave each other advice about what they consider the best
material to use. In that sense, they work collaboratively to solve a situation which one of the members found problematic. Since all contributions were considered valuable by its members and all worked together, this CoP fostered collaboratively work to solve problems. In certain occasions was how to teach a topic, others included how to deal with common situations as the one described by the teacher in the last sample. Data suggested that this type of interactions was one of the most significant benefits for all members of the CoP. The following excerpts illustrate how they valued this experience.

Teacher 4: I know that there are pending activities, there are the forums in which all of us make contributions on specific topics but the feature that I like the most is the interchange, the interchange of activities. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

Teacher 1: Look, in the sharing of knowledge, in that sharing of knowledge and experiences all we are enriched, everyone, and I think that in this area we are all going to learn a lot. Look, technologies today provide us a very easy way of sharing, you are in a particular place and I am in another but we all can share, discuss and meet. In fact, this is going to allow us in this community, to share all the material we have, that is awesome. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

My perception of how this CoP worked collaboratively was also positive. Since one of my concerns was the quality and variety of material they used in their classes, knowing that they were building a resources bank with all their contributions was satisfying. In the next excerpt, taken from the journal, I highlighted the benefit of that feature. I perceived the fact that teachers worked collaboratively as a very positive action that could improve their practices.

Having the opportunity of sharing ideas, teaching resources and even personal experiences in the CoP has been very beneficial for the program. Feedback does not come only from one person in charge of the coordination, it comes from all members. No one is the unique owner of knowledge. This feature of the CoP has enriched the quality of the program. I personally feel better knowing that the group
of teachers in the regions now has the support of a group of professionals in the field, not just my support. (Journal, 2/17/2013)

Although it was not an explicit established rule, interacting in the CoP fostered collaboratively work since all teachers felt committed to publish their own contribution in return of the benefit they obtained from their peers. They all seemed to understand the benefits of supporting each other in their teaching process. As the regional academic coordinator of this program, I also perceived the benefit of working collaboratively as an important contribution to the improvement to the program’s quality standards. In the following excerpt, taken from my journal, I documented my point of view regarding this issue.

In the CoP we have had the opportunity to share workshops to teach reading comprehension, books related to teaching and learning English, personal experiences and administrative issues. It has been very beneficial for all of us, even for me as a teacher. I have collected very useful activities that my colleagues have shared. Something really amazing about this CoP is that its interactions do not depend on me as the administrator of the site. Interactions take place at any time for any member. I would say that after three years of working collaboratively in this CoP, it is mature now. (Journal, 02/2014)

Creating a resources bank made with the material the CoP shared in its interaction was beneficial for all members; it helped them to increase the repertoire of options they had to work in their classes. It started with an isolated interchange of materials in the SNS among some members but since all members had access to that material and all obtained benefits, more members began to contribute to make a resources bank. The positive feedback that they received from their peers when they shared materials, encouraged the CoP to continue working collaboratively in the construction of the resources bank. The considerably increased of entries to the SNS seemed to indicate that their motivation to participate actively increased as they experienced the benefits of having a resources bank.
It also fostered the reflection on their own practices since they all could see how other teachers worked and what material they used to teach.

In urban settings, the EFL university teachers usually have more opportunities to attend seminars, conferences or different types of academic activities that could foster their professional development. In those events, teachers can make professional connections that help them to improve their practice. In regional settings, those opportunities are scarce and in some cases, EFL teachers do not even have that chance. This CoP offered them the possibility to share with their peers all the knowledge they have gathered in years of experience teaching in their contexts. It was also a valuable opportunity to work collaboratively receiving feedback from colleagues who shared the same interests.

CoP Promoted the Use of ICT in the Teachers’ Practices

Besides the benefits previously mentioned, data also indicated that the interactions in the CoP through a SNS promoted the integration of ICT in the teachers’ classrooms. None of the teachers knew about Edmodo when the CoP was implemented. Their use of ICT to teach their classes was limited to the available physical resources in the regional campuses and the internet websites offering different kinds of material. As a result, some of them only used the Internet to download printable material to take to their classes. Interacting in this CoP showed them that the potential benefits of integrating ICT to their classes could be expanded beyond the use of websites to download teaching material.

For instance, after testing Edmodo’s usefulness as an ICT tool, represented in the benefits they obtained in the CoP, some of them decided to replicate their positive experience in their own classrooms. They created their own groups in Edmodo to work
with their students using what this SNS with educational purposes offers to make their classes more interactive. Those features include the possibility administer tests, surveys and forums, post videos or any type of files available on Internet. The easy access to this ICT tool and the fact that most students were familiarized with its dynamics facilitated the active and continuous communication with their students.

In the next excerpt, taken from the focus group encounter, a teacher described how that experience positively affected his practice as an EFL teacher his context. In his intervention, the teacher reflected on how were his classes when he did not use technology in the classroom compared with his experience after testing the usefulness of a SNS with educational purposes. He found that the change brought him many benefits.

Teacher 1: It is very interesting. Well, now how I have benefited from it? Very simple, I sometimes begin to look at the classes that I taught 10 years ago compared to what I teach now, because in those days I dictated class, now I do not, now I work with students which is different and I prepare a work package in which each year and each semester I upload new things because today I manage a platform, I have a blog, I have many ways of how to reach the students and I am in contact with them, even without being in the university, it has been very beneficial in the sense that it has provided me with things and it is still happening (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

Teaching foreign languages in a regional context in a public university implies to overcome particular challenges as the scarce sources of books and materials in the university or local libraries, the limited access to efficient transportation and Internet services in rural areas. Data suggested that in spite of those limitations, the use of this ICT tool helped teachers to overcome those challenges. In the next excerpt, another teacher narrated his own experience using Edmodo in his particular context.
Teacher 3: With these new technologies the truth is that I make my classes much more dynamic, students are more motivated. It is not only the speech of the teacher but also the participation of the students guided by the teacher to make more meaningful and participatory classes. Now, the use of these platforms has allowed us, for instance especially to me, who get students, As Suroeste (the name of the region where he is located) is a bit large, that come from Andes, (the particular name of the town) but I receive students from Salgar, of Betania, Urrea of Jerico, (names of towns located in the same region) where sometimes the transportation is a bit difficult. Now, with these technologies I can provide access to the students; first in the fulfillment of the course of reading comprehension, the intensity, and second because it gives ease of access knowledge which is not only face-to-face but now, with these technologies, (sic) there is another mean, with that, we can guarantee the quality of the reading comprehension course. We can also guarantee that the student will acquire the necessary skills so they at least, understand a scientific text in English. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

What the teacher expressed indicated that he was replicating the experience he had in the CoP. He could interact synchronic and asynchronously with his students using a SNS with educational purposes. As he expressed it, the implementation of Edmodo helped him to overcome distance and time constrains, a very common situation in regional contexts; many students live in rural areas where efficient transportation is not always available and many students have to work and study at the same time. Despite the fact that Edmodo is only available in Internet and the connection in rural areas was not always granted, it seemed that the experience was fruitful.

Using a SNS to interact was not an innovation by itself to these group of teachers. They were already familiarized with the use of SNS to interact with their personal and professional connections. For instance, all of them were registered in Facebook, the most used SNS around the world. What the use of Edmodo showed them was an example of how integrate the use of ICT tools for their professional development and how to apply them to facilitate academic activities that could be developed in their courses.
An important amount of online resources are available for EFL teachers nowadays. All the participants in this study had used them to prepare their classes. However, their positive reports of their experience using a SNS with educational purposes for the first time confirmed that the possibilities of ICT tools to favor language learning in regional contexts could be more explored.

In general, my analysis of data suggested that the implementation of a CoP as a professional development strategy in a regional context, may contribute to increase the repertoire of options of how effectively integrate EFL teachers to promote positive effects in their practices. The difficulties and constrains in its implantation were also analyzed with the purpose of knowing the effects of the strategy. In the next section I will present the analysis of that situation.

**Difficulties in The Implementation of This Cop**

This CoP had been operating for about three years at the moment this study started. Many interactions occurred in the virtual space and in the face to face interactions that I had with the groups of teachers in each of their regional campuses. The number of members increased gradually, new members joined the CoP as they entered to the university and others dropped out because they either decided to change jobs or the university did not offer them more courses. It was a period of time in which the CoP had the benefits above mentioned. However, not everything could be considered positive in all aspects. In the next paragraphs I will describe the aspects that I found problematic in its implementation.
Different Levels of Participation

Data suggested that this CoP did not benefit its members in the same way. For instant, not all teachers participating in this CoP interacted actively on a regular basis. Although that situation seems to be problematic, Lave & Wenger (1991) state that the participation of members in a CoP is usually gradual. People participate in communities for different reasons, some because the community directly provides them practical benefits, some are interested in establishing personal connection, and others for the opportunity to improve their skills. For those scholars, it is unrealistic to expect that all members participate in the same way. Lavey & Wenger (1991) define the level of participation in a CoP in three main categories; small core groups, active groups and peripheral groups. The first group took the leadership of the CoP, its participation moves the community along its learning agenda. The second group attended meetings regularly and participated occasionally in the community forums, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group. The third group rarely participates; they simply watch interactions of the core and active groups. Therefore, the effects of this CoP were not perceived by all members in the same way. Members whose participation was more active could be more affected than members that belong to the peripheral group.

Lack of Active Participation

Most teachers in this CoP could be classified in the second group; they participated sharing their teaching material, asking and giving feedback to their peers, contributing with their insights in the academic discussions in the platform. A small group, specifically the group of teachers who participated in this research as a focus group, could be considered the core group. Their enthusiasm and permanent participation, leaded the CoP’s agenda.
For their level of participation, a third small group could be framed as a peripheral group. In other words, their level of participation was very limited. Thus, reporting their perceptions in this study was not possible. The following sample was taken from the historical register of activities done in the SNS by one of the members of the CoP.

This member’s last interaction in the CoP was three years ago. The same teacher expressed the following in the in-depth interview that I had with her.

Teacher: The truth is that I have not used it very much, I simply watch and take the material people publish, I take advantage of that but have not dared to write or comment, no, I have not done it.

Interviewer: is there any particular reason for that?

Teacher: mmm…lack of motivation and interest perhaps

(In-depth Interview 3, 14/18/2015).

Lave & Wenger (1991) stated that peripheral groups in a CoP are an essential dimension of communities of practice. They even could be not as passive as they seem;
they gain their own insights from the discussions and put them to good use. The fact that this teacher interacted only sporadically indicates that this teacher belonged to the peripheral group in the CoP.

**Lack of Proper Connectivity**

Although the lack of connectivity is not directly a difficulty related to the interactions of the CoP, it is an important aspect to consider in order to understand the conditions that affected the process. This CoP, as it was already described, was composed by a group of EFL teachers who worked in the regional campuses of a public university. In that context, the internet connection has become a necessary tool to maintain the interaction. Without a proper internet connection was not possible to interact using a SNS. Last year, I wrote a note in my journal which I used not only for the purposes of this study but also to report to the university the conditions of the program. The following excerpt illustrates my perceptions based on the observation of how the internet connectivity worked in the regional campuses.

Caucasia: In September 2014, in the development of a learning and teaching English seminar in Caucasia there were some conferences related to ICTs in education. One conference in particular, caught the attentions of most assistants. It was about designing material using apps. It was crowded. All teachers wanted to go. The problem was, and it is still a problem, we did not have an appropriate place to be with the teachers. There was not a computer room in which the 25 teachers could fit in a decent way. Only fifteen computers were available. Some teachers got together and worked in small groups. They had the option to attend to other presentations but they really wanted to go to his one. We did not have enough chairs to receive all teachers. The WIFI did not work either. So it was very disappointed.

Problems have been always the same with connectivity; there is not enough internet connection for the students, teachers or administrators. It does not mean that there is not, there is connection but is not strong enough in the Wi-Fi service and the computers with internet access are not enough. One of the teacher is always complaining about this situation. He wants to use an E learning platform in which he has organized his classes. As there are not enough computers, he asks them to
bring their laptops to the classroom. Many students complained about not having a laptop or expressing that it is not safe to bring their equipment because they could be robbed. Administrators in Caucasia are not happy with this situation and ask me to do something about it. I asked Dario about it and he told me his point of view.

Another example of connectivity problems that I have experienced is in the face to face meetings. Sometimes I have needed a place where I can work with the teachers with the internet. Not always is easy.

To sum up, no one can say at University of Antioquia that Internet connection does not exist but everybody agrees with the idea that it needs to be improved. (Personal journal, 12/11/2014)

My perception of this situation was confirmed in one of the intervention of a teacher in the focus group. When asked about the stumbling blocks of the CoP, one of the teachers commented on the connectivity situation in his town.

Teacher 2: It seems to me that the only difficulty I have had is the difficulty that sometimes the colleagues with whom I wanted to share some themes, some material, sometimes and the problem is about connectivity. Sometimes with students we also had connectivity problems because some are from rural areas and where access to the internet is supremely complicated for them. Anyway we are there in the process and the idea is to improve. (Focus group, 04/25/2015).

With the purpose of comprehending the significance of this case study in relation to the possibilities and constraints the regional EFL teachers of a public university may encounter with their participation in a CoP, in the next section, I will proceed to discuss its findings in the light of the theory and studies related to professional development in education.

Discussion

This study intended to find out the effects of a CoP implemented through a SNS with a group of EFL reading comprehension teachers from a public university in Colombia in regional contexts. Data suggested that the implementation of a CoP as a professional
development strategy fostered teachers’ ‘empowerment of their role, the reflection on their practice, it encouraged collaborative work and it promoted the integration of ICT in their classrooms.

First, a group of members of the CoP became active participants in the decision making process related to instruction as they proposed actions, ideas and suggestions to improve the reading comprehension program they taught. Traditionally, when educational institutions and particularly public universities in Colombia consider to propose initiatives that foster their EFL teachers ‘professional development, they offer seminars, conferences or lectures with experts in the field. Teachers surely obtain valuable benefits from those initiatives but in rare occasions they became active participants in the decision making process by assisting to a conference or a seminar. They undoubtedly learn from experts but their role in the construction of knowledge is passive. On the contrary, knowledge in a CoP is a socially constructed activity, its members play an active role in its construction. Therefore, universities and particularly public universities in this country should consider to help EFL teachers to become active participants in the decision making process related to instruction in their attempts to improve education in foreign languages through the implementation of CoP as a strategy for professional development.

Beyond the empowerment of their role as EFL university teachers, this CoP provided them with the possibility of give and receive feedback from their peers. This gain was of paramount importance since it deepened teachers’ awareness, and involved the examination of the different dimensions of their practice. It encouraged them to raise their voices to express and share what they have learnt with the experiences in their classrooms. These benefits differ from the ones obtained in the training perspective approach of
teachers’ professional development that traditionally has been used in the university settings. Traditionally, the initiatives to support EFL teachers from the training perspective currently adopted by most public university are made under the conception that they have deficiencies about the subject matter or related to skills and competences (Richards and Farrell, 2005). On the contrary, promoting the creation of CoPs as professional development strategy for EFL teachers in regional contexts would give voice to the teachers, it would provide them the opportunity to share their knowledge and their valuable experiences would be heard. They would be creating knowledge not simply receiving it from experts, that in spite of their good intentions, they usually do not know the real situation and needs in the regional context. Since knowledge is a social construction in a CoP, fostering their creation, would create a more context related agenda, more related to teachers’ needs.

In order to make significant improvements in language instruction in regional contexts, public universities need EFL professionals decided to actively participate with well-informed suggestions in the decision making process related to instruction. CoPs as a strategy of professional development does not underestimate teachers’ knowledge and experience; as Imbernón (2011) states, most initiatives in the training perspective do it. On the contrary, knowledge within a CoP is a social and shared construction built around the contributions of its members. In this CoP, the sociopolitical dimensions of education and the context where the teaching took place were taken into account to produce knowledge. A modern society, constantly exposed to continuous changes like the one in which this research was carried out, needs an education adapted to those changes. Recognizing the teachers’ strengths and not only their deficiencies was one of the main contributions of this
initiative. It empowered teachers as agents of change who can propose ideas and actions to improve their teaching practices. It introduced a new perspective for professional development taking advantage of the new possibilities offered by new technologies.

This strategy did not attempt to solve generic problems as Imbernón (2011) state most training programs attempt to do. It was through the self-reflection made by the teachers that problems were addressed. In the CoP teachers had the opportunity to reflect on the different options that the academic literature provides to use as tools to solve their everyday situations in the classrooms, they could socialize with their EFL peers the specific conditions of their context and the possibilities to apply changes that improve their practices. As a result, teachers in this CoP did not simply became well informed about what scholars in the academic field proposed, they also reflected on their practice and adapted that information to be used in their specific conditions.

When members of this CoP had a problematic situation to solve, for instance how to teach a specific reading comprehension topic or the need of teaching material to expand their repertoire of options, they worked collaboratively to find the best options to solve those situations producing an online resources bank available for all members. In that sense, the CoP encouraged collaborative work as a feasible alternative to find solutions to their problems. It did not necessarily imply the help of an expert scholar which could be an expensive alternative for public universities. Considering the unevaluable knowledge that a CoP can produce, fostering its implementation seems to be an affordable alternative to promote efficient professional development in regional contexts. Regional contexts tend to have teachers isolated from the rest of the University, CoPs could be a strategy to integrate them and encourage them to be part of an academic group.
As the analysis of data showed, the feedback they give and receive from their peers in the CoP undoubtedly contributed to improve their performance as EFL teachers in their regional context. This group of teachers shared the same interests; they were specifically familiarized with same program in similar context. This CoP of EFL teachers had the opportunity of dealing specifically with issues related to the courses they teach with EFL peers in charge of the same goals. The knowledge they produced as a result of their interactions was in alignment with what Hargreaves (2010) claims about learning; teachers only really learn when they connect with other teachers and can see beyond the immediate world that surrounds them. Therefore, exploring its feasibility at large or middle scale could benefit the professional development of EFL teachers in regional contexts in Colombia with an affordable strategy for public universities.

The successful experience of interacting using a SNS to maintain this CoP indicated that integrating ICT tools to deal with problematic situations in the EFL classrooms with an appropriate teachers’ professional development strategy could be highly beneficial for regional communities of teachers who live far away from each other. Rather than large investment of money to maintain them, the creation of CoPs requires a shift in attitude regarding what educational institutions consider beneficial strategies to foster teachers ‘professional development. Promoting its implementation with proper direction would require a shift from a training perspective to a development perspective regarding professional development for EFL university teachers.

Regarding the use of a SNS with educational purposes, this group of EFL teachers experienced a successful mediation of this ICT tool, its positive effects were reported in this study. The effective mediation of this CoP did not introduce teachers to advantages
that the Internet may offer to education. For instance, all of them were already aware of the
big amounts of teaching material that can be downloaded in Internet. What this successful
mediation showed them was how to integrate the ICT tools benefits to deal with specific
academic purposes using a collective strategy to produce knowledge. Promoting the use of
SNS with educational purposes to foster initiatives of professional development for EFL
teachers could be highly beneficial considering that most of them are familiarized with
their use, its cost is relatively low and it could be replicated in the teachers´classrooms
with positives results as some teachers in this study reported their cases.

Getting access to physical resources to produce knowledge is considerably difficult
in regional areas in Colombia. Most big libraries and academic institutions are located in
capital cities where the universities´main campuses are traditionally located as well. Thus,
the EFL university teachers in regional contexts do not have the same opportunities to
pursuit a continuous and useful professional development. If the public university in which
this study was carried out intents to keep replicating the urban models with the same
quality standards in the regions, it is of paramount importance to grant a similar amount of
opportunities for their urban and their regional campuses. Facilitate and promote the
creation of CoPs implemented using ICT tools represent an alternative to foster an
affordable but also very useful strategy to promote teachers´professional development in
regional contexts where teachers may have less opportunities to attend to academic events
in main cities.

To foster CoPs, the government and the public and private educational sector would
need to keep investing resources to guarantee an efficient access to online services in all
educational institutions. This type of initiative as it was described in this study, requires a
technological mediation to be carried out. However, investing only on physical equipment or in Internet connectivity is not enough to promote the integration of ICT to improve teachers’ practices in regional contexts. It is also necessary to explore with the academic community in those campuses how to use those resources effectively. This case study provides an example of how that could be done.

Even though, not all members of the CoP obtained the same type of benefits from their correlation with the CoP. Some members belonged to what Lave & Wenger (1991) define as the “peripheral group”; members whose level of participation is reduced to observe the interactions of the core and active groups. Knowing the causes for the lack of motivation from those specific groups to participate in initiatives like the one presented here could represent an opportunity to carry out further research. The results of such endeavor would surely increase the possibilities to adapt this strategy to a major scope of teachers since it would enlighten different and perhaps better ways to use CoPs as a professional development strategy for EFL teachers in similar contexts.

To conclude, I will present in the next section how this study has addressed the problem and its significance for the field.

**Conclusions**

In this study; I explored the effects of a CoP implemented through a SNS with educational purposes on the teaching practices of a group of EFL reading comprehension teachers from a public university in a regional context in Colombia. Data revealed that a CoP as a strategy for teachers’ professional development could contribute to improve their teaching practices in their particular context. On the one hand, the strategy showed to have
the potential to foster teachers’ empowerment of their role, their opportunities to reflect on the practice and to work collaboratively. It also promoted the integration of ICT in the teachers’ classrooms.

On the other hand, the data also showed that the benefits of a CoP did not apply in the same way to all its members. Positive results depend on the level of participation of each member. SNS with educational purposes offered a suitable ICT tool that was well accepted for the members of the CoP but the regional context in which this study was carried out presented limitations in the lack of connectivity to obtain access to the Internet services. As a consequence, some members could not probably participate as much as they could if they had proper internet connectivity. Private and public universities in regional contexts need to consider the important amount of professional development opportunities that teachers may use if they have the appropriated conditions. However, providing equipment and internet access is not enough. It is also important to consider how to integrate the advantages of the web 2.0 to improve the pedagogical practices. This case study reported that the implementation of CoPs as a strategy for professional development in regional contexts could be used as an example.

Regarding the contribution of this preliminary study, it seems to indicate that for its characteristics, CoPs could be framed in the development approach. Data revealed that the positive effects of this CoP in this group of EFL university teachers are in alignment with the ideal presented by (Cochram-Smith, 2004) who claim that when programs focus more on constructing knowledge and understanding than in promoting the best practices and teaching techniques, teachers are involved in an intellectual process of asking questions,
considering and reconsidering experiences, connecting their experience to larger conceptual frames as well as rethinking theories in view of their experiences.

Although this study has been primarily concerned with particularly the case of EFL university teachers, it may offer some insight into the large number of possibilities that implementing CoP as a strategy of professional development for teachers in regional contexts may bring. Hence, a growing number of options for further research in the field of EFL teaching become evident. For instance, the implementation of a CoP in a school setting could prove effective. Given that this study was developed with EFL university teachers, the challenges faced by school teachers could also be examined, as these might differ from those from the ones faced by university teachers. Additionally, knowing the effects of a CoP implemented through a SNS in that context could be highly beneficial for language policy makers, as it could be an affordable alternative for teachers’ professional development.

Another niche could be the analysis of the effects of CoP in an urban university setting. This strategy emerged from the need of finding an efficient way to overcome the lack of communication in a regional context, where long distances among teachers remains being a problem. However, due to working conditions, adjunct EFL teachers in universities in urban settings may face the same difficulties; although, they could live in the same city, they not have a proper space where they build knowledge with their peers. And additional and perhaps very ambitious research could be the analysis of the effects of CoP as a strategy of professional development for all teachers in the public sector.
The analysis of the different teachers’ needs in the contexts where a CoP could be applied would be an important implication that teachers or researchers must consider if they undertake a similar study. Knowing the specific needs of a particular group of teachers is important to decide how a CoP interact. Some group of teachers may value the interactions mediated with an ICT as it was the case in this study. However, depending on the specific conditions of a group of teachers the way teachers interact in a CoP may vary.

Implementing CoPs as an alternative for professional development in regional contexts would allow educational institutions in the main cities to better understand what their teachers and students need. Learning in a CoP benefits its members because they are constructing knowledge in the process of interacting with their peers. The specific knowledge that a teacher could gain in a CoP needs to be considered as a valuable advantage for the entire academic community.
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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW

Name of the project: The effects of a community of practice implemented through a Social Networking Site on a group of EFL university teachers from a public university in a regional context in Colombia.

Date: 14/18/2015

Interviewer: Nelson Gil

Position of the interviewee: EFL university teacher in a regional context

Objective: The purpose of these in-depth interviews was to know to what extend the activities and interactions in the CoP affected the teachers’ beliefs about how to improve their practice as EFL teachers in their contexts and what they think about interacting in a CoP using a SNS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preguntas generales</th>
<th>Preguntas de aclaración</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia en la CoP?</td>
<td>¿Qué ha aportado la interacción en la CoP a tus prácticas docentes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Hace cuánto perteneces a esta CoP?</td>
<td>Con que frecuencias interactúas en la CoP?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿De manera ha afectado la interacción que tienes en esta CoP tus practicas pedagógicas?</td>
<td>¿Cómo profesor en una sede regional?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿De qué manera has tenido interactuando en la CoP?</td>
<td>¿Qué influencia han tenido las discusiones académicas y el intercambio de material?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Cuál es tu opinión acerca del intercambio de materiales en la CoP?</td>
<td>¿De qué maneras has utilizado ese material?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Cuál es tu opinión acerca del intercambio de materiales en la CoP?</td>
<td>¿Encuentras respuestas a tus necesidades de recursos?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Hace cuánto perteneces a esta CoP?</td>
<td>¿Has compartido algún material?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿De manera ha afectado la interacción que tienes en esta CoP tus prácticas pedagógicas?</td>
<td>¿Hay alguna razón en particular por la cual no lo hayas hecho?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia interactuando en Edmodo?</td>
<td>¿Qué grado de dificultad consideras que representa interactuar en Edmodo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Cómo ha sido tu experiencia interactuando en Edmodo?</td>
<td>¿Has utilizado la herramienta con tus estudiantes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué piensas de las discusiones académicas que tenemos en la CoP?</td>
<td>¿Cuánto tiempo dedicas a la lectura de los artículos?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOCUS GROUP

Name of the project: The effects of a community of practice implemented through a Social Networking Site on a group of EFL university teachers from a public university in a regional context in Colombia

Date: 04/25/2015

Interviewer: Nelson Gil

Position of the interviewee: A group of EFL university teachers in a regional context.

Objective: The main goal of this interview is to gather information about their experiences as members of the CoP and how it affected their practices as EFL teachers and contrasted it with the other sources of data, particularly the in depth interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preguntas generales</th>
<th>Preguntas de aclaración</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué concepto tienen ustedes acerca de una comunidad de práctica?</td>
<td>¿Conocías el concepto de CoP como estrategia de desarrollo profesional? Perteneces a alguna otra comunidad de práctica?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué les ha representado la Cop a sus prácticas pedagógicas?</td>
<td>¿De qué manera ha afectado sus prácticas en el salón de clase? ¿Ha cambiado en algo tu desempeño desde que eres miembro de esta Cop?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué dificultades han tenido con la interacción en Edmodo?</td>
<td>¿Qué grado de dificultad consideran que tiene la interacción en Edmodo? ¿La conexión a internet ha funcionado? ¿Cómo solucionan los inconvenientes con la conexión a internet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué opinión tienen del intercambio de material que esta CoP les ha permitido tener?</td>
<td>¿Les ha sido útil? ¿Han usado el material que encuentran en la plataforma?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Qué creen que le hace falta a esta CoP?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>