

**CHINESE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING
IN MELAKA TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTE.
A NARRATIVE DESIGN.**

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Abstract

This paper looked at the effectiveness of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training in a blended learning environment. The study was carried out as the researcher would like to obtain feedback regarding their training sessions. As teacher educators, it is important for us to know what worked and what not during our training. Participants were teachers from four Chinese vernacular schools whom were asked to attend the course as part of the government's initiatives to increase the number of trained English teachers in the vernacular schools. Data were gathered from participants' reflections, questionnaires and interviews. They were analysed using Burnard's (1991) thematic content analysis. Findings reflected Robert's (1998) types of learning experience that was essential in CPD training. Direct experience, second-hand experience, input of new information, self-awareness and processing of experience and input are all part of important ingredients in ensuring effective CPD training.

Keywords: continuous professional development course, quality teachers, reflective practice, and lifelong learners

Introduction

This study hopes to shed some lights to fellow teacher educators on how better Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training can be planned and delivered effectively. Effective in this context means participating teachers after sacrificing and giving up their precious hours being away from home to attend courses, can safely returned to their respective schools, ready to embark on taking 'the road not taken' earlier. The 'road not taken' signifies new skills and strategies, attitudes and beliefs.

Current national policies on education, teacher education and CPD are underpinned by visions of a knowledge driven society in which lifelong learning is a key factor. Schools and teachers have been identified as the most important asset in the achievement of the vision of a learning society (Day, 2002). If schools are to deliver what seems to be required of them, an effective and appropriate CPD for the teaching workforce would seem to be an essential agenda. Providing relevant and personalized tailored CPD opportunities for all teachers must be made a priority. To run effective CPD courses is necessary as knowledge, skills and attitudes cannot be fully developed during the teachers' pre-service education and training days. Even if all those can be taught and developed, teachers still need to be equipped with lifelong learning as our societies' expectations regarding academic standards and equitable education are constantly redefined as our world progresses. By teachers being prepared to be lifelong learners, they will always be rethinking about how to teach and how to assess. Researcher believes that content and strategies delivered or shared during their CPD training should enable teachers to learn from their own practice and insights from their peers. Three main issues need to be discussed here. Firstly, teachers need to know that whatever ideas, knowledge, perceptions or experiences they have about teaching can and should be reviewed from time to time. Secondly, they need to think. Sometimes we have been too long in the profession that things became so routinized that we no longer think about what we are doing. They need to be shown how to carry out a metacognitive habit of mind, whereby they are continuously reflecting upon their practices (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Thirdly, teachers need to be able to juggle with multiple academic and social goals all at once at times. To be able to juggle and achieve this, strong sufficient knowledge of current academic and social goals and practices are crucial. Without keeping oneself abreast with in-trend development, chances are they may find their knowledge and skills are no longer relevant to the current education system.

Recent increased awareness of the importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has led the government to pay more attention to the quality of training being carried out. It

will be spending RM38.7 billion in 2013 in order to improve the quality of education (Star, Sept 29: 2012). According to the National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) Secretary-General, the extra allocation of RM500 mil announced for next year's budget is no small sum, yet was necessary as CPD is synonymous with the quality of teachers and education. For years we have heard and read especially in the media about the declining teaching standards in Malaysia while employers have often complained about the low proficiency among the new workforce that entered the job market. Far more public accountability is demanded than ever before and that accountability is increasingly more visible in media coverage and international comparisons. As James Kerr, principal of an international school in Penang mentioned during an open dialogue in an International Seminar on Teacher Education, many government teachers lack confidence, weak in English and are not able to talk about their job (Star, June 10:2007). His honesty reflected the urgent need to seek contemporary efficient ideas to further develop the teachers in Malaysia. In the same seminar, Prof Datuk Dr Ibrahim Ahmad Bajunid further adds that we cannot foster intellectual capabilities in students if we do not foster these first among our teachers. He also stressed upon the need to continuously conduct research in the education field if we are to meet high standards of teaching and raise the levels of achievement in schools and teacher development in the country.

Improving and empowering teacher and school leadership will be given top priority under the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2012). The Blueprint will open new horizons for the country's future education. The transformation reflects the seriousness of the government in taking Malaysian education into a system of high international quality and standard. The first key area of transformation is the empowerment of teachers. Research shows that high performing teachers will improve by up to fifty percent of their students' performance over a three-year period (Armour, and Makopoulou, 2012). To simplify, this means that better prepared teachers will produce better achieving students. According to Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, 60 percent of the teachers now are expected to remain in the education system for another 20 years. As such, efforts must be taken to improve their skills and capabilities. Ample opportunities will be provided for them to attend CPD courses. However, the concern here is how do we go about providing and delivering training experiences that engage and address the needs of our teachers through the CPD courses. As the OECD TALIS (2009) study showed, teacher professional development is generally not meeting the needs of the teachers in most countries and has failed to live up to its improvement promise (in Darleen, Pedder and Lavicza, 2011).

In this study, the perceptions of teachers will be investigated in terms of the effectiveness of the recently carried out CPD training in the Teacher Training Institute in Melaka. Smylie (1988) concluded from a path analysis study of 56 teachers' professional development processes, that teachers' perceptions and beliefs are the most significant predictors of individual change (in Darleen, Pedder and Lavicza, 2011). By studying the in-service teachers' perceptions of the CPD course, the strength and weaknesses found would enable the researcher to improve future CPD through various recommendations and suggestions. This information would be useful to the stakeholders like the Teacher Education Division, Teacher Training Institutes and schools. As such the objectives of the study are:

- a. To deliver training based on emerging trends in CPD literature
- b. To explore students' perceptions of the CPD training
- c. To suggest guidelines for effective CPD training.

There is a need for more in-depth studies investigating the complex issues revolving around CPD training and its effects on teachers' perceptions. This study therefore has the aim of examining how CPD training and students' perceptions are related as well as identifying critical factors affecting participants' perceptions of the training. Thus, the questions that guided this study are:

- a. How do the teachers perceive the given training?
- b. How do teachers perceive the use of blended approach in terms of their satisfaction, collaboration and social presence?
- c. What are the 'must-be-considered' guiding principles in a CPD course?

The study only looked at one group of teachers who were involved in the Add-Option Intervention Programme. As the group only consists of four teachers, generalisations can hardly be made. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this group of teachers.

Methodology

This is a narrative research design, where my intention is to describe the CPD training that was carried out, collect and tell stories about the training and the participant teachers experiences as the training unfolds. By doing this, researcher hope to improve future training through recording and reflecting upon the processes that took place. Teacher educators are expected to be capable of being explicit about their theories of learning and the rationale underlying their training approach (McGrath, 1997). The study also hopes to be able to explore the effectiveness of CPD training as perceived by the teachers themselves. According to Creswell (2008), narrative researchers explore an educational research problem by understanding the experiences of an individual. Clandinin & Connelly (2000), as cited in Creswell (2008), included both personal and social to the individual’s personal experiences. This study has included both the personal and social experiences of the teachers involved. This group consists of teachers who have been teaching English in school for less than 10 years. Details of them are in Figure 1.

Teacher	Age	Qualification	Option Major	Option Minor	Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching English
Tc 1	51	Teaching Certificate	Mandarin	None	24	9
Tc 2	33	Degree	Mandarin	■Mathematics ■Moral	8	7
Tc 3	33	Degree	Mandarin	■English ■Physical Education	7	7
Tc 4	35	Degree	Mandarin	■Science ■Local Studies	7	7

Figure 1: Participating teachers’ details

Instrumentation

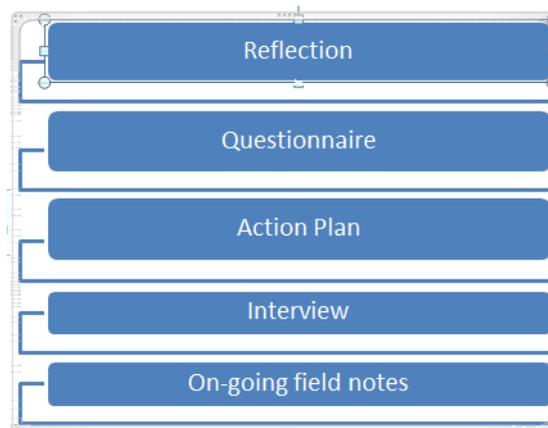


Figure 2: Data Collection Mode

A few instruments were used in gathering the data (refer Figure 2). The first is through a reflection journal template. The template is shown in Figure 3 below. Teachers were asked to fill in this template on a daily basis. They were first shown examples on how and what to write in the template. A brainstorming session was carried out in order to find out students’ prior knowledge of reflection. Reflective processes were modeled out loud, by showing them an

example of a metacognitive process when reflecting and showed them samples of how these will then be written in each column. As this is a new experience for them, guidance has to be provided. According to Moon (2004), overt discussion and explicating the model will reap better results than merely advocating the practice. Students need to be shown what reflection is all about and how it is carried out, giving them an example, before we can expect them to reflect

Reflective Journal

My Teaching and Learning Practices

What I discovered/learned on my own?	What I discovered/learned from my trainer?	What I discovered/learned from my peers?

Figure 3: Reflection Template

The second source of data was field-notes. These made up of researcher’s own reflection after every training session, plus jotted down notes during the training when the researcher noticed or realized new aspects either about the training itself or the participants. In this aspect both ‘in-action’ and ‘on-action’ reflection were carried out (Schon, 1983). The third instrument was a questionnaire which I used to gather data about the blended approach used in carrying out the training. The questionnaire was adapted from So & Brush, 2008. Refer appendix 1 for the snapshot of my online course which I prepared for this training. The online course was meant to help them upload their assignments from time to time and a place where I have put up a number of resources which could help them in completing their work. There are videos, powerpoint presentations, articles, and websites. I believe these different media of learning will help expose them to the different strategies that are widely available now. By experiencing them, themselves, I hope to influence them to adopt them into their classroom teaching.

The next method of data gathering was through an action plan template (refer Figure 5). Just shortly before the course ended, they were asked to reflect on 5 aspects which I considered important for them, and to think of their current situation and if any actions needed to improve themselves.

ACTION PLAN

FOCUS AREA	CURRENT SITUATION	GOAL	ACTIONS REQUIRED	DURATION
Content knowledge				
Pedagogical knowledge				
Technological knowledge				
Skills				
Attitude				

Figure 4: Action Plan Template

My last approach in gathering data was using interview. This would further allow the researcher to tap respondents’ level of knowledge and understanding regarding certain issues (Bryman, 2008).

The terms used in this study is operationally defined for clear understanding as the following:

- Continuous professional development: Courses where teachers attend ranging from a few hours to a few years in which they maintain or improve their knowledge and skill related to their work.
- Teacher Training Institutes: There are 27 Teacher Training Institutes in Malaysia training and conferring degree to pre-service primary school teachers and providing continuous professional development courses to both the primary and secondary in-service teachers as and when necessary.
- Collaborative learning: An instructional approach in which a small number of learners interact together and share their knowledge and skills in order to reach a specific learning goal.
- Satisfaction: An affective learning outcome indicating the degree of learner reaction to values and quality of learning and motivation for learning.
- Social presence: A psychological degree to which a learner perceives the presence of and connectedness with other learners.
- Blended learning: A learning approach that combines face to face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities which forms and integrated instructional approach.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data involved analyzing, synthesizing and reducing the information obtained from various sources. This includes data collected from questionnaires, journals and interviews. The analysis relied heavily on description. Interpretations were made continuously throughout the course of the training. They were formulated as the training was carried out. Thematic content analysis by Burnard (1991) was used to analyse all the data.

Stage	Description
1	Read all data; weekly journals, metaphors and final week journals
2	Re-read the data and make notes throughout the reading, generate general themes. Immersed in the data.
3	Re-read the data and identify specific headings and categories. Open-coding. Generate categories.
4	Sort out the categories into precise groups. Collapse some of the similar categories into broad categories.
5	Re-sort categories, similar headings are grouped to form a final list and remove extraneous categories.
6	A colleague was invited to blindly validate my findings. Categories were discussed and adjusted as necessary.
7	Journals and categories were examined identifying the data relating to each category.
8	Data linked to category headings. Numbers are used to distinguish between findings in the journals and categories.

Figure 5: Data analysis adapted from Burnard (1991)

Kolb's experiential learning theory was adopted and it serves the basis of the training development. Researcher believes that experiential approaches to learning will help the participants to acquire and transform new experiences as stepping stones to further development. In Kolb's theory, action, cognition, reflection and experience are four interdependent processes, responsible for holistic integrative learning (Kayes, 2002).

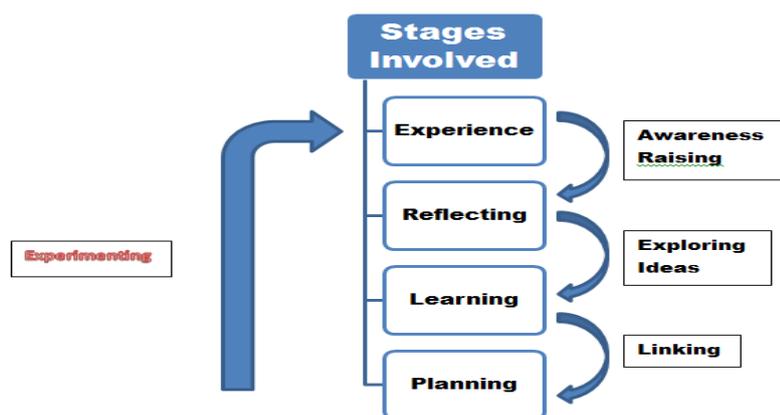


Figure 6: Training Framework (adapted from Kolb, 1984)

Roberts (1998) five main types of learning experience were also built-in during the training. They are direct experience, second-hand experience, input of new information, self-awareness and processing of experience and input. They were included through:

- micro-teaching; to offer them direct experience,
- observation of how the training sessions were delivered and reading assignments; second-hand experience,
- lectures through powerpoint slides and discussion; new information input
- recalling own experience; to create self-awareness,
- portfolio building, coursework and daily reflective journals; to enable them to process their experiences and input.

Findings

From their reflection: What I discovered on my own?

From the analysis, all four teachers had come to face the reality of their poor command of the language. At the start of the training, all of them were complaining about their students' proficiency. Later they realised that they too were doing exactly what their students were doing. Examples include not wanting to speak in English during class, making many grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, not reading, etc. Having to speak out and do written tasks in class as a student, gave them the opportunity to see things from their students' perspectives. It is hoped that they will increase their efforts to improve their proficiency so as to be a better model for their students. I also hope that they will be more sympathetic to their students' struggle in trying to master the language, and that is by being more patient and have varied strategies in hand.

From their reflection: What I discovered from my trainer?

They mostly talked about characteristics of the trainer during the training. The trainer had to consciously model characteristics of a good language teacher; being patient, knowledgeable, and were trying to motivate the class most of the time. The trainer modeled the things that she wanted them to acquire. Though one mentioned that the trainer had given them too much work as compared to the other groups, they all agreed that the trainer had succeeded in making them see the crucial need for them to improve themselves. This is to be done through reading and getting acquainted with the World Wide Web. Information communication technology (ICT) integration was also stressed by the trainer, as shown, in their reflection. They saw the need for technology integration. Experiencing the integration themselves as students, helped made it clearer for them on how to carry it out as teachers. Instead of just telling them the strategies, teacher educators should make their participants go through them in order to help their participating teachers to internalise the strengths and benefits of the strategies.

From their reflection: What I discovered from my peers?

From their peers, they learned a lot about themselves. Looking at the capabilities of their peers in producing effective teaching aids, or seeing how competent their peers were with their ICT skills

enough to motivate and create the urge within them to improve themselves. They also realized working with their fellow peers is not a bad thing after all. They began to see the joy in working and learning together. I believe they will look forward to sharing their practices with their colleagues in schools soon. However, whether this happens will only be known when the trainers observe them in schools next year as a follow-up to the course.

**From their questionnaire
Satisfaction**

All four teachers agreed that they have learned a great deal from the discussions that were carried out. Through these, they were able to learn about others’ perspectives and experiences, thus made them realized the need to increase their knowledge through reading. They also agreed that this course has given them a quality input, partly due to the nature of the coursework and the expectations that were expected from them. Out of the four, only one mentioned that she did not want to take another blended learning course. This teacher is the eldest among them and she has just started to use the laptop during the course. However, she told in class that she is now seriously considering buying a laptop for herself after the course.

Collaborative learning

Most felt they were part of a group with regards to their online and face-to-face work. They were able to learn new skills, gather new knowledge, exchange opinions and develop problem-solving skills. Participants were exploring, developing, strengthening and refining their knowledge and skills together during their lesson planning process in class. As such, they are satisfied with the collaborative aspect of the training.

Social presence

Most of the participants felt that it was easy for them to express themselves through the different forms of communication available during the training. They were comfortable to participate in the different platform of communication and are in the opinion that the forms chosen were all technically reliable and easy to use. However, most were also not sure if the language used was easily understood neither if communication via the internet could build caring relationships among them.

From their action plan:

Figure 7: An excerpt taken from a teacher’s action plan

FOCUS AREA	CURRENT SITUATION	GOAL	ACTIONS REQUIRED	TIMING
Content knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Haven’t attended any formal training courses in English Language Teaching. So, my teaching in English before is based on textbook and teacher guide book. Still lacking the content knowledge. 2. Not confident in teaching KSSR class. 3. Not confident in teaching phonics. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve my language knowledge start from Grammar 2. I want to learn phonics 3. be more knowledgeable in my teaching career. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read and do exercise of Grammar. 2. Study the textbook and workbook and the content standard 3. Sign up for my phonics class. 4. Do more reading 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. on-going process
Pedagogical knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sometimes, I found that my teaching did not help the pupils to remember the basic grammar rules that I kept on repeating through “chalk and talk” 2. Stressed too much on 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I need to improve my method of teaching in terms of creating activities to 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get source from Internet, adopt new techniques that suit my pupils’ level. 2. I must get the motivational VCD clips and show to my 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. on-going process

From the analysis done on the four teachers’ action plan, findings showed that they want to improve their command of the language. They want to be competent and knowledgeable in the language. I feel this aspect will take a long time looking at their current proficiency state. They must be able to maintain this enthusiasm within them. That is where the real challenge lies I feel. In terms of pedagogical aspect, teachers involved want to know more about teaching English effectively. Through the course, they have been exposed to the numerous websites where help is just a click away. The deep-rooted culture in rote-memorising and serious academic work, have prevented them from exploring further. In terms of ICT integration, most felt the training was an eye-opener to new possibilities. A number of programmes were shown and introduced to them,



but time did not permit for the practical part. These are just springboards for them to begin the need for change in their teaching strategies. They will have to take the initiatives to further explore and learn on their own. One area where their voices resonate is in having good speaking skills. They all want to be able to speak in the language well. In a way I felt so sorry for them having to teach English. It would take quite some time before they can be proficient in the language. In the meantime, students in the Chinese schools will be shortchanged by having teachers who are not qualified to teach English. To master a language takes time, and these teachers are put in a situation where if they were given a chance, they would not want to be in. It is like asking me to teach in French. However, despite the constraints and challenges, they are trying their level best to improve themselves. They plan to read, to attend courses, especially related to grammar and phonics and to learn from their colleagues.

From the interviews:

Finally, I carried out interviews with each and every participant. For all of them this is their very first Blended Learning experience. As adult learners who did not stay in campus, they find having an online component to the course very helpful (refer Appendix 1). They mentioned it is convenient as they were able to submit their tasks at any time of the day and materials were easily retrieved. Out of the four, two of the teachers planned to develop their own online course in school. ICT integration was again stressed during the interviews. They felt they have learned so much from the training in relation to using ICT in classroom teaching. Tailoring their teaching according to students' interest will be most of their focus next year when the school starts. In general they all agreed they are more confident now and that the training had helped them grow professionally.

Discussion & Suggestions

The start of the training has to be from where they are as according to Bolitho & Wright (1995). I have not thought about this until I read their article and attended a postgraduate course. This is a pertinent point as no new learning can take place unless they can make connection with their previous knowledge, experience and beliefs. They will not be able to remember, understand or apply ideas that have no connections to their experience. It is difficult to understand simply by watching or listening. Sometimes we trainers are too engrossed to start and finish the training that we forgot, that initial connection has to be made first. Research has shown attempts to directly fits new learning often fails (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

Once the initial connection has been made, then we build on expanding their knowledge, skills and attitudes through social-constructivist approach. Social constructivist perspectives focus on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (Palincsar, 1998). As interaction promotes cognition and learning, effective teaching and learning takes place through talk and discussion either among themselves, or with the trainer. This stimulating teaching and learning environment will be further enhanced if there is good trusting relationship between participants and the trainer. By sharing and discussing about their practices, or even problems faced, they are given the chance to have their voices heard. With this, they will be able to reconstruct their beliefs and perceptions about themselves and their practices for the better.

Conclusion

Over the years there has been little fundamental change with regard to how we approach our CPD training. Although technological advancements in society have been unrelenting, technological innovation in our training sessions are limited. As can be seen from the findings, teachers want to know and are ready to learn and adopt technological innovations in their teaching and learning process. By knowing where these teachers are coming from (Bolithos & Wright, 1995), planning and execution of the courses can be aligned with what the teachers want. Continuous professional development (CPD) training is meant to help and assist teachers to develop themselves as better teachers. Being better not only means knowing what was taught, but also how it was taught and how the learners were understood. CPD training must lead to

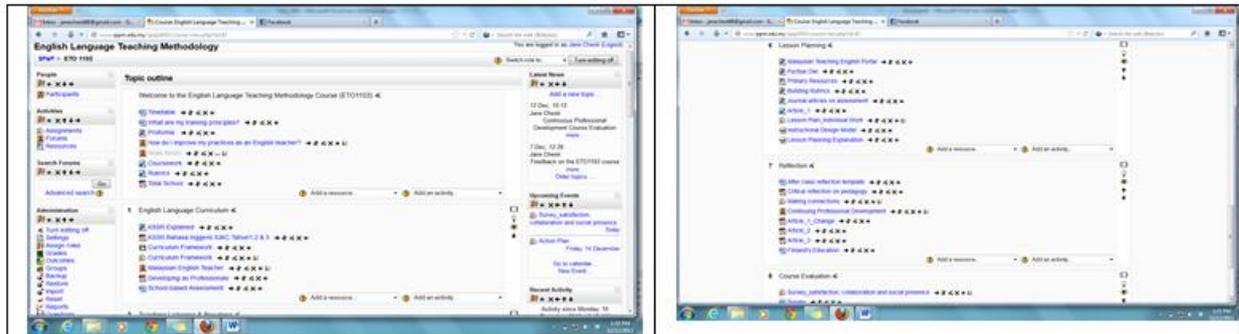
developing change and improvement among teachers that is meaningful and affects children's learning. It must include training and implementation that is combined with evidence of improved students' learning. Then we can be quite sure that some of the input from the CPD courses will have a chance of being adopted in the teachers' classroom practices. Trainers on the other hand, are at the forefront of these trainings. As human learning is a complex phenomenon, without careful planning, the time, effort and money spent on these trainings, will not reap the required results. As such, trainers should continuously be equipping themselves with current knowledge and practices, besides developing appropriate beliefs and attitudes.

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Appendix 1

The online course designed and implemented during the training



Appendix 2

Summary of Reflection on the Teachers' Teaching and Learning Practices

Teacher	What I discovered/learned on my own?	What I discovered/learned from my trainer?	What I discovered/learned from my peers?
Kwong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●the need to teach differently ●poor command of the language ●need to change attitude ●poor communication skills ● need to catch up on ICT skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●need for ICT integration ●characteristics of a good teacher; motivator, listens, explain well, knowledgeable, well-prepared, friendly ●need to read so as to improve myself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●their advance skills ●able to prepare teaching aids ●to be determined, cooperative, hardworking and humble ●have many fresh ideas
Lim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●more hardworking ●beginning to read ● poor command of the language ●poor communication skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●teacher as motivator, friendly ●clarity of tasks given ●teaching without example is not helpful ●characteristics of a good teacher: motivator, listens, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●able to understand other ● beauty of sharing ●need to encourage another