



## **Online discussion forums for rural teacher professional development**

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### **Abstract**

Rural teachers often have difficulties to participate conventionally in professional development programs in towns. This article explains the possibility and challenge of developing an online e-learning program and forum to support rural English teacher capacity building. The research was conducted through a qualitative survey in four districts in two of fourteen counties in Kalimantan Barat province, Indonesia. The data were collected through interview and observation and were analyzed using a three-level classification system that consisted of unidimensional description, multidimensional description, and explanation. The research found that the government regulations, the transportation infrastructure, the internet connection, and the teacher readiness could support the online discussion forum. The possible design to support the forum was an asynchronous discussion forum in social media groups. The challenge was finding motivated and committed teachers to initiate and lead the forums. Based on the discussion and conclusion, the research recommends that external experts mentor the leaders in the first year. When the leaders are ready to manage the groups, the mentor can motivate the leaders to manage the groups autonomously and may collaborate with the external experts to conduct some relevant professional development programs.

**Keywords:** e-learning; rural area; teacher development; online forum

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## Introduction

Continuous teacher professional development is one of the critical elements of education quality assurance and enhancement. Teachers are required to continuously improve their competencies. Students wanted teachers to be skilful, to think critically, to be creative, and to be innovative (Norahmi, 2017). Committed teachers should be prepared, sustain their commitment, and advance their performance (Hariri & Sumintono, 2020). In rural areas, where infrastructures and facilities are very limited, teachers are the central factor in education. However, as we observed, it was not easy for rural teachers in Kalimantan Barat Indonesia to go to learning centres in town to improve their quality competences. Kalimantan Barat is a province that is located in the western part of Kalimantan (Borneo) island, and the capital city is Pontianak.

To be able to learn together in such a situation, the teachers must have learning communities that consist of separated members and are connected through online communication. However, there would be difficult to develop online learning communities while the internet connection and experts in ELT were not easy to find. A study has found that teachers in rural areas in Indonesia should cope with many challenges, such as infrastructure, source of learning, language barrier, parent's mindset, the inadequacy of teachers, student's competence, and students' mindset (Febriana et al., 2018). Infrastructure and learning resources were the major challenges that rural teachers should solve if they would develop an online learning forum as a means of improving their competencies.

It is not tenable to use one definition of "rural" to be applied to different studies or decision-making. In an extensive study, a group of researchers reminded investigators to thoroughly describe the rural nature of their investigation from their conceptual point of view and stated their preference for an operational definition to situate the findings of their investigation over the other definitions (Koziol et al., 2015). This explanation is in line with the concept of distance in distant education. The term 'distance' can be understood from various perspectives: geographical, time, and intellectual (Simonson et al., 2015). The term 'rural area' in this research is mainly a geographical concept; that means the areas need particular effort to reach and to communicate with

people in other areas. This research focuses on the first perspective, that is, geographical distance.

It is found in many rural areas in Kalimantan Barat, but the researcher only chooses four districts. The two districts in Kubu Raya County (Batu Ampar and Terentang) were chosen because they can represent southern and eastern parts that are not border areas. Two districts in Sambas County (Sajingan Besar and Paloh) were chosen to represent northern areas and border areas. Batu Ampar is located far from the capital of the province (Pontianak City), in the south part of Kalimantan Barat. The district can only be reached by motorboat or by speed boat.

In the context of Indonesian education, as required by Act Number 14/2005, there are four competencies that every teacher must improve, namely: pedagogical competency, personality competency, professional competency, and social competency. In an attempt to improve the teachers' competencies, the government has launched some programs that can be taken by teachers. However, the government resources cannot reach every teacher nation-wide because of the significant number of teachers and the geographical situation. Teachers in rural areas cannot get access to the program as easily as urban teachers (Febriana et al., 2018). One of the solutions that they can find is teachers' virtual learning or online teacher forums. The aim of approaching the online community is to consider the best way to design the desired social and learning environment by utilizing the existing tools and contexts. However, it is essential to find the best structure of social and technical factors that creates the most suitable online learning community in certain circumstances (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011). Community culture plays a crucial role in the success of an online forum (Fu, 2013). Virtual learning forums are extensions of conventional learning that potentially can be used to improve participants' higher-order thinking and communication skills (Seethamraju, 2014).

One of the difficulties in starting distance learning is establishing an efficient mode of communication using technological resources. Online learning must be supported by frequent physical meetings (Nunes et al., 2016). However, with good leadership, online learning communities can be organized successfully (Chua et al., 2017; Ruggieri et al., 2013). Transformational leadership—that concentrates on intrinsic motivation and role-modelling—is found to be a useful model in online learning forums (Alotebi et al., 2018).

Online learning forums can help enhance conventional learning, particularly when the participants are fully engaged in the forums (Alzahrani, 2017; Simonson et al., 2015). Mentors and Leaders can help rural teachers through dialogue reflexivity (Willis et al., 2017). The members who engaged in fruitful collaboration prioritized encouraging social interaction over completing the task (the process is more important than the final product) (Vinagre, 2017). To be able to get engaged in an online forum, a teacher needs conceptual and procedural competencies that can be gained through modelling and exploratory practices in their training (Vinagre, 2017).

Concerning rural teacher development, a study involving 427 participants in Taiwan reported that the Taiwan government could successfully decrease the Rural-Urban Knowledge Divide in higher education (Chen & Liu, 2013). Reported in 2015, a study in Kentucky found the collaboration amongst the professional development service providers, the organizations that gathered the data, and the scholarly community in content-based teacher development program had positive impacts on students' learning outcomes in rural areas (Barrett et al., 2015). A study participated in by 308 high school teacher respondents showed that most Indonesian teachers were ready to do mobile learning. They had a positive attitude toward utilizing technology and hoped to be able to get experience in mobile training or learning (Yusri et al., 2015). In Spain, it was found that elementary teachers believed that it was essential to facilitate access to information and to increase engagement, and the teachers' perception of the effectiveness of Apps for learning correlated to how they chose Apps. The study also concluded that the configuration of the affordances of Apps and mobile technology could increase aspects of learning (Domingo & Garganté, 2016).

Professional development was closely related to the professions' collective autonomy, not just a matter of the teachers' individual quality (Hermansen, 2017). In line with the advanced development of information technology, amongst positive trends of online collaboration (telecollaboration) is the increasing demand for its use as a means of educator professional development (Lewis, 2017). Then, a comprehensive survey found that it was possible to conduct professional development for rural teachers in Oklahoma (Peltola et al., 2017). A recent study in Japan evaluated the effectiveness of blended learning of English. The findings demonstrated the students' general contentment with the course, the educational and technical difficulties that they encountered, and the suggested solutions. The quality matter (QM) peer review showed the course failed to meet the essential standards (Alizadeh et al., 2019).

This article reports an investigation into the opportunity of developing online forums for rural English teachers in Kalimantan Barat, Indonesia. There were questions that this research investigated.

- (1) Which of the dimensions of government regulation, information technology infrastructure, institutional visions and programs, teacher's access to the internet, and teachers' skills in using the internet can and cannot support the attempt of developing online forums for English teachers?
- (2) Will it be possible for rural teachers in Kalimantan Barat to develop an efficient online forum as a means of their professional development program?
- (3) What are the recommended designs of the forum that will be effective and efficient?

This research is essential because, so far, the researcher could not find any study that focuses primarily on the problems and the solutions of developing English teacher's online professional development forums in the rural areas in Kalimantan Barat. The researcher answered problems by discussing the required situation that they described in the theoretical framework and the real social situation that they described in the findings of the research. It is expected that the findings of this research will be an important reference for the teachers in the area and the teacher trainers nearby to develop an online forum that can be used to help the rural teachers improve their professional capacity without leaving their classes and other professional responsibilities.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

The design of this research was a qualitative survey research method. It was Jansen (2010) who introduced the concept of "qualitative survey" to refer to the study of diversity in a population. It is not a study of distribution in the manner of a quantitative survey. Variation in populations is defined and investigated qualitatively. Instead of aiming at establishing frequencies, means, and other parameters, this method determines the diversity of topics of interest in a given population. This method does not count the number of populations that have

the same characteristic but establishes the meaningful variation in the population, namely relevant dimensions and values.

### **Participants**

The subjects of this research were English teachers, school principals, school inspectors, and English teacher trainers (university lecturers) in Kalimantan Barat province as shown in Table 1. Most respondents lived and worked in two counties in the province except for those who lived and worked in Pontianak city, as well as some teacher trainers who were the academic staffs of Universitas Tanjungpura.

Table 1. Research participants

County and university	District and unit	Participants			
		Teacher	Headmaster	Inspector	Lecturer
Sambas County	Sjingan Besar	3	1		
	Paloh	3	2	-	
Kubu Raya County	Terentang	3	2		
	Batu Ampar	4	3	1	
Pontianak Municipality	Pontianak Kota	2			
Universitas Tanjungpura	Language Center				2
	Faculty of Education				3

### **Data collection**

This research drew upon the situation and the practices of using information technologies for rural teachers' professional development in four rural districts in Kalimantan Barat province, namely Sjingan Besar district and Paloh district in Sambas county and Batu Ampar district and Terentang District in Kubu Raya county. The researcher conducted observations of government regulation documents, namely: constitution, acts, and other relevant legal products about education. Besides the government regulations, the transportation infrastructures, the information technologies facilities, and some schools' administrations and facilities were also part of the observation. In addition, the researcher supported collected data by interviewing English teachers and school principals. Last, the researcher also interviewed school inspectors and relevant teacher trainers at Universitas Tanjungpura.

The data in this research are mostly qualitative. To assure the quality of the data, the researcher followed the following protocols. The documents that the researcher observed were collected only from legal and valid sources. The

internet connections, school facilities, school programs, and transportation were observed and rechecked properly. The detailed information about school programs, teachers' habits in using the internet, and other teachers' professional development programs were collected through direct interview and crosschecks with teachers, headmasters, and school inspectors. The data of the lecturers' and the experienced teachers' activities relevant to rural teachers' quality improvement were collected through direct interviews, direct observation of their offices, and detailed observation of the government regulations relevant to this research. When the data had been organized, the researcher discussed and reconfirmed the data with the interviewees after organizing them.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed using the three-level classification system of qualitative survey data analysis (Jansen, 2010) that was supported with three-cycle coding. Level one was the unidimensional description. To start with, the researcher limited the object of this analysis and did the initial coding, focusing on the possibility of developing online discussion forums for English teacher professional development four districts and the possible challenge. Then, the researcher analyzed and classified the coded data into dimensions in the form of parent nodes. The analysis was not, then, focused on the differences between the four districts but the diversities that existed in the four districts. The results of this level of classification were relevant factors that existed in the four districts. I labelled a descriptor for each of the factors.

In the analysis network visualization, the researcher positioned each of the descriptors as child nodes. In the Findings section of this article, the unidimensional description is written under the subheading "English teachers in rural areas." Level two was the multidimensional description. This step consisted of qualitative causal analyses of the four dimensions that were supported by two levels of focused coding. The first level was coding the correlations of the factors within the dimensions, and the second level was correlating the factors across the dimensions. The causal analyses were conducted to find out the causal relations between the factors and the values. What the researcher meant by value was the converging nodes of a number of child nodes (descriptor). A value was a result of the convergence of a number of factors that had relatively similar roles in developing the online forum. The result of this analysis was a causal network that represents the argument of the possibility of developing an online rural English teacher discussion forum. This

multidimensional description is written under the subheading "The possibility of developing an online forum." Level three was an explanation. Based on the qualitative causal analyses, the researcher explained how the English teachers in the four districts were ready to get involved in online or virtual English teacher learning forums. The explanation was presented based on the interpretation of the causal network. The researcher write this explanation under the subheading "Proposed designed of the online English teaching forum."

## **Findings**

The findings of this research were presented in line with the data analysis procedure. The descriptions under the subheadings of English teachers in rural areas, the possibility of developing an online forum, and the proposed design of the online English teacher forums were consecutively the result of the unidimensional analysis, multidimensional analysis, and explanation. The analyses and explanations were supported by the data that were obtained through observations and interviews.

### ***English teachers in rural areas***

#### *Government regulations*

The documents of the national regulations that are related to online forum development consist of the constitution, acts, government regulations, and ministerial regulations. All implementations in the lower levels should refer to those regulations. The 1945 Constitution mandates the government to provide quality education for all people of Indonesia. Then, the national education system act (Act No. 20/2003) describes the system, budgeting, management, and other requirements to provide national education services. More specifically, Government Regulation Number 19/2005 mandates eight standards of national education, and one of them is the standard of educators. Minister of Government Official Alignment and Bureaucracy Reform Number 16/2009 requires educator quality standards and professional development. The Minister of Communication and Information Regulation Number 2/2008 regulates that one telecommunication tower should be used together by telecommunication providers, and Number 19/2010 regulates how internet services should reach every district in the country. Meanwhile, Act Number 4/2014 guarantees that every village will receive a significant amount of money to build infrastructure and facilities and to manage the village.



*Transportation and internet connection*

The four rural districts in this research are located in one of the largest provinces of the country and are located far away from the capital city of the province. Teachers need to travel about six to eight hours by land transportation from Sajingan Besar and Paloh to the provincial office of education; 3-4 hours by motorcycle plus 3-4 hours by bus. Most schools in these two areas were on the main roads, and there was no difficulty for teachers or students in going to schools. Whereas, travelling from Pontianak to Terentang or from Pontianak to Batu Ampar takes about 3-8 hours by motorcycle plus by speedboat. Teachers and government officials moved from point to point in rural areas by boat and motorcycle. The roads in rural areas are muddy, and motorcycle could not pass by in rainy seasons.

The researcher tried communicating with some teachers using GSM mobile phone and WhatsApp repeatedly. It was found that internet connection and telephone were available in the areas near communication towers (usually near the district offices), and the internet speed is low to average. Video conference or webinar could be done only in certain areas. It was possible, but not always, to get connected to the internet at schools. People could watch television broadcasts; but, in certain areas, they need a parabola antenna.

*Schools' plans and programs*

In elementary and secondary levels, the Indonesian education system provides general education (schools) that are controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) and Islamic education (madrasahs) that are controlled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). Every school and madrasah used the national curriculum and operated in a school-based management system under local government supervision. There were also schemes of financial support provided by national and local governments' public schools (local governments do not support madrasahs). Public schools and madrasahs are not allowed to collect any type of fee from the students. Private schools are founded and run by non-government organizations (NGOs). There also schemes of financial supports by the central government and local governments to private schools.

Schools were required to have some kind of vision and mission. Some of the schools broke them down into operational programs, but many did not. There was no single school or madrasah with teacher professional development through e-learning, although the headmasters and the teachers were aware that

they needed to improve themselves amid the lack of access. As an example, a vocational high school in Paloh wrote their missions as follow:

Mission 1: Providing the educational services based on competency, believe in God and implementation of life skill.

Mission 2: Implementing the principle of accountability and the spirit of entrepreneurship in management.

Mission 3: Searching for society's potentials to improve Paloh's District and Sambas County's competitiveness in the context of development in the globalization era.

Most school visions and programs were student-oriented and curriculum-oriented and were written mostly for accreditation requirements.

There was at least one English teacher at every school. In more established schools, most teachers were permanent teachers that hold an undergraduate degree in English language teaching and have the status of the professional teacher. It is also found, as explained by a school inspector, that in new junior high schools and madrasahs in very rural areas of Kubu Raya County, most teachers were elementary school teachers that graduated from the non-English language teaching program. They were situated in more difficult areas to access and had little possibility to visit more developed areas regularly. Public general school teachers and headmasters of senior high schools (year 10-12) are supervised by province education services, while teachers and headmasters of elementary and junior high schools (year 1-9) are supervised by county education services. Teachers of madrasahs are supervised by MoRA.

The schools sent their human resources to participate in professional training when the government invited them. A headmaster explained:

Yes, Sir. We at school focus on providing quality learning situations and services. All about human resources improvement are managed by county education services. If not invited to participate in training, we just learn by ourselves, but it is not easy.

In this case, most of the government programs of teacher development were conducted conventionally. They invited teachers to a city or other venue and provided trainers; most trainers were government officials. Two headmasters were found to have done creative programs of training teachers to operate computers and to help teachers buy a laptop by installments. However, it happened only once.

The schools in the four districts had minimal computer facilities. There were only three computer laboratories found in those four districts, namely at a private vocational high school in Batu Ampar, at a state junior high school in Terentang, and a state vocational school in Sajingan Besar. However, not all of them could work well, and it was difficult for teachers to use the lab for professional development. In Terentang, as explained by a school inspector, eleven of sixteen units were broken, and the lab could not function. Then, even though the condition was not good enough, the computer laboratory in Batu Ampar and Sajingan Besar was used by the students. It was not easy to find empty slots of computer lab schedules when the English teachers were free. A teacher in Batu Ampar said:

It was almost impossible to use schools' computers because we have a small number of computers but used by many students. Besides, we are also busy and cannot go to the lab at any time.

#### *Teachers' readiness*

English teachers are categorized into teachers with a certificate of professional teachers, permanent civil servant teacher, permanent private foundation teacher, and non-permanent teacher. Teachers with a certificate of professional teacher must have fulfilled all the requirements to be a professional teacher, granted professional allowance besides standard salary, and must work 24-hour per week as a professional teacher. They usually have better proficiency in English than other teachers and good knowledge of teaching methodology. Civil servant teachers are undergraduates in English teaching with active English skills who have passed government selection. They received a standard salary of a civil servant and must work 24-hour per week. A permanent private foundation teacher is a teacher that is hired fully by a private foundation to work at a school that is run by the foundation. A non-permanent teacher is a part-time teacher paid by the school per teaching hour.

Most professional English teachers worked for public schools in district centres, while English teachers in rural areas were mostly novice teachers. Some English teachers in private rural areas were non-permanent inexperienced young persons who did not finish studying in an English education department or English language academy or teachers of other subjects that were assigned to teach English. In some public and private junior high schools and madrasahs, the English teachers were teachers of elementary schools who were neither educated nor qualified to teach English. They – taught English in Bahasa

Indonesia (Indonesian national language) because they had very low English proficiency and needed training in English teaching methodology.

About two-thirds of the English teachers were computer-literate and internet-connected persons; the others were not. Those who were computer-literate were teachers who could go to internet-spot areas near district offices on workdays or could go home in town on the weekends. They used their computer or gadgets to communicate online. In town, they were supported with 12-hour or 24-hour electricity and a relatively slow internet connection and could learn from internet sources and social media using laptop/desktop computers and gadgets. Most of them communicated mainly through social media and social media groups. For official communication, they often used email, and they keep their data on the email and back them up with virtual drives and offline drives. No one has started developing an online learning forum for them. They had no idea of how to organize and how to find resources. A new teacher in Sajingan Besar said:

Actually, we really want to learn online from the internet and lectures like you, but we don't know how to do that and how to start. I am very young and still new. I don't mind doing things under my senior's supervision. It's difficult for me to invite them because I have a psychological burden if I initiate something here.

Most teachers attended workshops and other professional development meetings if the school sent. In the workshops, they usually met their colleagues and ex-classmates and shared their experiences. Some of those teachers went to conferences organized by universities and attended discussions organized by English teacher forums that they call *Musyawah Guru Mata Pelajaran* (MGMP).

Some teachers who worked far away from the centre of districts or were geographically isolated never got connected to the internet or cellular spots. They did not know or were not even eager to know how to use the internet, computer, or even android. They updated their knowledge through radio broadcasts and headmasters' briefings. In their spare time, they worked in rice fields or went fishing in the sea. Local conventional English teachers' forums did not work well because of the geographical and transportation constraints. School inspectors could not reach schools in very rural or isolated schools because every county only had a minimal number of school inspectors compared to the number of schools and the broad span of control.

In the capital city of Kalimantan Barat province, there are some lecturers or teacher trainers and experienced teachers who can help improve the rural teachers' quality. A lecturer at the faculty of education said:

My pleasure! I will be very happy if I can help rural teachers via an only forum. If I can get a partner teacher in a rural area, I will be happy to write a proposal for social work, and I will be able to help them funded by this campus. Rural area and borderland are very sexy issues. Perhaps, some experienced teachers in Pontianak will be happy to join me.

They mostly work in universities and colleges and more developed schools. Some of them also served as teacher tutors and school inspectors. As required by regulations, lecturers should do social work and research as part of their professional development. Some groups of lecturers of the education and teacher training faculty went to rural areas to help improve the rural teachers' quality. Since they attended professional development meetings only once in a while and without any follow-up, the teachers' quality in those areas did not develop significantly. On the other hand, teachers in town tended to do classroom action research in their schools as a part of their professional development; and usually did not have an impact on the teachers in rural areas.

### ***The possibility of developing an online forum***

It was found that it would be possible to develop a rural English teacher online discussion forum that can be used to learn together to improve their professional competencies. A causal analysis that is visualized in the causal network in Figure 1 shows that there are three major values that might influence the attempt of developing rural English teacher online discussion forum in the four districts, namely: opportunity, strength, and weakness. No data proved that there was a threat if the teachers in those areas would develop the online forum. The three values were the result of qualitative causal and correlational analyses of the descriptors as explained.

The opportunity was the external factors that we found supportive to an attempt of initiating and developing the English teacher online forum in the four districts. Most factors that existed in the government regulation dimension and in the connectivity dimension might be able to encourage teachers to develop their competences. The standards of teacher's quality and the requirements of teacher's promotion that were stipulated by the government regulation extrinsically motivated the teachers to get access to the internet in order to find information and to learn together or to learn from others. The

regulation that forces telecommunication companies to share towers with other providers and the obligation of the government to provide internet in every district would ease the teachers to get internet spots near their places. The regulation that mandates the government to provide village funds to every village equally and the mandate to the government to take priorities to rural, frontal, and border areas would enable to accelerate the development of the four districts. Such a situation would make the teachers get more facilities and access to knowledge and people and would make the development of the forum relatively easier.

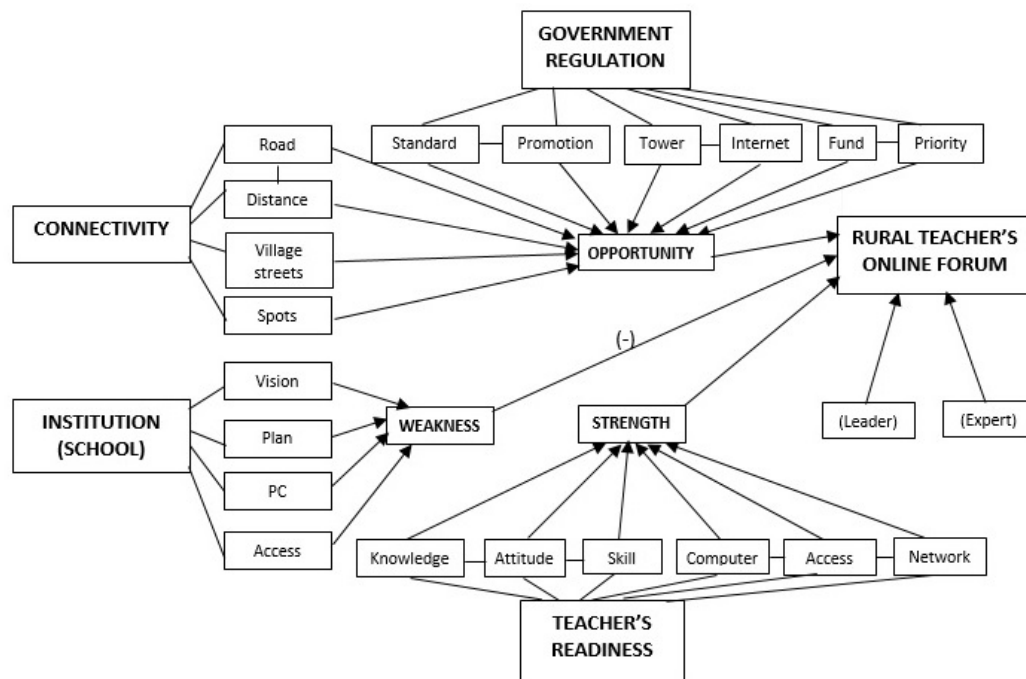


Figure 1. The causal network of the possibility of developing rural English teacher online forums in Kalimantan Barat

Four factors in the connectivity dimension also contributed to the opportunity value. The poor road condition, especially from Terentang and from Padang Tikar to the nearest cities and to the capital of Kalimantan Barat province, might be able to drive the teachers to communicate and to find information through the internet more frequently. Likewise, the length of time that people in Paloh and Sajingan Besar should spend to reach the capital of the province would direct the teachers to learn in their places. Whereas, the availability of sea transportations and coaches would make them possible to get gadgets and other electronic equipment that they needed to learn online. Another pair of factors that support the opportunity value is the good condition

of streets within and amongst the villages in the four districts and the availability of internet spots in every district centre. Most teachers could go to the district centres and could visit their colleagues for discussions whenever they need to. It meant, the teachers could do face-to-face discussion with their colleagues nearby and could get information and do online discussion with people outside the districts using the internet. When they went to their hometown on the weekends, they could utilize better internet connection to find information and do online discussions. The two dimensions contributed to an immense opportunity to an effort of developing an online rural English teachers' discussion forum.

The teacher readiness dimension had six factors, and all of them contributed to the strength value. The teachers' knowledge, attitude, and skills that were correlated to each other powerfully influence the teachers' behaviour and habit toward the using of gadget and the internet to support their competencies. The other powerful support that the teachers could control was the configuration of teachers' ownership of computers, their ability to get internet access in different places, and their social and professional networks. The two configurations support each other to form the strength value of the possibility of developing an online forum.

Weakness value was mostly contributed by their institutions (schools). The visions and plans that did not cover teacher professional development resulted in the schedule, job description, and budget that did not support the teacher online forum development. Then, the unavailability of computers and internet connection for teacher professional development had made the teachers hopeless to the schools' support to the possibility of developing the forum.

### ***Proposed design of the online English teacher forums***

From the analysis of the situation, there is a possibility to develop online forums to improve teachers' quality in the four rural districts. To overcome the psychological and social -distances amongst them, the teachers may develop different and flexible forums for different smaller communities and a broader forum to make them connected with one another. The different and flexible forums will enable the teachers to communicate more confidently, and the larger group will be able to connect them with teachers in different rural areas or different levels of school. It is an essential requirement that the teachers can get connected to the internet, have enough computers and gadgets that support internet connection, and like to attend discussion forums. The opportunity was

open because the government had issued regulations that require the teachers to improve their competences, promised reward for teachers with excellent competences, and facilitated telecommunication companies to provide services to rural societies. Notwithstanding geographical and transportation difficulties, it is still possible for teachers to meet each other in offline discussion forums. Despite the inadequacy of internet facilities and strategic plan, the schools always send teachers for teacher development programs by the government.

#### *Synergizing online and offline activities*

To build online forums, the English teachers in the four rural districts need to synergize their online and offline activities. Topics and problems can be introduced and discussed virtually through the apps and social media that were used by the teachers. Online sources that a teacher has learned from can be shared with his/her colleagues in chat rooms or groups. MGMP can be one of the alternative offline forums. In MGMP meetings, teachers can do more interactive and personalized discussions and can share more information. Teachers can have regular meetings in the county centers. They will be able to organize the meeting because the organizers and the participants can discuss their preparations online before they meet. It would also be possible to support offline meetings with a webinar, but more preparation will be necessary. The synergy between the online and offline forum will be able to make the forums more productive; not only does it give complete information, but it also motivates more teachers to get involved in the forum.

#### *Designing the format*

Asynchronous online forums for English teachers in rural areas of West Kalimantan can be developed by utilizing the available resources and by synergizing the online forum with the offline forum. The purpose of developing the forums is to make chat rooms or online learning forums to help teachers in rural areas learn from one another and interact with external experts. The forums are informal and open to every English teacher in the area. There can be more than one chat room in one area to accommodate teachers with different backgrounds and levels of competence. Community members can use different applications or social media to adjust to the members' habits. The scope of the learning topics is curriculum and materials development, professional promotion, and teachers' competency improvement.

Teachers that have a relatively intensive engagement with the internet can be the core of the members. Teachers with a certificate of professional



teachers can mentor novice and less experienced teachers. To be able to reach the teachers in very rural areas, government radio and community radio broadcasts can be good alternatives. The members can use English and Bahasa Indonesia as the medium of communication. However, the organizer and the core teachers must use Bahasa Indonesia when communicating with less experienced teachers and with teachers in very rural areas.

However, the forums need a leader or a group of leaders that can voluntarily initiate, plan, organize, actuate, and maintain the program. A small group of teachers can start the forums from a small group of connected teachers by disregarding their locations and levels of competence. These volunteers then invite other teachers to get connected with them online, organize the flow of conversations, and connect the forum with the MGMPs.

#### *Inviting external help*

External agents would be able to help teachers initiate and manage online forums. Some groups of experts that possibly can help are teacher trainers, teacher trainees, and experienced teachers in West Kalimantan or other places, including overseas teachers and teacher trainers. The external persons can play roles as resource persons, mentors, and IT supports. In the beginning, the external agents can get involved actively in the forums, but they should reduce their involvements gradually to the very minimum level, like scaffolding. It is essential to confirm at the beginning of the program that the external persons help the teachers voluntarily. It will be beneficial if the external help can synergize their professional program with the forum's activities funded by the external institutions.

#### ***Leadership challenges and solutions***

From the situational analysis and the proposed design, it is evident that rural education needs the presence of leadership. More importantly, strong leadership is necessary to build a new community with a strong vision to improve the quality of English education through English teachers' quality improvement. However, it is a challenge to find a teacher that can voluntarily do rigorous work while working full-time.

Two traditional views of leadership, a leader is born, and a leader is trained, can be good alternatives but will take much time. The third alternative is involving external resource to scaffold the development of the online forum. Through utilizing current information and communication technologies, the

external resources can find motivated teachers and help them build the forums through the scaffolding process. The scaffolding process is also training given to the motivated teachers because they will learn how to build and run online discussion forums for the rural teacher when they are working with the external resource persons.

## **Discussion**

### ***Online activities and physical meetings***

There should always be programs or activities that can improve teachers' quality to improve the quality of education, particularly in rural areas where there are more geographical challenges that may undermine the teachers' commitment to teaching. It is imperative to prepare, maintain, and improve committed teachers' commitment and performance (Hariri & Sumintono, 2020). English teachers upgrading and workshops were provided by the government but not very often, and this needs to be followed up with discussions amongst the teachers. Online forums can be an excellent alternative to help the teachers improve their competencies, mainly if the teachers can participate in the forums appropriately (Alzahrani, 2017; Simonson et al., 2015). In an online forum, the interaction and discussion process are more important than completing the task (Vinagre, 2017) because the learning processes take place when they are interacting with one another. The findings that most teachers in some rural areas could get access to the internet had laptops and android mobile phones and liked to attend seminars and other professional development meetings could build optimism that it would be possible to build English teachers online forums for them. It can be estimated that the learning process will take place in the proposed forum as the findings also said that most teachers are also active in social media, and some of them are tutors of teacher professional development programs that were recruited and trained by the government. A study that uncovered Indonesian teachers' readiness and positive attitude toward mobile learning (Yusri et al., 2015) can be an excellent support to building the online forum.

Online discussion forums need to be reinforced with physical meetings (Nunes et al., 2016). This strong suggestion can be fulfilled in Sajingan Besar and Paloh districts because most schools in those two districts are located on the main roads, and the teachers can meet at one of the school buildings or one of the government buildings. However, in Terentang and Batu Ampar districts, only teachers that work or live near the centre of the districts will be able to do

so. Teachers who work and live far away from the centre of the districts will not be able to attend a physical meeting or to meet one another. They even could not get connected with other English teachers online.

So far, it has been a severe problem to reach rural teachers in some parts of Terentang and Batu Ampar. Geographical distance and transportation problems have made them "isolated" from other schools and communities of the same districts. As a beginning, however, this program does not need to reach every rural teacher. The teacher community can start from small and then grow the forum to reach larger areas and more significant numbers of teachers. It is not very important to debate whether this program is purely a rural teachers' forum as some different definitions have been raised by experts. Two of them have been included above (Koziol et al., 2015; Simonson et al., 2015). What is proposed here is a forum to help teachers that are geographically far from the main centres of education and to grow the forum little-by-little.

### ***Telecollaborative competencies and content knowledge***

Teachers are required to have telecollaborative competences (procedural and conceptual) to be able to participate in an online forum (Vinagre, 2017). It will be an advantage if every English teacher in the four rural districts has adequate telecollaborative competences. The forum will run smoothly, and the members will get the maximum benefit from smooth and proper online forum activities. However, a small group of teachers that have good telecollaborative competences will be enough to initiate this forum and help their colleagues share the knowledge of telecollaboration and manage the forum voluntarily. As indicated in the findings, some teachers are already trained and recruited as teacher instructors by the government. Informally they can be mentors and leaders of the forums. This way will be in-line with what was suggested in a previous study that some mentors' and leaders' assistance through dialogue reflexivity would be very helpful for the rural teacher (Willis et al., 2017).

The initiators and leaders of this proposed forum can learn from a study in Kentucky that found the benefit of collaboration amongst the professional development service providers, the organizations that gathered the data, and the scholarly community in content-based teacher development program (Barrett et al., 2015). Teacher trainers in universities and experienced teachers that work and stay in the main cities in Kalimantan Barat are potential partners to collaborate as external resources. As they are required to do research and social works for their promotions, this forum can offer collaborative activities

for their research and social work that have positive impacts on the development of the forum and the rural teacher's quality improvement. The rural teachers will be able to learn conceptual competence, procedural competence, and content knowledge from external experts through collaborative activities. It is much more beneficial if the external experts can get involved in the online forum because the process will be less costly and the teachers can practice learning through the online forum.

### ***Asynchronous discussion***

Asynchronous mode activities are chosen because they are flexible and enable rural teachers to participate in the forum whenever they get internet access. In a synchronous program, any participant can learn in different places and at different times (Simonson et al., 2015). As indicated in the findings, most teachers actively connect to the internet, but they need certain spots and specific times to get connected to the internet. Weekends, when they went back to their homes in towns, were the best time for them to go online. Asynchronous mode of discussions can give the teachers time to go online and to prepare responses. As they were at different levels of English proficiency and professional knowledge, members who are not confident with their knowledge and language will benefit from the extra time to respond.

### ***Need for leadership***

The findings show that there is a challenge of leadership. So far, the internet facilities have been available even though not 7/24 and not in most areas. The transportation infrastructure has not been a big problem for the teachers to meet and learn together. The teachers need someone or a group of people that can initiate and motivate the teachers to collaborate in a learning forum. With good leadership, online learning forums can be organized (Chua et al., 2017; Ruggieri et al., 2013). More specifically, transformational leadership can be a useful model to make online learning forums take place (Alotebi et al., 2018). This type of leader is characterized by intrinsic motivation and role-modelling rather than by other drives.

### ***Periodical evaluation***

Program evaluation is always important, including in the context of developing and running the rural English teacher discussion forum. The evaluation can be conducted from various perspectives, but basically, it is essential to know if the forum needs adaptations or improvement. The evaluation can focus on learners,

instructors, resources, pedagogy, technology, and culture (Saykılı, 2018). The leaders and mentors may learn from a study in Japan about the effectiveness of blended learning of English (Alizadeh et al., 2019). It is also essential to know if the teachers are satisfied with the program and whether the program can help improve the rural teachers' competencies.

## **Conclusion**

The situation in the rural areas of Kalimantan Barat – Indonesia, particularly in the four districts of this research, supports the possibility of developing English teacher discussion forums. Asynchronous mode of online discussion forums using social media can be an alternative to be used by the forums. The proposed model of discussion and media can overcome the internet connection problem, gaps of expertise, and psychological and social challenges. Teacher trainers from universities and experienced teachers can be invited as resource persons that will be able to enrich the forums and to mentor the forum administrators. To implement this proposal, a group of committed teachers or committed external volunteers should start the action by gathering interested teachers to join with them in an online forum and start the discussion. Teachers with transformational leadership capacities can initiate the discussion and administer the forum.

Through learning and sharing information in the discussion forums, the rural teachers will be able to improve their communication and professional competences. In the coming years, when the internet is more accessible in rural areas, the teachers will potentially be able to connect themselves and their students to teachers and students in towns and in other countries. Such a situation will help the rural areas develop more vastly, and the gaps between the quality of life in towns and in the rural areas will decrease.

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