A Case Study of Enhancing Teacher Knowledge

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative research examined the extent to which Taiwanese educators in one selected high school in Taiwan viewed their English language study group as a professional development activity that contributes to their teaching. This case study employed the following data collection techniques: (1) informal observations and interviews, (2) focus group interview, (3) semi-structured individual interviews, and (4) documents and records. The site selected for this study was the National Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School in Chia-Yi City in Taiwan. An important feature of this particular study group, the English Teachers Club, is that it had been in existence for 16 years. Participants in this teacher study group reported the benefits of this professional development activity included: learning English as a foreign language, gaining
ideas for improving classroom English instruction, and sharing teaching experiences, stimulating positive dispositions to learning, fostering intellectual development, and socialization and friendship. These benefits, I argue, helped participants to develop content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The experiences of the teacher study group revealed some of the successes and problems that the teachers experienced as their involvement in a study group evolved.

Key words: English Study Group, Teacher Professional Development, Content Knowledge, Pedagogical Knowledge, Pedagogical Content Knowledge

I. Introduction

Typically, traditional professional development programs are characterized as “one shot” training workshops where experts deliver new knowledge or skills to teachers through lecture presentations. However, a number of researchers suggest that this traditional form of professional development using outside experts to transit knowledge to teachers is usually ineffective because teachers do not have much control of the learning agenda and have limited opportunities to both explore the theory underlying new ideas and skills and to practice the skill in a risk free environment. Furthermore, traditional professional development is usually not on-going and teachers do not gain feedback on their implementation of any new idea or skill. As Guskey argues, “Effective staff development rests not so much in the initial training but in what happens afterward. It is the follow-up, the support, the on-going professionally embedded assistance that makes the real difference” (p. 7).

Given the limitations of traditional professional development, study groups have emerged as an alternative approach in which teachers have more autonomy to identify their own learning needs and to engage in self-directed learning. Much of the literature on study groups, however, focuses on the method or procedure of how to develop study groups in a school. However, little literature focuses on the effect of study groups on their professional growth. This study attempted to examine study group participants’ perceptions of study groups as a vehicle for teacher learning. Second, this study examined teachers’ narrated effect of attending a study group on their professional growth. This understanding should include how study groups affect their professional learning.

The significance of the study should contribute to the limited body of knowledge about teacher study groups and participants’ perceptions of their influence on their professional growth and learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Study groups have been categorized as a reform type of professional development. As Murphy argued, “study groups have been hailed as a creative method for staff development, as a
way to promote the professionalization of teachers, and as a technique to foster school restructuring” (p. 71). These notions connect with my research with regards to the value of teacher study groups in the two following ways. First, since teacher study groups appear to be a form of staff development, the more important issue is what are the purposes and outcomes of study groups for teachers. I believe any professional development activities should be evaluated based on participants’ own perceptions of their worth and of how their experiences influence their teaching in the classroom. This study attempted to examine study group participants’ perceptions of study groups as a vehicle for teacher learning. Second, this study examined teachers’ narrated effect of attending a study group on their professional growth.

A major assumption of my dissertation is that study groups enable teachers to engage in and control their own learning. Several empirical studies provide further evidence of how study groups affect teacher learning. A number of researchers also provide evidence that study group discussions increase the likelihood that new teaching behaviors will be adopted and transferred from the professional development activity to classroom practice. For example, in the study of teachers and principals’ attitudes about teacher study groups at the “Shining Star” program, Emery found that teacher study groups were an effective professional development model that allowed staff members to grow professionally in a style that fit a variety of their needs. Many teachers and principals who were interviewed in this study seemed to express similar positive feelings with regards to learning experiences evolving from study groups. Both teachers and principals viewed study groups as a continuous source of lasting professional development. Teacher study groups can provide these active learning opportunities for teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and professional growth.

The above literature reveals that teacher study groups are able to promote teacher professional development so that many teachers can find value. Teacher study groups have shown in the literature to have a strong positive correlation to teacher development. However, Pfaff noted that there is very little current data available on the effectiveness of study groups, especially teachers’ perceptions of study groups as a form of staff development to their professional development. There is little information about Taiwanese teachers’ perceptions of the use of teacher study groups on their professional growth. Despite the paucity of empirical investigations, the literature discussed above still provides a foundation of informative studies with regards to teacher study groups as a form of staff development. With respect to my research questions, little information is available about Taiwanese teachers’ perceptions of the use of study groups on their professional growth. The following is my research question: What do the teachers view as the benefits of a teacher study group to their professional growth?
METHODOLOGY

Research Site

The site selected for this study is the National Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School in Chia-Yi City in Taiwan. The English Teachers Club at National Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School is the oldest English study group in elementary and secondary schools in Taiwan. It has been in operation for sixteen years, and functions entirely in English. This is significant because, according to Liu and his colleagues (1996), before 1996 it was difficult to find teacher study groups in Taiwanese schools.

An Introduction to the English Teachers Club

A teacher study group is defined as “a collaborative group organized and sustained by teachers to help them strengthen their professional development in areas of common interest” (p. 7). Under this definition, the English Teachers Club at National Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School is a form of study group.

The English Teachers Club has been in existence for sixteen years, since 1988. The purpose of the English Club is to provide an environment and opportunity to promote the use of the English language for teachers. Because Taiwan is not an English-speaking country, people, even English teachers, have few opportunities to hear and speak English. In this study group, all the members have the opportunity to speak in English with Chinese teachers, as well as with native speakers of the English language, because one or two native English speakers are invited to a meeting each month. The English Teachers Club is directed by a group of teachers to enrich their English development in areas of common concern. However, one does not have to be an English teacher to join; it is open to all teachers.

Participants

The participants in this study included eight members of the English Teachers Club: seven teachers working at the National Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School and one teacher working at Chia-Yi Municipal Junior High School. The group consisted of five English teachers, one chemistry teacher, one music teacher, and one guidance counselor.

Data Collection Techniques

This study employed the following data collection techniques: (1) informal observations and informal interviews, (2) focus group interviews, (3) semi-structured individual interviews, and (4) documents and records.

Data Analysis Techniques

In order to accomplish the goals of my study, the methods of data analysis included: searching
for patterns, themes, and ideas in the data; creating coding categories as the patterns emerged; and organizing the data into these categories. By analyzing the data in a structured and meaningful way, I identified key themes and relationships, in discovering participants’ insights on study groups. In particular, I described teachers’ perceptions of the effect of study groups on their professional and personal growth. Finally, I intended to explore the narrated effective characteristics of study groups from participants’ perspectives.

**Findings, Discussions and Conclusion**

Data from individual interviews, a focus group interview, observations, and school documents revealed six categories concerning the perceived benefits of the study group. They included a) learning English as a foreign language, b) gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction, c) sharing teaching experiences, d) stimulating positive dispositions to learning, e) fostering intellectual development, and f) socializing and friendship.

In this section, I focus on how the first three benefits of the study group are connected to teacher professional learning. The three categories of reported benefits can be viewed as representing a content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge.

**Developing English to Improve Subject-Matter Knowledge**

When asked about their own learning experiences in the study group, teachers emphasized improving English language skills. All eight participants in this study expressed positive feelings about the English language learning experiences in the study group. Additionally, when asked about the purpose of the study group in the individual interviews and focus group interview, the eight participants indicated that the primary purpose is to improve English skills of: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Michael explained how this teacher study group helped members to improve their English skills:

The purpose of this study group certainly is to increase the opportunities of listening, speaking, reading and writing for Taiwanese teachers. Because if you want to discuss an article that is distributed a week ahead of time, you got to read first and think and process, or write notes to keep your mind organized prior to the discussion. So, writing, reading (article), listening (listen to what people talk about), and speaking (talk about your opinion) ….. these four skills are more beneficial from the practice.

Furthermore, through my informal and formal interviews with the participants, as they took responsibility for their English learning, all the teachers in the teacher study group reported that they made progress in their English ability. Given that the purpose and focus of the study group is learning English as a foreign language, participation clearly represents one way for English teachers to acquire subject matter knowledge. The findings in the study indicate that this teacher
study group serves as a vehicle for English teachers to develop in-depth content knowledge. Subject matter knowledge is an understanding of the major themes, concepts, and constructs in the field of instruction. Teachers need a deep understanding of the subject matter they teach, because content knowledge is associated with shaping instructional practice. If teachers have in-depth content knowledge, they not only have a variety of sources explaining for their students, but also can build connections to other content areas which makes learning more relevant.

However, this study group is not just for English teachers, it is also open to teachers of other subjects. Although they do not teach English, teachers of other subjects have the opportunity to improve their English for personal development. The content knowledge about English that they learn can be understood as the knowledge of other content, “a teacher’s non-target content knowledge that is not directly related to the subject being taught” (p. 267). In this study, the teachers of other subjects, Sharon, reported using English as a tool to capture information related to their subject area. As Hashweh pointed out, when teachers of other subjects are proficient in English, they have more resources and information on which to draw to enhance their content knowledge. Although English is not their subject area, teachers of other subjects can acquire knowledge in the study group that contributes to their teaching. This is one way that this study group connects to the professional development of teachers of other subjects. The subject matter knowledge that English teachers, as well as non-English teachers, develop in this study group represents one characteristic of this study group as a place for professional learning. However, although this study group reportedly contributed to the development of in-depth content knowledge, there is no evidence to see how well these teachers develop their subject matter knowledge.

General Pedagogical Knowledge

The reported benefit of sharing teaching experiences can be related to the development of general pedagogical knowledge, an important component of teacher professional development. As Borko and Putnam explain, pedagogical knowledge includes “knowledge of various strategies for creating learning environments and conducting lessons; strategies and arrangements for effective classroom management; and more fundamental knowledge and beliefs about learners, how they learn, and how that learning can be fostered by teaching” (p. 39).

When considering how the study group had affected them professionally, the five participants who are teachers of English reported that the experience of attending the study group made them feel confident in English, and in turn, in their English teaching. In this study, six teachers pointed out that the study group helped them to add more subject matter in the classroom by introducing content or experiences of their discussions. They reported that the English learning experience from the study group enriched their instructional content and helped to interest students. Eric viewed what he learned in this study group as his teaching resources. Michael also pointed out that students
benefited a lot when he introduced the contents of their readings to them, because it is more varied and interesting than what is in textbooks. The above examples indicate that the study group provides a professional learning opportunity for teachers to develop their knowledge of instruction, identified as one essential component of general pedagogical knowledge.

Furthermore, as a result of her participation in the study group, Christina made efforts to change her English teaching to create an English-speaking environment for her students. She challenged herself to speak in English all the time, rather than just translating text from Chinese to English or English to Chinese. English teachers in the study reported that they made efforts to change their teaching to create an English-speaking environment for students. The reported benefits of this study group also suggest that teachers developed general pedagogical development in the form of ideas for creating learning environments for students.

In addition to the knowledge of learning environments and instructional strategies, another reported benefit of the study group relates to classroom management, a component of general pedagogical development. For example, novice teachers indicated that they obtain helpful ideas from their more experienced colleagues by sharing their teaching experiences. A study by Johnson (1992) pointed out that classroom management was the aspect of pedagogical decisions of most concern to ESL novice teachers. If teachers want to accomplish effective classroom management, they need to have “strategies for establishing rules and procedures, organizing groups, monitoring and pacing classroom events, and reacting to misbehavior” (p. 41). While classroom management is a general concern of novice teachers, this study group reportedly provides opportunities for novice teachers to foster their knowledge of classroom management.

The reported benefits of fostering teachers’ curriculum and instruction, creating English learning environments, and classroom management that characterized this study group are conducive to teachers’ general pedagogical development. In this study, the study group provides teachers the professional learning opportunity to be engaged in active discussion of instructional ideas and content. This evidence shows that the study group is a place not only for people to get together, but also for them to share and exchange ideas to enhance their pedagogical knowledge.

The study group also was reported to influence the non-English teachers’ promotion of English teaching strategies. For example, Sharon, a chemistry teacher, used a strategy of encouraging students to memorize English terms to understand a different situation in Chemistry. She explained about the differences of chemistry terms in English and Chinese to students in her classrooms and warned them to be aware of the different usage of chemical terms in different language. Another non-English teacher, Angelica, talked about how the study group experiences affected the relationship between her counseling and students in the school. She had more resources and content to use in her counseling for understanding.

Hence, the study group provided teachers with ideas and information to stimulate their teaching and thus students’ learning in the classrooms, creating a link between teachers’ English
learning and their students’ English learning. In other words, the study group not only provides a way for English teachers to make their English instruction more interesting and relevant to current issues, but also for non-English teachers to lead students to understand English more, even apply English in their field. These effects for teachers can broaden students’ learning English as a foreign language beyond the limited world of textbooks. This shows that although attending this study group was not directly applicable to the instruction of teachers from other subject areas, the study group also apparently influenced their general pedagogical knowledge.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

While English teachers confided that the learning of English contributed to their content knowledge, the study group experience also helped them to transfer this knowledge into English instruction. These English teachers reported that their participation in the study group not only improved their English speaking abilities, but it also helped them make a more meaningful connection between the process of learning English and teaching English. This means that teachers in the study group developed pedagogical content knowledge which is understood as the transformation of teachers’ subject matter knowledge into their classroom teaching.\(^{14,15}\)

The findings in the study suggest that teachers are involved in the development of knowledge of instructional strategies and representations\(^{22}\), which are components of pedagogical content knowledge. With this knowledge, teachers are more likely to adapt the appropriate forms of representation for the subject matter by using explanations, examples, illustrations, etc., that make the subject understandable and interesting to students.\(^{15}\) In this study, teachers reported that the discussions during the study group sessions influenced what they do in the classroom, because the group discussions provided them with instructional ideas. Teachers seemed to take advantage of this study group as a learning opportunity to enrich their curriculums to enhance students’ interest to learning English. The reported benefits indicate that the study group is a professional learning opportunity contributing to teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge.

In addition, teachers reported that they would add new content to their classrooms if the information is related to their teaching. As discussed, Michael and Florence reported that materials received during the study group kept them updated about new developments in their perspective fields. Developing knowledge of curriculum and curricular materials has been identified as a component of pedagogical content knowledge.\(^{22}\) Such knowledge of curriculum and curricular materials is characterized as the knowledge about “the curricular materials available for teaching particular subject matter and about how the curriculum is organized and structured both horizontally and vertically within one’s own school system”\(^{22}\) (p. 50). Put simply, this is the knowledge about what resources and materials are available for teaching and selecting appropriate materials. As Darling-Hammond\(^{23}\) mentioned in describing how teacher learning supports student learning, teachers need to know about curriculum resources to connect their students with sources
of information and knowledge that allow them to explore ideas, acquire and synthesize information. This suggests that English teachers’ experiences in the study group provide them with new curriculum sources beyond the textbooks for the content they teach. The development of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge helps them explore ideas about their curriculum and instructional practices. These results reveal this study group is a professional learning opportunity that enhances teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge.

The Impact on Improving Teaching Practice and on Students’ Performance

Although this study shows the direct link to teachers’ professional development, there is an impact on improving teaching practice and on students’ performance.

This study shows that teachers are willing to try new ideas and transfer content and experiences from the study group to their classrooms, although there are no specific skills or strategies that seem to be transferred to the classroom setting. There was also no data directly understanding the issues of relating the impact of the study groups on lesson and curriculum planning. It was not part of this study, however, to examine the relationship between teachers’ learning English in the study group, and student achievement in learning English. Certainly there is no focus on student achievement in this study group. The participants, for example, don’t collect and analyze data about student work to determine student obstacles to learning. One teacher said, “To students, I have no idea on about this (student achievement). My students seem not to have had any influence on from it”.

When asked if the experience of attending the study group changed their classroom practice, all the teachers interviewed responded that they did not target a specific skill or strategy to directly apply to classroom teaching. In my observations, there seemed to have no evidence that the study group encouraged critical teacher reflection on their teaching practice, both individually or as a group, and or supported study group participants to look for other alternatives and teaching strategies that might prove helpful to certain students beyond a concern on the part of some teachers to learn about better classroom management strategies. One teacher explained that the reason why teachers seldom reflected in study group sessions on student learning was that members were from different schools although at the time of this study only one participant was from a different school, and the problems and students they faced were different.

Interestingly, all of the participants responded that the experiences of attending the study group didn’t make them work with other teachers on curriculum and instruction much more. As Michael said, “It’s a personal job to prepare for teaching material. It's common for teachers to deal with these materials by themselves. It's not like teachers in Western countries, who work together on their curriculum planning.” The eight teachers interviewed explained that this view of curriculum planning contributes to a generally isolated teaching culture in Taiwan. As previously stated, teachers commonly indicated that curriculum planning and instruction in classroom tends to
be an individual responsibility, rather than collaborating with other teachers. Although the study group process was supportive in helping to reduce the sense of isolation and giving teachers the opportunity to come together on a regular basis and share ideas and discuss relevant issues about teaching or education, there is still a long way for teachers to go to become reflective in their classroom practice through collaboration in the study group.

The commonly shared view that teaching is an individual personal responsibility makes teachers hesitant to reflect on their teaching practice with colleagues. Under the dominant teaching culture in Taiwan, teachers usually are not comfortable opening their classroom for other teachers to observe, let alone allowing colleagues to discuss their teaching. Taiwanese teachers seem not to be ready to accept this challenge to their teaching. Given this isolated teaching culture, teachers’ learning in the study group tends to be a somewhat superficial or limited sharing of teaching experience rather than a critical reflection on their teaching practice. Based on my observations and interviews, the teachers in this study group seldom had conversations about how they teach and foster students’ English learning in classrooms and what problems they faced in their teaching. This indicates that this study group is not centered on student learning and performance but on teachers’ English learning. This is not surprising that teachers in this study did not mention or suggest how to specifically promote teachers’ teaching practice and how to foster students’ learning effectiveness. As Pfaff\(^6\) and Emery\(^9\) argue study groups need further research to identify their influence on student achievement since the ultimate goal of staff development is to increase student learning and student performance.

II. Conclusion

In summary, the knowledge teachers reported learning in the study group can be viewed as representing a dynamic complex of subject matter knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. In this study, the reported benefits of the study group, English learning as a foreign language, gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction, and sharing teaching experiences, suggest that teacher learning in the study group contributes to their content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. These characteristics confirm the importance of this study group as a professional development activity. However, the isolated teaching culture shows the limited sharing of teaching practice, and further influence students’ English learning.

References

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