

*Full Length Research Paper*

# How teachers develop their professional knowledge in English study group in Taiwan

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Accepted 27 October, 2017

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the perceptions of Taiwanese teachers of the effects of a study group on their professional growth in the workplace. 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. The participants in this study included eight members of the English Teachers Club. Although the focus of this club was offering opportunities for members to practice and improve their English, it functioned as a teacher study group. Specifically, the reported benefits of this professional development activity included: learning English as a foreign language, gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction, sharing teaching experiences, stimulating positive dispositions to learning, and fostering intellectual development. These benefits, I argue, helped participants to develop content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, fostering of continuing learning, and cognitive/intellectual and theoretical development. The experiences of the teacher study group at Chia-Yi Girls' Senior High School revealed some of the successes and problems that the teachers experienced as their involvement in a study group evolved.

**Key words:** Professional development, study group, content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) not only argued that teacher learning can occur in a variety of ways, but also that training was not the only way of providing staff development. They further suggested that teachers meet regularly in small instructional support groups to examine research on teaching and learning as a catalyst for change. One form of job-embedded learning they propose is study groups. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley also argued that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, staff development will regularly include study groups as one of the multiple ways of offering staff development at the school site. Study groups are one method to get educators involved in shaping their professional development, as well as facilitating the improvement of their school (Anders and Richardson, 1991; Kincheloe, 1991).

A major assumption of the present study is that study groups enable teachers to engage in and control their own learning. As Short et al. (1993) argued, while educational reform usually focused on students' learning, professional development opportunities seldom offer educators

a way to be active participants in their own learning; and teacher learning is the cornerstone of teachers' professional development. Research on adult learning offers a theoretical framework for staff developers to use as they select activities to engage teachers in learning (Knowles, 1980). Knowles (1980) explains that when adults mature, they see themselves as self-directed learners with a reservoir of experiences. Teachers can be treated as active learners to grow and develop in a manner that accommodates their needs in study groups based on adult learning. Teacher study groups can provide these active learning opportunities for teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and professional growth. Several empirical studies (Pfaff, 2000; Meyer et al., 1998; Caine and Caine, 2000; Murphy, 1992; Garet et al., 2001; Emery, 1998; Short et al., 1993) provide further evidence of how study groups affect teacher learning.

A number of researchers 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 (Fullan, 1991; Emery, 1998; Birchark et al., 1998; Short et al., 1993; Pfaff, 2000). In addition, members of the groups commented on the ways in which their dialogue with others helped them think through connections between their beliefs and their practices (Birchark et al., 1998). Further, Short et al. (1993) used an interactive approach to curriculum change through study groups which enabled teachers and principals to share their understanding and language about curriculum. Therefore, these experiences show that the format of study groups provides teachers with an opportunity to share teaching strategies and classroom experiences, while they are encouraged to try new approaches or strategies in their classroom from the support received within study groups. While the significance of study groups in the studies mentioned above is obvious, there is little research focused on how teacher study groups can directly connect to teachers' professional development.

These notions connect with my research with regards to the value of teacher study groups in the three 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. Professional development activities of teachers should be evaluated based on participants' own perceptions of their worth and of how their experiences influence their teaching in the classroom. Second, this study examined teachers' narrated effect of attending a study group on their professional growth. Third, while English education has received much attention in Taiwan, the contribution of an English Teachers Club, especially one with a 17-year history, has not been investigated.

With respect to teachers' perceptions of the effect of study groups on their professional development, we raised the followings research questions:

What do the teachers in a selected Taiwanese high school view as the benefits of a teacher study group?

To what extent, if any, does a teacher study group affect Taiwanese teachers' professional development?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative 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 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" (Cramer et al., 1996). Following this definition, the English Teachers Club at National Chia-Yi Girls' Senior High School is a teacher study group. The English Teachers Club has been in existence since 1988. It is directed by a group of teachers to enrich their English development in areas of common concern. Membership is not limited to the Eng-

lish teachers at that school. Anyone who is interested in improving his or her English, or who is interested in learning English is welcome to attend. The purpose of the Club is to provide an environment and opportunity to promote the use of the English language either in listening, speaking, reading, or writing among English teachers. Teachers in Taiwan, even English teachers, have few opportunities to hear and speak English. In this study group, members have the opportunity to speak in English with Chinese teachers, as well as with native speakers of the English language, for one or two native English speakers are invited to a meeting each month. The group meets every Wednesday afternoon for one hour at Chia-Yi Girls' Senior High School. The school doesn't assign classes to teachers who attend the English Teachers Club on Wednesday afternoon. Members take turns to be host speakers at each meeting. The facilitator must choose the topic and provide a copy of the reading text for the other teachers to read prior to each meeting, and prepare questions to guide conversation in the group as well.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study included eight members from the English Teachers Club: seven teachers working at the National Chia-Yi Girls' Senior High School and one teacher at Chia-Yi Municipal Junior High School. Among the eight participants, five are English teachers, one chemistry teacher, one music teacher, and one guidance counselor. The eight participants range in years of teaching experience from one year to 40 years. They have attended this study group as little as one year and as long as sixteen years. I translated and transcribed all Chinese audiotapes into English. As a reliability check, two of Taiwanese graduate students who major in English were asked to read transcripts of selected interviews in Chinese and then review my English translations.

## **Data Analysis**

As individual and focus group interviews were completed and transcribed, the information was saved in a separate file for each individual. All data were read, re-read, and analyzed by identifying participants' anonymous name, question number, categories in parenthesis and a sentence, phrase, or text to identify the category. This is a way to see more alternative explanations, anomalies, or conclusions by analyzing a group database. In addition, each question was also analyzed based on the responses from participants. By analyzing each question from participants, additional categories were compared, contrasted or combined to clearly elicit the development of themes. The QSR- NUD\*IST qualitative data analysis computer software program was used as the tool for data analysis.

## **RESULTS**

Data from individual interviews, a focus group interview, observations, and school documents revealed five categories concerning the perceived benefits of the study group:

1. Learning English as a foreign language.
2. Gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction.
3. Sharing teaching experiences.
4. Stimulating positive dispositions to learning.
5. Fostering intellectual development.

## Learning English as a Foreign Language

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, the eight participants indicated that the primary purpose is to improve English skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Nevertheless, this study group provided teachers the opportunity to read English articles and articulate them in their own words in English. For example, in their discussion the article set for discussion at this meeting, "Anxious British Parents Can Track Their Children via Their Mobile Phones", teachers debated whether schools should prohibit students having a mobile phone in schools, and how schools and teachers should deal with the problems of cell phones. One chemistry teacher even raised the issue of the effect of the electrical wave on the human body. Teachers practiced their English by articulating their ideas and explaining the concepts found in the variety of English articles they read. Because they talked about different topics in each meeting, the participants reported that this study group provided opportunities for them to know how to use the appropriate terms or idioms for different situations in English. As a result of reading varied articles, the seven teachers indicated that they read more than they had before and were able to read materials they would not normally have read otherwise.

Furthermore, all the teachers in the teacher study group reported that they made progress in their English ability. The following statements are typical: "my four skills (Listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are improved;" "I really think I make a lot of progress in listening. ..., my reading ability is better than before;" and "I think my English writing is better than Chinese writing."

There was a general agreement that study group participants gained a stronger sense of themselves as English learners and they want to try harder to continue learning English professionally and recreationally. For example, Michael is engaged in translating the Buddhist Scripture in his free time and he thinks it helpful for his English. He said,

I think my translation efforts are a way of growth. During my translation, I need to understand the semantic implications of the Chinese language, and then try to express them in English. If I don't understand some terms of plants, for example, I need to consult. If I encounter medical terms, I need to look them up or ask some experts..... In such cases, it is not only a challenge, but also breakthrough and growth for me.

These comments suggest that the English learning experiences in this teacher study group help teachers in using English.

## Gaining Ideas For Improving Classroom English Instruction

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. For instance, George and Florence felt that the confidence members gained from the study group transfers to classroom teaching. They believed that conducting presentations in the study group in English helps members to display and testify their English ability, and further influences their behavior in classrooms.

In addition to participants in this teacher study group improving their English speaking ability, they reported that their participation helped them make a more meaningful connection between the process of English learning and English teaching. Through the interviews, the participants indicated that attending this teacher study group helped them to improve their classroom English instruction. When English teachers are proficient in the language they teach, their classroom teaching should be positively influenced. One English teacher, Michael, stated that it is important for English teachers to improve their English teaching by increasing their teaching content knowledge. He also noted that this teacher study group provided the opportunity for English teachers to pursue their professional growth in a way that improves 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. George believed that this teacher study group increased teachers' content knowledge of English. 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.

Another English teacher reported that the knowledge gained during the study group meetings helped her ask questions of students and engage students in more meaningful conversations about their English. Florence also reported that current issues discussed in the study group helped her English instruction:

When SARS happened in Taiwan in the past few months, we discussed many articles related to SARS. I mentioned something related to this to students such as some English vocabulary about SARS or other information regarding social issues. I usually mention our discussion related to current news to students in my class.

Christina, as a result of her participation in the study group, 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. She mentioned, "If you have the habit of speaking English in the club, you will try to teach in English in your classroom. This also gives students the environment of English for listening."

In addition, non-English teachers reported their transfer of study group experiences to the classroom. 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. She said,

In this study group, there are people with different background. Some are singles. Some are married with kids. They all agree on this. Definitely, do not evaluate our kids simply from one way. Both kids and parents would suffer from this with the same results. It proves that it's not just a theory, but it's actually working. It assists my students and parents in building an interactive relationship allowing them to be more open-minded. I think the study group is helpful to me as a guidance counselor.

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.

The connection between teachers' English learning and their English teaching is evident from this study. The study group provides a way for those English teachers and non-English teachers to be stimulated with new ideas for their English teaching.

### **Sharing Teaching Experiences**

The data indicated that this study group provided an opportunity for teachers to share and learn from each other's teaching experiences. In particular, these teachers responded that they enjoyed learning English and sharing classroom problems with others in this small group setting.

In this study, teachers vary greatly in their years of teaching experience and therefore their educational and instructional needs. Novice teachers can benefit from learning new ideas from more experienced teachers. One novice teacher, Florence, said,

We usually talk about the issues related to education or family. For example, Michael and George have more teaching experience, and they will talk about their family and their teaching experiences to us. George also told us how to teach students. He is a junior high school teacher who is different than high school teachers like us. The level of students is different than ours, but we can hear about his ideas.

The study group provides teachers with the opportunity to discuss and exchange teaching experiences and for novice teachers to obtain helpful ideas from their more experienced colleagues.

Moreover, when asked of the relationship between the study group discussions and what they do in the classroom, seven teachers believed that the sharing of teaching experiences in the group discussion had provided them with new ideas that would help them in their classrooms. Michael positively felt that teachers brought the experiences of attending the study group to students in the classrooms.

Furthermore, the study group discussions also encouraged educators to relate specific ideas and activities to their practice. Angelica, the guidance counselor, indicated that the study group discussions helped her to clarify her counseling theory and skills when she dealt with students' problems in the school.

By sharing their teaching experiences, participants in the study group indicated they learn from each other and can make connections to the kind of learning environment they were creating for their students in the classrooms.

### **Stimulating Positive Dispositions To Learning**

All of the participants indicated in the focus group interview and individual interviews that the study group promoted a positive attitude to learning, which made them more active and open to different perspectives and other people's viewpoints.

Angelica reported she had learned how to view things with an open mind. She said she had become more open-minded and active in pursuing learning through the friendly discussion in the group. She commented that,

The most important thing is to bravely listen and speak. The feeling is enjoyable. Although some articles are difficult to read yet, the feeling is enjoyable because the group doesn't make you feel scared. At the beginning, I felt like a student sitting the oral defense or examination. Now I no longer feel embarrassed and have an open-minded attitude. This is what I am now. I can listen to others' perspectives in the group. This is my attitude about it. I'm also interested to know what they are and

how they are presented in English. This changing attitude is an encouragement for me.

Angelica summarized that members learned together and learned from each other. She commented, "although the meeting is just for one hour, you seem to read more than ten books. And these materials are highlighted and selected by our fellow teachers. This is an authenticity everyone appreciates." The point is that everyone contributed to the spirit of learning in this study group. Learning was not only focused on English development, but also on the attitude of learning together in this study group.

In the interviews and focus group interview, five teachers reported that they expect that they will continue to learn and pursue growth in the study group. Florence said, "I think I will keep going on attending this group." Angelica indicated that she had developed an attitude to learning that made her want to continue to learn. She said, "It has positive influences on my attitude to learning. Of course, I grow during this process. I learn and enjoy it. Because of this, I'm willing to keep on attending this group and to maintain this learning attitude."

Olivia indicated that this study group stimulated her to continue pursuing knowledge and growth. She believed that she learned the spirit of learning without ending. She stated, "Stimulate us to search out knowledge and have a learning attitude. The feeling of learning is like "ocean"... without ending."

This attitude to learning made Michael believe that teachers needed to continue learning something new to increase their teaching efficacy. He stated,

I used to think that many Taiwanese teachers had one belief: that it is ok as long as I teach hard. Wrong. If you don't try new things on teaching, it's just like frying cold rice and vegetable (example in American way, it would be Macaroni Cheese). Nothing new.

George also added the importance of continuing to pursue professional growth for teachers. He mentioned that teachers usually stopped at the level of their graduation from colleges if they didn't continue seeking growth in their teaching. He also described his attitude to learning as a result of exchanging the role of teacher and student in the study group. He commented that, "When I am not speaking, other members are teachers. On the other hand, when I am the speaker, they are students. We would like to seek for knowledge." George attributed his English improvement to attending the study group for 15 years. He wanted to continue to attend the study group to learn English.

Clearly, the participants in this study group see each other as learning partners and also connect who they are as persons to who they are as learners. It appears that the participants develop a positive attitude to learning that is more open and active through attending this study group. This positive attitude to learning fosters a desire for continued learning.

## Promoting Intellectual Development

Through my observations and informal conversations, most of the teachers seemed to instinctively understand that they have to engage themselves in the discussion by coming to the English Teachers Club meetings prepared, if they are to reach their goal of developing their English. The eight participants indicated that the discussions are beneficial because they generate and connect new ideas.

Most of the teachers regularly read the required material for the meeting and were able to talk with their group members about the ideas they had come up with. Teachers often referred to specific passages within the text as they tried to make a point about the concept being discussed. However, it also appears that teachers felt pressure to generate ideas for the meetings. Angelica, a guidance counselor, said,

You also need to think of something you want to say. Not just read the article. You know what I mean? It's not the question of reading but the idea. You need to spend time to think which idea or point to present during the meeting.

Additionally, five teachers reported that other members' points of view provided connections and ideas they would not have thought of on their own. Due to members' different background, and teaching years, the heterogeneity of the study group broadened the overall understanding of the content as members shared their perspectives and applied new understandings to a specific grade level or subject area. In the study group sessions, teachers are able to receive valuable feedback from their colleagues, which can help them to confirm that what they were doing was right, to clarify misconceptions they might have had, and give them new ideas and visions about educational issues. Christina felt that different perspectives she heard from members in the study group helped her to reconsider her thinking, and explore new areas. She commented.

Sometimes we just focus on what we teach, and our life experiences or articles we read. We usually avoid something we are not interested in. But because of this group, the various topics or perspectives brought by different members usually gave me a new opportunity to think and explore something new. I think this is good.

This study shows that this teacher study group helps teachers not only generate new ideas in order to contribute to group discussion, but also to appreciate new ideas and different opinions. When teachers have opportunities to generate and connect new ideas and to reflect on their thinking, there is likely to be a positive effect on their teaching because it may reveal some incoherence or inconsistency in their thinking and provide information or ideas to clarify or revise their pedagogical understanding.

## DISCUSSIONS

In this section, I focus on how the reported benefits of the study group are connected to teacher professional learning. Five benefits can be linked to professional learning:

1. Learning English as a foreign language.
2. Gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction.
3. Sharing teaching experiences.
4. Stimulating positive dispositions to learning.
5. Fostering intellectual development.

The first three categories of reported benefits can be viewed as representing a content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1987). The fourth and fifth categories focus on how the reported benefits of a study group can foster teachers' cognitive development as an indirect link to teacher development.

### Subject-Matter Knowledge

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. Subject matter knowledge is an understanding of the major themes, concepts, and constructs in the field of instruction (Grossman, 1990).

Teachers need a deep understanding of the subject matter they teach. A number of studies (Borko and Putnam, 1995; Ball and Cohen, 1999; Ball and McDiarmid, 1990; Garet et al., 2001; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Sparks and Hirsh, 2002; Clair and Adger, 1999; Crandall, 1993; Johnston and Goettesch, 2000) suggest that teachers benefit from professional development activities designed to broaden their understandings of the subject matter they teach, because content knowledge is associated with shaping instructional practice. If teachers have in-depth content knowledge such as the structure, patterns and themes of their discipline, they not only have a variety of sources explaining for their students, but build connections to other content areas.

The study group provides an opportunity for teachers of English to deepen their understanding of English and practice their English language skills. It also enables them to converse in the language they are teaching, and thus improve their communication skills. They read English articles, and use English to talk about their perspectives on the readings, discuss and exchange their ideas, write notes on their readings, and prepare presentations. By inviting native speakers of English to take part in, members of the study group create an English-speaking environment in which they may interact with one another. As a result, the teachers believed that they had developed a greater understanding of English and that their participation in the study group improved their Engli-

sh fluency, enriched their content knowledge of particular topics, procedures, and concepts, and helped them understand structures and connections within English. Teachers also reported that the study group helped them add new content in the classroom as they introduced the subject matter or experiences from the discussions. Overall, the teachers attending the study group increased their ability to speak the English language, to articulate its rules, to understand its structures, and to appreciate and understand the connections among English ideas. In summary, it is shown that this teacher study group serves as a vehicle for English teachers to develop in-depth content knowledge.

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 (Shulman, 1986), "a teacher's non-target content knowledge that is not directly related to the subject being taught" (Cochran et al., 1993). In this study, the teachers of other subjects reported using English as a tool to capture information related to their subject area. For example, the chemistry teacher, Sharon, reported she learned about the differences between chemistry terms written in English and in Chinese. In turn, she was able to explain these differences to the students in her classrooms and warn them to beware of the different usages of chemical terms in other languages. That knowledge not only deepens the teacher's understanding of chemistry, but broadens the students' understanding.

As Hashweh (1987) 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 professional development. 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.

This study group's reported capacity to enhance teachers' subject matter knowledge corresponds to an identified characteristic of effective professional development (Garet et al., 2001). Several studies (Garet et al., 2001; Reynolds, 1995; Rhine, 1998) have identified that little attention in staff development is focused on teachers' content knowledge despite the importance of subject matter knowledge to teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. 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.

The subject matter that English teachers reported lear-

ning in the study group is connected to their teaching. For example, as a result of this engagement in English learning, the participants reported that they feel confident when they communicate with foreigners in English and when they speak English in class. As Reynolds (1992) argued, competent teachers need certain personal characteristics such as self-confidence to execute teaching tasks in a competent manner. When teachers feel confident in their subject matter, they will have more confidence to teach. This example shows that teachers have the learning opportunity to enhance their subject matter and have a link to their pedagogical development as a competent teacher.

### **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 (1995) 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”. In this study, teachers reported that the discussions during the study group sessions influence what they do in the classroom, because the group discussions provide them with instructional ideas. For example, Angelica reported that the study group is helpful to her as a guidance counselor because she has the opportunity to verify her professional counseling knowledge from the perspectives of other members. She found that she can apply some of the members “actual experiences” as scenarios to use with her students and with their parents. Moreover, Christina reported that she reflects on her teaching after hearing other members’ experiences in the study group. Through such sharing, teachers felt they were able to connect their personal experiences to student learning, which enabled them to engage students in more meaningful conversations. As a result, teachers and counselors were able to directly link their study group experiences to what they did in their classrooms or offices, a characteristic of effective professional development (Sparks and Hirsh, 2002).

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 (Grossman, 1990).

Additionally, the teachers reported that the ideas and knowledge gained from group discussion helped them to ask questions of students and engage students in more meaningful conversations related to their lives. This experience suggests that the study group opens up possibilities for teachers to organize the instructional space

with new ideas to teach for student understanding.

By integrating new ideas and content instruction, this study group increases the possibility that new teaching behaviors will be adopted and transferred to classroom practice. As Resnick (1987) argued, not only is instruction viewed as the direct presentation of knowledge to be learned, but it also involves the creation of environments where students can construct their own understandings. In these instances, teachers were trying to create environments within their classrooms that enhanced learning English for comprehension. Attempting to facilitate meaningful student learning and to support students in their efforts to understand a topic or solve a problem in English, Christina began asking questions that were intended to promote students’ critical thinking skills, while Sharon encouraged students to understand the differences between the Chinese and the English interpretations of concepts in chemistry. Teachers’ reported study group experiences suggest that they enabled them to think through ideas for teaching some topics. This study group apparently influenced general pedagogical knowledge of teachers of English and other subject areas.

Furthermore, 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. English teachers in the study reported that they made efforts to change their teaching to create an English-speaking environment for students. For example, Christina and George created an English learning environment for students by speaking English all the time rather than just translating text from Chinese to English or English to Chinese. As Florez and Burt (2001) stated, meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language are necessary for successful language acquisition. Real fluency involves an automatic processing of language.

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 (Borko and Putnam, 1995). For example, novice teachers indicated that they obtain helpful ideas from their more experienced colleagues by discussing 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” (Borko and Putnam, 1995). 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. A number of studies (Lieberman, 1996; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, and Stiles, 1998) have pointed out that professional development activities should provide learning opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful discussion, planning, and practice. 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.

### **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 (Shulman, 1986; Grossman, 1990). Some English teachers reported that their students' interests in learning English was enhanced because the study group exposed the teachers to more varied, and interesting content such as current news, instead of limiting them to textbooks.

Somewhat similarly, Christina and Florence indicated that they usually shared with their students' real-life issues and stories they heard in the club. They usually incorporated personal experiences in her teaching because it made grammar more interesting. In other words, Christina and Florence provided their students with opportunities to learn grammar or communication skills in English by using real-world examples. These findings suggest that teachers are involved in the development of knowledge of instructional strategies and representations (Borko and Putnam, 1995), 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 (Grossman, 1990). 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. Eric said that he viewed this study group as a teaching resource and consciously transferred the content to students because he can add new content from his study group experiences which are related to his curriculum planning. 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 (Borko and Putnam, 1995). 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" (Borko and Putnam, 1995). Put simply, this is the knowledge about what resources and materials are available for teaching and selecting appropriate materials. As Darling-Hammond (1998) 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.

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. Effective teachers must be able to use what they have learned to facilitate student learning, because teaching needs to comprehensively apply their knowledge rather than storage knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Freeman, 1989). 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 directly leading to their professional development.

### **Fostering Of Continuing Learning**

All of the participants reported that the study group promoted positive dispositions toward learning, which made them more active and open to different perspectives and other people's viewpoints. Teachers reported that they



developed positive dispositions toward learning that made them want to continue to learn English and other kinds of knowledge on an ongoing basis, which they saw as necessary to increase their teaching efficacy; otherwise, they believe, teachers would stay at the level they were when they graduated from college. This finding shows that the positive dispositions to learning not only influenced their attitude toward English, but also their belief that teaching needs new knowledge to stay fresh. For example, Olivia indicated that this study group stimulated her to continue pursuing knowledge and growth. Significantly, the study group reportedly helps create a positive attitude to learning that connects to their ability to learn English and a desire to continue professional growth to teach well.

It is crucial for teachers to continue their professional development in order to “keep pace with change and to review and renew their own knowledge, skills and visions for good teaching” (Day, 1999, p.2). In other words, teacher professional development demands a lifelong commitment to learning. The study group participants’ positive disposition to learning means they are meeting a necessary condition for effective professional development.

### **Cognitive/Intellectual And Theoretical Development**

Howey (1985) has conceptualized cognitive development as one of six purposes of staff development because, he argues, differences in cognitive development not only influence teacher learning in professional development activities, but also affect teaching behavior in their classrooms. Cognitive development provides insight to “underlying patterns of thought and problem solving that play a central role in determining an individual’s approach to the world” (Oja, 1991). In other words, cognitive development is how thinking affects how people behave.

The teachers reported that they felt pressure to generate ideas for the meetings: they are responsible for reading the material which address a broad range of topics and issues, and generating some critical ideas to contribute to the group discussion. For example, Florence indicated that their responsibility was not only to read the material, but also to come up with ideas to stimulate group discussion. This pressure, they argued, promotes their critical thinking. The teachers reported that other members’ points of view provided connections and ideas they would not have thought of on their own. They also reported that they understood more about their own differences and skills in comparison to other group members. The range of material read in the study group also gives teachers the opportunity to enrich their learning with ideas and knowledge from sources beyond their classrooms.

As Hunt (1975) stated, “matching” for developmental growth involves “placing an individual in a learning environment slightly more complex and demanding than the individual would naturally prefer”. These examples men-

tioned above indicate that this study group is an environment where teachers began to extend their problem-solving abilities and conceptual development. Howey (1985) argues from reviewing the literature that teachers with high conceptual levels are better able to look at a problem from multiple viewpoints, generate hypotheses, and be able to create more diverse learning settings for their students. Therefore, some of the reported benefits of the study group can be argued as contributing to teachers’ cognitive development.

In addition, theoretical development serves as another category to connect to teacher professional development. As explained by Angelica, the guidance counselor, the study group discussions helped her clarify her counseling theory and skills when she dealt with students’ problems in the school. Through sharing and exchanging ideas in the group discussion, she found that what she learned about educational theory is not just a theory, but actually works for kids and parents. The clarification of her educational theory from the group discussion helps her students and parents build an interactive relationship by allowing them to be more open-minded. This corresponds to one identified purpose of staff development, theoretical development which is defined as the “contribution to the attainment of goals set forth in a selected educational theory” (Howey, 1985) . This study group apparently assisted some teachers to develop constructs or theories that served to guide their professional behavior.

### **Conclusion**

This study found that the English Teachers Club at Chia-Yi Girls’ Senior High School functions as a teacher study group. This collaborative group, according to its members, promotes both collective and individual growth in developing their English language skills in a supportive learning environment. The benefits of this professional development activity include: learning English as a foreign language, gaining ideas for improving classroom English instruction, sharing teaching experiences, stimulating positive dispositions to learning, and fostering intellectual development. The first three reported benefits contributed to teachers’ subject matter knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. The benefits of stimulating positive dispositions to learning and fostering intellectual development can be viewed as contributing to the participants’ cognitive development and theoretical development, which can be conceptualized as legitimate purpose of professional development. In these ways, the study group is viewed as a professional learning opportunity.

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