

English for the Community

Growing together: CPD through Teacher Activity Groups

February 2021

An abridged version of the 'English for the Community Independent Evaluation Report' by Professor Simon Borg. The full report is available at britishcouncil.ro/en/programmes/society/english-community.

Introduction

Teacher development that is unifying and peer-led, engaging, exciting, voluntary and most of all, transformative in its impact on both teachers and learners - this was the aim of English for the Community (EfC), a three-year language teacher development programme delivered in Romania by the British Council in partnership with the Romanian-American Foundation (RAF). Working with teachers of English in rural areas, the programme aimed to improve student learning of English by promoting more communicative, student-centred and interactive classroom practices, doing so through a set of peer-led Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs).

Three years on, an independent evaluation report led by UK consultant Simon Borg has found the programme and TAG approach highly appreciated by participants, and, above all, transformative in its effect on teachers' understandings, dispositions, and classroom practices – an effect cascaded with a positive impact on the English language learning of the estimated 20,000 students that EfC teachers have worked with over the three years of the project.

The TAG model piloted through English for the Community is one that most stakeholders wanted to see continued – and a CPD model that can also be extended to other disciplines and other areas of Romania. However, as outlined in the report below, for an effective model such as the TAG approach to continuous professional development to be sustainable, a key issue relates to its integration into the Romanian education system and its formal accreditation.

English for the Community

English for the Community (EfC) was a three-year language teacher development programme delivered in Romania between 2017-2020 by the British Council, in partnership with the Romanian-American Foundation. Working with state school teachers of English in over 100 schools in rural and small urban areas of nine counties, the programme promoted more communicative, student-centred and interactive classroom practices.

Programme aims:

150 teachers in nine counties have more developed skills for effective classroom teaching, reaching at least 20,000 students.

Teachers are able to form and implement local communities of practice, both digitally and face-to-face, to improve their quality of teaching, access resources and build on their CPD.

Teachers are more aware of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and know how to access CPD opportunities according to their learning needs.

EfC Teacher Activity Groups

The core of the English for the Community programme was Teacher Activity Groups.

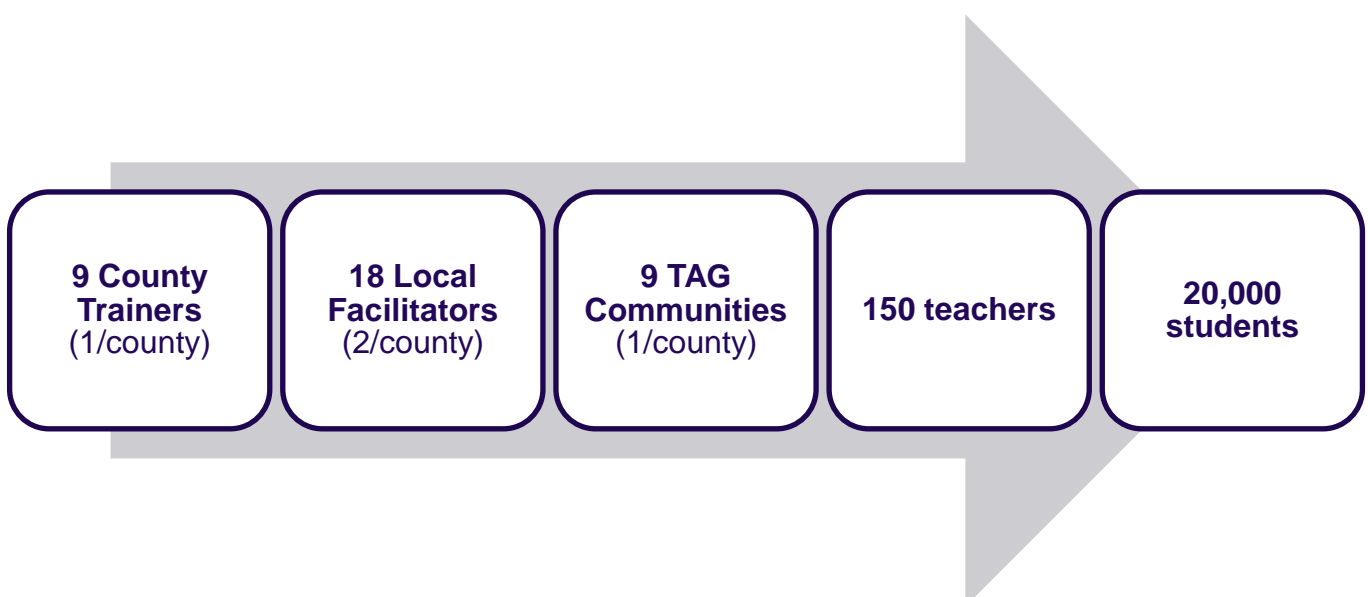
'[TAGs are] sustained groups in which teachers learn with each other and from one another. There is a role for a facilitator, co-ordinator or teacher educator, but the focus is on teacher-driven sharing, collaboration, interaction and reflection. Another important feature of TAGs is that they take place over time (for example, once a month over a school year), thus fostering positive group dynamics and allowing for ongoing teacher development.'

One further quality of TAGs is that they are grounded in what teachers do, and thus teachers' experiences in the classroom are a key focus both during the TAGs as well as in between TAGs; in fact, what happens between TAGs is arguably as important as the TAG meetings themselves as it is in schools that teachers have the chance to experiment with new ideas in their teaching, to reflect on the process and to take these reflections back to the subsequent TAG to share with their colleagues.' ([Simon Borg](#))

Within English for the Community, communities of practice named **Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs)** were formed in each county and met monthly to learn and share experiences of teaching.

TAGs were co-ordinated by appropriately trained Local Facilitators. The programme was voluntary, organised outside school hours and not officially accredited by the Ministry of National Education (MNE). Despite the voluntary and unofficial status of the TAGs, the number of teachers attending was maintained almost in full throughout the programme, even after TAGs started to be organised online, after the Covid-19 lockdown.

Over its three years, the programme engaged more than 300 teachers of English in rural and small urban communities across Romania. **A core group of 150 teachers** across the nine programme counties regularly attended and engaged with monthly Teacher Activity Group sessions, while **18 teachers** were trained and coordinated activities voluntarily as **Local Facilitators** (two Local Facilitators / county). For each county, an experienced teacher trainer (County Trainer) provided initial training and continuing support to the Local Facilitators.



Programme and TAG impact

In 2020, the British Council commissioned Language Teacher Development Consultant [Simon Borg](#) to carry out an independent evaluation of the English for the Community programme. The report analysed a wide range of evidence collected from different stakeholders, including:

- Online surveys for 100 teachers, 18 Local Facilitators
- Online individual interviews with two teachers from each TAG, one Local Facilitator in each county, four County Trainers and nine County Inspectors
- Change stories from 50% of core teachers attending TAGs and materials that illustrate change in teaching and learning from the other 50% of core teachers
- Review of programme-related social media group content (Facebook, WhatsApp)

Key Findings

The main conclusion of the independent impact evaluation report for EfC was that:

‘The programme was effectively delivered, highly appreciated by participants, and, above all, transformative in its effect on teachers’ understandings, dispositions, and classroom practices’

Furthermore, with reference to the social significance of the programme, the report concluded:

‘[English for the Community] reduced feelings of isolation among teachers and helped them realise that they were not alone in experiencing particular challenges in the classroom.’

The report found that:

- **over 93%** of the teachers surveyed agreed that the quality of their lessons had improved as a result of the programme;
- **over 94%** of the teachers surveyed also said that due to EfC they were more enthusiastic about their professional development;
- the programme also promoted changes in teachers’ dispositions – their confidence as teachers, willingness to innovate and open-mindedness:
 - ✓ **88%** of participants reported having become more confident as teachers
 - ✓ **89%** are more confident in their ability to use technology to teach English
 - ✓ **91%** use their textbook more creatively
- positive impacts were recorded on students, who became more engaged, motivated, and confident in learning and using English:
 - ✓ **87%** of teachers believe their students are more motivated during English lessons
 - ✓ **88%** believe students have had more opportunities to speak English in class

The report concludes that overall TAGs were seen to be different to existing forms of CPD for teachers because they were voluntary, regular, involved smaller groups, were less formal, addressed teachers' needs, were practical, and allowed teachers to interact, discuss and collaborate in a relaxed manner.

The more formal meetings organised by the Inspectorates do play an important role in ensuring teachers are kept informed about educational policies and activities at national and County level; the feedback here, though, suggests that more regular opportunities for professional development of the kind that TAGs provided would be appreciated by teachers.

The results (of the evaluation) provide consistently strong evidence that EfC was a successful programme. It led to many positive changes in participants' knowledge, dispositions and classroom practices and these developments will have enhanced many students' experiences of and progress in learning English. If sustained over time, the changes in the teaching and learning of English stimulated by the programme can contribute to improved attitudes towards and proficiency in English among students in the participating rural communities.

This programme also provides convincing support for the value of models of professional development that are collaborative, collegial, teacher-led, practical and learning-oriented.

While EfC focused on teachers of English, some teachers of other languages and of other non-language subjects altogether also participated. TAGs do in fact provide a model of professional development that is relevant to teachers of all subjects.

Impact on teachers

Participants valued the sense of community and positive relationships created in TAGs. Their interactive, collaborative, practical and less formal nature was seen to be more enjoyable and relevant than other forms of professional development.

'TAG meetings changed my perspective regarding my profession. I used to think I was powerless and dare not change the traditional way of teaching. After a year or so, I started to play more, using puzzles, play roles, I asked children to work on projects. I became more creative, flexible and relaxed overall.'

'I think the role of a teacher has changed dramatically (...) I rather see myself as a content facilitator, an advisor, a resources provider, a co-learner or a designer and less as an assessor.'

'It was a wonderful experience because it was a really practical course (...) it was interactive and entertaining (...) no one was judging anyone.'

'Another change was the boost in my confidence and motivation. I realized that I wasn't alone in my struggles with the difficulties every teacher has to go through during these times and career.'

Impact on learners

TAG activity, and the changes in teachers' practices and motivation, has had a positive impact on over 20,000 students across Romania.

After participating in TAGs, teachers:

- frequently reported increased interactivity in lessons, use of a wider range of resources and a more relaxed and positive teaching style
- noted greater attention to and awareness of students' needs
- frequently highlighted positive impacts on students, who became more engaged, motivated, and confident in learning and using English.

'I learned that what matters in teaching is inspiring and building relationships with my students.'

- TAG Teacher

Teachers surveyed considered that:

- Students have had more opportunities to speak English in class: 88% approx. agree (almost 50% strongly)
- Students have become more motivated: 87% approx. agree (approx. 40% strongly)
- The quality of their lessons had improved: 90% approx. agree (over 50% strongly)

County inspector:

'I've seen some lessons where students were more motivated to participate, where anticipated classroom problems were very well managed and also they were using resources with more ease (...) Students were more motivated and they were at ease with English. They had the courage to speak English.'

Teachers in the programme:

'I have stressed creativity, I have encouraged them more, I have corrected them rarely, smiling, in soft voice as natural as I could speak. They've got confident, they started speaking more, they started correcting themselves naturally, and finally the results came. I had a very creative young boy, in 8th Grade, who obtained a Honorable Mention at English County Olympics. Last school year a six grader student obtained 2 third prizes at a Speak Out competition (creative writing and dramatic monologue), I had some participants at a Public Speaking competition (a local one). Last year one of my shyest students obtained 8,70 at an English evaluation for bilingual classes.'

'I think the most important thing I learned during TAGs and that changed my way of teaching and improved results of my students is that having fun in class is the best way to learn. I realized that the right materials and a positive attitude in class help the students stay engaged and enjoy English classes.'

Strengthening CPD for teachers: next steps

English for the Community TAGs had a positive, transformative impact on teacher's practices and motivations – and, as the report concludes, all stakeholders, teachers, local facilitators, county trainers and county inspectors, were consistent in the view that the programme should continue. However, as the report outlines, for a model such as the English for the Community TAGs to become sustainable over time and achieve its full potential in strengthening CPD for teachers in the long term, stakeholder feedback highlighted a series of suggested changes, with the one aspect discussed in more detail being **programme accreditation**.

Recommendations from teachers

While some teachers did not feel that for them personally this was an important issue, it was generally recognised that obtaining professional credits was an important part of teachers' lives in Romania and that it would be good if EfC were an officially recognised programme. The teachers, said, for example:

'I think more teachers would participate because we need credits.' (T1)

'These TAGs are so fun and you'd be killing two birds with one stone, you go to the courses, it's super fun, you also get the credits.' (T5)

'I think it would be very good ... we need the credits but we don't really find proper courses.' (T10)

Other possible changes to the programme suggested by TAG teachers included more focus on online teaching (in anticipation of continuing school closures) or the chance to visit the classrooms of other teachers on the programme.

Recommendations from Local Facilitators

As with teachers, the issue most commented on was that of **recognition by the MNE**:

'I think that, in order for future TAGs to be successful, the participants should get credits for attending the meetings.'

Other themes commonly mentioned included:

- **Localised content used flexibly:** *'I think it would be important to have a certain number of TAGs on discussing concrete local problems signalled by our colleagues.'*
- **Teachers assuming more responsibility for TAGs:** *'Local Facilitators could give some stages to the participants in order to facilitate them, changing the roles.'*

Recommendations from County Inspectors

The need for programme accreditation was highlighted by county inspectors too:

'I would have preferred that this course, being part of a very very good project, be also accredited and offer teachers the credits they need.'

Recommendations made by Simon Borg

The report by consultant Simon Borg includes a series of recommendations that can be considered to enhance the programme and its impact even further. Some of them are:

Systemic Integration - Official recognition can be a positive step in attracting more teachers to attend and integrating TAGs into the educational system.

Careful consideration of how TAGs might become a more systemic component of teacher professional development in Romania is needed:

'How can the Inspectorate (at county and even national level) be given more responsibility for the programme in a way that supports MNE policy but does not lead to the loss of TAGs' most prized features (such as their less formal nature, pedagogical focus and strong sense of community)?'

Action planning and reflection - Considering ways of introducing a more structured approach to action planning and reflection, to encourage and engage teachers in applying ideas from TAGs to their classrooms.

Social Media Groups - Exploring ways of utilising the social media groups as a forum for ongoing reflection and critical discussion of teaching and learning.

Future programmes - Careful consideration of ways of sustaining the involvement in TAGs of those who participated this year.

'How, can the twin goals of programme expansion (to new teachers) and programme consolidation (with the existing group) be achieved? It is also critical that the expertise developed among LFs be exploited in future versions of the programme.'

'Given that so much of the value of TAGs lies in the strong sense of trust and community that they foster, though, I would recommend that opportunities to join groups be limited to strategic points, such as the start of each school year or semester.'

Benefits for non-TAG Teachers - Building in structured mechanisms for reaching out to colleagues of TAG teachers as target beneficiaries in future versions of the programme.

Monitoring and Evaluation - While pre- and post- project classroom observations may have a role to play in programme evaluation, additional methods of capturing information about what happens in classrooms should be considered. Ideally, these will be ongoing throughout a programme and provide qualitative and quantitative insight into teachers' work.

For any future versions of the programme, it is recommended that external monitoring and evaluation be built in from the outset.

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