

English for the Community

Teacher Activity Groups

Traditionally, the main way to support teachers in their continuing professional development has been to ask them to attend training talks, workshops or courses, events which are often useful and enjoyable. Face-to-face training is not the only way to support the continuing professional development of teachers, however, and it does have limitations. Training events tend to be quite short and it is easy to forget what we have learnt during them and there is often no chance for us to try out new ideas in our own classrooms until the training event is over. It takes time and lots of experimenting until we feel comfortable with less familiar ways of teaching or learning.

One comparatively new way of supporting teachers is to establish a Teacher Activity Group, or TAG for short. Teachers around the world have been developing TAGs in countries as different as India, Palestine and Uzbekistan, with the support of organisations such as the British Council.

A TAG involves a group of teachers meeting regularly, usually monthly, for between two and three hours to provide mutual support and share learning. All the teachers come from the same location: the town or village where the TAG takes place so they are familiar with the same context, the same challenges and the same sources of satisfaction of teaching learners in that location. This means that TAG can focus on the local needs and wants of teachers. Usually, between ten and thirty teachers is an effective number for a TAG. Together, the teachers form what is called a '**community of practice**' and as in any community, they share ideas and opinions and support each other's development.

Teachers can participate in a range of activities in these TAGs. They can:

- discuss teaching issues and challenges
- find solutions to these challenges
- identify strategies that work well in the classroom
- engage with different sources of new ideas, through reading, through watching videos and through using other online resources
- share ideas and keep each other up to date on new developments both locally and in the international world of English language teaching
- find answers to questions about teaching or learning they may have
- discuss difficult areas of language and support each other in relevant types of language development
- make plans to use new activities and techniques in their own classrooms, try them out and report their successes and challenges to the group at the next session
- reflect effectively and help each other to reflect on teaching and learning.

The important feature of the TAG is that all the participants have the chance to interact. As the writer Tony Wright has said: 'talk is the fuel of teacher development'.

Effective TAGs are examples of collaboration between teachers who all have a shared purpose and are working towards a similar goal: to improve the quality of their teaching for their own professional satisfaction. TAGs are an example of **peer learning** and they do not require an 'expert' to direct the participants and the questions they discuss seldom have 'correct' answers. This also means that the atmosphere in the Teacher Activity Group is more informal than a training session – a little like a club for teachers. One important difference between a Teacher Activity Group and a club, however, is that Teacher Activity Groups have a set of aims, an organised structure for each session and a framework to work within. Each TAG is also associated with the other TAGs in nine locations across the country as an integral part of the *English for the Community* project.

This framework is provided by ideas in the **TAG Participant Resource Book** and the **Local Facilitator Handbook**. Input for the TAG is based on selected activities, texts and videos from the British Council *Teaching for Success* Collections. The Resource Book and Handbook provide suggestions for the first twelve sessions of the TAG (the TAG's first year). After the first year, support will be provided to Local Facilitators and TAG members, with the help of Country Trainers, to design the next year's sessions themselves.

TAGs do not need a 'leader' or someone to be present whose skills and knowledge are very different from the majority of participants. However, each TAG has a Local Facilitator, who is also a teacher in the location where the TAG takes place. The role of this Local Facilitator includes guiding the discussion and encouraging all participants to contribute and share their ideas but Local Facilitators are not to be regarded as 'a source of all knowledge.' Local Facilitators take part in all the activities, contribute their own opinions and encourage others to do the same. Together, the Local Facilitator and TAG members pool their skills and awareness and 'construct' new approaches to classroom teaching. The Local Facilitator's role also includes communicating with everybody to let them know that the TAG will take place, ensuring that everybody has the right resources, encouraging new members to join and also encouraging group members to bring along new teachers. The best TAGs are the TAGs that grow.

Successful TAGs are an example of teachers taking charge of their own continuing professional development and they are very much the product of the contribution of their members in terms of actively working together, sharing ideas, applying their learning to their own classrooms and sharing their learning with colleagues in the sessions that follow. Everybody has a part to play in the TAG and the more everybody is involved, the more learning will take place. Unlike training events, TAGs are ongoing and take place regularly enabling TAG members to keep in touch between sessions and share what they are doing in the classroom.

Enabling TAG members to communicate with each other means that TAGs have a digital element. Local Facilitators encourage use of WhatsApp, Facebook and other types of social media to ensure members keep in touch with each other and, just as importantly, with teachers involved in other TAGs in the nine locations across Romania. Each session supports members in making use of online sites and video and there are suggestions for further reading in each session. TAG members can consult these sites between TAG sessions and report back on what they found

interesting to their colleagues. Each session also presents opportunities to learn using MOOCs (which you and your TAG members can join free of charge) and other online professional development courses. Going digital means that TAGs are linked to other TAGs around the country and to the wider world.

The *English for the Community* project (of which TAGs are a very important part) is supported by a partnership between the British Council and the Romanian-American Foundation. TAG development includes consistent monitoring and evaluation procedures to gather data on success and to support where there are challenges. Each month, the Local Facilitator submits a TAG report to the British Council Project Manager which includes stories of effective practice, feedback from TAG members, photographs and short video clips on mobile phones. Country Trainers also observe sessions regularly and report back.

The most important difference between a TAG and a training event is that TAGs are fully sustainable. They are powered by the enthusiasm and interest of their members and will run successfully as long as TAG members are happy to contribute. As Penny Ur says:

You have within your teaching routine the main tools for personal progress: your experience and your reflections on it, interaction with other teachers in your institution. Teacher development takes place when teachers, working as individuals or in a group consciously take advantage of such resources to forward their own professional development.

They represent an innovative initiative for supporting the professional development of teachers and a project design which can be applied to other locations in Romania and to other educational initiatives.