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Professional development through Teacher Activity Groups

A review of evidence from international projects

Simon Borg, Amy Lightfoot and Radhika Gholkar

ISBN: 978-0-86355-979-2

10 Spring Gardens
London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

Cover photo: a Teacher Activity Group session in Maharahstra, India

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About the authors

Simon Borg has been involved in language teaching and teacher education for over 30 years. As an educational consultant, he specialises in the design, implementation and evaluation of teacher professional development programmes and policies in a range of international contexts. Details of his work (and his blog) are available at http://simon-borg.co.uk/.

Amy Lightfoot is the Regional Education and English Academic Lead for the British Council in South Asia. She leads on the academic strategy and quality assurance of English and school-based education projects and related research activities. She has been working in the field of education for more than 20 years, with over a decade of specialising in South Asian contexts. She has special interests and expertise in alternative models for teacher professional development, the monitoring and evaluation of teacher competence and performance, multilingual education and the use of digital platforms, with a variety of published work exploring these areas.

Radhika Gholkar is a Senior Academic Manager with the British Council in India. She manages teacher development projects in partnership with state governments across the education sectors, and has substantial experience of teaching English both face-to-face and online. She is particularly interested in the potential of using technology for teachers' professional growth, for example looking at how this can be supported through online communities of practice using WhatsApp.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the project teams in Armenia, Egypt, India, Jordan, Palestine and Romania who supplied information for this report.

We would also like to thank our reviewers for their comments and feedback: Runna Badwan, Ellen Darling, Deepali Dharmaraj, Simon Etherton, Addeh Hovassapian, Tamir Ismail and Tim Phillips.

We are also very grateful to all the teachers and facilitators who participated with such enthusiasm in the Teacher Activity Groups and who contributed to the project evaluations on which this review is based.

A TAG session in Palestine

1

Introduction

The British Council is the UK's cultural relations organisation. One strand of its global activity focuses on the use of English within education systems, with significant attention paid to the continuing professional development (CPD) of state school English language teachers. Around the world, and very often in low-resource contexts, the British Council supports teacher CPD in partnership with local educational organisations. The broad goals of this work are to enhance teacher competence, instructional quality and educational provision for students learning English as a subject.

The British Council's approach to CPD is called *Teaching for Success*,[1] which aims to provide frameworks, resources and support for needs-based and contextualised teacher development. The launch of Teaching for Success in 2015 aimed to further raise awareness among educational authorities that conventional top-down, short-term, large-scale cascade models of in-service teacher education were not delivering visible and sustained changes in teaching and learning.[2] Using this approach, the British Council's work in recent years has promoted additional forms of CPD which, in line with international insights into effective teacher learning (Desimone, 2011; Earley & Porritt, 2009; Zepeda, 2019), have sought to provide teachers with opportunities to learn collaboratively, over time, and in a manner which is more teacher-driven and linked to what happens in classrooms.

An early site of exploration was Maharashtra in West India, where the British Council had a history of engagement (particularly via cascade CPD projects) with the state government. It was in this context that the model of CPD examined in this report – Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs) – emerged. TAGs were initially conceptualised as communities of practice (CoPs) made up of groups of around 25 teachers from the same cluster[3] who met once a month for the purposes of professional development. In between these meetings, which were led by TAG facilitators, teachers continued to interact via WhatsApp groups. TAGs aimed, via discussions of relevant professional issues, to provide teachers with opportunities to develop their English language and pedagogical skills and to experiment in the classroom and reflect on innovative, student-centred approaches to teaching. While a handbook of resources was provided to give TAGs a structure, it was envisaged that, over time, reliance on these resources would decrease and teachers would take more ownership for the content and focus of TAGs.

TAGs were launched in Maharashtra in 2016. At the time, and independently of the British Council, informal regular teacher groups called teacher clubs were already operating on a small scale in some parts of the state.[4] While reportedly successful in terms of their internally supportive function for the participating teachers, these teacher clubs lacked external buy-in or recognition from government officials (Padwad & Parnham, 2019). TAGs were, in contrast, recognised by the state education department and incorporated into a formal large-scale CPD project. TAGs, then, are CoPs that are formally instituted rather than being set up organically and informally by teachers. In India, as well as in the other examples we discuss here, there were various reasons for this more structured approach to CoPs: a desire by the sponsors to operate at scale and (in most cases) to nominate (rather than to invite) teachers to participate; the novelty for teachers and facilitators of collaborative modes of CPD; and an established educational tradition in which teachers were more likely to engage in a sustained manner in CPD when this was centrally organised and recognised.

1. https://www.britishcouncil.in/teach/continuing-professional-development
2. For a discussion of cascade training, see Hayes, (2000).
3. Clusters are the smallest unit of administration within India states. State administration is organised into districts, blocks and clusters.
4. On teacher clubs in Maharashtra, see also: http://www.teacherplus.org/a-learning-club-for-teachers/

Since the establishment of TAGs in India, they have been incorporated into several other CPD initiatives that the British Council has supported in a number of countries. A guide to setting up TAGs has also been produced to support project managers (Borg, 2019a). This offers the definition:

> *[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.* (p. 3)

The purposes of this report are, with reference to a selection of British Council projects, to analyse how TAGs have been implemented and what the evidence available suggests about their value as a model of CPD and about the factors that facilitate or hinder their effectiveness. Although the projects reviewed mostly involved teachers of English as a foreign language in primary and secondary state schools, TAGs can be used with teachers of any subject at all levels of education. The insights provided here will, therefore, be relevant to the utilisation of formal CoPs for teacher development more generally. Before presenting the TAG projects and our analysis of them, the next section considers theoretical issues relevant to CoPs and their role in the CPD of teachers.

Teachers discuss ideas in a TAG session in Armenia

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Literature review

It is widely acknowledged that 'high quality education for pupils depends upon the commitment and resilience of thoughtful, knowledgeable, skilled teachers' (Day et al., 2007, in Day & Leitch, 2007, p. 707). Professional development is also recognised as a central element in the improvement of teachers, but, as noted by Bates and Morgan (2018, p. 623), while professional development initiatives 'should positively influence teacher knowledge and practice and in turn student learning', many initiatives 'fail to meet this goal'. Various reasons why this occurs have been discussed in the literature (Borg, 2015), such as lack of relevance to teachers' needs, simplistic notions of how teachers learn, short-term and one-off training interventions and unsupportive conditions for teacher growth within schools.

More positively, though, there has been much research into the features of professional development that enhance its effectiveness. Desimone (2011), for example, argued that development opportunities need to be content focused, coherent with other development initiatives and teacher beliefs, of consistent duration and involve active learning and collective participation in the form of an 'interactive learning community' (p. 69). More recently, Weston and Hindly (2019) have suggested, based on the conclusions of several literature reviews, that effective professional development is iterative, seen by teachers to be relevant to their job, focused on impact on students and supported by conditions that are conducive to teacher learning.

The role of collaboration in teacher professional development has also been regularly highlighted. For example, Lieberman and Miller (2014, p. 9) define professional learning as 'steady, intellectual work that promotes meaningful engagement with ideas and with colleagues over time', while the importance of 'structured collaborative learning' has also been noted (Weston & Hindly, 2019, p. 64). Increasing teacher ownership in their own development is, it has also been argued, beneficial. For example, programmes where teachers have been asked to provide input on design and/or content have been shown to be more successful (Popova, Evans, Breeding & Aranciba, 2018). In the context of a study of the Activity Based Learning (ABL) movement in South India, Niesz and Ryan (2018, p. 219) also highlight the importance of 'democratically-oriented contexts of change activity' that have a positive impact on 'teacher identity and agency'.

Overall, then, contemporary understandings of teacher professional development[5] provide support for approaches that give teachers some ownership of the learning process, are linked to their needs (and those of their students) and which empower teachers to learn together and from one another. Such concerns align very well with the notion of communities of practice, which we will now discuss.

2.1. Defining CoPs

Wenger defines communities of practice (CoPs) as 'social learning systems' (2010, p. 179) characterised by 'a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). He has also defined CoPs as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2011, p. 1). Teacher CoPs are often described using the terms professional learning communities (PLCs) (Watson, 2014) and teacher communities (Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer & Kyndt, 2017).

Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) note that the precise format of CoPs can vary significantly. They may be small or large and can consist of a core group or also have many peripheral members. Membership can also be local or global, and CoPs can meet face-to-face, online or both. Some may be

5. It must be acknowledged, though, that evidence of 'what works' in teacher professional development is not typically derived from the kinds of under-researched low-resource contexts the British Council works in. This does not mean such global evidence is irrelevant to such contexts, but its applicability does need to be critically considered.

formally recognised (as the TAGs we discuss here), often supported with a budget, while others are very informal.

CoPs are generally seen to be a bottom-up phenomenon. In the context of teaching, this would mean that teachers themselves initiate CoPs and engage consistently and continually in needs-based developmental activities. Thus Liedtka (1999) states that 'communities of practice evolve, they aren't created' (p. 7). However, some literature points to a need to 'design' CoPs. For example, Johnson (2001) recommends that project leaders 'set up a design' and let the community emerge 'within and around it' (p. 53). Vangrieken et al. (2017) call such 'designed' or 'created' CoPs 'formal' teacher communities, and the TAG projects we discuss in this report were formal CoPs of this kind.

2.2 Features of effective CoPs

A variety of factors will determine the effectiveness of CoPs. Wenger (2000, pp. 227–228) outlines three 'modes of belonging' or 'forms of participation': 'engagement' or 'doing things together'; 'imagination' or 'constructing an image of ourselves' as members of a community; and 'alignment' or ensuring the local activities of a CoP are aligned with broader external processes (thus enabling the work of the CoP to have wider impact). CoPs will be more effective when these forms of participation are achieved.

Wenger also stresses the need to 'articulate some dimensions of progress' because such communities can 'learn not to learn' or become 'cages' (p. 230). He outlines three such possible dimensions: 'enterprise' – initiative to sustain learning; 'mutuality' – interaction among group members; and 'repertoire' – the degree of self-awareness a community has about its shared concepts, language and tools. According to Wenger (2000), leadership is another factor that can impinge on the effectiveness of CoPs. In education, this point about leadership is supported by Vangrieken et al. (2017), who reviewed 40 studies involving teacher communities. They concluded that supportive leadership was one key condition for success, along with positive group dynamics and composition and trust and respect.

Watson (2014) (in a more critical analysis) also discussed the features of effective PLCs and, citing earlier work by Bolam et al. (2005), noted the following commonly cited characteristics: shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupils' learning, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration focused on learning and a focus on group as well as individual professional learning. In a recent example of the application of formal CoPs to large-scale teacher CPD, the Education Development Trust also identified 15 success indicators, under four headings: 'high quality content and professional dialogue', 'a collaborative culture', 'appropriate governance, leadership and facilitation' and 'key enabling conditions' (Rossignoli, Amenya, Kamana, Tiganescu & Kudenko, 2019, p. 8). The authors emphasise the interdependency of these factors, recognising that without adequate attention to each, the success of a CoP could be compromised.

2.3 Benefits of CoPs

From a review of ten PLCs, Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008, p. 80) concluded that CoPs have a positive impact on 'teacher practice and student achievement'. They also reported evidence that CoPs encouraged teachers to focus more on student learning and improved the professional culture at schools. More specifically, teachers can benefit from CoPs in many ways. Participation in CoPs necessitates that teachers regularly use – and hence gradually develop – particular skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication and collaboration. By developing such skills themselves in their CoPs, teachers may be in a better position to support their learners to develop them as well. CoPs also contextualise teacher development. That is, the activities of a CoP are situated, grounded in and driven by the work teachers do in classrooms. This leads to more authentic sharing and problem solving and also makes it more likely that what teachers learn from their CoPs will be applied for the benefit of students. CoPs allow teachers to discuss issues of immediate relevance, to examine common challenges and to work towards solutions. As suggested by Trust and Horrocks (2018), CoPs can also facilitate critical reflection and teacher agency. One purpose of this report is to ascertain the extent to which there is evidence in TAG projects of the various benefits CoPs are claimed to have.

2.4 Challenges to CoPs

The effectiveness of CoPs can be challenged by various factors, typically associated with teacher ownership, interpersonal relations and group leadership. It is possible that tensions may arise between the need to give teachers ownership of their community, in terms of decisions about processes and content, and the externally devised structures that often characterise formal CoPs. To counter the negative impacts on teacher motivation that a perceived lack of ownership might have, teacher interest can be sustained, as Lieberman (2000) notes, by keeping the work of the CoP focused on practice and not on 'lofty goals'.

Rossignoli et al. (2019) also highlight the importance of content that is connected to teachers' immediate curricula and classrooms (p. v).

In terms of relationships, Probst and Borzillo (2008) suggest that poor or weak connections between group members can challenge the success of a CoP. Mládková (2015) also notes that CoPs can give rise to group politics and damaging behaviour such as 'monopolies, elitism, arrogance, jealousness' (p. 440). In relation to group dynamics, effective facilitators can strengthen links between community members and keep everyone focused on the objectives of the CoP. They can also promote the mutual trust, respect and support that are required to sustain a CoP. As noted earlier, one focus of the analysis presented here will be on the challenges that arise in the implementation of TAGs.

2.5 Impact of teacher CoPs

In the context of science education, a review by Dogan, Pringle and Mesa (2016) concluded that 'as a result of participation in PLCs, [teachers] improved their use of reform-based science teaching practices, including shifting to a more student-centered approach through facilitation and scaffolding of student inquiry' (p. 575). A study of teachers of Chinese in a Hong Kong secondary school also found that participation in a teacher learning community led to changes in either teachers' practices or their beliefs, or both, in five key areas: curriculum, teaching, student learning, roles of teacher, and learning to teach (Tam, 2015). The positive findings of these two studies reflect the conclusions of Vangrieken et al. (2017) whose systematic review of 40 studies of teacher communities (TCs) concluded that 'every study views TCs as highly valuable settings for teachers' on-going professional development … TCs are considered an effective tool for making true changes in teaching practice, starting from the teachers themselves' (p. 52). However, these authors also conclude that 'empirical research measuring the effectiveness of TCs with regard to increased teacher professional development is lacking' (p. 54). This is true in education generally but even more so in the field of English language teaching.

It is clear, then, that the CoP is a well-established concept and one that has been widely adopted in education to support the professional development of teachers. CoPs embody many features that are believed to enhance the effectiveness of teacher professional development, and evidence exists that teacher communities can stimulate changes in the observable and unobservable (such as beliefs) dimensions of teachers' work. The British Council's use of CoPs – in the form of TAGs on CPD projects around the world – is, thus, theoretically grounded. What is lacking at present, though, is evidence about the implementation of TAGs and about their impacts. This is a gap that this report addresses. Specifically, by drawing on various forms of project documents, particularly evaluation reports, we investigate these questions:

1. How have TAGs been implemented in British Council CPD projects in different countries?
2. What evidence is available from these projects about the impacts of TAGs?
3. What challenges for the impactful implementation of TAGs do these projects highlight?
4. Overall, what does this analysis suggest about the value and feasibility of TAGs as a model of CPD and about the conditions required to make TAGs effective?

A TAG session in Maharashtra, India

3

Methodology

The starting point for this analysis was to identify British Council CPD projects where TAGs had been or were currently being used. For every TAG project that was identified, project managers were asked to share any relevant documentation they had. This came in the form of Word documents, Excel spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations and included baseline studies, handbooks (for participants and facilitators) and – most importantly – evaluation reports (which totalled almost 500 pages and constituted the bulk of the material we reviewed). Where further details were required or needed to be clarified, we also corresponded with project managers and the additional information they provided was added to our database. To enhance data management (see Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017), all materials were stored digitally and organised into folders for each project.

Based on an initial review of the material compiled, six TAG projects were identified for analysis, in India, Palestine, Jordan, Romania, Egypt and Armenia (which was one country in a larger five-nation project in Wider Europe). We are aware that TAG activity may also be taking place elsewhere,[6] but relevant details and documents were not available at the time of this review. Although the volume of documentation available for the six focal projects varied and the projects themselves were at different stages of implementation, in each case there was sufficient material of relevance to our research questions.

The second, more detailed, phase of analysis involved a closer reading of all the documents available for these six projects. The evaluation reports were particularly important as they provided insight into project implementation, outcomes and challenges. Project summaries (see Appendix 1) were first developed from the documents and, where necessary, we asked project managers to confirm that these summaries were accurate and to suggest edits, which were then incorporated. Using qualitative thematic analysis guided by the research questions for this report, the project documents were then read carefully and relevant content was identified, extracted (digitally copied) and categorised under three broad headings: *Implementation of TAGs, Benefits (impacts) of TAGs* and *Challenges arising during TAGs*. This stage of the process was deductive, as content in the documents was being categorised under the three headings pre-determined by our research questions. Once all the relevant material had been extracted from the source documents and collated under these main headings, a second, more inductive, phase of textual analysis (see Kuckartz, 2019) took place, where, through further reading of the data extracted from the project documents, sub-themes within each main heading were identified. Overall, the process of analysis resulted in the framework of major headings and subheadings which provides the structure for the results we now present.

Teachers at a TAG meeting in Armenia

6. For example, in Nepal https://www.britishcouncil.org.np/improving-teaching-skills-tag

4

Analysis

A summary of the key features of the six TAG projects chosen for analysis is presented in Table 1. Specific features of these projects are now analysed in line with the research questions specified above.

4.1 TAG implementation

The first research question focused on the implementation of TAGs. This is addressed in the subsections below.

4.1.1 The role of TAGs in CPD projects

While TAGs have been conceptualised in a fairly consistent way across the six CPD projects, their role in these initiatives has varied. In India and Egypt, TAGs are the core professional learning activity for teachers; further support is provided (as for all TAGs) outside the monthly meetings using digital channels, but the TAG is the primary project component. This is also the case in the Romania and Wider Europe projects. In Palestine, Phase 1 followed the India model (with teachers attending monthly workshops), but in Phase 2 the introduction of online modules for teachers to complete between TAGs meant that the role of TAGs changed; it became more specifically a space for teachers to discuss their attempts to apply in the classroom ideas from the modules studied each month. Finally, the role of TAGs in Jordan was more limited. Teachers did meet each month, but, as noted in project reports, TAGs were an 'extra layer of support' (Duly, 2019, p. 22) for teachers, where they discussed problems, particularly related to the online modules they were studying (with less emphasis on the implementation of these in the classroom).

A TAG session in Armenia

Table 1: Six TAG projects

Feature	Palestine	Jordan	India	Romania	Egypt	Wider Europe [7]
Project duration	Two phases: 8 and 6 months (2017–19)[8]	7 months (2017–18)	2016–21 (two 3-year phases)	3 years (2018–20)	1 year (2019–20)	6 months (2019)
No. of teachers	780	78	45,000	150	22,600	c. 1,000
No. of TAGs	44 (phase 1) 14 (phase 2)	3	2,000	9	783	30 (all five countries), nine of which in Armenia
No. of teachers / TAG	c. 20	c. 20	20–25	10–15	25–40	5–20 (five countries); 10–20 in Armenia
Target grades	Primary	Primary/ Secondary	Primary	Primary/ Secondary	Primary	Primary/ Secondary
TAG frequency	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
TAG duration	2.5 hours	2 hours	3 hours	3 hours	3 hours	3 hours
Focus	Teaching methodology	Teaching methodology	Language development and teaching methodology	Teaching methodology	Language development and teaching methodology	Teaching methodology
Facilitators	Phase 1: 44 Phase 2: 14	1 British Council trainer; 14 local mentors	Phase 1: 250 Phase 2: 600	9	431	120 (working in pairs)
Materials	TAG modules; online Teaching for Success modules	Handouts; Teaching for Success modules	TAG Resource Book	Workbook (Teaching for Success modules)	TAG Resource Book	Workbook (Teaching for Success modules and TeachingEnglish website content)
Online communities	Facebook	VEO[9]	WhatsApp; Twitter	Facebook; WhatsApp	WhatsApp	MOOCs; Facebook

7. This was a larger five-nation project. Our analysis includes one participating country, Armenia.
8. These figures for Palestine were correct at the time of writing. More recently, a second year of Phase 2 has been completed and Phase 3 is starting in late 2020.
9. Video tagging software with associated platform for sharing among TAG members: https://veo.co.uk/

4.1.2 The structure of TAGs

One consistent feature of TAGs is a structure – a sequence of stages which meetings and materials follow. This structure has varied across projects. In India and Egypt, sessions are organised around four areas of content – language development, learning by reading, learning by watching and reflection, and action planning. In Phase 1 of the project in Palestine, TAGs were organised as standard workshops, but in Phase 2 this was wholly changed (British Council, 2019c) to follow the sequence below:

- general discussion of any problems, issues and questions with any part of the course
- individual teacher presentations to share innovative classroom practices
- whole-group discussion of online teaching modules and their application in the classroom
- action planning, through which teachers identified aspects of teaching they might experiment with in the classrooms before the next TAG.

A similar format was adopted in Jordan, though it was implemented in a less-structured way (for example, teachers shared experiences in groups rather than giving a presentation). In Romania and in other countries in the Wider Europe project cluster, the structure for TAG meetings recommended in the facilitators' handbook was:

- Introduce session aims
- Warming up
- Share
- Discuss
- Read
- Watch
- Think
- Design and apply.

The first two stages were introductory in nature, while the next two focused on discussing teachers' classroom experiences since the last meeting. 'Read' and 'Watch' activities provided texts and videos for teachers to engage with and analyse, while the final two stages focused on the planned application of new ideas from the TAG to teachers' own classrooms.

4.1.3 The content of TAGs

In India and Egypt, TAG Resource Books were used which included materials that aimed to enhance teachers' English language skills, teaching methods and reflective abilities. The focus on language proficiency was considered important in these contexts, given the modest levels of English that primary school teachers of English were felt to have. In the remaining projects, such concerns were not present, and TAGs have focused entirely on the development of teaching and reflection skills. For example, in Romania a baseline study noted that 'teachers had a comparatively high level of English and [...] any professional development initiative should address pedagogic skills development rather than language proficiency' (British Council, 2018a, p. 9). Where teaching methods modules were studied, the substantive topics covered during TAGs varied across projects according to what was seen to be most relevant to teachers (typically based on some form of needs analysis or baseline study).

While the materials provided gave TAG sessions a concrete focus, it was hoped that as facilitators and teachers gained confidence and competence, reliance on such materials would be reduced and teachers would take more responsibility for identifying resources to focus on during TAGs. The evidence about whether this is occurring is mixed. For example, a 2019 report about TAGs in India noted that 'The TAG Resource Book continues to be used rather linearly and inflexibly as a textbook ... More content for the TAGs can come from teachers' classrooms' (Borg, 2019c, p. 7). There was also limited evidence from Egypt that, over time, TAGs became less dependent on the TAG Resource Book. In contrast, Palestine (Phase 2) gave teachers a key role in generating the content for TAGs. In this context, following the study of online teaching methods modules, for every TAG 'English teachers (a) delivered a 10 minute presentation demonstrating new activities they have tried out in the classroom (maximum three teachers per meeting) [and] (b) answered questions from other teachers about how they implemented the new ideas' (British Council, 2019c, p. 16). Romania is the only TAG where there is documented evidence of facilitators designing TAG sessions. Predefined materials were provided for 12 meetings. For a further five, facilitators received additional training in materials design and, after consulting their teachers on topics of interest, developed the TAG materials themselves. In Wider Europe, we were advised in a personal communication from the project manager that 'detachment from the resources provided happened during 2019–20 period specially during the Covid-19 lock down when the facilitators had built confidence and shifted to online teaching topics and developed materials of their own.'

4.1.4 TAG facilitators

The central role that facilitators play in TAGs is underlined in project proposals and evaluations. Facilitators have been recruited against rigorous criteria (which include English language proficiency, teaching experience and attitudes to professional development). In India, for example, recruitment 'involved three stages; an interview, a group task and a written task. This ensures that selected candidates are suitable and motivated, as they will play a key role in the project' (British Council, 2017, p. 8). Training has been provided to help facilitators develop the skills they need to run TAGs and to support teachers (including online) effectively. The feedback provided by facilitators on the training they received was consistently good (as measured by the feedback forms completed at the end of the training and – in some cases – survey responses provided at a later date). For example, in Armenia, post-training feedback showed that all facilitators answered '10' when asked to say on an increasing scale of 1–10 how likely it was that they would recommend such a course to a colleague. In India, focus group interviews with TAG facilitators also showed they were very positive about the training they had received (Borg, 2018c).

On the smaller projects, recruiting TAG facilitators was not an issue. In Romania and Armenia, for example, only 18 (two per TAG) were required. On the large-scale initiatives in India and Egypt, though, targets were much higher and the number of facilitators fell short of those anticipated (and, consequently, fewer TAGs were set up). In India (Phase 1), the target was 250 facilitators and estimates were that in Year 3 of the project there were 207 facilitators in place (Borg, 2019d). In Egypt, the target was 600; according to the final evaluation report (Borg, 2020b), 488 were recruited. It was not just the ambitious targets that complicated recruitment; the criteria candidates had to meet were also rigorous. Additionally, individuals who met the criteria may have opted not to join the project as it did not carry any salary benefits or reduction from existing workloads. In Egypt, TAGs were also scheduled on a non-working day, a source of dissatisfaction that was repeatedly highlighted in feedback from facilitators and teachers (Borg, 2020b).

As noted, facilitators received intensive blocks of training at different points during the projects. They also had access to ongoing WhatsApp groups exclusively for the facilitators. In some cases, too, they received periodic feedback on their work; for example, in Romania, whenever Country Trainers observed TAGs they were also able to have a debriefing conversation with the facilitator (British Council, 2019a). In Wider Europe, the facilitators received planned ongoing mentoring from their trainers for the first six weeks. This focused on TAG content and the delivery techniques, with the aim of building facilitators' confidence and identifying areas of their own competences that needed further development. On the larger-scale projects, though, ensuring that facilitators had access to regular ongoing support (outside the formal training) was a challenge. At the end of the first year of TAGs in Egypt, for example, it was recommended that 'the quality of TEs' [teacher educators'] work be monitored more closely, including the opportunity for them to receive feedback on their work at different points during the year, including, but not limited to, during formal training events' (Borg, 2020b, p. 57).

4.1.5 Online components

Across the projects under review here, TAGs were characterised by various forms of further online support.[10] These were meant to fulfil various functions:

- to sustain teachers' sense of community in between the physical meetings
- to give teachers continuing access to support from their facilitator
- to encourage teachers to extend their professional learning independently, through, for example, MOOCs
- to help teachers develop confidence in and skills at using social media for professional development
- to give teachers access to study support (sometimes via an e-moderator), where online teaching modules were part of the project.

WhatsApp and Facebook are the social media platforms that have been most widely used to sustain TAGs, though Zoom and Twitter have featured too. In Armenia, participants maintained contact through closed Facebook groups, while in Romania, both WhatsApp and closed Facebook groups were used (British Council, 2018b). In India and Egypt, for every TAG a WhatsApp group was created. In India these groups have been particularly popular, and one report noted that 'it is clear that the use of WhatsApp by teachers has for many of [the participants]

10. The projects under discussion here were implemented before the Covid pandemic. As we note later, though, TAGs are now increasingly being conducted virtually and while many of the points we make – for example, about TAG content, organisation and facilitators, remain valid – the role of what were previously additional online components has now inevitably changed.

become an important way of sharing ideas and communicating with peers in between TAG meetings' (Borg, 2019d, p. 21). In India, too, the use of social media to support TAGs has led to further forms of online CPD, such as regular Twitter events hosted by TAG facilitators and others involved in the project. In Jordan, teachers had access to VEO – a platform for sharing recordings of lessons online – but limited evidence was available about how widely it was being used.

Teachers' engagement in online professional development varied across projects. In Egypt, over 43 per cent of the 5,088 teachers sampled said they participated in the online groups once a week (Borg, 2020b). In India, 77 per cent of 396 teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I contribute to the TAG WhatsApp groups regularly during the month' (Borg, 2019d). In Palestine (Phase 2), teachers were required to study online modules, and WhatsApp groups were created to support this, but evidence about teacher engagement in these groups was not included in evaluation reports. In Romania, where teachers were encouraged to engage in various forms of additional online CPD, an early report noted that 'the use of MOOCs remains very limited' (British Council, 2018b), and while a later report noted increased engagement by teachers with online content, online CPD was still not widespread (British Council, 2019a). Overall, then, while the uptake of online interaction via social media seemed high across projects, teacher engagement with additional forms of online CPD was more modest.

In Romania, 83 per cent of the teachers felt that their social media group had supported their professional development 'a great deal' or 'a lot'. This is also the only TAG project to date where a closer analysis of what happens on TAG social media groups has taken place. The content of three Facebook groups and two WhatsApp groups was studied and it was found that

> *The social media groups] fulfilled administrative (for example, scheduling TAG meetings), professional (for example, sharing resources for teaching or professional development) and social (for example, congratulating LFs [facilitators] or teachers on successful sessions) purposes. There was, though, limited sharing on the groups of photos and videos from teachers' classrooms, and data protection issues may have influenced that. The groups were not a forum for discussions of teaching and learning.* (Borg, 2020a, p. 56)

4.2 Evaluation results

The second research question we examined here related to the impacts of TAGs as reported in the various evaluation reports that were reviewed. Before proceeding, it must be noted that projects varied significantly in how they were evaluated, largely for budgetary reasons. For example, while several engaged external evaluation consultants, others did not. The kinds of evaluation tools used (questionnaires, observations of TAGs and lessons in schools, focus group interviews, teacher narratives, case studies) also varied across projects as did the samples of respondents involved and the volume of data collected. Space does not permit a more detailed analysis of this issue here (though we return to it in Section 6 below), but it is important to note that, particularly in terms of direct observations of TAGs and of TAG teacher performance in the classroom, the empirical evidence presented in evaluation reports was generally limited – for example, for the evaluation of India (Phase 1), only 27 TAGs were observed (less than one per cent of the total) (Borg, 2019d). Romania was an exception here (though it was also a much smaller project), and in this context 25 per cent of the TAGs were evaluated by observers (British Council, 2019a). In contrast, questionnaires were much more extensively used across projects in obtaining feedback on the perceived impact of TAGs. For example, in Egypt over 5,000 teachers responded to an online exit survey (Borg, 2020b).

Our analysis of the evidence available highlighted two broad headings under which the results of TAG project evaluations can be summarised: the quality of TAGs and the impact of TAGs on teachers, teaching and learning.

A teacher in Palestine participates in an online TAG

4.2.1 Quality of TAGs

Across projects, when teachers were asked to evaluate the content, organisation and facilitation of TAGs, their responses were consistently positive.[11] For example, in Palestine, 'the average score for the TAG sessions is 5 out of 5' (British Council, 2019c, p. 18) and in Romania 88 per cent of the 91 teachers completing a questionnaire said the TAG meetings were 'excellent' (British Council, 2019a, p. 14). It is clear that teachers enjoy TAGs, and one reason for this is that they are seen to be of more value than the generic, less practical and non-interactive kinds of professional development teachers are accustomed to. One facilitator from Romania, for example, said that 'our meetings were totally different from anything that they [teachers] have experienced before' (Borg, 2020a, p. 42). In contexts where teachers were initially sceptical about TAGs, the development of more positive attitudes was reported as teachers realised that TAGs were a different approach to CPD. In Egypt, for example, it was noted that

> *Several teacher educators stated how teachers were reluctant at the beginning of the TAG to attend, assuming that it would be similar to the other trainings they attend for the Ministry of Education. But after some time, they started to feel more enthusiastic to the extent that even other teachers, who were not in the attendance list, expressed their interest to attend as well.* (British Council, 2019b, p. 3)

Teachers' positive attitudes to TAGs were also reflected in the way they rated their facilitators. In Romania, for example, 95 per cent of the questionnaire respondents said their facilitators' performance was 'excellent' (British Council, 2019a, p. 15). Relevant content was another feature of TAGs that teachers responded well to. For example, in Armenia over 95 per cent of 83 teachers responding to a questionnaire felt that the material covered in TAGs was relevant to their contexts.

Teachers valued TAGs for other reasons too. This list, for example, is based on feedback from teachers in Palestine (Borg, 2018b, p. 7):

- TAGs allow teachers to share ideas, problems and techniques
- teachers can seek solutions to common problems that they face
- teachers are not just receiving information as in previous training
- TAGs provide opportunities for immediate application to the classroom of practical ideas
- teachers can learn from the experiences of colleagues.

Based on reports from the facilitators in Romania, various other features that made TAGs successful were identified (British Council, 2018b, pp. 3–6):

- positive atmosphere
- enthusiastic participants
- effective interaction
- sharing of opinions
- relevant and good-quality materials
- clear structure
- non-judgemental environment.

Romania was also the context where the value of creating a sustained and supportive professional network was repeatedly noted in the final evaluation report. One Country Trainer, for example, noted that

> *This is the first time when teachers managed to come together as a network and offer each other support … Before the TAG they would have worked in isolation, whenever they needed help or support, they wouldn't have had anyone to turn to … but now they work as a group.* (Borg, 2020a, p. 49)

Compared to this abundance of evidence based on self-reports, objective measures of the quality of TAGs were less salient in project evaluation reports. In Romania, Country Trainers observed 45 TAGs over the life of the project and evaluated these using a structured observation tool. This included 12 criteria (related to, for example, rapport, interaction and questioning skills) that were rated on a scale of Levels 0–3 (with 0 being the lowest). Across all criteria, most of the 18 facilitators were rated at Levels 2 and 3 (British Council, 2019a). A similar observation tool (but with 14 criteria) was previously used in India; in this case, one project target was that 70 per cent of the facilitators would achieve Level 2 on at least ten criteria. However, only 65.4 per cent of facilitators met this target (Borg, 2019d, p. 7). It must also be noted that in this case only 12.6 per cent (n=24) of the active facilitators were observed. Egypt, too, evaluated a very small sample of nine TAG facilitators (2.1 per cent of the total), using a modified form of the observation tool developed in India. A comparison of baseline and exit performance showed that facilitators' overall mean rating on 11 criteria rose from 2.06 (out of 3) to 2.16. Again, the modest samples involved here do not allow conclusions to be reached about the quality of TAGs on the project more generally.

11. It must be noted, though, that similarly positive feedback is regularly received by the British Council on its more conventional face-to-face training.

One theme that recurred in evaluations of the two largest TAG projects was that facilitators often followed the TAG materials provided quite closely. In India, for example, it was noted that 'TAG Co-ordinators[12] tend to treat the TAG Resource Book as a textbook and to use it in a linear manner. They would benefit from support to understand how they can use the resource book more flexibly' (Borg, 2019d, p. 5). Similar concerns were noted in Egypt. For example, one observed facilitator was described as 'keen on covering all the topics in the TAG Resource Book during the duration of the TAG; however, he needed to provide more opportunities for teachers to adapt the activities discussed and have them think of how to adapt them to better fit their contexts' (British Council, 2019b, p. 4). The final evaluation report for Egypt also noted that 'if teacher educators are overly concerned about working through the resource book it will be used prescriptively and limit the opportunities for professional development that TAGs offer' (Borg, 2020b, p. 58). The tension between structuring TAGs through predefined content and allowing them to function as responsive, flexible spaces for teacher development is an issue we return to later.

4.2.2 Impact on teachers, teaching and learning

Across evaluation reports there is evidence that TAGs have led to changes in what happens in classrooms. In India, an observation tool was used to assess the extent to which teachers use interactive and learning-centred techniques during lessons, and at end project almost 76 per cent of a small sample of 54 teachers were rated as being at Level 2 on a scale of competence ranging from 0 to 3 (3 being the highest). Learner participation in lessons was also assessed at baseline and end project; while 36 per cent of teachers at baseline were at Level 2 on this criterion, at the end of the project this increased to 54 per cent. In Egypt (Borg, 2020b), observations of another modest sample of 33 lessons at the end of the project showed that, compared to baseline measures, 26 teachers improved the overall rating they achieved against 31 criteria. An increase in the extent that learner-centred practices (as defined by eight criteria) were evident in the observed lessons was also found. Overall, though, it is clear that, particularly on the larger projects, it has not been possible (primarily due to resource constraints) to observe TAGs and teachers more widely.

Additionally, teachers were asked in questionnaires and focus groups whether they have used ideas from the TAGs in their classrooms. In India, 82 per cent of 396 teachers surveyed (from a population of around 12,000) responded positively to this question, while in focus groups teachers consistently gave examples of new techniques they were applying in their lessons, such as pair work, group work and various kinds of games. In Romania, 100 core teachers were asked about the overall impact of TAGs on their work; of the 91 respondents, 58 per cent said they had led to significant changes in their teaching, while a further 38 per cent said they had resulted in a number of changes (Borg, 2020a, p. 22). When these teachers were asked to comment more specifically on ten impact statements, they also responded very positively. For example, 95.6 per cent agreed that 'my lessons have become more interactive (pair/group work)', 95.6 per cent felt that 'I am more enthusiastic about my professional development', while 93.4 per cent of respondents agreed that the quality of their lessons had improved as a result of the programme.

In Armenia, in response to the question 'On a scale of 1–5 (5 being the highest rating), how much has your participation in the Teacher Activity Groups helped improve your teaching skills?', 61.6 per cent of 86 respondents chose '5' while 33.7 per cent selected '4'. In Egypt, over 90 per cent of 5,088 teachers also agreed that, as a result of TAGs, their English was better, that they were better able to apply learner-centred activities in the classroom and that 'my English teaching skills and techniques have improved' (Borg, 2020b). In a separate survey in Egypt, Ministry Supervisors, whose responsibilities included observing TAG teachers, agreed (14 out of 19 responses) that the majority of teachers had improved their teaching skills as a result of TAGs.

Two additional qualitative sources of impact data were collected from the teachers in Romania – teacher change stories and samples of teaching and learning materials. The former consisted of short narratives of around 250 words (see Appendix 2 for an example) in which teachers wrote about the impact of TAGs on them. Based on 27 stories, several kinds of change that teachers said they experienced were identified, including in their teaching methods, confidence as teachers, teaching style, attention to students' needs and use of resources (Borg, 2020a).

Another source of insight into TAGs is the collection of case studies from the project in India (British Council, 2019d).[13] This illustrates, with input from a range of stakeholders (including parents), many ways in which TAGs have made a difference. Four recurrent areas of impact in the collection are

12. Facilitators had different titles across projects. In India they are called TAG Co-ordinators.
13. These case studies have been compiled into the publication *Stories of Change* https://www.tatatrusts.org/upload/tejas-books-on-stories-of-change.PDF

confidence and motivation (in both cases for facilitators, teachers and students), use of technology (especially for CPD) and interaction (in TAGs and in teachers' classrooms). Overall, the final evaluation for India (Cycle 1) (Borg, 2019d) notes that various sources of qualitative data from interviews with teachers and TAG facilitators, case studies, presentations at a symposium to mark the end of Phase 1, and open-ended comments in stakeholder questionnaires provide substantial evidence that TAGs were very successful in:

- creating enthusiasm for CPD among teachers
- boosting teachers' enthusiasm to innovate in their classrooms
- increasing teachers' confidence to speak English
- increasing the opportunities learners have for using English in the classroom
- making English lessons in primary schools more interactive.

In Palestine, too, the evaluation reported that '88 per cent of course participants found the face-to-face monthly TAG meetings very useful' (British Council, 2019c, p. 21), and teachers and supervisors were asked to describe changes that had taken place in the classroom. Examples were provided in relation to learners' motivation, integrating inclusive learning and thinking skills methods, understanding differentiation and assessment of learning. For example, one teacher reported that 'one of the changes in my class was the class atmosphere which was changed by using a variety of strategies to motivate the students to learn and applying different levels of activities to suit the different levels of students' (p. 22).[14]

Overall, then, the evaluation reports available provide (despite limited direct evidence from classroom observations) quantitative and qualitative evidence to indicate that TAGs did have a positive impact on various aspects of teachers' classroom practices, their confidence (as teachers and speakers of English) and their attitudes (towards their students and CPD). It was generally felt by teachers, too, that as a result of TAGs, their learners were experiencing more interactive lessons and that, as a result, learners' confidence and motivation related to learning English had also increased.

4.3 TAG-related challenges

An analysis of the documentation from the six TAG projects highlighted a range of challenges that arose. These are summarised in Table 2. These issues were not present to the same degree on every project, but the list provides an overall picture of factors that may limit the effectiveness of TAGs. We should note here, too, that these challenges did not necessarily persist to the same degree throughout projects; in response to intermediate evaluation reports, for example, project teams did often take action to address particular barriers to the effectiveness of TAGs.

A TAG activity in Egypt

14. It must be noted, though, that in the second cycle of PALTAGs the core CPD activity was the study of online teaching modules rather than the TAG meetings, and teacher feedback on 'the course' was most likely often written with reference to these modules.

Table 2: Challenges during TAG projects

Challenge	Description
Administration and logistics	The effective administrative support by local educational authorities required for TAGs to run smoothly was not always provided.
Conceptualisation of TAGs	Some teachers viewed TAGs as conventional input-based training workshops. Some facilitators used the resources provided linearly.
Facilitator development	Beyond the formal training days provided, ongoing job-based opportunities for facilitators to develop were often limited.
Reflective practice	Limited progress was achieved in developing in teachers the ability to reflect on their own and their colleagues' efforts to implement ideas from TAGs in the classroom.
Online engagement	The extent to which TAG teachers engaged in further online learning outside TAGs varied within and across projects.
Localised content	The materials developed for TAGs were not usually sufficiently localised and linked to teachers' curricula.
Monitoring and evaluation	Monitoring and evaluation across projects did not permit generalisable conclusions and focused insufficiently on direct observations of TAGs and lessons in schools.

Below we focus on the first four of these issues (those which, along with the final point, recurred most) with examples from the projects.

4.3.1 Administration and logistics

On the large-scale projects in India and Egypt, thousands of state school teachers across wide geographical areas took part in TAGs, and effective support from local educational authorities in such cases was vital for the smooth implementation of TAGs. Instances where this support was lacking were noted in some places. For example, in India, TAGs were held on a school day, so every month centrally issued official release letters had to be sent to school principals. Without these, teachers would not be allowed to attend TAGs, and there were occasions where the letters were not issued in time and teachers were not released. It was also the responsibility of local officials to identify premises and to ensure these were prepared for TAGs, but the extent to which this occurred varied across districts. For example, early on in Egypt, an external report noted occasions where teachers and their facilitator found that the TAG venue had not been opened (Borg, 2019b). Limited awareness of TAGs among school principals was a related administrative challenge that was noted in Egypt (Borg, 2020b).

Administrative issues were also alluded to on the smaller projects. In Armenia, the project manager noted that 'an authoritative body's involvement is needed to support the logistical arrangement of the meetings' (email, 28.11.2019). In Romania, evaluation reports make specific reference to the central role played by a dedicated project officer who was responsible for the administration of TAGs as well as for collecting and reviewing evaluation data (British Council, 2019a). This was the only project not administered by a local Ministry of Education, and the British Council was thus able to take overall responsibility for its administration.

4.3.2 Conceptualisation of TAGs

TAGs represented a new way of thinking about CPD for both facilitators and teachers, yet there was some evidence, particularly in the early phases of projects, that participants often engaged in TAGs as if they were conventional training sessions. For example, a report from Palestine Phase 1 describes a TAG on the topic of 'technology' that was delivered by a well-prepared and confident facilitator:

> *As a TAG, though, the session was problematic as it was a training workshop … Teachers worked through a series of activities … and had limited opportunities to share experience – for example, to talk about the technologies they had access to in their schools and if or how they used them.* (Borg, 2018b, p. 18)

In Egypt, too, examples of TAGs were described where the facilitator 'was keen on covering all the topics in the TAG Resource Book during the duration of the TAG' without providing teachers space to reflect and discuss. In another example, the facilitator spent the whole TAG lecturing the teachers about pronunciation (British Council, 2019b, p. 4). It is reasonable to expect that, as facilitators and teachers became more familiar with TAGs, this particular challenge would have become less salient. Sufficient evidence from TAG observations, though, was not available to assess the extent to which this development occurred.

4.3.3 Facilitator development

On all six TAG projects, the individuals responsible for leading the TAGs – what we have referred to here as facilitators (though variously called co-ordinators, facilitators and teacher educators on different projects) – received a certain number of days of formal training in preparation for their role. For example, in Egypt, teacher educators received 14 days of training in three blocks over ten months (Borg, 2020b), while in Romania facilitators attended a four-day course at the start of the project, with additional ongoing support sessions (Borg, 2020a). As noted earlier, feedback from participants on the training provided was consistently positive. Facilitators were typically teachers with limited experience of supporting the development of other teachers and it was therefore to be expected that they would require ongoing support to develop their own competences at leading TAGs. In Romania, facilitators were periodically observed by Country Trainers (external staff recruited locally for the project by the British Council) from whom they also received some feedback. Across projects, though, there was limited evidence of ways in which the competence of facilitators was monitored and job-embedded (i.e. in addition to blocked training) support provided. This was particularly evident in the larger-scale projects, where hundreds of facilitators operated across wide geographical areas. Overall, TAG facilitators would have benefited from opportunities to receive periodic feedback and developmental support for their work. For example, the final evaluation for Egypt notes that teacher educators (TEs)

> *received 14 days of training. It was unclear, though, what ongoing support for their work they had outside these events. It is recommended … that the quality of TEs' work be monitored more closely, including the opportunity for them to receive feedback on their work at different points during the year, including but not limited to, during formal training events.* (Borg, 2019d, p. 58)

4.3.4 Reflective practice

Promoting reflective practice among teachers is a key goal of TAGs; it was hoped that teachers would experiment with ideas from TAGs in their classrooms, reflect on the process, and share their experiences and reflections with one another in a subsequent TAG meeting. In India, though, it was noted that the time allocated to 'reflection' during each session was often limited. For example, it took up a few minutes at the start (where teachers said something about their teaching since the last meeting) or was covered briefly at the end (where teachers were asked to reflect on how they might use ideas from the TAG in their subsequent teaching). After three years of TAGs in India, a report noted that 'reflection and action planning … remain areas of TAGs where limited progress has been achieved … At present the reflection and action planning work in TAGs is rather superficial and has no discernible impact on teachers' (Borg, 2019d, p. 4).

'Reflection' was also noted as an area needing further development early in the Romania project (British Council, 2018b). The final evaluation for this project also highlighted the need for a more structured approach to the development of teachers' reflective skills. In Egypt, while almost 94 per cent of over 5,000 teachers surveyed agreed that as a result of TAGs they were better able to reflect on their teaching, more concrete evidence of this was not available. Concerns about reflection extended to facilitators too – in Egypt, a small sample of teacher educators observed at baseline and end project registered no improvement in their ability to reflect on their work, as assessed through post-TAG discussions with observers (Borg, 2020b).

A TAG session in Romania

5

Summary of findings

While the analysis presented here has focused on TAG projects delivered by the British Council in six international contexts, the insights that have emerged are, we would argue, more broadly relevant to the design, implementation and evaluation of formal CoPs for teacher professional development.

It is clear from the evidence discussed that TAGs are positively viewed by stakeholders – teachers, facilitators and (where sufficient awareness among this group exists) local educational authorities. Teachers' immediate positive responses to TAGs are often a result of their novelty and the way this approach to CPD contrasts with more customary top-down and less interactive and personalised approaches. However, an analysis of teacher feedback over time and across projects shows that their positive reactions are not simply a response to novel experiences; they do recognise the many ways in which TAGs contribute to their development by stimulating positive changes in their:

- confidence as teachers
- attitudes and beliefs
- relationships with colleagues
- willingness to innovate
- knowledge and use of student-centred instructional strategies.

Where language development has been a goal of TAGs, teachers also reported feeling more confident as speakers of English.

Teachers consistently reported, too, that the benefits of TAGs for them do translate into enhanced learning experiences for their students, though this is an issue for which more concrete evidence is lacking. Also, while TAGs provide teachers with opportunities to reflect regularly and systematically on their teaching, this is another area where the evidence available suggests that impact is generally not strong.

Overall, though, it is clear that TAGs can and do have a positive impact on several dimensions of teacher competence and that teachers believe that, in turn, the learning experiences of their students are also enhanced. These findings regarding formal CoPs are thus broadly supportive of the literature on teacher communities more generally and which, as discussed earlier (for example, Vangrieken et al., 2017), argue that they can be a powerful source of collaborative professional development.

Various challenges to the effective implementation of TAGs were also identified in the six projects reviewed. A lack of deeper reflection by teachers has already been noted here; additional challenges took the form of ineffective administrative support, limited ongoing opportunities for facilitators to develop and, at a more conceptual level, how well the principles underpinning TAGs were understood by all stakeholders. These are discussed further in the next section, where we consider some key requirements for making TAGs work.

6

Making TAGs work

Informed by the analysis presented in this report, we now consider seven broader issues that are key to the successful implementation of TAGs (and perhaps of formal CoPs more generally) for teacher CPD.

6.1 Making TAGs distinctive

It is important for all stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the ways in which TAGs are distinct from more conventional forms of training. As discussed earlier, when TAGs are led by a facilitator and sessions are structured around predefined (and often 'global') materials, there is a risk that meetings may come to resemble conventional trainer-delivered teacher workshops. The definition of TAGs provided in the introduction to this report highlights the key features of TAGs which need to be protected to minimise such risks. These are:

- sustained activity over time (face-to-face and/or online)
- opportunities for teachers to learn together (collaborative CPD)
- opportunities for teachers to learn from one another (teachers as a source of expertise)
- dynamic content that is defined by teachers' classroom contexts (localisation and immediate relevance)
- sharing and interaction as key teacher learning processes
- positive group dynamics – trust, openness and a non-judgemental environment
- classroom inquiry and reflection (cyclical links between TAGs and teaching).

This combination of characteristics distinguishes TAGs from conventional training and it is thus unhelpful, for example, to call any regular gathering of a group of teachers a TAG; it is not just a physical structure but one characterised by specific principles, purposes and processes.

It cannot be assumed that stakeholders will from the outset share the view of CPD that TAGs are based on. For example, teachers accustomed to less active and collaborative forms of professional development may attend TAGs expecting the facilitator to lecture or 'teach' specific content; they may also not appreciate the importance of the inquiry and reflection that needs to happen in classrooms between TAG sessions (and thus feel that simply being present at the monthly meetings will suffice). In other words, the concepts of teacher agency and reflective activity that TAGs build on may not be rooted in the different educational cultures in which they are established and so, as a result, TAGs may take on features which are more familiar to the local participants.

Teachers may also initially be wary of talking about challenges they face in the classroom (fearing it reflects badly on their perceived competence or, again, as it contradicts cultural or contextual norms, for example of face-saving). Local education officials who are expected to support TAGs may also hold unsupportive notions of CPD or even, by discouraging teachers' attempts to innovate in the classroom, limit the impact TAGs have on teaching and learning. Attempts to implement TAGs, then, must be supported by efforts to ensure that key underlying principles are understood and accepted by all stakeholders.

6.2 Competent TAG facilitators

While CoPs can exist without facilitators, our focus here has been on formal CoPs called TAGs in which a facilitator of some kind is required (irrespective of the term used to describe the role). In implementing this model of CPD it is important for those responsible to consider these questions regarding facilitators (adapted from Borg, in press):

- What competences will they require?
- How many of them will be needed?
- How will they be recruited?
- Will they be locally or externally sourced?
- What preparation will they need?
- What range of responsibilities will they be given?
- Will they be paid and/or receive any incentives?
- What ongoing support will they receive?
- How will the quality of their work be assessed?

In the six TAG projects reviewed here, the facilitators were drawn from a local population of teachers and given preparatory and ongoing training. In all cases, too, they worked on a voluntary basis, typically without any reduction in their normal teaching workloads. In some cases, TAGs were also organised outside normal school hours. Such decisions about workloads and the scheduling of TAGs are often made by the educational authorities who are responsible for TAG projects, and questions should be asked about the sustainability of models of CPD which rely on the willingness of facilitators to work in their own time and without any incentive. Nonetheless, the evidence from the projects analysed here suggests that facilitators are willing to engage in TAGs and that they value both the preparatory training they receive for their role and the experience of working with teacher colleagues over time.

In terms of the competences required by TAG facilitators, the following list highlights some key requirements (Borg, 2019a, pp. 9–10):

- good levels of English (assuming English language development is a focus of the TAGs) and/or appropriate levels of local language(s)
- extensive teaching experience in the local context
- the ability and willingness to reflect on their own work
- an understanding of the value of teacher-led, school-based, social CPD
- familiarity with basic technologies that can be used in teaching and training
- the ability to create a safe climate in which teachers are willing to make their work available for public discussion
- the ability to maximise opportunities for teachers to share experiences
- knowledge of how to encourage teachers to reflect critically on their work and that of their colleagues
- the ability to structure sessions so that they lead to some concrete outcomes
- the ability to motivate teachers to try out new ideas in their classrooms
- an understanding of the difference between TAGs and training workshops
- knowing how to exploit unplanned opportunities for collaborative learning that arise during TAGs.

These are just illustrative, and additional ideas might be derived from the British Council's CPD framework for teacher educators,[15] which includes ten professional practices, seven enabling skills and five features of self-awareness. The current global health crisis has increased the likelihood that TAGs will increasingly be organised virtually (in Egypt, India and Wider Europe, for example, TAGs have moved online) and this has implications for additional digital competences that TAG facilitators will require.

15. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/cpd-framework-teacher-educators

6.3 Balancing structure and autonomy

Formal CoPs such as TAGs create an external structure for teacher CPD. Tensions can arise between the requirements imposed by this external structure and a desire to give teachers and facilitators scope to work responsively and flexibly. An awareness of these potential tensions and some consideration of how best to manage them is recommended when TAGs are being planned and implemented. One obvious example here is the fact that attending TAGs is often mandated by educational authorities (rather than being an initial choice which teachers make). While this would seem to contravene a basic proviso for effective CPD – voluntary participation – it must also be recognised that, particularly where educational reform at scale is being targeted, optional participation by teachers in CPD can be counterproductive. Educational authorities, then, need to devise strategies which maximise teacher participation in TAGs but which also make the experience a worthwhile and positive one. The evidence available consistently indicates that teachers enjoy participating in TAGs, and this suggests that although initial concerns about mandated participation may arise, these will subside as teachers come to recognise the value of such participation. This assumes, of course, that TAGs have been set up appropriately in terms of content, facilitators, venues and other logistical matters. Another way of increasing teacher engagement is for TAGs to occur during normal working hours, though this was generally not the case in the projects reviewed here.

Tensions between structure and autonomy on TAGs can also arise from the way content is defined. All of the projects reviewed here were supported by modules of content packaged into handbooks, resource books or online modules. These were valued by participants; for facilitators (who were often new to the role) they made preparation less time-consuming and provided a consistent structure they could follow; for teachers, they provided a range of activities organised around pedagogical themes of general interest (for example, motivating students or teaching vocabulary). Predefined materials also allowed for consistency across TAGs running simultaneously in different locations.

At the same time, though, predefined material can stifle the emergent focus on issues of immediate local interest that TAGs are so suited to exploring. There is also a risk that predefined materials (particularly if they are replicated across different projects) may not be sufficiently localised and aligned with the curriculum teachers use. These are not easy tensions to resolve. The development of high-quality localised TAG materials is a costly and time-consuming activity and will not be possible without appropriate resources (time, money and expertise); this is particularly true on larger projects and it is no coincidence that it was only on the smaller projects that some TAG materials were developed by the facilitators themselves.

Content can also be teacher-generated. This does not mean that teachers should design materials for a whole three-hour TAG; but teachers can be encouraged to provide various artefacts from the classroom – such as audio and video recordings, examples of students' work, instructional materials (including those designed by teachers or found online), textbook extracts, teachers' written reflections on their lessons or student feedback – and make these the focus of TAG discussions. Teachers can also bring to TAGs concrete examples of challenges they face or aspects of their work they would like to improve, and collaborative discussions around these can take place.

Overall, the goal for TAGs should be, over time, to reduce reliance on materials determined by others, to increase the space allocated to teacher-generated content and to involve facilitators in the design of content with high local value.

6.4 Administrative support

Effective administration is a central part of TAG projects. Where TAGs are a mandated CPD activity within an educational system, various logistical tasks need to be completed before the TAGs can actually take place. These include communicating with teachers (informing them about TAGs), assigning them to groups, deciding on a venue, ensuring the venue is open (if the meeting is outside working hours) and equipped, and issuing release letters (if teachers need permission to be away from their schools). Transporting TAG materials to venues (often over large geographical areas) is another administrative task. Attendance also needs to be monitored and (especially for mandated projects) absences followed up (especially on larger projects, obtaining precise attendance data has been an issue). The many administrative tasks that need to be completed in support of TAGs are often assigned to multiple officials at different levels of the educational system, thus increasing the potential for inefficiency. On smaller projects, such challenges are more manageable, but effective administration is nonetheless still vital.

An important stage in planning TAG projects, then, is to identify the one-off and recurring administrative tasks that need to be completed, assign these to individuals with relevant competence (some preparatory training may be needed) and to draw up an organisational chart of some kind that shows the different levels of responsibility and reporting. It must also be ensured that those responsible for the administration of TAGs understand what they are (see 6.1 above) and appreciate the importance of the tasks they are responsible for.

6.5 Online components for CPD

Each of the TAG projects discussed here had some kind of online component. In some cases, teachers worked through online modules about language teaching then discussed these during the TAG. In others (and this was a more common model), social media groups allowed teachers and facilitators to keep in touch in between the physical TAG meetings. Where such groups were used (mostly on Facebook or WhatsApp), there is evidence that teachers did value them and contributed regularly. In one context, participation was also stimulated by regular online discussions that were moderated by facilitators. However, questions do arise about the particular functions that TAG social media groups can and do fulfil. One general trend observed in the two projects for which data was available was that the online groups fulfilled various administrative, professional and social purposes but did not provide a forum for reflective or critical discussions of teaching and learning. This may link to the more general point noted across projects that developing teachers' reflective skills during TAGs was an issue that merited more attention, but other explanations are possible too. For example, teachers will be keen to maintain positive group dynamics and this may limit written observations online that may be perceived as negative. Teachers also want to motivate one another; complimentary language was thus frequent in the online groups. One final reason may be time – reflecting on other teachers' experiences and commenting in depth is time-consuming.

Although TAG social media groups have great potential as a forum for reflective discussions of teaching and learning, this is unlikely to be fulfilled unless teachers are provided with a framework for such activity. For example, each month one or two teachers can be asked to share some concrete classroom experience that links to a recent TAG theme, with some discussion questions which other teachers have a week to comment on (or which can be addressed through a synchronous discussion). We are not suggesting that such activity displace the valuable social function that TAG social media groups currently play. Rather, the goal should be to extract more professional value from the groups in a way that complements the TAG meetings.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that in several contexts TAGs have become wholly virtual events. There is some evidence from Romania (where the final TAGs of the project were done online) to suggest that while teachers prefer the face-to-face meetings, they have continued to enjoy meeting virtually. Informal feedback from India also suggests that online TAGs are working well there too. In Wider Europe, a dedicated virtual TAG platform has been designed for teachers across the region, and innovative ways of using this to support teacher development are currently being explored. Of course, in early cases the prior existence of a strong physical teacher community will have facilitated the transition to online groups, and it remains to be seen how TAGs will function if they are virtual from the outset. The implementation and impact of e-TAGs (also referred to as v-TAGs) is an issue for further research as working online starts to become the norm for teacher CoPs.

6.6 Situated inquiry

Situated inquiry is the process through which teachers experiment with new pedagogical ideas in their classrooms and reflect systematically on the process, with particular attention to its impact on students' learning experiences. As previously discussed, while one goal of TAGs is to promote inquiry and reflection of this kind, the evidence available suggests that this is an aspect of TAGs that merits more attention. Various steps can be taken to promote situated inquiry on TAG projects, including:

- recognising that inquiry and reflection may be novel processes for teachers and facilitators and that the relevant skills need to be developed over time
- providing teachers with examples that demonstrate in concrete terms what situated inquiry looks like
- introducing teachers to simple tools and techniques they can use in the classroom to collect evidence of how well new teaching strategies are working
- creating a structure (for example, a series of stages) that supports teachers' efforts to engage in situated inquiry
- allocating sufficient time during TAG meetings to sharing, discussing and preparing for situated inquiry

- ensuring that the process is kept manageable – if it is felt by teachers to involve too much additional work, they are less likely to engage
- considering ways in which online components such as social media groups can provide an additional space for teachers to share and discuss their inquiries.

Situated inquiry should be a critical element in TAGs. It establishes reciprocal links between TAG meetings and what happens in classrooms and enables teachers not only to apply in their classrooms new techniques acquired in TAGs but to critically assess their effectiveness.

6.7 Robust evaluation

Our final point here is that it is difficult to reach informed conclusions about the effectiveness of TAGs without robust impact evaluations. What is feasible will, of course, always be determined by the resources available. However, even where resources are limited, decisions about how to conduct evaluations need to be made strategically, and always with a focus on obtaining trustworthy data. Measures such as teacher satisfaction, outputs and reach describe, respectively, how stakeholders feel, what activities were completed and how many people were affected; these are easily assessed but do not provide insight into impact, i.e. whether TAGs lead to any actual change or if the TAG model is more effective than traditional workshop-style training. This is where the focus of impact evaluations should be, something that was generally acknowledged in the projects reviewed here. In other words, evaluations did seek to understand whether TAGs had led to changes in teachers, teaching and learning.

Despite this awareness, though, the evaluation procedures applied were generally limited in their ability to provide robust evidence of such changes. The observation of TAG teachers was either absent from project evaluations or limited to very modest samples. It was also not coherent across projects, meaning that it was difficult to triangulate the findings in order to draw general conclusions. Also, none of the projects included a focus on student learning as part of the evaluation of TAGs. In contrast, questionnaires were widely used to examine stakeholder perceptions of TAGs and their impact. While these have an important role to play, effective evaluations of TAG projects will combine quantitative and qualitative data collected using different methods and from a range of stakeholders, and ideally using a standardised set of tools and processes. In some cases, case studies and teacher narratives (change stories) were used to explore the impact of TAGs and such approaches should be considered alongside those that are more conventionally adopted. The literature on the monitoring and evaluation of professional development provides more guidance on such matters (for example, Borg, 2018a; Kiely, 2019; Killion, 2018; Muijs & Lindsay, 2008).

A TAG session in Egypt

7

Conclusion

Since 2016, TAGs have become an established model of CPD on projects delivered by the British Council in different parts of the world, and this is the first published analysis of the implementation and evaluation of this formal kind of teacher community of practice. On the basis of the evidence available from six completed or ongoing projects, it is clear that TAGs are valued by teachers and other stakeholders. Teachers consistently report that as a result of TAGs they are using a wider range of teaching techniques and resources, delivering more interactive and student-centred lessons (which their students benefit from) and that they feel more professionally confident. TAGs are also appreciated for the manner in which they create supportive teacher networks. The analysis has also highlighted various challenges that can limit the effectiveness of TAGs and made recommendations for addressing these, particularly through a more flexible, localised and teacher-led approach to the development of content and a greater focus on the development of inquiry and reflection, including through TAG-related social media groups. The importance to TAGs of effective administration and competent facilitators also emerged clearly from the projects discussed here. Key to the successful implementation of TAGs is, additionally, an awareness among all stakeholders of the defining features of TAGs which make them different from conventional forms of training.

8

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Appendix 1: TAG project summaries

TEJAS – India

https://www.britishcouncil.in/programmes/english-partnerships/state/Tejas

TEJAS was the original TAG project. Its first cycle ran in India from 2016 to 2019 through a partnership between the State Government of Maharashtra, Tata Trusts and the British Council. The British Council had in previous years delivered large-scale teacher training in India via cascade models (intensive training of master trainers who subsequently delivered the same training to teachers in their districts). Educational authorities in India, though, were looking for CPD models that were more teacher-led, that engaged teachers over longer periods of time, that had a stronger collaborative dimension and that allowed for greater interplay between CPD and what teachers were doing in the classroom. The TAG model was adopted in response to these needs.

TEJAS aimed to establish 750 TAGs in nine districts, with some 20 primary school teachers of English in each TAG giving a total target of 15,000 participating teachers. Each TAG was led by a TAG Co-ordinator, an experienced teacher who received 15 days of training (spread over three years) for this role. The project sought to appoint 250 TAG Co-ordinators, and each was responsible for three TAGs. Saturday (a working day) was the designated TAG meeting day, and each TAG met at a local school once a month throughout the school year. To support TAGs, TAG Resource Books were produced by the British Council for each year of the project. The professional development materials in the resource books were organised under four headings: language development (activities to enhance teachers' English language skills), learning by reading (texts about teaching for teachers to discuss), learning by watching (videos demonstrating classroom activities), and reflection and action planning (where teachers thought about what they would implement in their classrooms and reflected on the activities they tried out). During each three-hour TAG meeting, the teachers, guided by their co-ordinator (or by a TAG member who was given responsibility for a particular activity), worked through material from each of the four sections in the TAG Resource Book.

TAG Co-ordinators were supported by a team of State Academic Resource Persons (SARPs). These individuals were employed by the State Institute for English (SIE). One of their key roles was to assist TAG Co-ordinators with administrative matters involved in running TAGs.

In between the face-to-face monthly meetings, teachers interacted via WhatsApp groups (one per TAG), through which they were able to share ideas, resources and video clips from their classrooms. TAG Co-ordinators also had their own WhatsApp group. Twitter chats were also organised by TAG Co-ordinators and SARPS (see #tejas4ed on Twitter for examples of these).

At the end of Phase 1, a symposium was organised at which TAG teachers and co-ordinators prepared poster presentations to share their experiences of the project and of the impact it had had.

TEJAS was evaluated through observations of TAGs and of lessons taught by TAG teachers, focus group interviews with TAG Co-ordinators and teachers, and questionnaires completed by TAG Co-ordinators, TAG teachers and students taught by these teachers. Evaluations were conducted by British Council Training Consultants and by external evaluators. An additional form of impact evidence produced at the end of TEJAS Cycle 1 was a collection of case studies where stakeholders described the impact the project has had on them.

In 2019 the project was scaled up to cover 27 additional districts in Maharashtra. Cycle 2 aims to train a further 600 TAG Co-ordinators, who will be responsible for 1,200 TAGs involving some 30,000 teachers. This cycle will also run for three years.

PALTAG – Occupied Palestinian Territories

https://www.britishcouncil.ps/en/teaching-success

TAGs were launched in Palestine in September 2017 and have been delivered in two phases. In the first eight-month phase there were 44 TAGs involving 780 teachers of English in Grades 5–12. Each TAG was led by a TAG Supervisor (elsewhere referred to as a TAG Facilitator) from either the Ministry of Education (33) or United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA – 11), who were co-funding PALTAG. During this first phase, the British Council project manager responsible for the project designed workshop materials each month and met the TAG Supervisors to review and discuss these. This was the only form of training these facilitators received. Once a month, on a Tuesday (this is the day allocated to the professional development of English teachers in Palestine), facilitators ran a two-hour TAG and delivered the workshop. In between TAGs, a PALTAG Facebook group was used to sustain ongoing interaction among teachers via, for example, competitions and surveys. At the end of the first phase, a PALTAG Symposium was organised at which several well-known international ELT speakers gave presentations.

Phase 2 of PALTAG ran for six months from September 2018 and involved 14 TAGs (each again led by a supervisor) and a total of 210 teachers. While in Phase 1 the TAG was delivered as a workshop prepared by the project manager, in Phase 2 TAGs were integrated into a broader CPD strategy and each month consisted of:

- one online training module from the British Council's Teaching for Success catalogue, which all teachers completed with the support of an e-moderator
- observation of teaching by TAG Supervisors (of three teachers each month). Supervisors received training aimed at improving their ability to conduct classroom observations and discuss these constructively with teachers
- one 2.5-hour TAG meeting in which (a) teachers delivered a ten-minute presentation demonstrating new activities they had tried out in the classroom (maximum three teachers per meeting), (b) the classroom implementation of the online training module for that month was discussed and (c) teachers wrote a personal action plan for the month ahead.

WhatsApp groups were set up for each TAG group to allow teachers to interact regularly with one another and with their supervisors.

PALTAGs were evaluated via questionnaires completed by teachers, facilitators and e-moderators. In Phase 1, an external evaluator also visited the project and wrote a report based on observed TAG sessions and meetings with teachers and supervisors.

Makani – Jordan

TAGs were also used in Jordan as part of a teacher development project that involved practitioners in UNICEF Makani centres. These are schools where vulnerable children have access to learning support and child-protection services. Seventy-eight teachers took part in the seven-month project, which started in September 2017. In addition to attending TAGs, teachers completed both face-to-face and online methodology modules from the British Council's Teaching for Success catalogue.

The TAGs were organised by a British Council trainer. He was supported by 14 mentors, who completed a 'train the trainer' course to prepare them for their role (which included conducting classroom observations with teachers). TAGs (with some 20 teachers in each group) were organised in the fourth week of every month and lasted two hours. The suggested structure for the TAGs was as follows:

- introductory discussion
- feedback on monthly lesson observations
- group discussion about what has gone well / not so well in recent classes
- action plan for upcoming month (using TAG planning sheet)
- sharing and discussion of videos teachers have made of their own classes.

The first stage was led by the British Council trainer with the whole group; for the rest of the TAG, though, teachers worked in smaller groups that were facilitated by mentors.

All teachers on the project were given access to VEO, a platform which allowed them to share recordings of their teaching with other members of the group. Each centre where TAGs were held had also been given a router and internet subscription.

Conclusions about the impact of the Makani project were reported in an end-term report written by the British Council project manager. This drew on feedback from teachers, mentors, trainers and e-moderators, as well as evidence from teachers' language tests and classroom observations.

English for the Community – Romania

https://www.britishcouncil.ro/en/programmes/society/english-community

English for the Community was a three-year TAG project that ran in Romania from 2017 to 2020. It was a partnership between the British Council and the Romanian–American Foundation. The project consisted of nine TAGs (each in a rural town) of 10–15 state-school teachers of English. One hundred and fifty teachers participated, all on a voluntary basis. In contrast to the other projects being analysed here, English for the Community was not organised by the Ministry of Education.

TAGs met once a month and sessions were led by local facilitators. These were experienced teachers who received four days of initial training from the British Council for this role.

Informed by a baseline study and needs analysis, modules were selected from the British Council's Teaching for Success catalogue of professional development materials and compiled into a booklet. Each month, one module was covered during a TAG meeting. Examples of modules include Lesson planning, Helping learners with vocabulary, Developing learners' pronunciation skills, and Assessing learners

In between TAG meetings, teachers were encouraged to interact online. To support this purpose, a closed Facebook group and/or a WhatsApp group was created for each TAG.

For the purposes of evaluation, local facilitators wrote reports after every TAG meeting and submitted them to the project team. British Council trainers also observed every fourth TAG session and evaluated it using a standardised observation tool. After conducting TAG observations, British Council trainers held reflective debriefing sessions with TAG members and local facilitators.

National Teacher Training Programme – Egypt

https://www.britishcouncil.org.eg/en/programmes/education/national-teacher-training-programme

The National Teacher Training Programme (NTTP) was a three-year project in Egypt that started in 2017 through a partnership between the British Council and the Ministry of Education. The project aimed to develop the competences of around 22,000 primary school teachers nationwide (this figure includes some 2,000 teachers of mathematics and science in addition to teachers of English).

The TAG model implemented was similar to that used on TEJAS: teachers met for three hours monthly (on Saturdays – a non-working day) in around 1,200 groups of 25–40 participants. Meetings took place in a centrally located school in each *idara* (local district) around the country and TAGs were facilitated by 431 teacher educators – experienced teachers who completed a three-phase training course to support them in their role. In turn, teacher educators were supported by 70 Ministry Supervisors, whose roles included logistics such as securing suitable premises for the TAG meetings, monitoring attendance by teachers at TAGs and observing TAG teachers back in their classrooms. A TAG Resource Book was produced, following the model developed in TEJAS but with content updated for the Egyptian context. During each TAG meeting, teachers worked through materials from the handbook.

At the end of the first cycle, an external evaluation of the NTTP was conducted. This drew on observations of TAGs and lessons in schools, interviews and surveys with different stakeholders and teacher language tests.

English Clubs: Improved Skills for Stronger Societies – Wider Europe

With the support of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), in 2018 the British Council launched a TAG initiative in five countries in Wider Europe: Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia and Georgia. This was a six-month pilot project which ended in April 2019.

In late 2018, training was provided (in Ukraine) for the 'Master Trainers' – individuals who would be responsible for training the local facilitators in each country. These individuals (four from each participating country) subsequently trained a total of some 120 local facilitators in their countries (the organisation of this training varied across countries). The first phase of the training focused on issues relevant to teacher development; the second phase introduced TAGs and how they would be organised. As part of their preparation, local facilitators received a handbook which provided full details of TAG objectives, content and structure.

TAGs were rolled out from early 2019. Meetings took place monthly and lasted three hours, and in total some 1,000 secondary-school teachers of English participated in this project. A TAG participants' handbook was produced, which included the same modules used on the Romania TAG project above. The structure for each TAG was also explained in this handbook as follows:

- a warmer activity to begin the session
- 'Think' and 'Discuss' sections to help teachers express ideas and opinions about a range of topics related to the teaching and learning of English
- a 'Read' section where teachers read and discuss an article on a topic related to the teaching and learning of English
- a 'Watch' section where a video of teaching is viewed and discussed.

In this project, emphasis was also placed, through 'Design' and 'Apply' sections in each TAG, on the application to the classroom of ideas learned during the TAG. Teachers were also expected to develop action plans and to reflect on these prior to each subsequent TAG session.

The CSSF project encouraged teachers to engage with a wide range of digital resources (such as MOOCs and the British Council's own websites) to further support their professional development in between TAGs. Social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp were also used to enable teachers to interact digitally.

Evaluation was handled internally, though procedures varied across countries. For the purposes of this report, we were given access to data from Armenia. In this context, there were nine TAGs made up of 15–20 teachers, and six TAG meetings were organised between January and May 2019. The TAGs were evaluated through an online questionnaire completed by teachers.

The project has now been extended for three years, with the vTAG concept now accepted as the approach to CPD for all English teachers in Georgia. Similar proposals are under discussion in Armenia

Appendix 2: Teacher change story

Before starting this course I realised that I had gotten somewhat stuck in my teaching. I was lacking imagination while preparing my lessons and once I got bored during an activity in class I realised that it wasn't a good sign and that I needed to do something immediately. This course really came as a breath of fresh air.

The format of the course was a plus and the facilitators were great. I got to experience every lesson 'hands on', we worked with and around every topic from the course. We got involved in every technique and participated with pleasure in every activity which made me realize the importance of empathy, which I sometimes forgot to include in my teaching due to different factors. The real change happened during my lessons and not outside of it. It helped me to better shape the activities on my students and it was critical for my on the spot decisions during activities. It was easier for me to adapt the activities according to my students' needs and mood of the class.

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. I loved the fact that we formed a community and shared our experience with each other and often found solutions to problems we didn't realize we had. This also helped me give my best to bring every class together and help them connect with each other.

All in all it was a great and beneficial experience and I would love to have the chance to continue because of the connection I got to experience with my fellow teachers. I believe that there are still things we can learn and share with each other during face-to-face meetings and we can still grow as a community which is better prepared to teach new and changing generations of young thinkers.

(Borg, 2020a, p. 68)

This report examines the British Council's use of a model of continuing professional development (CPD) called Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs). Drawing on evidence from six projects in different countries, the analysis reviews the implementation of TAGs, their impact on teachers and students and the challenges that TAGs may give rise to. Recommendations for setting up TAG projects are also provided.

Although the projects reviewed here mainly involved teachers of English as a foreign language in primary and secondary state schools, TAGs can support the CPD of teachers of any subject at all levels of education. The insights provided here will, therefore, be relevant to the use of formal communities of practice for teacher development more generally.

ISBN: 978-0-86355-979-2