

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE: A DISCUSSION GROUP FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Although teachers spend much of their time working with students, it is very important that they connect with fellow teachers. These meetings and gatherings can be formal or informal and should give teachers time and space to discuss teaching challenges, student issues, content questions, and research on language teaching and learning. When teachers are given opportunities to talk with their colleagues, they can return to their classrooms feeling more energized and better informed. They also can feel comfortable knowing that they have a supportive group of colleagues who are experiencing similar highs and lows in their classrooms.

In this week's Teacher's Corner, teacher-trainers can learn about a simple way to bring teachers together while strengthening their language teaching knowledge. A monthly discussion group lets teachers read about new research in language teaching and discuss how that research might be adapted to their language classes. This week, we outline how to get a discussion group started, where to find content, and how to recruit and retain participants.

### DISCUSSION GROUP LOGISTICS

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For some teachers and teacher-trainers, two of the biggest barriers to professional development are the time involved and the interest in the subject. Address the following issues before the first scheduled discussion group:

- Identify a time and day that is convenient for all or for most teachers at the school. Start by identifying times during the day when teachers are required to be at school but can use the time

for different purposes. For example, if all teachers have an hour at the end of each school day, add this hour to your list of possible times.

- Contact teachers through e-mail and in person to get their feedback on a language teaching discussion group. Present the idea as a bi-monthly, monthly, or quarterly meeting when teachers read an article related to current research in language teaching then come together to discuss the article and how to move from research to practice. Remind teachers that participation is voluntary and that teachers can participate as time and interest permit. For example, some teachers might not be interested in every topic and shouldn't feel compelled to attend every meeting. At the same time, encourage those who are not always interested to attend and share their unique perspectives.
- Offer teachers the opportunity to choose content. One option is for one person (someone new each time) to choose an article to read before the next meeting. Alternatively, teachers could vote on a set of topics that interest them. Then, the trainer could select the content to share with teachers before each meeting.
- Identify a location that is accessible to all interested teachers and that can accommodate a fluctuating number of participants.
- Offer small but appealing incentives to encourage participation. For example, hold the meeting over lunch time and suggest teachers bring their lunch, but provide a dessert. Offer coffee or tea at a late afternoon meeting. Also suggest that teachers can add their participation in this group to the professional development section of their résumés.

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## CHOOSING CONTENT

As previously mentioned, teachers can choose content each time, or teachers can create a list of topics and the trainer chooses content. Either way, teachers and trainers benefit from knowing about sites with

free and open resources on language teaching and learning. Here's a list of websites to get the selection process started.

- [English Teaching Forum](#) from American English is a quarterly journal that presents research, teaching ideas, and materials for teaching English.
- [TESOL International Association](#) offers several free online resources such as newsletters, bulletins, and blogs that present and discuss current research in the field.
- [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#) offers some free materials that discuss issues and research in higher education, including English language learning.
- [The Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition](#) from the University of Minnesota shares papers, conference materials, and resources related to language acquisition.
- [Center for Applied Linguistics](#) promotes, funds, and conducts research in applied linguistics and posts some research briefs as well as a number of links on their site.

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## CONDUCTING MEETINGS

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Busy teachers are more likely to participate when meetings are engaging, relevant, and efficient. Try some of the following tips to make each discussion group successful.

- Offer an agenda. Let participants know how the discussion group will proceed and how much time will be spent discussing the research versus how much time will be spent brainstorming ways to apply the research to the classroom.
- At the beginning, offer a little background information on the topic to get participants thinking about the topic and the article they've read. Background information might include information about the researchers, the project, or the origin of the research.
- Prepare a few questions to initiate discussion. Teachers could even submit their own questions ahead of time or write them down on note cards to give to the trainer. This way, if the discussion starts to go off topic, the trainer has a way to steer the discussion back to the topic.

- Open the discussion up to the whole group by asking for reactions and thoughts on the reading. Encourage everyone to speak openly about their reactions. Explain that the discussion is intended to enrich their own thinking about the topic.
- When the conversation slows or the meeting is at the halfway point, begin to switch the focus of the discussion to how the research and its results could be used in the language classroom. What are the implications for teaching? For learners? How might this research inform lesson or curriculum design?
- Take notes throughout the discussion and spend the last two minutes reviewing what was discussed and the options for applying the research.

When language teachers and professionals take time to review current research in the field, they expand and add to their own language teaching and learning knowledge. By sharing their knowledge with colleagues, they further challenge themselves to think about who they are as teachers and how they can grow professionally.