

Improving vocabulary instruction through Teacher Study Groups

Joseph Dimino, Mary Jo Taylor, and Russell Gersten explain how team meetings can be a forum for effective vocabulary professional development

GRADE-LEVEL TEAM MEETINGS can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they provide teachers with a chance to communicate with colleagues, share common problems and dilemmas, and share reactions to new curricula, standards, or interventions. On the other hand, discussions can meander; the focus can be more on sharing common gripes. It is a rarity for teachers to consider these meetings a source of serious new learning, or a means of translating research into practice.

In this article, we describe a new approach to professional development (PD) for teaching vocabulary, where grade-level team meetings are used as a forum for new learning and enhancing existing curricula to conform to evidence-based principles. This approach can lead to enhanced outcomes in vocabulary, and significant change in teaching practice.

A new approach to PD

Teacher Study Groups (TSGs) are an alternative to traditional modes of PD, which are often ineffective. They provide a model whose content and processes are grounded in, and validated by, research. In developing this framework, we relied on several sources. The first was our own research on PD. One of our consistent findings was the need to link the content of PD to curricula that teachers are actually using. Another was “the reality principle,” the need for suggestions for improving practice to be feasible to implement within the constraints of day-to-day teaching.

TSGs are intended to foster a deeper understanding of how scientifically based research in vocabulary instruction is applied to classroom practice. The program covers major research concepts in vocabulary, and teachers begin to think about and ultimately use research-based instructional strategies in their classrooms by integrating them into their existing curriculum.

Structure of TSG sessions

Ten TSG sessions take place, twice a month for five months. The sessions address:

- Selecting words to teach;

- Developing student-friendly definitions, examples, contrasting examples, and concrete representations;
- Activities to ensure multiple meaningful exposures to new words; and
- Using context to determine word meanings, to help build students’ awareness and curiosity about words in the environment and strategies to cumulatively review previously taught words.

A five-phase process is repeated during each session. This is: (1) debrief of classroom application of the research, (2) discussion of the focus research concept, (3) compare research with practice, (4) plan collaboratively, and (5) assignment.

1. Debrief

Participants begin by debriefing the lesson they collaboratively planned in the previous session. During these debriefs, the facilitator asks questions to prompt participants to describe the lesson they taught, discuss how students responded, and explain any changes or adjustments they made while teaching the lesson.

2. Discuss the focus research concept

A new research concept is presented during this portion of the session. Participants review, reflect on, and discuss the research concept before proceeding to the next portion of the session.

3. Compare research with practice

During this segment, the participants choose a selection in the core reading program that they will be teaching before the next TSG meeting. Their task is to determine how the lesson did or did not align with the research they discussed in the previous segment of the session. As a group they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson

and how it could be modified to reflect the research.

4. Plan collaboratively

Next, the participants work collaboratively to plan a lesson that incorporates the facets of the research that they determined were missing as they compared research with practice.

5. Assignment

Group members are asked to teach the lesson they developed during the session.

Unique features of the TSG

- **Promoting procedural and conceptual knowledge through modeling and discussion.** Integrating conceptual and procedural components in professional development is critical to help teachers develop a solid working knowledge of research-based practices. Teachers must not only understand the central concepts covered in the professional development, but also see how the concepts can be applied to classroom practice. Modeling and discussing the key focus research concepts that are used to guide teachers’ thinking about effective vocabulary instruction remain at the forefront in each of the TSG sessions. Participants are

“I liked finding out what’s going on in my colleagues’ classrooms – what’s working for them, and what’s not, stealing ideas and giving ideas to strengthen my teaching”

Participating first-grade teacher

intellectually engaged as this foundational knowledge about the research grounds their conceptions regarding the effectiveness of their lessons.

- **Regularly scheduled TSG sessions.**

Research has shown that professional development programs that last at least four months, and include at least 14 hours of collaborative activities, have the potential to bring about positive changes in student outcomes. Over the course of a school year and in a community of learners, teachers in our professional development study have the opportunity to read and discuss current research in effective vocabulary instruction. They

STRUGGLING READERS

Making professional development effective

can learn how to apply research-based concepts to classroom practice, and share their knowledge and experiences in a setting that supports communication and collaboration.

- **Collegiality.** Professional development efforts should establish collaborative environments in which teachers feel comfortable and supported as they discuss research-based innovative techniques and the realities of implementing those techniques in their classrooms. A key component of the TSG professional development model is for participants to help each other benefit from every session. To that end, a facilitator chosen from the school staff, who is knowledgeable in the field of literacy, is assigned to conduct these sessions. The facilitator follows a “game plan” which clearly delineates what is to be accomplished during the session.
- **Feasible and concrete.** Teachers value – and tend to apply more frequently – professional development that is translated into specific manageable techniques that can be used with existing curricula. TSGs are not intended to change the core curriculum, but to enhance it by using new, validated practices. In the sessions, teachers learn about research-based concepts and techniques and think about ways to embed them easily into their existing routines and curricula.
- **Active engagement.** Professional development is likely to be more effective when teachers are actively engaged in learning, rather than passively listening to lectures or watching demonstrations. It is critical that teachers have the opportunity to talk about the lessons they taught, to discuss their students’ responses to instruction, and actively prepare lesson plans during the session. This makes the TSG a more meaningful, useful, and motivating experience.

What we know

- PD programs that last at least four months have the potential to change student outcomes.
- PD content must be linked to the curriculum, and practical within day-to-day teaching.
- To help teachers develop a solid working knowledge of research-based practices, PD must feature conceptual and procedural components.
- There must be a focus on student learning, for example, how many words the teacher wants students to learn.



- **Focus on student learning.** It is important for professional development to focus on improving student learning. In TSGs, teachers determine the number of words they want their students to learn. They keep this goal in mind as they monitor students’ progress and change their instruction accordingly. The ultimate reward occurs when they notice that the words they taught are becoming part of their students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabulary. This motivates teachers to continue learning and applying research-based strategies regularly and skillfully.

Conclusion

When teachers engage in TSGs with others including peers, coaches, facilitators, or administrators, they tend to change their vocabulary teaching practices and succeed in increasing their students’ vocabulary knowledge. Results of a rigorous randomized field trial found significant improvements in observed teaching practice and moderate effect sizes in measures of vocabulary. Our TSG model includes many of the tenets of high-quality professional development and addresses many of the shortcomings of most popular and widely used professional development formats.

About the authors

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Further reading

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