

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN THROUGH AN EFL TEACHER STUDY GROUP

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how a teacher study group collectively examined problems in their current English curriculum and redesigned the curriculum into theme-based lessons for various grades. Comprised of seven elementary school teachers and a teacher educator, the teacher study group met bi-weekly for three hours for a total of eight meetings. The transcripts from the group meetings, individual interviews, field-notes, and lesson plans were collected. With the framework of activity theory for data analysis, this study reports on the problems reviewed and identified in the curriculum, and explores how the group worked collaboratively to restructure their English curriculum by developing thematic units incorporating key competencies in the textbooks. The teachers' perceptions towards their participation in curriculum redesign are analyzed and reported.

Keywords: activity theory, teacher study group, curriculum integration, thematic units

INTRODUCTION

There has been an increasing interest in exploring teacher professional development in terms of how teachers develop their pedagogical expertise in collaborative environments (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hung & Yeh, 2013). Teachers are encouraged to continue their professional development in order to tailor instruction to suit students' needs so their instruction can better meet students' learning needs (Shulman, 1987). Avalos (2011) refers to professional

development as “teacher learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students’ growth” (p. 10). Drawing upon Borko’s concepts (2004), Voogt and her colleagues (2011) contend that teacher learning “takes place in all the arenas in which the teacher participates: the classroom, the community of teachers, and the school environment” (p.1235). They claim that the key elements for effective teacher professional development should (a) emphasize a deeper understanding of the subject matter (e.g. Whitcomb, Borko, & Liston, 2009), (b) supply concrete examples for classroom applications (e.g. Voogt, 2010), (c) engage teachers in actual practice instead of providing them with abstract descriptions (e.g. Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007), and (d) provide opportunities for peer teacher collaboration, so as to localize their practices (e.g. Penuel et al., 2007; Simmie, 2007).

One alternative accommodating these essential elements is to engage teachers in a study group to design and re-design a teaching curriculum (Handelzalts, 2009; Simmie, 2007). For example, many attempts have been made to investigate teacher professional development through collaborative curriculum design for science (George & Lubben, 2002; Voogt, Almekinders, Van den Akker, & Moonen, 2005), math and literacy (Rock & Wilson, 2005), chemistry (Parchmann et al., 2006), engineering courses (Schneider & Pickett, 2006), and Asian studies classes (Baildon & Damico, 2008). In comparison, the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education is an under-studied area, especially with curriculum design through teacher’s collaboration. The first extensive discussions and analyses of EFL teacher education related studies were reported in Chao, Lo, and Yeh’s (2006) study. From reviewing 1,056 journal articles from *English Teaching & Learning*, these studies collectively reported that no more than three percent of research papers addressed related issues about EFL teachers in Taiwan. Many scholars have also pinpointed that EFL teachers are seldom placed at the center of English education development and EFL teacher related issues have rarely been studied, particularly in an EFL educational context (Chao, Lo, & Yeh, 2006; Hung & Yeh, 2013; Liou, 2000; Yeh, 2007; Yeh, Hung, & Chen, 2012). To address this research gap, this study aimed to explore how a teacher study group, comprised of seven English teachers and a teacher educator, examined the problems existing in the English curriculum and collaboratively redesigned the curriculum. Based

on the purposes of the study, three research questions were addressed: (1) How did the study group examine and approach their currently taught English curriculum? (2) How did the EFL elementary school teachers redesign the curriculum? (3) What were the perceived benefits and challenges in redesigning an English curriculum in a teacher study group?

Teacher Study Groups for Professional Development

Teacher training programs in Taiwan have often been limited to workshops and seminars; however, such one-shot teacher training workshops are criticized by those upholding constructivist principles (Yeh, 2007; Yeh, 2011, Yeh, Hung, & Chen, 2012). Jenlink and Kinnucan-Welsch (2001) observed that “Traditional approaches to teacher preparation and staff development are under increasingly critical scrutiny for their inability to meet the professional learning needs of practitioners” (p. 705). To match the actual needs of teachers, professional development avenues should allow teachers to pursue continuous meaningful examinations of their classroom teaching while identifying pedagogical problems to formulate possible solutions (McCarney, 2004).

One of the choices to support teacher learning is to form a teacher study group (Carroll, 2005). A teacher study group refers to an inquiry-oriented community where teachers collaborate with each other to share practical teaching experiences in order to achieve a collective goal of improving their teaching professionalism through a systematic and interactive process (Lambson, 2010; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Such collaborative interaction within the community often leads to “teacher change” which is a central notion “regarded as a natural and expected component of the professional activity of teachers and schools” (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 948).

Lieberman and Miller (2004) argue that when teachers collaboratively design curricula, assessments, and instructional strategies, they gradually obtain collective knowledge, confidence, and autonomy to generate alternatives to a one-size-fits-all approach. By using a teacher study group as the means of teacher professional development, teachers continue to learn and expand their own knowledge and prepare to meet the new demands of education (Soloman, 1987). Through collaboration,

Hui-chin Yeh

teachers can also draw links between their beliefs and practice by articulating what they have learned, experienced, and planned for prospective exploration. The format of collaborative learning not only motivates teachers to construct knowledge, but also creates a driving force to encourage teachers to learn and grow together to improve their professional careers collectively.

In comparison to teacher training programs and workshops, conferences, and class observations, teacher study groups offer different advantages for teacher professional development. For example, all teacher participants are intrinsically motivated to reach the shared and collective objectives. Teachers gain ownership and autonomy in their learning process by determining the topics for group discussion and employing a variety of supplementary materials to promote further discussion. From this self directed learning approach in professional knowledge development, teachers are able to attain their daily practice needs (Hung & Yeh, 2013; Yeh, 2007). Promising results have been gained by using study groups as fundamental models to enhance teacher professional development, and many scholars have reported that a teacher study group makes it possible for teachers to (1) understand themselves through reflection for self-actualization, (2) improve interpersonal relationships among colleagues, (3) enrich teachers' professionalism, (4) sustain continuous growth, and (5) equip themselves with critical thinking abilities to evaluate and adapt acquired skills or pedagogy to meet students' needs while transforming themselves into independent teachers and learners in their own professional development (Chao, Lo, & Yeh, 2006; Lambson, 2010; Liaw, 2009; Yeh, 2007; Yeh, Hung, & Chen, 2012).

Using Activity Theory to Explore How the Teacher Study Group Examined and Redesigned the Curriculum

Activity theory was adopted as an analytical tool to explore how the teacher study group examined and approached the redesign of their EFL elementary curriculum. It has been widely utilized as an instrumental tool to analyze social activity in general education and social networking activities in pursuit of an objective (Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002). Lantolf (2006) explains that activity theory provides a "unified account of Vygotsky's proposals on the nature and development of human

behavior” (p. 8). It is grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) theoretical underpinning that learning takes place from participation in joint activities, a process that is closely tied to social practices mediated by artifacts. The activity framework “transcends the dichotomies of micro- and macro-, mental and material, observation and intervention in analysis and redesign of work” (Engeström, 2000, p. 960). The framework is shown in Figure 1 as ‘object-oriented collective activity’ mediated by tools, community, rules, and division of labor. Particularly in teacher professional development, Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) pointed out that utilizing activity theory as an analytical lens “makes it a powerful framework for studying teachers’ professional development, particularly in longitudinal studies that follow teachers as they progress through different social contexts” (p.24). Buell (2004) also confirmed that this framework provides insight into how teachers approached the redesign and enhancement of the curriculum in a “restructured” manner (p. 1984).

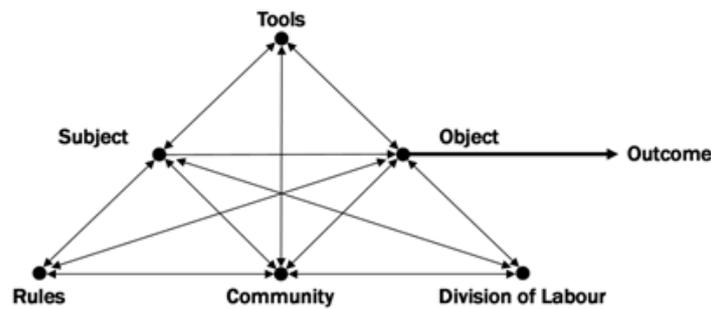


Figure 1. The Framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 2000)

Crawford and Hasan (2006) contend that activity theory provides a rich and holistic analysis to delineate the processes and outcomes of how people work collaboratively with different artifacts in a dynamic and social environment. Within this analytical framework, the primary components of social activity are the subject, tool, and object, where the subject is the person being studied, the object is the intended outcome (or goal), and the tool is the mediating artifact that has influence on the activity in a learning community. In total, there are six components in the activity theory model, all of which interact with each other to nurture social interaction in working towards redesigning curricula

Hui-chin Yeh

collaboratively (Baran & Cagiltay, 2010; Van Aalsvoort, 2004). In this study, the subject refers to the participating teachers in the teacher study group, and the object is using collaborative examination to fulfill the goal of restructuring the English curriculum to meet the students' needs. The tool is associated with learning materials, such as textbooks or storybooks, which the teachers utilized to design and implement in their teaching practice. The community refers to the group members who participated in semi-structured bi-weekly meetings guided by rules, structures, and regulations of the teacher study group. Finally, division of labor refers to the distribution of responsibility among the participants taking part in the study group. Several studies have used the sub-activities (sub-triangulations) of activity theory to inform instructional design, development (e.g. Greenhow & Belbas, 2007) and explore students' intercultural awareness (Yang, 2013). In order to clearly delineate the relationship amongst the six components of activity theory (six nodes: tools, subject, rules, community, division of labor, object), the sub-activities were further identified within the larger framework (six nodes). Through further using the sub-triangulations as pathways to understand teacher professional development, the complexities of how a professional teacher study group approaches and implements curriculum redesign can be unpacked. In this study, the sub-activities of Subject-Rule-Object, Subject-Tool-Object, and Subject-Division of Labor-Object as the salient sub-triangulations sheds light on how the curriculum was examined and reformed through the group's collaborative effort in a teacher study group.

METHOD

Context and Participants

Seven EFL elementary school teachers and a teacher educator, eight in total, formed a teacher study group to mutually collaborate. In the study group, the school teachers and the teacher educator collectively tackled compelling problems and issues in curriculum design in order to enhance teacher professional development and improve student learning. A total of eight bi-weekly meetings were held, with each session lasting three hours and attended by all of the participants. At the time of the current study, the seven EFL teachers taught in a mid-size elementary

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

school with a student enrollment of 650 across grade levels one to six in Yunlin County (see Table 1). They had all obtained their B.A. degree in language-education-related areas and their ages ranged from 24 to 35. The researcher was invited to participate as the teacher educator in this teacher study group because her research expertise centers on English teacher education. The researcher's role in this teacher study group served as a participant observer/teacher educator, which follows Borg and Gall's (1983) observation that, "by being actively involved in the situation that the researcher is observing, the researcher often gains insights and develops interpersonal relationships that are virtually impossible to achieve through any other method" (p.26). During this study, the researcher participated in another school-based teacher study group with five EFL elementary school teachers (Hung & Yeh, 2013). The researcher also formed a teacher educator study group with two other researchers, one based in Northern Taiwan and another in Southern Taiwan. In the teacher study group related to this paper, the researcher served as an expert to introduce related reading materials, artifacts, and lesson plans to the group, and witnessed the participating teachers negotiate meanings with each other on the group-selected topics for the group meetings.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

Name of Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Level(s) of teaching	Highest Degree
Mr. Zhou	Male	2.5 years	3 rd grade	B.A.
Mr. Wu	Male	1 year	5 th , 6 th grade	B.A.
Ms. Yang	Female	8 years	4 th , 6 th grade	B.A.
Ms. Hsu	Female	2 years	1 st grade	B.A.
Ms. Wang	Female	1 year	4 th , 6 th grade	B.A.
Ms. Huang	Female	7 years	2 nd grade	B.A.
Ms. Li	Female	5 years	3 rd , 5 th grade	B.A.
Professor Yeh	Female	5 years	Undergraduate/ Graduate	Ph.D.

Data Collection

The data resources for this study included: 1) the transcripts of the eight bi-weekly meeting sessions (24 hours in total); 2) the transcripts of participants' final semi-structured interviews (one hour for each interview); 3) field-notes, artifacts, and the lesson plans discussed in group meeting sessions. The transcripts of bi-weekly meetings and the participants' final retrospective interviews were collected to analyze what problems the teacher study group discovered in the existing English curriculum and how the group redesigned this curriculum. The artifacts and teaching materials, such as lesson plans, shared in group meeting sessions were collected to report the problems the group highlighted in the existing curriculum.

Data collection took place from the beginning and throughout the study to refine questions and develop new avenues of inquiry. Following each meeting and interview, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes verbatim. Since the process requires attentive and intensive listening, the act of transcribing served as a preliminary method of analysis. A final semi-structured interview was conducted with each individual teacher one week after the final teacher group meeting. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand teacher learning and their observations on student learning processes and outcomes resulting from participating in a teacher study group and their perceptions of their English curriculum redesign. Kvale (1996) indicates that the semi-structured interview "has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions, yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequences and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects" (p. 124). A total of 289 pages of transcripts from eight group meetings and a total of 89 pages from the individual interviews were analyzed.

Data Analysis

All the materials used in group meeting sessions such as biweekly meeting transcripts, field notes, and designed lesson units were analyzed based on activity theory (Engeström, 2000). The researcher and research assistant analyzed the meeting transcripts and generated the major themes that emerged from group discussions. The

eight-step-model of defining and describing the nodes on the activity triangle shown in Figure 1 was adopted from Greenhow and Belbas (2007) to identify and illuminate the relationship in the activity system (see Table 2). Discussion themes from each meeting were compared and contrasted through a thick coding scheme based on the analytical framework of activity theory to explore possible collapsed codes and themes. The inter-rater reliability of the transcripts of bi-weekly meetings, the field-notes, artifacts and the thematic units discussed in group meeting sessions, ranged between 0.82 and 0.84. The sub-activity triangles: Subject-Rule-Object, Subject-Division of Labor-Object and Subject-Tool-Object illustrate how the group examined the existing problems in the textbooks and approached the redesign of the curriculum. The participants' final semi-structured interviews were analyzed through content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). Using content analysis, the researcher identified similar statements and calculated their frequency to report the most salient perceptions towards participation in the curriculum redesign.

Table 2. *The Eight-Step-Model of Defining and Describing the Nodes on the Activity Triangle Shown in Figure 1 Adopted from Greenhow and Belbas (2007)*

Step	Node of activity	Defining questions
Step 1	Activity of interest	What sort of activity am I interested in?
Step 2	Objective	Why is the activity taking place?
Step 3	Subjects	Who is involved in carrying out the activity?
Step 4	Tools	By what means are the subjects performing this activity?
Step 5	Rules and regulations	Are there cultural norms, rules or regulations governing the performance of the activity?

Table 2. *The Eight-Step-Model of Defining and Describing the Nodes on the Activity Triangle Shown in Figure 1 Adopted from Greenhow and Belbas (2007) (continued)*

Step	Node of activity	Defining questions
Step 6	Division of labor	Who is responsible for what and how the roles are organized?
Step 7	Community	What is the environment in which this activity is carried out?
Step 8	Outcome	What is the desired outcome from carrying out this activity?

RESULTS

Activity theory served as the analytical framework to explore how the group examined and approached the curriculum redesign collaboratively. The researcher first reported the problems that the teachers had discovered in the current English curriculum (see Figure 2), and later identified how teachers integrated different curriculum components that were revised through a collaborative process (see Figure 3). The sub-activity triangles illuminate the variety of processes that take place within the larger activity model: Subject-Rule-Object, Subject-Tool-Object, Subject-Community-Object, and Subject-Division of Labor-Object. These relationships illustrate how the group redesigned the curriculum to further develop scaffolding for student learning. The teachers' perceived benefits and challenges of redesigning the curriculum were also analyzed.

RQ1: How Did the Teacher Study Group Examine and Approach Their Currently Taught English Curriculum?

In serving as a platform for facilitating discussion and inquiry, the teacher study group served as the avenue for collaborative analysis of pedagogical rules and identification of issues within the current English curriculum. The study group discussed major problems identified in the curriculum to provide alternatives for their students (outcomes). As the

primary node of activity, the study group serves as a linchpin to hold together and unite various other nodes (tools, division of labor, rules, object, and outcome), while facilitating the process of inquiry with curriculum examination and re-design. In the following section, each sub-system is illustrated and analyzed to illuminate their collaborative processes in examining problems existing in the curriculum.

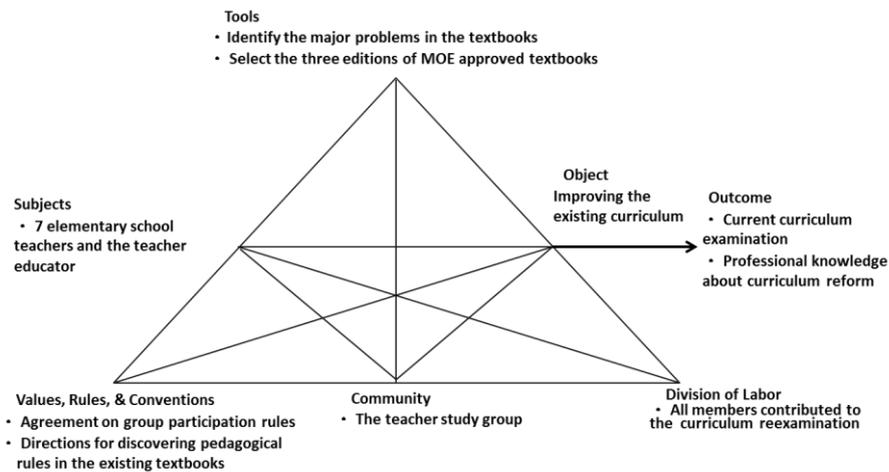


Figure 2. Stage One Generated Model of the Curriculum Examination Activity System



Subject-Rule-Object refers to the norms, expectations, and conventions that have an impact on the means by which an activity is carried out. In the first phase of the teacher study group, the conventions and norms refer to work principles agreed by all members to optimize activities in the teacher study group for collaborative curriculum reexamination (object). Each member alternated leading discussions, writing summaries of discussions, and sending notes to group members via email. Prior to each weekly meeting, each group member's allocated

Hui-chin Yeh

work involved analyzing issues within their own teaching curriculum, and then distributing a summary of their findings of curriculum reexamination to the other members. In addition, each member has the opportunity to rotate being a leader to facilitate meeting discussions, thus allowing each teacher to build professional skills in leadership. At the meeting, the leader facilitated the group discussions on the major problems they had discovered in the textbooks (field-notes, GM I). This implemented structure allowed each teacher to transform their personal insights to collaborative dialogue. For instance, the setup of the teacher study group allowed dialogic exchange to be ongoing, even outside of the physical meeting space. The overall structure of the teacher study group encouraged teachers to reflect individually on the curriculum they directly utilized in their professional settings, and then share their experiences or insights with other teachers in the study group. The teacher study group served as a venue to critically review and examine teaching materials, thus nurturing social practices to promote pedagogical reform. Moreover, it provided a forum to explore the pedagogical rules that were implicitly employed in the existing textbooks. The discussion extract below illustrates how the teachers attempt to tease out the various pedagogical issues within the curriculum and propose solutions:

Ms. Yang: It is hard to adopt a single curriculum using the conventional textbooks to meet our students' learning needs and learning styles because of the double peak phenomena.

Ms. Huang: I also feel that the content of the current English curriculum cannot match the needs of most students. For high proficiency level students, they feel the design of the English textbooks is too easy, and for low proficiency level students, they are not motivated at all to learn from the English textbooks.

Ms. Wang: I have also been thinking we should teach something else, but the students need to take the monthly tests based on the textbooks. So we are stuck to what works best for them and only teach for test purposes.

Professor Yeh: That is why the ideas we discussed in this group will help us in our teaching. (GM V)

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

The above excerpt illustrates the process that teachers (subject) underwent in examining the current conventions (rules) in order to reform upon it or devise new working principles that increase language proficiency with meaningful content. After analyzing the curriculum content to locate pedagogical weaknesses, the teachers reported that drill practices and explicit explanations are the most common practices, since monthly tests are a major part of institutional assessment. Teachers stated their concern in feeling pressed to help students gain the highest scores. They also recognized that most students are not motivated to learn from textbooks, mainly due to the dry content and the large disparity gap of students' English proficiency levels that make English learning non-cohesive. The teachers also note the wide gap in English proficiency creates an asymmetric phenomenon where the majority of students are either of high or low proficiency, with only a very small percentile of middle level students. In addition, teaching to prepare for monthly tests had an adverse effect which drove teachers to use pedagogical methods of drilling and repetitive practice. Although the teachers realized the detriments in having the education system prioritize the testing success of students, they also knew they could not remove this procedure, as it has been largely institutionalized.

In order to address all the problems identified, and to acknowledge the set curriculum in elementary schools, the teachers (subject) devised key principles (rules) that centered on bolstering the current curriculum by creating supplementary curriculum units (object). The primary principle that the teachers decided to adopt after intensive discussions was to help the curriculum move away from its rigid fashion of drilling by infusing lessons with creativity and promoting the inter-connectivity of lesson content. In order to reach this goal in revising the curriculum (object), the teachers reached a consensus of using visual storybooks as the core materials in the supplementary curriculum. Another principle was adopted to address the asymmetric phenomenon of student language proficiency. This principle was set up to help teachers create content that offered teachers the flexibility to adapt to student needs and interests, in order to cater to all students in the spectrum of learning. For instance, a journaling task to accompany *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* can have varying writing prompts to adapt to children's writing levels. All the teachers agreed to create lesson modules that teachers can supplement to the current curriculum, based on their relevant needs. In adopting these new key principles to revise the curriculum, the teachers established a

Hui-chin Yeh

working framework to help reach their goal of revising the curriculum (object).

Subject-division of labor-object ()

Subject-Division of Labor-Object refers to how the teachers shared the responsibility to examine the content of MOE approved textbooks currently used in the schools in order to redesign the curriculum. The divisions of labor helped teachers (subjects) examine the entire curriculum for all grade levels in manageable division of labor in order to work towards curriculum reexamination.

As there were 18 books in total to evaluate, each teacher examined three textbook editions from grade one through six. Each textbook was further divided into smaller units, so that specific curriculum components could be evaluated on a micro level to work towards macro level analysis of the entire curriculum. This system of dividing work also encouraged the teachers to work collaboratively in identifying issues across all grade curriculums, while allowing deeper analysis at each stage. In the first stage, the teachers listed all the major recurring themes, and then evaluated a) whether the units were connected from one to another, or if themes could be connected and b) whether each unit covered all sections for linguistic training such as vocabulary words and sentence structures. For instance, from identifying how the theme of “Festivals” was incorporated several times across various grades, the teachers would delve deeper to examine whether the sentences, vocabulary and context of the sections were well-integrated in providing a cohesive lesson plan (field-notes, GM I-IV).

The second stage of analysis largely involved teachers identifying the core competencies for each grade level and the different English language milestones that each grade should accomplish. In determining the benchmark of English proficiency for each grade, the teachers considered what students should have achieved when entering a new grade and the smaller stages between their entry points to their graduation from the national curriculum guidelines. This smaller division of analysis in the textbook curriculum also helped teachers evaluate what specific components of the textbook were aligned with developing core competences.

Although some of the issues located in the textbooks were

problematic, the teachers still recognized that it may be necessary for some sentences to be more artificial for the purpose of a language classroom. For instance, Ms. Wang stated, “The purpose of the language classroom is to promote language learning. It might be unavoidable to teach a sentence, such as “What is Linda doing?” while the others know the answers from the picture without asking the question for the purpose of language learning” (GM III).

In recognizing that the textbooks still provide fundamental basics in EFL learning, the teachers proposed to enhance student learning by incorporating other authentic materials, such as storybooks, chants, and songs to integrate curriculum units and themes across different grade levels. To have each unit reinforce one another, the teachers planned to integrate the topics from the textbooks into their curriculum redesign to build students’ basic proficiency levels in vocabulary and sentence structure.

Therefore, the Division of Labor helped teachers (subject) reach the objective of the curriculum reexamination (object) by classifying work sections to encourage deeper probing from a broad level to more specific levels. This method of bifurcation in analysis walked teachers through a step-by-step process to assist them in comprehending how all the units combined to create a comprehensive curriculum.

Subject-tool-object ()

The sub-triangulation of Subject-Tool-Object refers to the use of the teacher study group to develop their awareness by examining the problems in the curriculum. The participants in the study group decided to examine a number of English textbooks used in Taiwanese elementary school English classes in order to locate issues in the current English curriculum. In order to cover issues across the entire curriculum, each teacher was assigned three different versions of MOE approved textbooks. While engaged in intensive discussion, the seven teachers and teacher educator critically examined the problems they found in the textbooks and reflected on how to resolve curriculum issues with various approaches and solutions. All of the teachers admitted that in fulfilling their teacher roles, they closely followed the prescribed lessons from textbooks without critically reviewing the content. Within the group meetings, several major problems in the English textbooks were identified. First, the teachers noted that dialogues in the English

Hui-chin Yeh

textbooks lacked authenticity in providing students with a meaningful learning context. In extracts one and two, the teachers examined the dialogues presented in their English textbooks. When the teachers discussed the sentences, such as “What do you do on Sunday?” or “What are you wearing today?” they realized that since some of the dialogues were not context-embedded and authentic, students may have found it difficult to apply what they had learned from the textbooks to real life situations. Second, they pinpointed that a lot of sentences were artificial and would be semantically incorrect if they were to use them, even if the interlocutor may have known the answers. Ms. Huang said, “It is more accurate to say ‘What do you do on Sundays?’ ‘What are you wearing for the party tonight?’ ‘Where did you buy your clothes?’ based on the relevant contexts.”

Dialogue examples from textbooks:

Dialogue 1

Willy: Hello, Ken. What are you wearing?

Ken: I’m wearing jeans and a T-shirt.

Dialogue 2

1:30 PM

Willy: Hello, Ken. What do you do on Sunday?

Ken: I play baseball on Sunday.

Willy: Can I play baseball with you?

Ken: Sure. See you tomorrow.

Dialogue 3

Helen: What can you do?

Kevin: I can walk.

Group discussion:

Ms. Zhou: I really didn't see any of the problems in our textbooks until our discussions. I am shocked that I was not aware that these sentences were not meaningful to learners without a relevant context.

Ms. Yang: Me too. I obtained a critical perspective after our discussions. I realized some of the sentences were not meaningful enough for students to use in real life contexts. Another example in the textbook was "Am I a girl?" A meaningful context is necessary for this kind of sentence.

Ms. Wang: Right! We focused on the sentence substitutions only. The dialogues are not situated in a meaningful context since there surely is not a genuine reason to ask this question.

Ms. Huang: Right...I have never thought of this before...we seldom ask someone, "What are you wearing?" in our daily life, unless the one who asks is blind.

Ms. Li: But a lot of sentences in the textbooks are presented like this. I have taught a unit which intends to teach the sentence pattern "Can you (verb)?" Can you sing? Yes, I can. The substitute pictures include "walk, sleep, drink, or cry." So students need to make up sentences like "Can you cry? Can you sleep?"

Ms. Wang: Yes...It is very common for us to follow the textbook without thinking carefully about meaningful contexts.

Ms. Yang: Right...these are our biological needs. We really cannot say "I can cry." Maybe we can modify it into "Can you sleep with the light on?" to make it more meaningful.

(Group Meeting VI, GM hereafter)

These teacher conversations reflect various processes at play in the triangulation between Subject-Tool-Object. This sub-triangle demonstrates how the teacher study group (subject) provided a dialogic space for exchanging thoughts in order to probe into the problems existing in the curriculum (object). With collaborative dialogue, the

teachers were able to build on each other's insights and proposals to better locate issues within the curriculum. For instance, with discussions that examined the texts (tool), the teachers (subject) identified how the lack of proper conversation contexts and thorough explanation of word applications resulted in artificial and grammatically awkward sentences. The teachers recognized that the textbook content only trains students to memorize basic sentence structures and word substitution in a formulaic fashion. They also concluded how this results in a narrow understanding of the English language and deprives students of expanding their linguistic repertoire. The identification of the issues also helped with the proposal of various ideas to address these issues, especially in equipping students with linguistic skills that exercises critical thinking. Thus, the triangulation between Subject-Tool-Object demonstrates how the exchange between tool (MOE approved textbooks) and subject (seven teachers) encourages collaborative dialogue to pinpoint issues across various levels of curriculum content. With these significant realizations, the teachers (subjects) can ultimately work up to their objective in the curriculum reexamination (object).

RQ2: How Did the EFL Elementary School Teachers Redesign the Curriculum?

Figure 3 shows that the seven teachers and the teacher educator (subject) employed picture books as a major tool (tool) to solve many of the problems that they had discovered in the current English teaching curriculum (object). In the study group (community), the teachers and the teacher educator re-designed the thematic units with their pedagogical rules (rules) and developed an integrated English teaching curriculum with division of labor. The group had designed fourteen thematic units for the integrated English curriculum, incorporating topics such as animals, foods, colors, and so on. The process of how the group redesigned the curriculum can be analyzed through the sub-triangles: Subject-Rule-Object, Subject-Tool-Object, and Subject-Division of Labor-Object. These configurations demonstrate the study group's collaborative process that aims at restructuring the English curriculum to provide students with authentic contexts for English learning.

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

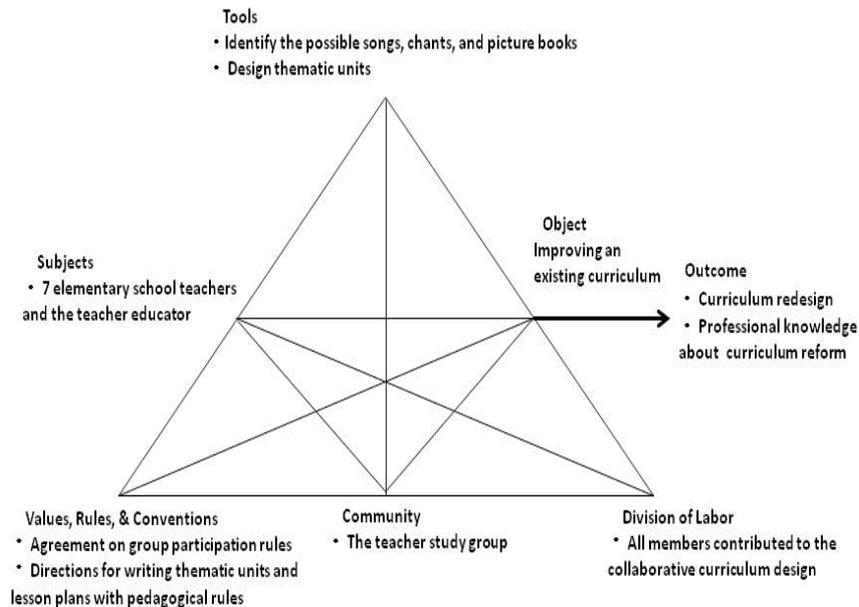


Figure 3. Stage Two Generated a Model of the Curriculum Reform Activity System

Subject-rule-object ()

Subject-Rule-Object refers to the norms and conventions that influence how the activities are carried out. Norms and conventions refer to the curriculum requirements that teachers must meet by national curriculum guidelines. It also refers to the key principles established by the study group, which serve as a guiding framework for the teachers in redesigning curricula.

In the first phase of curriculum redesign, the primary aim of teachers was to establish a framework (rules) that will help teachers (subject) create supplementary materials to address the gaps in the current curriculum (goal). In evaluating the national curriculum

guidelines, teachers were also able to identify both the gaps and benefits. Prior to creating a lesson plan, the teachers surveyed the existing curriculum to evaluate the outlined requirements of the national curriculum. These core essentials first served as a basis, or bare-bones structure that the teachers planned to further build upon. The national curriculum guidelines were primarily divided into three large categories: a) language skills to acquire and hone, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, plus integration of all four abilities and, b) course structure by fulfilling target vocabulary and phrases. Within these required areas in EFL learning (reading, listening, speaking, writing and integration), all curriculum components are the same: 1) distinguish alphabet letters, 2) speak and listen basic words 3) understand daily usage of words and 4) comprehend sentences. In addressing how the curriculum falls short of honing critical thinking in language development, the teachers in the group wanted to build upon this basic structure to enrich the curriculum, and nurture linguistic growth (field-notes, GM I-GM V).

Thus, the framework and key principles (rules) were based on the fundamentals of situating the curriculum content in authentic contexts through the use of storybooks. The main principle is to incorporate various methods to elicit meanings and lesson essentials through a multi-sensory and inter-disciplinary approach (field-notes, GM IV). The teachers reached this through Group Discussion I – IV, where teachers first determined storybooks as the ideal tool to integrate various themes because it covers the target vocabulary and common phrases of the national curriculum guidelines in a creative and meaningful narrative. To further strengthen the structure, the teachers devised various inter-related activities around the core content of the storybooks with songs and chants.

Therefore, the key principles adopted took into consideration the missing gaps in the national curriculum guidelines that made the content disconnected from students. To ensure the improved curriculum structure addressed this issue, the teachers agreed that students' life experiences should be well connected with the designed units in order to enhance learning motivation over time. Thus, teachers were encouraged to factor in all the agreed principles in selecting picture books and devising a lesson plan.

*Subject-division of labor-object* ()

Subject-Division of Labor-Object refers to how responsibility and expertise is shared within the teacher study group to work towards creating comprehensive course units to supplement the existing curriculum (object). After the participating teachers examined the topics covered in the various editions of the textbooks at different grade levels, they reorganized the topics and devised additional lesson units to address any gaps in order to make the overall curriculum cohesive. In equally dividing the work to create 14 thematic units, each teacher devised three lesson plans incorporating two topics that they were currently teaching. This division of labor allowed each teacher to lend their expertise in integrating topics to create comprehensive lesson plans. Table 3 below illustrates how the teachers strategically devised the pairing of topics based on the thematic content of picture books that they planned to use.

Table 3. *Thematic Topics of the Integrated Curriculum*

	Topics	Topic 1	Topic 2
Name			
Ms. Wang		Animals	Colors
Mr. Zhou		Foods	Weeks
Ms. Yang		Families	Festivals
Ms. Hsu		Clothing	Facial expressions
Mr. Wu		Weather	Emotions
Ms. Huang		Jobs	Sports
Ms. Li		Learning subjects	Classroom materials

While each teacher created the unit separately, all of the units listed in Table 3 collectively represent a curriculum to be built in as supplementary materials for current textbooks. In total, the teachers devised 14 thematic units with 42 lesson plans, where many of the thematic topics were further broken down into specific sub-topics. Additionally, each teacher also had to integrate other activities to

encourage interactive learning, such as reflection questions, songs, journaling, inviting guest speakers, and class discussions (field-notes, GM V).

The following lesson plan, devised by Mr. Zhou, exemplifies how the delegation of tasks helped each teacher in thoroughly creating a course unit with various components that align with the curriculum objectives. For instance, to fulfill the thematic unit of “food” and “weeks,” Mr. Zhou selected the storybook, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, in order to integrate various vocabularies which students were required to learn in previous lessons (numbers, colors, days of the week). Mr. Zhou’s course design is a prototype of how the teachers created various sub-sections that is largely centered on connecting the storyline with students’ lives. The various aspects of Mr. Zhou’s course design on Food and Days of the Week integrated five sections to foster the development of students’ listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities.

The first subdivision involved the teacher explaining the phases within the life cycle of a butterfly which was built on the second sub-section involving questions designed for further exploration, such as “What do caterpillars eat? Where can we find butterflies on campus? What color are they? What do they like to eat?” The teacher tied songs into the third sub-section of the unit, to aide student’s memorization and word recitation skills. The last sub-section of the unit promoted students’ writing skills with a food diary, where students recorded what they consumed on a daily basis. Opportunities were provided for the students to retell their story to their partners, discuss the food they had during the week, and sing songs on stage.

Another example of a lesson plan (see Table 4), devised by Ms. Huang, demonstrates how each teacher’s integration of various components further develops competencies in the main curriculum (reading, writing, speaking, and listening). With the assigned course topic of jobs and sports, Ms. Huang designed her unit with four sections, each reinforcing main ideas of the thematic topic. Ms. Huang’s lesson plan below illustrates the process of how each teacher took the responsibility to incorporate at least three to four inter-related activities for each unit in order to hone linguistic abilities with specific tasks. For instance, part III in interviewing involved students learning to formulate questions, hold discussion and dialogic exchange, and sharpen writing (recording interview information) and presentation skills.

Table 4. A Sample of a Lesson Plan

Lesson Topic: Jobs and Sports

Book: *Willy the Dreamer*, by Anthony Browne

Part I. Introduce variety of occupations (i.e. ballet dancer, painter, writer, doctor)

- The teacher briefly explains the responsibilities of each, and the differences between one another.

Part II. Related questions to text that encourage discussion

Discussion Questions	Connected to Book Content	Related to Self
Pre-reading	What do you think Willy likes to do?	What do you like to do?
Post-reading	Do you dream of being a wrestler like Willy?	What would you like to do when you grow up? What sports do you like to play?

Part III. Job occupation interviews

- Students interviewed their parents or relatives about their jobs and what sports they like to do in their free time.
- Students later reported their interviews to the class.

Part IV. Guest speaker

- A firefighter (one of the classmate's parents) was asked to share what the job entails.
- The teacher introduces more related vocabulary and sentence patterns after the presentation.

As demonstrated with Mr. Zhou and Ms. Huang's lesson plans (subject), the delegation of tasks (division of labor) allowed all of the teachers to contribute their expertise in creating and redesigning the integrated and comprehensive lesson units (object). Since each lesson module varies in its design and integration of activities, the units collectively help the curriculum to achieve the full spectrum of linguistic competencies in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. For instance, Mrs. Huang's lesson plan differs from Mr. Zhou's in that it incorporates interview skills and invites an outside guest speaker to provide a real-life perspective. On the other hand, Mr. Zhou's plan incorporated the food journal to encourage self-reflection. Additionally, since the organization

of the thematic units was not meant to be followed in sequential order, these courses offered teachers the flexibility to add the lesson modules to suit their students' proficiency levels and needs.

Moreover, with the division of labor, the integrated thematic units (object) helped teachers draw a deeper connection between course content and students' life experience. Ms. Huang reported, "when I made such a connection, my students were so excited to learn about the parent's job and they related to the vocabulary and remembered it more easily (GM VIII)." Furthermore, she observed that "My students loved to learn those new words or phrases that are related to their ideal job and they now recognize vocabulary and sentence patterns more easily" (GM VIII). Ms. Huang reported that by incorporating the picture book *Willy the Dreamer* into her target lesson, her students had more exposure to authentic language and experienced connections between what is taught in class and what others actually do in real life.

Subject-tool-object ()

Subject-Tool-Object refers to how the group redesigned and enhanced the curriculum to make it more integrated, consistent, contextual, and authentic (see Figure 3). Picture books were incorporated as supplementary curriculum materials (tools) since the teachers recognized how it cohesively teaches themes to students by integrating many linguistic components together, such as vocabulary and sentence patterns. The teachers discussed various methods to optimize the use of picture books by employing storytelling methods to help students grasp main ideas, such as varying their intonation and using facial expressions to animate words and sentences. With the combination of these methods, the teachers noted how the usage of picture books helped students overcome learning issues that they previously faced.

Ms. Wang: The picture books incorporated a cuing system that helped students learn information in a holistic way. Since students are used to learning information in a fragmented way, the picture books gave students many ways to interpret and comprehend English. For instance, with the visuals, students could learn colors, pictures, and shapes all at once and also associate them with the words (GM VI).

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

Ms. Wang's statement reflects how picture books (tool) served as an ideal medium in providing an immersive language method to help students learn vocabulary and sentence usage situated in an authentic context. As noted by Ms. Wang, the storybooks serving as supplementary materials resolved the conventional method of how textbooks teach English in a piece meal process; with storybooks, students were now able to decipher meaning by using surrounding sentences and visuals as clues.

To further enhance the curriculum content of picture books, the teachers also assigned all students to compose a section of the story with an accompanying picture. The overarching aim of this assigned task was for students to collectively create a class storybook. Another primary goal for this task was to have students apply sentence patterns and vocabulary words from the textbooks and storybooks read in class. The students were then asked to share their completed work with their peers and teachers. The below excerpt delineates the various steps that teachers took in implementing the new curriculum with the use of picture books, while also demonstrating the positive effects that it had on students' learning.

Ms. Huang: My students felt very excited about designing their collective picture books. Each student in class was encouraged to design one section of the whole-class picture book. Then, I would combine each student's picture into a whole picture book, and use the student-made picture books as my teaching materials. By doing so, students felt very excited about their contribution. After we made the storybook together, we collectively wrote the storyline for each page. I would put up all the learned vocabulary and sentence patterns on the blackboard and we would try to include them while writing the storyline. (GM VII)

The above excerpt encapsulates how the teachers used picture books (tools) as part of the core curriculum materials in redesigning the curriculum (object). First, the teachers evaluated how to utilize picture books (tools) to fully engage students when presenting its storyline. Secondly, the teachers extended the basic use of the main curriculum content by devising lesson plans that empowered both students and teachers. Most importantly, students' sharing of their work with peers

and teachers fortified students' ownership of language and motivation to learn. Thus, by integrating picture books with collaborative tasks, the new curriculum (object) incorporates the various interests of children, and allows the lesson content to be shaped collaboratively by all classmates. Moreover, this curriculum redesign (object) provided another means for teachers to evaluate student's reading comprehension levels by reviewing how students expressed their ideas and applied learned vocabulary and sentence patterns in narrative form.

RQ3: What Were the Perceived Benefits and Challenges in Redesigning an English Curriculum in a Teacher Study Group?

All seven teachers reported that their professional growth was promoted through collaborative curriculum reexamination and redesign in the teacher study group (see Table 3). They all appreciated that they could learn to identify problems existing in the curriculum and put the ideas discussed in the group into their daily practice. For example, Ms. Wang expressed: "I learned how to collect more authentic materials, such as picture books, advertisements, or video clips to integrate the themes across the units and topics in the textbooks to fit with the spiral curriculum we have discussed. It indeed became more meaningful to student learning." (Interview VII). Ms. Li added, "I feel it is quite effective that after we covered the content in the textbooks, we attempted to use other resources, like picture books, to allow our students to integrate what was learned in a systematic and integrated manner" (Interview V). Five teachers acknowledged that collaborative efforts saved a lot of time facilitating the curriculum integration and identifying related resources pertinent to their teaching. They also reported that they could adopt the 14 thematic units in their teaching and further extend them based on their students' needs and proficiency levels. Five of the seven teachers also claimed that learning from other teachers about how to use storybooks, songs, chants, or role-playing to integrate different themes together, facilitated student learning and increased student motivation for learning. For example, Ms. Hsu said, "Some of my students had a hard time memorizing the vocabulary and sentence patterns. They kept copying the English words many times like how they learned Chinese characters. Gradually, they lost interest and became bored. After I implemented our newly designed lessons, my students were more willing to express their ideas in English, and they picked up

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

words naturally and easily” (Interview VI). Ms. Li also reported her observations, stating, “My students started to check out the English storybooks from the library. Though they still have a lot of unknown words, they started to read English storybooks after my implementation of the redesigned curriculum” (Interview V).

From participating in the study group, five teachers indicated that they collaboratively arranged their students to read a story to other students in other classes across different levels on Thursday mornings. For example, Ms. Yang stated, “When my students went to other classes to read stories to others, they had improved so much. They had their target audience in mind while practicing storytelling. It became so engaging for them to make everything correct [appropriate] beforehand.” (Interview I). When the thematic units were introduced to the students, the teachers reported that they were more engaged in the learning activities and showed their interest and motivation in English learning. The students from different grade levels also had more opportunities to tell stories to each other after the thematic units were taught. They could relate the topics to their daily life and learn English in a collaborative manner with their peers.

Table 5. *The Teachers’ Perceived Benefits toward the English Curriculum Redesign in the Teacher Study Group*

General statements	Frequency
The teacher study group helped me better understand problems in the English teaching curriculum	7/7
Through the teacher study group, I can use the learned ideas to create an effective and integrated English curriculum.	7/7
The teacher study group offered me various useful teaching resources to design the integrated English curriculum.	6/7
Through the collaborative discussions with other teachers in the teacher study group, I expanded my teaching knowledge about the dynamic use of teaching activities to increase students’ learning motivation and learning outcomes.	5/7
I found that with this group, I can collaborate with other teachers to have students perform for an authentic audience.	5/7
After we designed the thematic units with divisions of labor, we all can use them in our classes	5/7

In the teacher study group, the teachers constantly shared the difficulties that they encountered when integrating different themes across different grade levels. All of them expressed that it was not easy for them to identify the artificial sentences in the textbooks on their own, and they indicated that the discussions in the group helped them raise their awareness to supplement authentic materials for their teaching. Six teachers reported that they needed to improve their sensitivity to the language, particularly their English grammatical knowledge, in order to provide students with an integrated curriculum. Engaging in a teacher study group enhanced their professional knowledge of the target language in rewriting and integrating the lesson content in a holistic manner. Five teachers discussed various challenges in looking for the appropriate materials to integrate the intended themes together. They also acknowledged that with only their individual effort, they were not able to recognize problems in the textbooks and provide students with other alternatives (Table 6).

Table 6. *The Teachers' Perceived Challenges toward the English Curriculum Redesign*

General statements	Frequency
I found it difficult to identify the artificial sentence structures in the textbooks.	7/7
I realized I am quite limited in my professional knowledge to redesign the curriculum for my students.	6/7
Sometimes, it took me so much time to integrate two or more themes together by finding related materials, such as songs, chants, and picture books.	5/7
I really cannot recognize the problems that I identified by myself.	5/7

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Activity theory provides a lens to unpack the processes of how a group of EFL teachers and a teacher educator discovered problems and redesigned their EFL curriculum by participating in a teacher study group. This study confirms, as with previous studies (e.g., Grossman et al., 1999), that activity theory provides a useful framework to investigate

ENGLISH CURRICULUM REDESIGN

teacher learning. Participating in the teacher study group, the teachers realized that language and learning cannot be separated from relevant contexts. They were concerned that meaningful context and authentic materials were pivotal in an English curriculum design, which helped students become familiar with the correct use of English in real situations and to improve students' retention of language input. After they examined problems in their current English textbooks, they decided to redesign the curriculum through collaborative effort. The teachers criticized the existing English curriculum as being fragmented and irrelevant to students' life experiences. In order to resolve this issue and address the curriculum gaps identified, the teachers redesigned the English curriculum with integrative thematic units to make students become more engaged in the learning process. When teachers showed initiative by organizing the content knowledge thematically, instead of imparting predetermined knowledge from the curriculum developers to students, the teachers learned to develop their professional knowledge and adjusted their practices. The teachers in the group observed that their students became more active in their learning and they could relate the lessons to their lives. They also reported that when learning in a meaningful context, the students found it much easier to memorize vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Lortie (1975) termed teaching as "the egg carton profession" (p. 223), thereby clearly pinpointing the isolation that exists in teaching careers. The isolation can be broken down by initiating a teacher study group where like-minded teachers might continue to outgrow themselves professionally (Knox, 1990). It is suggested that professional teachers must not only seek out opportunities to enrich their professional knowledge, but also apply acquired knowledge or skills to make their pedagogy applicable and efficient for students with different proficiency levels and learning styles. This collaboration in curriculum design aimed to foster professional development and ultimately to make curriculum integration beneficial to students' learning. As a result of the teacher study group enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills, it directly resulted in the advancement of students' English proficiency. The study set out to provide a basis for developing a teacher study group where participating teachers took ownership of their learning, asserted autonomy over the decision-making process in examining the current English curriculum, and took initiative in designing, enhancing, and developing a more meaningful and integrated curriculum. The findings reported how a

Hui-chin Yeh

group of EFL teachers made changes and took action in their daily teaching practice. The teachers' collective efforts in facilitating curriculum integration will encourage more EFL teachers to engage in a learning community, such as a teacher study group, to create an integrated curriculum for local schools and communities.

The collaboration in a teacher study group nurtures professional development in a way that offers a meaningful and enriching experience, thereby serving as a catalyst to make effective teaching and learning possible. Teachers involved in a teacher study group are able to practice reflection and inquiry through curriculum redesign and also take charge of their own professional growth and commitment to improvement. Ultimately, teachers sharpen their professional knowledge and skills and share observations with their colleagues; they make use of new knowledge and modify their beliefs, assumptions, and practices based on students' learning; they are empowered in their own professional field and make progress in their teaching. Different from conventional teacher professional development avenues, teachers' roles were changed from passive knowledge transmitters into active constructors (Johnson, 2000; Yeh, 2007). The mismatch of the delivery of outside expert knowledge and teachers' demands in daily practices can be overcome through a teacher study group. In this study, the teachers approached redesigning the curriculum in order to help students organize their prior knowledge, as well as personal experiences, and apply learned knowledge to real life situations. Knowledge is shared instead of being transmitted because school teachers and teacher educators are intellectual equals (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; LePage, Boudreau, Maier, Robinson, & Cox, 2001). Expertise is thus distributed because the participating teachers from different backgrounds possess different kinds of knowledge and experiences (Butler, et al., 2004). The different knowledge and experiences constitute a significant repertoire for teacher learning in a teacher study group.

The study is limited by the lack of an investigation of the students' learning progress and outcomes in these teachers' classes. This study only reported the teachers' observations on their students' learning. Further research can look into student progress in English learning after the teachers' implementation of the curriculum redesign. Moreover, future studies can explore the students' perceptions toward the curriculum integration to cross examine the effectiveness of the curriculum redesign.

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Hui-chin Yeh

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透過英語教師成長社群進行課程再造

葉惠菁

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本研究旨在探究教師成長社群如何合作檢視當今英語課程所存在的問題，並將課程以主題單元的方式進行課程再造。本研究係由七名小學教師與一名師資培育專家共同組成的教師成長社群。參與者每兩週聚會一次，每次為時三個小時，共聚會八次。研究資料的蒐集包含小組聚會逐字記錄稿、個別訪談、觀察筆記以及設計教案等。本研究以活動理論之理論基礎進行資料分析，探究教師成長社群如何揭示現有的課程問題，並藉由合作撰寫主題式的教案以利統整教科書中的核心能力而進行英語課程再造。參與課程再造的教師的觀感也進一步地分析與呈現。

關鍵詞: 活動理論、教師成長社群、課程統整、主題單元

