# Research Mobilization in TESL Reading Groups: Benefits, Challenges, Supports, and Procedures

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*To enhance English as a second language (ESL) instructors' understanding and utilization of peer-reviewed research for professional learning and development, we facilitated the establishment of and supported professional reading groups in nine adult ESL programs. We examined the benefits and challenges experienced by the 76 participants over five years, through focus group interviews, audio-taped group discussions, and monthly questionnaires. Analyses revealed that, despite the challenges reported, reading group involvement promoted reflection, confirmed current professional practices, fostered learning, impacted practice, emphasized the importance of professional development, and encouraged networking. Strategies for establishing and maintaining effective professional reading groups in ESL programs are provided.*

*Pour augmenter, chez les enseignants d'anglais langue seconde (AL2), la compréhension et l'utilisation de la recherche examinée par des pairs dans le cadre de l'apprentissage et de la formation professionnels, nous avons facilité la création de groupes professionnels de lecture et appuyé leur emploi au sein de neuf programmes d'ALS pour adultes. Par des entrevues avec des groupes de réflexion, des discussions de groupe enregistrées et des questionnaires mensuels, nous avons étudié les avantages et les défis vécus par les 76 participants au cours de cinq ans. Les analyses ont démontré que malgré les défis signalés, la participation au groupe de lecture a favorisé la réflexion, confirmé les pratiques professionnelles actuelles, encouragé l'apprentissage, influencé la pratique, souligné l'importance du développement professionnel et encouragé le réseautage. Nous fournissons des stratégies pour l'établissement et le maintien de groupes professionnels de lecture efficaces au sein des programmes d'ALS.*

In general, research is crucial for generating new knowledge, increasing our understanding of the world, constructing theories, and learning how to apply new and existing knowledge to solve problems. In the context of education, the focus of much research is on ways to improve teaching, learning, and assessment. This applied research is intended to have direct implications for practice. In the field of teaching English as a second language (TESL), practitioner-oriented applied linguistics journals (e.g., *TESL Canada Journal; ELT Journal*) are a source of empirical evidence that can guide pedagogical practices. Applied linguistics as defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002) is "the study of second and foreign language learning and teaching; the study of language and linguistics in relation to practical problems" (p. 28). Because research and practice are two equally valuable sources of knowledge that contribute to improvements in educational

practices (Anwaruddin, 2019a), English as a second language (ESL) instructor engagement with current applied linguistics research is an essential component of professional learning and development that can promote the implementation of effective, evidence-informed instructional practices in ESL classrooms (e.g., Paran, 2017). However, the literature on practitioner engagement with research in Canada suggests that few ESL instructors engage extensively in professional reading, few read applied research articles published in academic journals, (Abbott, Lee, & Rossiter, 2017; Abbott, Rossiter, & Hatami, 2015; Rossiter, Abbott, & Hatami, 2013), and knowledge mobilization initiatives in the field of TESL are limited.

Knowledge mobilization is "the reciprocal and complementary flow and uptake of research knowledge between researchers, knowledge brokers and knowledge users—both within and beyond academia—in such a way that may benefit users and create positive impacts" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2019). The creation of research-based products (e.g., refereed articles, books, book chapters, newsletter articles, and research summaries) is one of three key knowledge mobilization (KMb) strategies (Cooper, Levin, & Campbell, 2009). The second strategy is the organization of KMb events (e.g., academic conferences and public presentations), while the third strategy is the development of a variety of networks designed to support KMb efforts (e.g., Research Impact Canada). In the project described in this paper, we integrated two of these strategies by forming researcher-institutional support networks that encouraged the co-construction of knowledge through the process of reading and discussing journal articles in professional TESL reading groups. The reading of conceptually and methodologically sound research is essential for transforming research into practice, and, for this reason, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) advocates "for more attention to how practitioners can use research" (2014, p. 2). The benefits and challenges of reading and discussing peer-reviewed research in professional reading groups, outside of reading required for post-secondary college or university courses, remain largely unexplored. The existing literature on TESL instructors' professional reading has been limited in scope, focusing on teachers' perceptions of research (e.g., Sato & Loewen, 2019) outside of professional reading groups. To extend our understanding of the role of research on pedagogy, the focus of the project described in this article was to promote sustained ESL instructor research mobilization and utilization by establishing and supporting professional reading groups in nine adult ESL programs. The present study is unique in its multi-site context, number of groups (*n* = 9) examined, multiple sources of data collected (monthly questionnaires, focus group interviews, discussion group recordings), and longitudinal design (five years).

## Literature Review

A number of studies have explored professional reading groups in a variety of contexts (e.g., biology [Brill, Falk, & Yarden, 2003], campus administration [Eckel, Kezar, & Lieberman, 1999], K-12 education [Brown & Hayes, 2004; Gardiner, Cumming-Potvin, & Hesterman, 2013], evaluation [Kishchuk, Gauthier, Roy, & Borys, 2013], nursing [Nesbitt, 2013; Nesbitt & Barton, 2014; Ravin, 2012]). Most professional reading groups documented in the research literature were established for general professional development (PD), but others were also initiated to fulfill PD requirements for credentialing (e.g., Kishchuk et al., 2013; McGlinn, Calvert, & Johnson, 2003; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010). Previous reading group research has typically reported on only one or two reading groups that took place over varying lengths of time, from 6 months (e.g., Nesbitt, 2013) to 5 years (e.g., Ravin, 2012), and/or discussions that

were based on a variety of reading materials, including books (e.g., Burbank, Kauchak, & Bates, 2010; Kooy, 2006; McGlinn, Calvert, & Johnson, 2003; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010; Stiler, 2007), multimedia (e.g., Gardiner et al., 2013), short fiction and extended narratives (e.g., Kwek, Albright, & Kramer-Dahl, 2007). A few studies (e.g., Deenadayalan, Grimmer-Somers, Prior, & Kumar, 2008; Kishchuk et al., 2013; Ravin, 2012) have provided useful guidelines for organizing reading group discussions (e.g., have a purpose, set a regular time, choose a leader and relevant readings, distribute readings well in advance), yet other studies have explored differences in the dynamics of short discussions held during the lunch hour in the workplace versus extended discussions on Saturday evenings at a colleague's house (e.g., Stiler, 2007).

The perceived benefits of professional reading groups in a variety of contexts have also been documented, among which are the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (e.g., Brill et al., 2003; Millar, 2010); the opportunity for reflection on practice and the sharing of ideas (e.g., Brown & Hayes, 2004); increased participant empowerment (e.g., Brown & Hayes, 2004; Monroe-Baillargeon, & Shema, 2010); the translation of research into practice (e.g., Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Nesbitt & Barton, 2014); greater confidence in reading research (Nesbitt, 2013); and the development of a community of practice (e.g., Gardiner et al., 2013; Nesbitt, 2013). Communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 4). A community of practice has three crucial characteristics: a common domain of interest, a caring group/community of practitioners who share information and help each other learn, and a shared understanding and repertoire of practice. The collaborative learning that occurs and the social networks created in communities of practice are keys to improving individual practice and organizational performance. The study reported in this paper is grounded in communities of practice, as successful professional learning and development (PLD) in TESL reading groups may be attributed to collaborative, caring communities of ESL instructors who share interests, knowledge, and expertise with the goal of improving their practice.

Challenges related to the availability and selection of readings, irregular attendance, logistics, and lack of incentives for membership in professional reading groups have also been reported (e.g., Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Stiler, 2007). Despite these challenges, the literature suggests that professional reading groups are effective in improving knowledge; however, evidence of the uptake or application of information from journal articles (Deenadayalan et al., 2008) and the sustainability of peer-reviewed research reading groups over an extended period of time are lacking.

Key factors for supporting effective PLD found in both the wider literature and in our research within the Canadian ESL context are that successful, effective PLD is collaborative (Guskey, 2000), collegial (Bigsby & Firestone, 2017), relevant to program and instructor needs (Abbott et al., 2015), practitioner-driven (Sugrue, 2011), social in nature, and ongoing (Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015).

The professional reading group project described in this paper extends our program of research on ESL instructor PLD in communities of practice. In the past, we have solicited from TESL researchers, instructors, and program administrators recommendations for enhancing practitioner professional development and for increasing ESL instructor reading of research (Abbott & Rossiter, 2011; Abbott et al., 2017; Abbott et al., 2015; Rossiter et al., 2013). In national surveys of adult ESL instructors and program administrators (Abbott et al., 2015), we found that practitioners were underutilizing peer-reviewed research articles and that, in general,

in most ESL programs, instructors were not being encouraged to read them. However, the instructors in the 2015 study, who reported that they had read research articles, indicated that their reading positively impacted their work. Furthermore, an impressive majority (86%) expressed interest in enhancing their interaction with research within their program context. To bridge this gap, ESL instructors in a focus group interview suggested the formation of reading groups (Rossiter et al., 2013).

The only published reading group study directly related to the teaching of adult ESL is an institutional report by Millar (2010), in which she documented the benefits of a reading group for 10 ESL literacy instructors led by the researcher for five months (five times for 1.25 hours each). Individual interviews with each of the participants in Millar's study suggested that the reading group members provided many concrete ideas that could be used in the classroom; however, there was no indication that the group discussions were based on the reading of peer-reviewed journal articles. To date, the benefits and challenges of reading peer-reviewed research articles in TESL reading groups and the effective supports and procedures that facilitate sustained instructor engagement have not been explored.

The study reported in this paper moves beyond descriptive survey research to a longitudinal study of nine professional TESL reading groups. The following research questions guided our investigation:

1. What were the benefits of reading and discussing peer-reviewed research in the professional reading groups?

2. What challenges did the participants experience in the reading groups?

3. What supports and procedures encouraged and sustained participation in reading groups?

This multisite study is novel in terms of its contexts (diverse adult ESL programs), the number of groups examined (nine), and its longitudinal design (five years), which combined monthly questionnaire, focus group interview, and group discussion data. Our project addresses gaps in the literature on ESL instructor research uptake and use by providing new insights across ESL program contexts and over time.

## Method

### Participant Recruitment and Procedures

This project was conducted in a large Western Canadian city from 2012 to 2017. After receiving Tri-council ethics approval and ethics approval from the associated institutions, we contacted the administrators of 12 adult ESL programs and invited them to email an information letter and consent form to their ESL instructors. The ESL programs were operated by government and privately funded institutions that provided adult ESL learners (temporary foreign workers, immigrants, international students) with newcomer/settlement language training, general ESL classes, and/or English for academic purposes courses. These language courses ranged from 7 weeks to 14 weeks in length. To ensure voluntary participation from the instructors, we asked the 10 program administrators who responded to our email to distribute our information letter and consent form to their ESL instructors. In the letter, we invited the instructors to contact us directly if they were interested in forming a professional reading group within their ESL program; therefore, the administrators were not directly involved in the formation or facilitation of the reading groups. Although invitations were initially sent to 12 program administrators, two

did not reply to our emails, and one program had too few consenting instructors to establish a reading group (only 2 instructors expressed an interest). Therefore, we arranged an organizational meeting with those instructors who had consented to participate in 9 different ESL programs.

In each group, one facilitator was solicited to liaise between the members and the researchers. Each group was asked to discuss their professional learning needs and then to create and email us a list of topics they were interested in reading more about. Example topics included ESL literacy, academic writing, assessment, plagiarism, pronunciation, grammar, task-based language teaching, pragmatics, and trauma informed pedagogy. Based on the literature (Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Kishchuk et al., 2013; Ravin, 2012), we created general guidelines for organizing reading groups (have a purpose, set a regular time, choose a leader and relevant readings, distribute readings well in advance). At each organizational meeting, we provided the group members with these guidelines. After receiving their list of professional learning needs, the research team searched for peer-reviewed articles to address each of the groups' expressed needs and compiled a list of practitioner-oriented, relevant, current article suggestions for each group. Then we emailed each of the group facilitators the article references and a brief summary of each of the articles. Each group was then asked to select and read one research article per month and to organize and attend a meeting to discuss it. The members determined their own procedures for selecting which articles to read. For example, some groups collaboratively selected the articles, whereas others designated alternating members to select the articles. Sometimes when they wanted to read more deeply about a particular topic, they selected articles from the reference lists of previously read articles. When new learning needs arose and/or the groups exhausted their lists of articles, the group facilitators contacted the research team for additional suggestions for articles to read.

Before the first reading group meeting, each participant was emailed a link to an online background questionnaire (see description in the instrument section below). Each group facilitator informed the researchers of the meeting dates and articles read. After each reading group meeting, the participants received a link to a monthly questionnaire (described below). The groups followed our general organizational guidelines throughout the course of the study. The provision of the guidelines, suggestions for articles, and monthly questionnaires encapsulated the extent of the researchers' involvement in facilitating the reading groups.

Two one-hour focus group interviews (see description below) with each of the groups were audio-recorded, and a one-hour focus group interview was conducted with the reading group facilitators (see the interview guide description below). Three 60–90-minute reading group discussions were audio-recorded to document the reading groups' practices and explore the dynamics and functionality of the reading groups, the ways in which instructors interpreted the research, and the leadership strategies implemented in the discussions.

**Instruments**

**Reading group participants' background questionnaire.** Participants completed a cloud-based online background questionnaire consisting of 14 questions, including multiple-choice, yes/no, Likert-type, and open-ended responses. We solicited information on the participants' educational background (and TESL specializations); current program, institution, and position; teaching experience, including ESL courses and proficiency levels taught; and the extent to which participants felt the need for ongoing TESL PD. Participants were also asked the

degree to which they were motivated to join a professional reading group in their programs.

**Reading group participants' monthly questionnaire.** Participants were asked to complete a 15-item monthly online questionnaire after each of their reading group discussions. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Six questions in the first half focused on the impact of both the previous month's article and discussion on the instructors' classroom practices and on benefits to students' learning. Nine questions in the second half enquired about the perceived value of both the article and the group discussion, and their application of the article's content and findings.

**Reading group participants' focus group interview guide.** A semi-structured focus group interview guide was developed to explore the participants' perceptions of the articles, the group discussions, and their group membership. We also enquired about the impact of the journal articles on their knowledge, skills, practices, attitudes, students' learning outcomes, and programs; supports and recognition provided for participation; suggestions for improving the reading groups' functionality and sustainability; and the key elements of a successful reading group.

**Reading group facilitators' focus group interview guide.** A semi-structured focus group interview guide was designed to address the benefits and challenges of establishing, facilitating, and maintaining a reading group in the particular context and culture of the facilitators' institutions; and further recommendations for enhancing the development and maintenance of successful reading groups.

## Data Analysis

Questionnaire data were downloaded and quantified. Frequencies and descriptive statistics for the quantitative questionnaire items (multiple-choice, Likert-type ratings, yes/no, numeric responses) were calculated. Focus group interviews and discussion recordings were transcribed and verified, and then the interview, discussion, and open-ended questionnaire data were analyzed using applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) by three members of the research team.

All three researchers independently read the participants' responses carefully multiple times. Each of the research questions (benefits, challenges, supports) formed the uber-themes (Guest et al., 2012) throughout this iterative and reflective analysis process. In each reading, key ideas were transformed into codes and applied to all of the participants' responses. Research team meetings were held regularly to discuss and refine the coding; the few instances of coding differences were resolved through consensus. Codes were collated under each uber-theme, and emergent themes under each uber-theme were checked and cross-checked across all participants' responses and comments in the entire dataset. Themes were refined, discussed among the researchers, and finalized.

## Results and Discussion

### Participants' Background Information

Each of the nine reading groups consisted of 6-12 practitioners who volunteered to take part in the study without any particular support from their ESL program. In total, 76 ESL instructors participated. Over half (58%) of the instructors taught in a Language Instruction for Newcomers

to Canada (LINC) program at their institutions, and the remainder instructed in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs (26%), general ESL programs (23%), and a variety of other types of programs (i.e., English for specific purposes, adult literacy, high school ESL for students 17 to 20 years old) (15%). A few of the participants indicated that they worked in two programs, leading to a greater than 100% cumulative percentage.

Approximately half of the instructors reported a graduate degree as their highest level of education (master's degree, 45%; doctorate 2%). The other half possessed varying undergraduate credentials (bachelor's degree, 27%; after-degree diploma, 11%; after-degree certificate, 7%; certificate with no degree, 2%). In all, 65% of the participants had specialized in TESL or a TESL-related field.

The participants were employed full-time, defined as a minimum of 20 instructional hours per week. Their adult ESL teaching experiences ranged from less than one year to 21 years (*M* = 7.5, *Mdn* = 5, *Mo* = 10, *SD* = 5.9). At the outset of the study, the majority of the participants indicated a high (43%) or very high (32%) need for ongoing TESL professional development. Similarly, they expressed high (39%) or very high (36%) motivation for joining a professional reading group in their ESL programs.

## Benefits of Involvement in the Reading Groups

Thematic analyses (Guest et al., 2012) of the participants' open-ended questionnaire responses and the focus group interview transcripts revealed that the uber-theme of benefits received the greatest number of codes in our analysis (87%). Involvement in the reading groups promoted reflection, confirmed practice, fostered learning, impacted practice, emphasized the importance of PD, and encouraged professional networking. Each of these themes is elaborated with narrative accounts from the data below.

**Promotion of reflection.** Many instructors reported that the reading groups promoted reflection and facilitated greater understanding of the readings. One reported: "We can read these articles on our own, but the synthesis we get from discussing them is really valuable." A participant from a different group stated: "I find that I get a chance to reflect on things when I'm here and talk about things … not only does it impact your learning, but quite often these are things that we bring up with our administration." These comments demonstrate the value of group reflection for participant understanding, as reflection on knowledge and practice is required to confirm or transform practice.

The following quote is one instructor's self-reflections regarding how the reading groups increased her exposure to journal articles: "[In the initial questionnaire,] I was asked, 'How many articles or journals have you read?' And I'm like, 'OMG, none!' … And now it's like, 'OMG, look how many I've read!'" Other researchers (e.g., Brown & Hayes, 2004; Gardiner et al., 2013) have also found that participation in reading groups encouraged individual and group reflection.

**Confirmation of practice.** Instructors' reading often confirmed their current practice. For example, one participant stated "This [article] reinforces that library time is actually really important for my literacy students, because it gets them into the habit of reading." Another indicated

> It's maybe something you have a feeling about, and you have not read about it, but when you do find it in the article, you confirm you're on the right path, you can continue on. Sometimes research validates what you're doing in the classroom. But sometimes you get those new ideas, too, because … you know,

we can't say, "this is the way we've always done it and that's good enough." I think being open to new ideas is really a huge benefit.

The research articles reminded some participants of what they had learned in their TESL post-graduate studies and encouraged them to revisit particular teaching approaches and activities. Consistent with previous research (Abbott et al., 2015; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010), engagement with peer-reviewed research articles frequently affirmed the instructors' professional competence.

**Fostering of learning.** Participants reported that they were learning as a result of their participation in the reading groups. One commented, "It's an opportunity for most of us to get updated information in the field. And you know, the learning that comes with reading is great."

Another stated, "There were a lot of practical techniques and tips that we could incorporate into our classroom, so I really enjoyed reading this article." One participant even considered the reading group a form of "free university!" Aligned with findings from Brill et al. (2003), the reading groups in our study enhanced the participants' knowledge and skills.

Members of the reading groups also shared information from the articles with other colleagues in numerous ways. For example, ideas were shared at staff meetings and other staff members had the opportunity to access the articles themselves. This extended the culture of learning throughout the programs. These findings are congruent with those in Brown and Hayes (2004), supporting the contribution of professional reading groups to the creation of effective learning environments.

**Impact on practice.** The collaborative process of learning and sharing together stimulated innovative ideas for using the literature. Participants' open-ended responses to our monthly surveys showed the impact of the articles on their practice. For example, one stated,

"I use more form-focused activities such as spelling quizzes and crossword puzzles when teaching reading/vocabulary." Another reported,

> This [article] motivated me to change my teaching style. … I tried to incorporate other types of corrective feedback and, I think, even within one or two weeks from reading the article, I've noticed some positive changes in the classroom already.

These ESL instructors, like those in Millar (2010), were able to apply information from the readings directly to their classroom instruction.

In one program, reading an article was an impetus for a workshop and a modification of assessment practice:

> We changed a question on an assessment ('Describe a situation when you had conflict with someone.') because of our new awareness of refugee trauma … It wasn't till we got literature and a workshop that … Okay, well, now we'll change it.

This suggests that the evidence from peer-reviewed research increased participants' empowerment at the program level, similar to findings reported in Brown and Hayes (2004) and Monroe-Baillargeon and Shema (2010).

**The importance of PD.** Many participants acknowledged the extent to which the reading groups had contributed to their professional development over time. One commented:

> For me, it's professional development. I want to continue this and push myself, stay updated with research articles and look for new ideas, no matter how many years I teach the same class. I don't want it to be the same every day.

The reading groups also supported revisions to curricula and instructor adaptation to these changes. One group, for example, reported that note-taking had been added to their curriculum, and "[in] some of our exams, we've switched to a note-taking kind of format". As a result, the group realized that they needed PD on the latest research on teaching and assessing note-taking, so they requested and chose an article that addressed these issues.

The participants also recognized the impact of participation in reading groups on their institutional cultures: "It enriches not only … the theoretical side of teaching and the PD—but also the whole school environment." These results align with previous findings from Monroe-Baillargeon and Shema (2010), highlighting that reading groups are a valuable form of PLD.

**Professional networking.** Several instructors asserted that the reading groups encouraged professional networking and nurtured communities of practice, as reflected in the following quotes:

> "We're very supportive of each other. We're helpful. We give each other ideas, and I think that's what makes it successful."

> "I found that I really developed a deeper respect for my colleagues when I heard how they're using ideas in their classrooms. Even though you work with these people … we don't really get that chance to connect on a deeper level with our colleagues. So that was a huge benefit for our group."

> "I don't feel so isolated."

The reading groups reduced instructor isolation by cultivating tight-knit, supportive communities of practice. These supportive, trusting learning communities have the power to significantly enhance instructors' abilities to critique and refine their practices by adapting research materials and findings, given the resources (e.g., technology, funding, time) and constraints (instructional, curricular, and institutional) of their teaching contexts. Several investigations of professional reading groups have also confirmed the positive influence of reading groups on participants' collegiality (Gardiner et al., 2013; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010; Nesbitt, 2013; Nesbitt & Barton, 2014; Stiler, 2007) and the fostering of communities of practice (Gardiner et al., 2013; Nesbitt, 2013).

Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Brown & Hayes, 2004; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010), the opportunities for the sharing of ideas at the reading group meetings were appreciated by the participants, and, specific to our study, particularly valued by the novice teachers. Overall, the professional networking facilitated by reading group membership provided the support for the instructors to envision how the research materials and recommendations could be used or adapted. The groups mobilized and transformed the research where possible so it was suitable for their context, similar to those in Nesbitt and Barton (2014).

## Challenges

A total of 7% of the codes were categorized under the uber-theme of challenges. At times, the

reading groups experienced challenges related to time, energy, the obligation to stay on schedule with the readings, changes in group membership, the limited transferability of some of the information in the articles to the instructors' practice, unfamiliarity with the academic genre, and the lack of research to address context specific problems. Qualitative summaries of each of these themes are presented below.

**Time.** The following quotes from the focus group interviews are representative of the problems that the group members faced in terms of time. Choosing a meeting time was a particular challenge for some reading groups: "We've got one group working in the morning, and the other group working in the afternoon. … So it makes it really, really hard." Many participants found it challenging to schedule time to adequately prepare for reading group meetings. One instructor explained:

> Time is always a difficulty, so being able to read the article and, you know, take some time to really reflect and be able to sit down with the group and have some substantive ideas to share … sometimes I feel, "Ah, I should read it and then reread it", because you know you're always getting more when you read it again, right? You have more questions, or you have ideas that come up. So for me, it's just maybe honouring it a bit more by giving it a bit more time.

Some participants were also challenged by the length of a few articles, which increased the time required to read and reflect: "It could be discouraging if it's too long because of the time pressures all of us are under." In the TESL literature (e.g., Abbott et al., 2015), the issue of article length has previously been reported by teachers as a barrier to the reading of academic articles.

**Energy.** Having the energy to complete the readings or participate in the group discussions was a challenge for some, particularly at busy times. One participant said, "I sometimes have trouble reading the articles because, at the end of the day, I'm so tired that I start falling asleep." Another stated, "At the end of the term, people are so tired, so tired!" For most, however, this wasn't an issue, as one participant indicated, "It doesn't take a lot of effort to put time aside to come for breakfast, to talk to colleagues, and at the same time get a little more PD and knowledge and share."

**Obligation.** The following quotes are representative of the members' feelings of obligation, but they also indicate the benefits of peer pressure. One member said, "[participation in the group] forces you to do some PD, which is fantastic … otherwise you wouldn't." A second participant said, "But I like that pressure, 'cause if I didn't have it, I wouldn't read any articles. I hadn't read any academic articles since I left university, until I joined this group. I kept meaning to do it, but …" Another respondent indicated how she fulfilled her obligation to the group: "I got up at 5:30 this morning to read this."

**Changing membership.** Some participants also had to deal with challenges in terms of changing group membership. One explained,

> Our program has a huge number of staff from September to December and then a really low number from January to April. Then it picks up again in August. So it's really hard for the group to stay together during the off-term.

This caused some sessional instructors to drop out of the groups because they did not have ongoing employment contracts. The resulting changes to group membership created challenges

for group organizers/leaders in terms of updating mailing lists for articles and reminders. Furthermore, as indicated in the quote below, changing group membership affected group dynamics:

> Because our group grew at a certain point, there was a standard group of about seven or eight that were coming, and at one point some extra people started coming and the members said that [negatively] changed the dynamics for them.

Stiler (2007) also found that group membership impacted meeting dynamics. Therefore, in his study, he suggested that "participation could have been increased by excluding the administrator" (p. 88) from one of the groups.

**Transferability.** Another challenge was finding articles that had information or practical strategies that all the reading group members could apply in their classes. As one listening/speaking instructor stated, "There're lots of interesting things I learn and I'm like, 'Wow, if I teach writing, I'm going to do that', but … sometimes I can't apply the learnings because I'm not teaching [that] skill in the program." A participant in a different program explained: "Even though we're learning really interesting things, sometimes it's not always something that teachers can apply to their classroom, depending on their classroom setup and the purpose of their classroom, and what type of class they are teaching."

**Academic genre.** Consistent with the literature on teacher engagement with academic readings (e.g., Rossiter et al., 2013), at times, particular peer-reviewed articles were difficult for some instructors to understand due to the complexity of the language used or the nature of the theoretical constructs that were discussed in the articles. The following quotes reflect some challenges participants experienced with a few of the readings: "I encountered so many words that I didn't know the meanings of. Academia has its own language and terminology, but I've been away from it for so many years." "I liked the content, but I found the reading of it actually a little bit more challenging because of some of the technical terms." "You had to be extremely familiar with the vocabulary. You couldn't just read it and say, 'okay'. It's not an introductory article."

The intention of particular mandatory article components, such as limitations, also led a few participants to disregard information in the articles because they interpreted the limitations to mean that the ideas could not be applied to other classes or proficiency levels. A few participants also could not see the value of research that was conducted in a different teaching context (e.g., academic vs settlement programs). However, through the co-construction of knowledge in the groups they were able to contextualize the information in the articles so that it was relevant to their practice. This finding is in alignment with Anwaruddin's (2019b) observation that professional conversations may be helpful in contextualizing and personalizing applied linguistic research so that it becomes relevant to language teachers' practice. Initially, some participants seemed to read primarily to confirm or validate their own practices but this changed over time. Although confirmation of teachers' ideas and experiences should be encouraged, as this reaffirms their competence, the application of new information and ideas based on theory and research should also be emphasized.

**Lack of relevant research.** At times, a few participants became frustrated when there was no research available to address particular problems that they were experiencing. For example, empirical research on portfolio-based language assessment in LINC classes was limited. In another case, research on the benefits of offering separate listening/speaking and

reading/writing classes was scarce. Deenadayalan et al. (2008) and Stiler (2007) also reported issues with the selection and availability of readings. However, the reading groups in our study were fortunate to have the support of researchers with access to extensive academic databases. Without this access to relevant research readings, selection would have been a much greater challenge for the majority of the groups.

Even articles that were viewed as highly practical and relevant by the researchers did not generate the same level of discussion and excitement in all groups, as some participants failed to see the relevance of information to their practice. It is possible that the participants who valued the articles may have received more training and practice in understanding academic discourse or were more accustomed to viewing their practice through a theoretical lens. Their perceptions of the relevance of some articles may also have been related to their purpose for reading. For example, instructors may have read more carefully when they were tasked with reading to find needed information to address a particular problem or to lead group discussions.

## Supports and Procedures That Encouraged and Sustained the Reading Groups

The uber-theme of supports received 6% of the codes. Sustainability of the reading groups was affected by a variety of factors that we categorized as either supports or procedures.

**Supports.** The creation of close-knit communities of practice contributed to the sustainability of the groups. Groups with members who trusted one another; were positive and well-respected; had a sense of humor; and were willing to share ideas, resources, and materials created a sustainable, supportive culture where professional learning was valued. As one participant explained,

> I'm not getting judged here. No one is going to evaluate me. And I'm just going to enjoy this because I want to. I have the impression that every other person that comes to the meeting is enjoying it—and that's why they commit.

Most participants considered the reading groups an enjoyable, sustainable form of PD. As one stated, "It's not a chore to spend your lunchtime with some colleagues—with our group, it's fun."

Finding a mutually convenient time to meet was a key factor that impacted group sustainability. Groups met in the morning, at lunch, or in the late afternoon. However, some groups changed the initial days or times of their meetings to better accommodate their members. For example, a member of one group that switched from Friday afternoons to Thursday mornings indicated that "there's no time that's super convenient [but] after work, my brain is fried."

Researcher assistance in locating suitable articles was also a significant support for the groups. As two instructors commented, "It's just really good to get articles that we know have been peer-reviewed, that are sound, that have been vetted for us. Because it makes our job easier." Another participant confirmed, "We don't have time to do the research."

If program administrators value, support, encourage, and promote professional reading in their ESL programs, these learning communities will likely continue to meet and attract new members on a voluntary basis. As one member of a lunch time reading group commented, "Having [our administrator] allow us to do this during our prep time is incredible." A member of another group, who was also an administrator, offered this example of a support: "Anything they do PD-wise, I as the chair can document as part of their workload template agreement."

Administrator recognition of instructor participation was provided to the five groups that continued to meet after the close of this study, leading us to surmise that administrator support is key to the sustainability of professional reading groups.

These findings indicate that researcher and administrator supports have considerable impact on the viability and sustainability of the reading groups. The reading groups were established by the researchers as a knowledge mobilization initiative, and research support in the form of article suggestions ensured that the reading groups remained viable particularly at the outset of the study. However, after researcher contact was reduced at the conclusion of the study, administrator supports became essential: the five groups that continued to meet after our last monthly questionnaire was sent out were the ones in which the administrators officially recognized their instructors' participation. The actions of these administrators demonstrate their recognition of the positive effects that the professional reading groups have on their ESL programs' policies and their instructors' practices. The continuation of these five groups after the end of our research project also suggests that there was subsequent buy-in for professional reading groups at both the instructor and institution levels. The fact that all of the participants volunteered to regularly read research articles and meet on their own time to discuss the research over a period of several years indicates that all the participants value their professional reading groups.

**Recommended reading group procedures.** Based on the findings presented above, we make the following recommendations for creating a context-specific approach to learning and professional development in TESL. Our guidelines expand on the existing ones identified in our literature review (see Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Kishchuk et al., 2013; Ravin, 2012): have a purpose, set a regular time, choose a leader and relevant readings, and distribute readings well in advance.

1. Establish a purpose for the reading group (e.g., PLD in a social context).

2. Discuss with the program manager/director possible supports and incentives for establishing a professional reading group.

3. Recruit individuals with similar PLD needs and interests.

4. Negotiate regular monthly meeting times, location, and length (~60 minutes).

5. Set guidelines for selecting readings, sending meeting reminders, and leading discussions (i.e., selecting leaders to summarize and prepare questions for each reading).

6. Prioritize reading topics.

7. Locate and select relevant, practical, readable articles (e.g., open access articles).

8. Schedule adequate time for individual reading, reflection, and review.

9. Meet and collaborate to interpret, evaluate, and discuss potential applications of the theories and readings, given individual contexts, goals, and understandings of the potential consequences or limitations of use.

10. Prepare to report the transfer and application of learnings to practice at the next meeting.

## Connections to the Broader Professional Reading Group Literature

The present study provides novel insights into the benefits and challenges of TESL reading

groups, and the supports required to sustain the reading of peer-reviewed articles by TESL practitioners. Our findings align with research conducted in the general education research literature that has found multiple perceived benefits from participation in professional reading groups (e.g., Brill et al., 2003; Brown & Hayes, 2004; Millar, 2010). Participation in TESL reading groups also promoted learning (e.g., Brill et al., 2003) and reflection (e.g., Brown & Hayes, 2004), empowered the instructors (e.g., Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010) through confirmation of their existing practice, and perhaps most importantly, impacted classroom practices through the infusion of research into the instructors' pedagogy (e.g., Nesbitt & Barton, 2014). Like Gardiner et al., (2013), we observed that reading groups foster the development of communities of practices; however, we also found that administrator supports are critical to sustainability of these communities of practice.

Similar to other research that has examined professional reading groups as a form of general PLD in the short term (e.g., Kishchuk et al., 2013; McGlinn et al., 2003; Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema, 2010), our participants also indicated that they valued reading groups as PLD in the long term. This was demonstrated through the instructors' voluntary participation over a period of five years, as well as by the five administrators who recognized the benefits of reading group participation by sanctioning reading groups as official PLD and recognizing the instructors' participation in their annual reports.

## Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Over the period of five academic years, we examined PLD in nine professional reading groups with 76 participants. Our findings highlight key benefits and challenges of reading peer-reviewed research articles in TESL reading groups and effective supports and procedures that facilitate sustained instructor participation. The benefits of the groups were significant, as professional learning from the reading of journal articles (a) cultivated communities of practice in which ESL instructors worked together to mobilize research and translate applicable new knowledge into practice, (b) strengthened the collaborative work cultures in the ESL programs, and (c) emphasized the value of ongoing PLD. Instructors used their shared knowledge of second language acquisition theories and research to reflect on and interpret the information and materials in the peer-reviewed journal articles. They assessed the extent to which these confirmed their practice or could be applied to enhance instruction in their particular teaching contexts.

In future research, actual classroom data could be collected to complement the reported benefits of PLD in reading groups. Administrators, coordinators, and instructors could jointly engage in professional reading to address higher-level program needs. This shared approach to PLD might lead to greater appreciation for and recognition of participant involvement in professional reading groups. Authors could provide suggestions of how information in their articles might be used in different teaching contexts to support a variety of learning outcomes. Researchers could also initiate and evaluate the effects of socially networked reading group discussions on knowledge transfer, utilization, and information exchange.

Learning through professional reading groups is a complex, creative, individual, and social process that requires time, energy, commitment, collegiality, and practical, accessible, and relevant articles. However, with the implementation of the supports and procedures identified in this study, reading groups have the potential to become teacher-driven (rather than administrator-driven) communities of practice in which instructors organize and participate in

valuable, sustainable, long-term professional learning and development.

## Acknowledgements

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