

Research Paper

A Feasibility Study of the Cognition of Lesson Study for the Professional Development of EFL Teachers at Iranian English Language Institutes

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ABSTRACT

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Background and Objectives: The study aimed to investigate the feasibility study of the cognition and implementation of Lesson Study at Iranian English language institutes.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative approach through descriptive conceptual content analysis along with quantitative analysis of content analysis to see whether Lesson Study (LS) is recognized or applicable in Iranian context. Accordingly, a group of 30 English institute managers in Iran were considered for the sample of the study. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 13 open-ended questions answered by the interviewees aimed at generating ideas. After transcribing the interviews, through deductive descriptive coding, 14 codes including belief, cognition, efficiency, implementation, preference, obstacles, financial issues, voluntary implementation, permission, class observation, interaction, collaboration, teacher and teaching were extracted.

Results: The results of study revealed that in most of the cases LS was not recognized by the managers of the English institutes in Iran. Consistently, LS was deemed inapplicable in Iran due to a lack of relevant knowledge.

Conclusion: It is important to note that implementing LS at Iranian English language Institutes may require cultural and contextual adaptation. If we want LS to take place, we must make it known. Those who fully understand and extensively implement this concept will achieve good results.

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Introduction

Lesson Study is an approach to teacher professional development (PD), set in Japan, involving collaborative planning of a lesson, live lesson observation and reflective discussion. Lesson Study has been increasingly adopted worldwide as a form of teacher learning and school improvement (Godfrey et al., 2019). An issue concerning stimulating teachers' professional development is that most of them teach individually in separate classes without having the chance to observe other teachers or receive feedbacks on their teaching (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). Lesson Study (LS) is a professional development approach that has been adopted immensely in Japan for more than a century and is often considered as a tool for teachers to develop professionally (Schipper et al., 2017). Professional collaboration, a specific kind of collaboration concerning professional issues, is currently an emerging theme in education. Along with the discussion on professional collaboration, an important theme has gained prominence, namely LS, grounded in the basic features of collaboration and reflection. The relevance of this analysis lies in the fact that it may indicate paths for LS in environments marked by professional isolation, giving teachers the opportunity to attain collaboration in teacher education and professional practices, thereby, enhancing their professional development (Richit & Da Ponte, 2021). LS has supported teachers to survey and move towards reform-based education through an effective professional learning model (Arslan, 2019). LS promotes teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy as well as student thinking by training professional teachers and increasing teaching materials. LS includes cycles of educational advancement in which teachers work jointly to define objectives for long-term improvement of students' learning, arrange a research lesson together to bring these objectives to life and present the lesson in a classroom with one group of teachers to collect records during the learning process (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004). LS requires no special tool or resources, but it requires minimal training. It currently helps improve learning and teaching and raising standards. One of the advantages of LS is that any small group of teachers can do it (Dudley, 2013). There is an increase in

professional development to help teachers support their students who have learning disabilities or difficulties. Understanding how to address the challenges students meet requires the training and professional development for teachers to enhance their knowledge of both typical and atypical learnings. As LS is based on the strong involvement and agency of teachers, it promises to be a model for professional development of teachers that is powerful regarding sustainability (Holmqvist, 2020). Equally, as one of the determinants of learning success, teachers' skills must always be evaluated and improved to achieve the quality standards (Laoli et al., 2022). This is because the quality of teachers' inadequacy in teaching practice will negatively impact students' learning conditions. Lesson Study has internationally come to prominence over the last 20 years in different variations including in several European countries (e.g., UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Spain and others) and the USA, though its center of activity is the Far East (Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and China) (Lee, 2008). Despite some variations in LS practice, the basic principles involve the collaborative design of lessons or units of study, the execution of the design with observation and the reflection on the product with a view to its improvement. In LS practice, a small group of teachers collaborates to develop a series of research lessons in which different approaches to teaching are tried out to improve specific forms of pupil learning, with the aim of enhancing teaching knowledge (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004). In the first study phase of the process, the team draws on their professional knowledge and any research informed knowledge that is relevant to the LS focus. In the next planning stage, a research lesson is planned to address the LS question. In the UK version of LS (Dudley, 2013), the LS cycle usually consists of three research lessons (RL), each preceded and followed by review and planning meetings (RP). Teachers in the LS teams focus on 1–2 case students in the planning, teaching and evaluation of the research lessons. These students are identified depending on the topic and aims of the LS (Dudley, 2013). Lesson Study has several benefits for both teachers and students including becoming lifelong learners, creating engaging lessons and units, enhancing knowledge in terms of

content, pedagogy, student-centered approaches, and assessment, providing a platform for sharing collaboratively, enriching various areas of education, offering professional development with dignity and a focus on process, and providing a time-tested approach to professional learning that exemplifies the Standards for Professional Learning (Khalid et al., 2016). Considering the students, as the benefactors of experiencing LS in their study program, the LS can provide them with focusing on student learning and development, providing a rare and valuable chance for teachers to be in a classroom solely to investigate student learning, unencumbered by the need to manage students or provide instruction and allowing a school to build coherent instruction, bringing to life its vision of student learning across grade levels. Lesson Study provides a collaborative and structured approach for teachers to improve their instructional practices and enhance student learning outcomes. It promotes ongoing professional development and encourages teachers to engage in reflective practices to continuously refine their teaching methods. By focusing on student learning and development, Lesson Study helps teachers create engaging lessons and units that meet their students' needs. Pointing to Lesson Study as collaborative research of teachers in the school and classroom, Sabbagh et al. (2023) in a study on designing a model for LS management in secondary schools concluded that teachers, using the qualitative circles of research, teaching and learning, try to help teachers in the process of questioning, planning, action, active observation, rethinking, and learning, and encourages the exchange of opinions, experience, practical work, and learning from each other. Zahedi et al. (2022) asserted that LS is a pattern of collaborative research in the classroom that can have an effective role in improving education quality. In his research, the aim was identifying the dimensions of promoting LS in the elementary school and based on the paradigm pattern of the dimensions and components of promoting LS in the elementary school, it can be concluded that LS can be designed and implemented to reach educational improvement. Laoli et.al (2022) conducted a study on the application of LS in improving the quality of English teaching and found that there were several obstacles faced by novice teachers when teaching a

course, including lack of confidence in teaching students, lack of experience, and the use of monotonous methods, media, and poor or inappropriate assessment techniques. The study highlighted the importance of providing support and training for novice teachers to help them overcome these obstacles and improve the quality of their teaching. Farvardin et.al (2022) conducted a study on the effect of lesson study on EFL learners' grammatical knowledge and teachers' perception and concluded that the teachers regarded lesson study to be beneficial to help them develop professionally. The results also indicated that LS can be used as a powerful tool for teacher development in both initial teacher training and in-service teacher training in EFL contexts. In addition, LS can be done in a single school to increase interaction and knowledge sharing among EFL teachers. Lesson study is an important approach to professional development for teachers, It provides a structured and collaborative approach for teachers to improve their instructional practices. By engaging in reflective practice and collaborating with colleagues, teachers can gain new insights and strategies that they can apply in their classrooms, leading to improved teaching practices. Lesson study focuses on student learning and development. It encourages teachers to work together in teams, fostering a collaborative culture in schools. Teachers can share their expertise, ideas, and strategies, leading to a collective improvement in teaching practices. By engaging in reflective practice and collaborative study of actual instruction, teachers can continuously refine their instructional practices and adapt to the changing needs of their students. Accordingly, Lesson study can enrich various areas of education by providing a platform for sharing collaboratively and enhancing knowledge in terms of content, pedagogy, and student-centered approaches (Durkin, 2023). This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How is Lesson Study recognized as a method of professional development by the managers of Iranian English language institutes?
2. To what extent is Lesson Study applicable at Iranian English language institutes?

Methodology:

The present study followed a qualitative design in which descriptive conceptual content analysis was used to identify the concepts or ideas within qualitative data to examine the issues under study. This study was conducted in Mazandaran and Khorasan Razavi provinces, at six English language institutes including Simin Foreign Language Institute, Gulf Institute, Melal IELTS Center, Iran Language Institute, Gofar Hakim Institute, and Color Institute. The participants of the present study were six institute managers who were experienced ELT teachers with at least 10 years of teaching experience. The managers of the institutes were selected based on the availability of the institutes in the Covid-19 pandemic. In this study, due to some limitations such as Covid-19 and the constraints on accessing the study sample that made random selection challenging, convenience sampling was used in which the managers of the institutes were sampled simply because they were "convenient" sources of data for researchers. To gather data, an open-ended questionnaire made up of a series of 13 questions related to LS was used being prepared by the researcher through studying the literature related to LS and its validity was checked by seven knowledgeable experts.

In this study, a semi-structured interview ranging from 30 minutes to 60 minutes was used by the researcher to collect some data around LS from the managers of the institutes to analyze and understand whether LS is feasible at English institutes or not. This study was conducted for 5-6 months. Regarding the topic of this study, it was a feasibility study, thus there was no experimental group or control group. Since this study was a qualitative study, descriptive conceptual content analysis was used in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches of content analysis were applied. Initially, a questionnaire comprising a series of 13 LS-related questions such as "Have you studied and researched in the field of LS? If possible, express your opinion in a few sentences", "Do you believe in Lesson Study as a method of professional development and do you consider it effective?", "Have you ever conducted Lesson Study in the institute under your supervision? or will you?",

"What are the reasons that hinder the implementation of Lesson Study?" and some others were used to gather data. Then, through applying this questionnaire, the managers were interviewed to collect data. Next, the gathered data were recorded and transcribed by the researcher to be qualitatively analyzed to identify 14 codes including belief, cognition, efficiency, implementation, preference, obstacles, financial issues, voluntary implementation, permission, class observation, interaction, collaboration, teacher and teaching. Among these codes, three were deemed the most important based on the research questions: cognition, efficiency, and implementation. Finally, the collected data were imported to MAXQDA 2020 and analyzed using a qualitative approach, and some of the gathered data were also analyzed using SPSS version 26 to examine the feasibility of LS at Iranian English language institutes.

Results:

Pointing to the first research questions "How is Lesson Study recognized as a method of professional development by the managers of Iranian English language institutes?", the researcher approached 30 institutes in different cities; out of these 30 institutes, 16 refused without considering the issue, therefore, 14 institutes agreed to cooperate, and out of these 14 institutes, eight institutes refused to cooperate after being informed about the issue to whom the reason for non-cooperation was mainly lack of recognition. Out of these 14 English language institutes, six institutes (six institute managers) agreed to cooperate. According to the interviews with participants and the collected data, the researcher coded the cases from which some data were obtained. Among these cases, the code "cognition" emerged as particularly significant in addressing this research question. To begin with, the ideas given by the interviewees on their cognition of LS are provided in table 1.

Table 1.

The ideas given by the interviewees on their cognition of LS.

	Cognition
Interviewee One	Yes, I know LS. I have a personal interest in this topic. I have studied and held a workshop on the subject.
Interviewee Two	I don't know it academically. We do not have academic knowledge, but I have some general information from my university days. LS is carried out based on the needs of the teachers and the class, and there is no fixed method.
Interviewee Three	It is an effective method and based on the explanations given, it is very good. The main difference is that it is natural and comes from practice to theory. I have also done things experimentally (using several professors in teaching). This creates a very good reflection among teachers in the class. I don't know it academically, but according to the principle of LS (teachers' cooperation to solve class problems), this topic was my idea before establishing the institute.
Interviewee Four	I have personally studied peer observation and mentoring, and I have read some materials, but I have no knowledge and no study about LS, and I have not seen at any institutes, even in famous institutions like the ILI. In my opinion, the difference between Lesson Study and other methods is that the teacher can choose the right method based on his own problem with the cooperation of other teachers and the needs of the class. I did not do it in my institute and my answer is negative. But in my opinion, based on the explanations given, it can be very effective.
Interviewee Five	Yes, there is a difference. LS is a type of participatory approach that involves participation among teachers. I also wrote a thesis on LS, and it is like action research, so the teacher must have the ability to reflect with others. Teachers observe each other and use their experiences to solve class problems with the aim of improving. As for me, I have a very positive opinion about it.
Interviewee Six	I know LS, but it has not been applied in a structured way in the class until now, but for someone to come and observe the class and give feedback, yes. There is something similar to this LS, called action research, which solves the problems of the class, and it is emphasized that it solves your own problems. The difference between them is that the LS is done in groups, and they observe and then the result of this case makes changes even in the lessons. But action research can be personal. I do for myself and my class and institute. In my opinion, LS is classified under the topic of CPD or continuous professional development. You go to these things to improve your career.

As can be seen in Table 2, the frequencies of the ideas given by the interviewees on their cognition direction of LS are provided.

Table 2

The frequencies of the ideas given by the interviewees on their cognition direction of LS

		Cognition Direction			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	positive	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	not relevant	1	16.7	16.7	33.3
	distorted familiarity	4	66.7	66.7	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Based on the search results and the obtained descriptive data, three institutes had no knowledge of LS, two institutes had partial knowledge and little information about LS. Only one institute had excellent knowledge and complete information about the study, so there is not an appropriate understanding available regarding the cognition of Lesson Study. The survey results provide insights into the partial cognition and implementation of Lesson Study in various contexts, but do not specifically address the cognition of LS by Iranian English language institute managers. Regarding the second research question "To what extent is Lesson Study applicable at Iranian English language institutes?", we will have a glance at the attained data. The code related to this question includes implementation, with its corresponding points provided below. In table 3, the interviewees' ideas about their implementation of LS were transcribed for analysis.

Table 3

The ideas given by the interviewees on their Implementation of LS.

Implementation	
Interviewee One	<p>Our teaching method in the institute is that those who are newcomers must observe at least 10 classes and write a report for them after the TTC course.</p> <p>It has helped so much that one of the new teachers who had many problems in the class has made a lot of progress.</p> <p>Our teachers observe each other's classes to see some Qs that are in their minds, how the teacher is dealing with the class, what are you doing? Tell me and... These Qs and answers have solved many problems.</p> <p>For their own benefit, teachers can invite other teachers to the class to receive feedback and get comments, or a less experienced teacher can go to an experienced teacher's class to learn things, or teachers of the same class can observe each other and think together.</p>

	<p>Almost 80% of the educational and management cases of the class are solved in the form of these teachers' discussions.</p> <p>You can solve all kinds of problems with LS. LS means that I have a problem and if I don't solve it, I will get hurt, so I think with other teachers to solve the problems.</p>
Interviewee Two	<p>In our teacher recruitment system, after the new teachers are trained, they must go to several classes and observe other teachers to learn the process of the institute.</p> <p>We had a course where the training was intensive and the content of the class was a lot, so the teachers talked to each other and shared the problems in those meetings.</p> <p>In our institute there are a series of meetings where teachers are asked for their opinions about the teaching departments, class management, time, etc.</p> <p>There were needs from the students, problems, ... whether in education or in management cases where a bunch of experienced teachers helped the less experienced ones and gave solutions on how to handle the class.</p>
Interviewee Three	<p>We didn't have a LS, but one issue was very important to me, that good support was formed among the language learners which was very satisfying.</p> <p>Naturally, yes, I did some parts of LS with the discussions and observations that the professors made together, not only in the field of educational processes, but also in other issues such as class and time management, they were able to reduce their problems a lot.</p>
Interviewee Four	<p>No, I have not done it yet, but if the institute reaches a good development and the number of students develops, I will definitely do it.</p> <p>I have not done it yet, but I can say with a high percentage that if LS is implemented in my institute, it will definitely improve the educational process.</p>
Interviewee Five	<p>Some parts of LS were used.</p> <p>Many of the problems of the classes have been solved because the experiences of experts were used and it has been very helpful but as I said, LS study is not fully implemented.</p>
Interviewee Six	<p>we had some parts of the Lesson Study, such as peer observation and mentoring, and we involve the teachers in the discussions, ... but it has not been applied in a structured way in the class until now, but for someone to come and observe the class and give feedback (part of the course research), yes.</p> <p>Because it is not conventional, its problems will be more than its benefits, but if it is done correctly, it will be wonderful.</p> <p>We have such collaborations, but we did not have an academic and structured LS.</p> <p>If we want to do it in a structured way, we can choose several teachers to do it, it must be culturalized.</p>

The frequencies of the ideas given by the interviewees regarding the Implementation direction of LS can be observed in Table 4.

Table 4

The frequencies of the ideas given by the interviewees regarding the Implementation direction of LS.

		Implementation direction			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	positive	1	16.7	16.7	16.7
	not relevant	5	83.3	83.3	100.0
	Total	6	100.0	100.0	

Implementing LS in Iranian English language Institutes can greatly benefit teachers and students by fostering a culture of continuous improvement and providing opportunities for professional growth and development. Ultimately, the applicability of LS is driven by its emphasis on collaboration, reflection, and continuous improvement. However, based on the ideas and irrelevancy of the talks being given by the interviewees as a result of their lack of knowledge and understanding of LS concept, it should be stated that LS is not applicable at Iranian English language institutes.

Discussion and Conclusion:

This study was an attempt to explore the feasibility of the cognition and implementation of Lesson Study for the professional development of EFL teachers at Iranian English institutes. Further, it was to determine if LS is recognized as a method of professional development by the managers of Iranian English language institutes and whether it is applicable at Iranian English language institutes. Based on the first research question, a strong, positive connection was found between understanding the LS and teachers' professional development.

The findings in this section are somewhat in line with studies conducted by Yoshida (1999), Fujii (2019) and Arsalan (2019) in which the process of creating a lesson plan, as a collaborative effort by teachers, is largely invisible to non-

Japanese adopters of Lesson Study, that is, educators around the world and in our case, in Iran were not that much familiar with the issue. Also, the obtained results are consistent with those of Bayram, & Bıkmaz (2021) believing that LS should be practiced by more EFL teachers because, as the findings of this study also suggest, LS is a platform that improves teaching (Yoshida, 1999) by enhancing teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and classroom practices (Cerbin, & Kopp, 2006).

Considering the applicability of the LS, the results of this study revealed that the LS is not that much applicable in Iranian context not because the concept has drawbacks but mainly because it is not embraced willingly and knowingly by the managers and the teachers in Iran which is in line with the results of the study by Alipour (2018) and Haghhighifard, & Marzban (2016) confirming that LS has a positive effect on Iranian EFL teachers' perception of teaching speaking and can be beneficial for EFL teachers in Iran but it is not employed by teachers often.

As extensively recapped in this research, Lesson Study is viewed as a professional development initiative that involves teachers working collaboratively to plan, observe, and reflect on a lesson. It helps to recognize the central importance and difficulty of teaching and provides a structured approach for teachers to build and refine ideas about "best practice" through careful, collaborative study of actual instruction. LS allows teachers to engage in classroom research, which can help them to identify areas for improvement and develop more effective teaching strategies. Its flexibility and focus on collaborative research make it a valuable approach for improving teaching practices and enhancing student learning outcomes.

Promoting the use of Lesson Study in English language institutes may require sharing success stories of English language teachers who have implemented LS in their classrooms. Providing training sessions for English language teachers to learn about LS and how to implement it effectively seems tangible and practical. These sessions can include hands-on activities, collaborative lesson planning, and reflection exercises. Consistently, partnering with universities and other

educational institutions to promote LS as a professional development method promotes joint training programs or incorporating LS into existing professional development initiatives. If we want the Lesson Study to take place, we must make it known. Those who are fully aware of this concept, wholeheartedly rely on it, and implement it extensively to get good results. The reason for its non-implementation is lack of recognition. The higher the knowledge about the study, the higher the beliefs, the better the foundation, and the better the removal of obstacles. It is recommended that practitioners and Institutes' managers that wish to implement LS in mixed teams, pay attention to the composition of the teams, to student teachers' present conversation skills and features of the participating schools in terms of learning organization.

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