



DOI:10.22144/ctujoisd.2023.052

## Using lesson study for teacher development: A case study of Vietnamese EFL teachers' reflections

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### Article info.

Received 21 Apr 2023

Revised 8 Jun 2023

Accepted 10 Jul 2023

### Keywords

Community college, EFL teaching, Lesson Study, teacher development

### ABSTRACT

*In this article, we present a case study of four Vietnamese teachers of English in a Community College working in a Lesson Study group that prepared them for teacher development in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). Qualitative data from interview, reflective writing and observation were analyzed during the researched lessons. By conducting Lesson Study, the teachers indicated they were fully aware of the important roles of Lesson Study in their professional development strategies. They declaimed Lesson Study, involving a small group of educators collaboratively designing, teaching, and refining a single lesson could provide a platform for mutual learning, collaboratively designing more effective lesson plans which focus on learning goals, and rendering timid teachers more confident in having their teaching observed by colleagues. However, some constraints faced by the teachers were identified, which may undermine the gains of Lesson Study.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, professional practice in actual classroom instruction has become a familiar and continuous activity for most Vietnamese lecturers in colleges and universities, which is one of the outstanding teaching methods to enhance students' learning and lecturers' professional ability (Lewis, 2019). Like in most countries, Vietnamese EFL teachers' competence with their different levels of knowledge and professional development has been a matter of concern for years.

Lesson Study is a well-established Japanese approach to examining classroom practice (Lewis, 2019) and is acknowledged as a model that places teachers at the forefront of professional development initiatives, aiming to comprehend the learning needs of their students (Do et al., 2020).

Lesson Study is characterized as an approach in which a group of teachers collaboratively focuses on

a specific aspect of students' learning development by collectively designing, teaching, observing, and assessing lessons (Jansen et al., 2021). Lesson Study is also known as a framework for collaborative design and research that places a strong emphasis on teachers' leadership in the pursuit of improved teaching, fostering interactions among students in the classroom, and addressing individual needs and differences (Matoba et al., 2007). This approach begins with the selection of a subject and objectives for student learning within a defined timeframe, leading to a comprehensive developmental plan that incorporates a specific research lesson as an integral component of an in-depth investigation.

In Viet Nam, Lesson Study is an emerging concept for teacher development. Although some projects have been conducted in some colleges and universities regarding improving non-English subject pedagogy, research conducted in English language teaching in a particular context as a

community college is still limited. The current study was undertaken to assess the application of Lesson Study for professional development (PD) with the aim of enhancing the quality of Lesson Study practices that are put into effect and reflected by a group of teachers of English in a community college in the Mekong Delta.

In the current study, Lesson Study is understood as a collaborative process that enables teachers with diverse expertise to work together preparing, teaching, observing and reflecting the research

lesson. The cycle of Lesson Study adapted in the current study is described in Lesson Study: Facilitator Guide (Leong et al., 2021), representing an ongoing procedure consisting of multiple stages, encompassing (1) Study and Plan, (2) Teach, Observe, and Debrief, (3) Revise and Reteach, and (4) Reflect and Report. The cycle of Lesson Study offers a structured framework for teachers to engage in collaborative professional development, fostering continuous improvement in teaching practice and student learning. This process is illustrated in the following diagram:

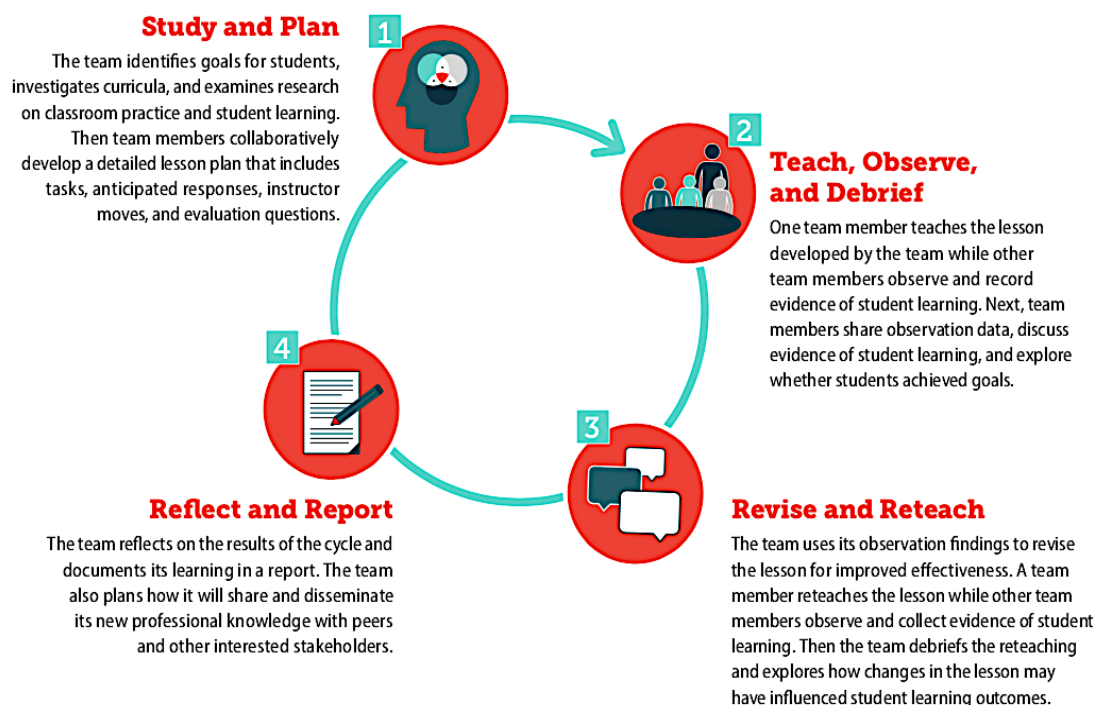


Figure 1. Lesson Study Cycle

## 2. RESEARCH ON LESSON STUDY

Lesson Study has a long history in Japan (Yoshida, 1999; Watanabe, 2002) and in recent years there has seen a steady growth in research implemented widely across Asia and several countries in Europe. Lesson Study has been proved to bring plenty of benefits to both teachers and students. In their researches, Bjuland et al. (2015) explored an adverse instance in which the lesson study intervention did not unfold as anticipated. Their aim was to pinpoint potential indicators for the unsuccessful implementation. The data collection for this intervention involved video observations and group interviews conducted after the student teachers had completed their field practice. The

research findings showed that the student teachers displayed the lack of teaching pedagogical content knowledge on campus before field practice. In addition, The mentor teacher and the student teachers are focused on determining what the students "should learn," but there are no indications of them identifying a specific research focus for the student teachers' own learning.

In a study akin to this, Coenders and Verhoef (2018) used a qualitative multiple case study approach that utilized various instruments such as individual interviews, reflective journals, and transcripts of collaborative meetings. This methodology was employed to investigate the learning experiences of both novice and experienced teachers, analyze

differences in their learning, and identify the Lesson Study components that contributed to their development. The findings unveiled that teachers, in their role as educators, prioritize engaging students in meaningful learning activities while minimizing their emphasis on content explanation. Additionally, teachers observed variations in students' learning pace and comprehension, which prompted considerations of class differentiation.

In the same year, Yalcin conducted a research investigation to examine how the lesson study approach impacted the professional growth of student teachers within the realm of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) department. The study adopted a qualitative research design to facilitate the accumulation of comprehensive insights into the intricacies of the lesson study process. Data was gathered from a variety of sources, including video recordings of research lessons, collaborative group meetings, reflective accounts shared after lessons, detailed notes kept by the researcher, observations made by student teachers, written instructional plans, and the personal reflections of the student teachers regarding their engagement in the process. The study revealed several remarkable results. Initially, the Lesson Study approach played a pivotal role in fostering the professional development of EFL teachers by encouraging them to observe and reflect upon their instructional behaviors and teaching techniques. Additionally, the collected data indicated a correlation between these observations and reflections and an increase in teachers' self-assurance. Furthermore, active engagement in discussions and reflections centered on learning and the needs of learners made a substantial contribution to the overall professional growth of these educators. Lastly, EFL pre-service teachers exhibited marked improvement in their pedagogical expertise, encompassing both the methods of instruction and the depth of content coverage.

In a recent study, In their 2020 study, Bayram and Canaran collaborated with a group of 20 EFL teachers to delve into the interpretation of the Lesson Study approach within the EFL teaching context and to uncover the potential opportunities and challenges that could emerge in the course of its implementation. The researchers discovered the implementation of Lesson Study fostered a collaborative learning environment and positively contributed to the enhancement of teachers' knowledge-in-practice. Nevertheless, the study revealed that potential pitfalls included teachers harboring misconceptions about Lesson Study and

the absence of adequate support mechanisms to facilitate its successful implementation. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Jansen and colleagues in 2021, the advantages of Lesson Study as a research approach in the context of (science) education were examined. The researchers employed both qualitative and quantitative data to assess the impact of the created lesson on students and to identify key areas for the utilization of Lesson Study as a research approach. The study's findings demonstrated that the designed lesson effectively introduced students to model-based reasoning, highlighting the efficacy of Lesson Study as a valuable research methodology in education.

In Vietnam, Lesson Study research have been performed in a few places as several primary and secondary schools, high schools and universities across the country, demonstrating an effective process to examine teaching practice and stimulate learning interests. In 2014, Vui conducted a study that focused on implementing Lesson Study to promote effective teaching and learning practices, specifically in the context of selected topics within lower secondary mathematics in Vietnam. The research involved grade 7 students, aged between 12 and 13 years, and encompassed a total of 185 students and 8 teachers. The study's outcomes revealed unanimous agreement among all mathematics teachers at the school, who acknowledged that lesson study presented a valuable opportunity for them to observe teaching and learning within an authentic classroom environment. Tsukui and Saito (2017) employed the case study approach as described by Creswell (2014). Their sole research instrument consisted of field notes, which were used to depict the actions that reflected and embodied the underlying values of a Vietnamese teacher. The central discovery of their study was that both the participant and the teacher initiated new actions involving reaching out, accepting, and welcoming classroom phenomena in order to observe and contemplate the reality and its significance. This approach was referred to as a 'stroll'. Another research by Diem and Thathong (2019) employed a research methodology that combined a qualitative case study approach with a descriptive statistics design with a semi-structured questionnaire and reflective writing. The study showed that The six pre-service biology teachers gained a deeper understanding of Lesson Study and how to effectively employ the Lesson Study process to develop improved biology lesson plans.

In the up-to-date research, Huong et al. (2021) conducted the study on 62 young teachers in five different Northern provinces of Vietnam to measure the pre-impact and post-impact results. The research team used a pedagogical experiment, a survey, and an interview. Analysis of the results of applying the Lesson Study model unveiled the advancements in the creation and utilization of lesson plans by novice educators, sparking significant interest among both teachers and students in adopting the Lesson Study model. Furthermore, the teacher participants had higher impact results than the group who did not apply this model. In 2022, Saito studied the nature of conceptions about Lesson Study for the Learning Community held by the educational authorities and teachers in Vietnam. The results suggest that teachers perceive this approach as necessitating a shift from traditional one-way lectures to actively involving students in group activities. Furthermore, during lesson observation and reflection sessions in different schools, it became evident that many teachers interpreted these opportunities as a platform to showcase their innovative teaching methods.

Although some Vietnamese researchers have attempted to implement Lesson Study to better their non-English subject teachers' instructional practice in many settings like secondary and high school level, the research of Lesson Study in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching is currently constrained or lacks extensive exploration, and the contexts of research are not extended to a higher level of education like college or university. Thus, an investigation on the opportunities and challenges of adopting Lesson Study in EFL teaching at the college level is truly essential.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

#### 3.1. Research aim and research question

Aiming to investigate EFL teacher perceptions of utilizing the Lesson Study for enhancing teacher professional development in terms of feasibility, usefulness, challenge and to provide a tool for better practice of teacher PD at the college, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How useful is the Lesson Study model as perceived by the EFL teachers at a community college?
2. What are the feasibilities and challenges of Lesson Study implementation from the teachers' perspectives?

#### 3.2. Research design

This research is an attempt to implement lesson study in a college context from which perceptions of EFL teachers in using the Lesson Study model for PD were elicited and examined. In this design, the qualitative methods of interview, reflective writing, and observation were used to collect relevant data for the study.

Six teachers of English in the Faculty of Foreign Languages at a community college were purposefully invited to participate in the preliminary execution and assessment of the procedure; however, after the first cycle of Lesson Study, two of these teachers declined to continue and cited the time commitment as the cause for their non-participation, while the remaining four participants were all female." whose average age is 25, with a minimum of five years and a maximum of nine years of teaching experience in English. They all have obtained a Bachelor's degree in English language teaching.

The researchers conducted interviews with participants to acquire a more profound insight into their perspectives, experiences, and perceptions related to the topic being investigated. The interviews involved open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their thoughts in their own words and provide detailed responses.

In addition, reflective writing was another method employed to collect data. Participants were asked to engage in reflective exercises or journaling, where they documented their thoughts, experiences, and reflections on specific aspects of the research topic. This method was valuable for capturing personal insights and self-reflection, providing a unique perspective on the subject.

Finally, observations were conducted as part of the data collection process. Researchers observed participants' behaviors, interactions, and other relevant factors during specific activities, events, or teaching sessions. Observations provided firsthand information about participants' behaviors, practices, and the context in which the research occurred.

#### 3.3. Data collection

After the process introduction, participants arranged the first meeting to brain-storm aspects of their practice they that they aimed to enhance and they also formulated a goal statement for the research lesson. Then they cooperatively designed the lesson plan for the research lesson. Within each group, one

member volunteered to be the teaching facilitator while the others observed. They collected data on students' learning that would be discussed during a post-lesson reflection meeting later, and teachers drew out implications for redesigning the lesson and for teaching and learning more broadly. After that, the Lesson Study group spent about an hour reflecting and critiquing the lesson. The participant group conducted two research lessons. Each research lesson was taught and reinforced through a three-cycle process adapted from the Lesson Study process in Japan (Figure 1).

The researcher acted as a facilitator and participant observer during these sessions. The facilitator listened and took notes,

If necessary, participants shared their insights, posed additional questions, and encouraged the teachers to delve deeper into their experiences and observations. Following this, the participants initiated the process of refining the lesson plan based on their observations and discussions. Another member of the group stepped forward to teach the revised lesson plan, while the rest of the group observed once more. After teaching the revised lesson, the participants reconvened to engage in reflective discussions about the lesson. At each stage of the process, they were encouraged to maintain a reflection log containing a series of guided questions prompting them to document their thoughts, feelings, understanding, experiences, and insights. Upon concluding the process, the participants collectively compiled a written journal summarizing their learnings. The researcher would use his notes as a second data source which was combined with reflective writing in order to understand the main themes related to study questions. Then, a one-by-one interview was conducted to get more insights and additional key ideas along with difficulties in the process.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Following Creswell (2014), in order to analyze the data sources, the researcher used five-step process: *familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation.*

Thematic analysis was used to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of using Lesson Study for professional development (PD). The analysis process involved several steps. First, the researcher immersed themselves in the collected data, which comprised interviews, reflective writing, and

observations. This involved transcribing interviews, organizing reflective writing pieces, and reviewing observational notes. With a clear research aim in mind, the researcher then identified meaningful concepts or ideas in the data and assigned initial codes to relevant sections.

Subsequently, the codes were reviewed, and emerging themes were identified by grouping related codes together. These themes were refined and modified in order to accurately represent the data and address the research questions. Each theme was defined with concise and meaningful descriptions, and labels were assigned to reflect their content and focus. The researcher then systematically analyzed each theme, exploring variations, sub-themes, and patterns within them.

To support each theme, the author carefully collected evidence from the data, such as quotes or excerpts that exemplified the perceptions and experiences of EFL teachers. The findings were interpreted and synthesized, reflecting on the patterns and insights that emerged from the data. Discussions were conducted to examine the feasibility, usefulness, and challenges associated with Lesson Study as perceived by the EFL teachers. These findings aimed to inform improved practices in teacher professional development at the college level.

Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis of the themes. The implications of the findings for implementing Lesson Study were discussed, while also addressing any limitations or areas for further research that became apparent during the analysis.

Now, look at an organized table summarizing the data and its relation to the theme of "Learning from colleagues".

– Data from the researcher's field notes

*"When first discussion meetings were conducted, I just felt like one participant and I in the team were talking too much. I would wait for other people to contribute and they wouldn't. They just said "agree, just do it". By the third meeting, I felt that the participants were getting more and more engaged and excited in an active discussion. They began to share more activities and feedback with one another."*

– Data from reflective writing

“This is also a chance for department teachers to meet, collaboratively work and mutually learn knowledge and experiences.” (Participant 1) “The most meaningful and impressive things to me is to get chances to design, teach and observe the same lesson with other teachers, which help me get more experiences from other colleagues in both designing and teaching.” (Participant 4)

– Data from the interview

“To me, this is a positive and effective approach in teacher development because it creates an environment for teacher to collaboratively work and mutually learn through discussion meetings and bilateral observations”. (Participant 4)

**Table 1. Summary of data on learning from colleagues**

Data Source	Participant	Key Points
Field Notes	Observer	Participants initially hesitant; one participant and researcher dominated discussions; increased engagement and active participation were observed as meetings progressed; participants shared activities and feedback.
Reflective Writing	Participant 1	Lesson Study provides an opportunity for department teachers to collaboratively work and mutually learn knowledge and experiences.
	Participant 4	Designing and teaching lessons with colleagues is the most meaningful and impressive aspect; gains experiences from other colleagues in both designing and teaching.
Interview	Participant 4	Lesson Study creates an environment for collaborative work and mutual learning through discussion meetings and bilateral observations; positive and effective approach to teacher development.

This table presents a concise overview of the data sources, participants' perspectives, and key points related to the theme of “Learning from colleagues”. It helps to visualize the connections between the data and the theme, providing a clear summary of the findings.

**4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1. Participants’ perceptions towards benefits of Lesson Study**

The findings from the data were consistent with previous research (Yalcin, 2018; Bayram & Canaran, 2020; Vui, 2014). It was clearly showed that the Lesson Study model can function as a mechanism for enhancing teacher professional development, resulting in a beneficial impact on practices of teaching process and on students’ learning. The participants believed Lesson Study embodies the key features of experiences that have a significant positive impact on teacher instructions, create opportunities for teacher to work collaboratively and reflect a wide range of key issues on every phase of the teaching and learning process. The data from the interview revealed, “Lesson Study can be applied as a way for teacher development. It helps teachers practice group work skills and learn to teach experiences from other teachers. Also, Lesson Study helps teachers get good lesson plans and improve instructional knowledge. Lesson Study can meet learners’ needs

because the lesson plans were carefully designed” (Participant 3). “To me, this is a positive and effective approach for teacher development because it creates an environment for teacher to collaboratively work and mutually learn through discussion meetings and bilateral observations” (Participant 4).

In addition, the teachers were motivated to reconstruct lessons that address students’ learning goals and blockage in learning. As with the findings above, the participants appeared to experience full benefits of professional growth because of involving in this process and Lesson Study was truly an appropriate professional development practice for a diverse range of context.

To learn from colleagues, the participants expressed appreciation that their colleagues’ observation and collaboration in the research lesson cycle contribute directly to the rich source of critiques. They also added that their colleagues can offer them new points of view related to content knowledge, teaching techniques and instructional strategies based on real evidence from lesson observations. They said, “This is also a chance for department teachers to meet, collaboratively work and mutually learn knowledge and experiences.” (Participant 1, reflective writing). “The most meaningful and impressive things to me is to get chances to design, teach and observe the same lesson with other

teachers, which help me get more experiences from other colleagues in both designing and teaching” (Participant 4, reflective writing).

Lesson Study created the opportunities and offered a community to open the teachers’ practice to scrutiny, and together with their community assist one another to think critically about their lessons, resulting in the teachers’ instructional improvement (Saito, 2022).

For lesson plans’ improvement, the teachers believed that involving in the Lesson Study would help them design good lesson plans thanks to the reviewing cycle. In fact, all the lesson plans taught through this process were carefully examined, taught, observed and revised by the whole group of teachers for numerous times based on ideas and suggestions from the collaborative group, especially from real evidence of observing phases capturing students’ learning in actual classrooms, so mistakes, ineffective activities and teaching constraints in the imperfect lesson plans would be carefully analyzed and then adjusted (Huong et al., 2021).

For meeting learners’ goals, the participants affirmed that, through lesson observations and post-lesson discussions; they received immediate and precious feedbacks that helped them understand their students’ learning process and attitudes toward the lessons. Based on the feedbacks, they cooperatively revised worksheets, tasks and teaching strategies to provide clearer instruction for future lessons, to better impact learning, helping to achieve the learning targets.

The final finding was that participation in the Lesson Study process can help the observed teachers overcome feelings of self-consciousness when being observed. The participants stated that, *“In the present context, classroom observation is still not a frequent practice. Although a certain number of teachers were selected by the school to do this, many teachers wanted to reject it. The reason was that they were not confident enough to be observed in their classes; however, through adopting Lesson Study process, the participants could overcome their anxiety and worry. They explained that this is because ownership of the study lessons belongs to all of the team members who devised the lesson plan and contribute in the whole process”* (Participant 2).

The Lesson Study provided the teachers with a non-threatening teaching environment, illuminating that

the focus of observation aims to evaluate the lesson design rather than evaluate teacher performance.

#### **4.2. Perceptions of feasibility and challenges of Lesson Study**

The participants believed the Lesson Study process effectively aided them in enhancing their teaching practices. and showed the desire to continue applying this process in the current context. According to these participants, Lesson Study can inspire them to work cooperatively with only one colleague, design effective activities that help interest students in the learning process, and experiment with several specific subjects. However, the data from the interview also revealed that the participants faced some difficulties which caused hesitation in applying this tool.

Although the results showed that the teachers found the whole process highly rewarding regarding improving teaching effectiveness, the participants complained Lesson Study was consuming much time and some revised activities may not suit all kinds of learners at the present site. First, time was considered the most dominant challenge in adapting Lesson Study as a school-based professional development tool because the Lesson Study process truly required significant commitments and teachers’ energy and time to complete a heavy workload cycle of study lessons. In addition, it was also revealed that the college teacher spent much time preparing lessons, teaching every semester, dealing with their family and domestic work, so when taking part in Lesson Study cycles, they had to take more responsibilities, which prevented them from engaging. The result also confirmed Bayram and Canaran (2020) finding in school that the process requires support mechanisms.

Another challenge reported was the question of whether revised lessons suit a variety of students. The teachers confirmed that although any revised activity based on visual evidence from observation notes may be better than an original one, it sometimes seemed less effective to apply in other classes.

In general, the two main problems above interfered much with the participants’ use of Lesson Study for their professional development and reduced their willingness to apply it. Therefore, in order to handle difficulties preventing teachers’ practice of this professional development process in the current context of the study, the participants suggested three solutions. First and foremost, the cycle of Lesson

Study should be applied by peer colleagues and last during a whole school year or several semesters, so the teachers can arrange their own time to follow the cycle and lessen work pressures during the whole cycle. This suggestion was in congruence with Ogisu and Saito (2019), Saito et al. (2018) idea that the success of Lesson Study is determined by long-term improvement.

It seems infeasible unless the school administrators and principals show their support in timetabling and providing staff professional development time. The school management has the responsibility to support as well as recognize teachers' efforts in improving the atmosphere of learning and developing their instructional skills.

The second suggestion was that the teachers should feel freer and more encouraged to observe the students' learning in depth and select more vivid evidence from all actual happening rather than only focus on information which can answer the questions. This suggestion is also advocated by previous research that in an era where teachers face pressure to adhere to specific curricula, access to information regarding what students are learning becomes indispensable for the enhancement of instructional quality and learning (Yalcin, 2018). Last, in terms of the revised lesson plans, it should be clear that the purpose of Lesson Study process is not to create a perfect model lesson for all of the classes with mixed levels, so designing separate lessons for each different type of learners with multiple background level needs to be concerned. This process enables teachers to look back and evaluate properly their teaching in the present context in which the same lesson is taught again and again with learners of different styles and multiple background levels and the feedback is superficial and focuses on teaching procedures rather than students' learning process. This finding is noticeable in the present study.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 5.1. Conclusion

The current research was conducted to investigate teachers' perceptions of using Lesson Study as a tool for teacher development in teaching English as a foreign language at a community college. The study also documented problems hindering teachers' use of teacher collaboration tools for PD. Its findings revealed that all the participants in the study were aware of the importance and benefits of

the Lesson Study process for their PD. They agreed that Lesson Study process was useful for their PD, which helped them improve their profession and teaching performance.

In terms of feasibility and challenges of applying the practice of Lesson Study at community college, the participants believed Lesson Study is a powerful tool for teacher growth and they expressed their willingness to adopt it in different ways such as implementing the process for a longer period and conducting it with one colleague only. However, the barriers that could prevent the participants from engaging in Lesson Study were the lack of time for collaborative planning and the effectiveness of revised lessons for recycling with multiple types of learners. The most commonly cited difficulty in the interview data was a large block of time for pre- and post-lesson meetings because they felt that too much of their time would be dedicated to completing an overloaded work cycle as Lesson Study.

### 5.2. Implications

The findings of the study were the bases for the following implications. First, it is an opportune time to incorporate Lesson Study as a professional development program in school if the administrators are searching for an efficient form of professional development that will directly improve students' achievement and effectiveness of teachers' performance. Second, in developing lesson plans, it should be collaboratively done in groups to make sure that numerous contributions and opinions supporting the design of lesson plans best suit students' learning objectives. In addition, from the findings of teachers' challenges in participating Lesson Study, the study suggested that the current college ought to accommodate the time and scheduling adjustments required for educators to participate in Lesson Study, as this endeavor has introduced a considerable amount of additional responsibilities to their own heavy schedules that teachers already faced with. Finally, the Lesson Study group should be constructed with peer teachers who have similar teaching interests so that they can arrange time and commit to the implementation process. The study is limited because all the taking part lecturers are female, which reflects the high percentage of female lecturers in the Department of Foreign Languages. The authors have acknowledged this limitation, and future research could involve a more diverse sample.



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