

The Dilemmas of Adopting a Foreign Model into Local Context: A Case of Lesson Study in Malaysian University Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The lesson study model was initially introduced in Japan as a core for professional development among teachers and a tool for improvement of teaching and learning. It has since become a global phenomenon and adoption of the idea was widespread across many countries (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Yoshida, 1999). This study aims to describe the challenges of implementing lesson study model on undergraduate English lecturers from a private university in Kuala Lumpur and a public university in Terengganu. Specifically, this article serves to address the lecturers' dilemmas in context of lesson study model that were focused on the aspects of bureaucracy, teacher readiness and cultural conflict. This study employs a qualitative research design through observations and interviews. The findings of the study are essential in providing an insight to the considerations that need to be taken into account when appropriating a borrowed educational model into local context.

Keywords: lesson study; professional development; teacher readiness; research lesson; local practice

INTRODUCTION

Lesson study, which was originated in Japan is regarded as a high status teaching culture dated back for centuries when Makoto Yoshida, a pioneer and an expert in this field, coined the term Lesson Study (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004; Isoda, Ohara & Miyakawa, 2007). It is derived from “*Jugyokenkyu*”, a Japanese word for teaching (“*Jugyo*”) and study (“*Kenkyu*”). Lesson study has become a tradition in Japan with *Kaizen*, a Japanese term for improvement or change for better, being its fundamental process with features of lesson study address the enhancement of teacher practice knowledge and the growth of teaching quality (NASEM, 2011). Lesson study is a process of collaborative teacher learning through the designing of research lessons, where teachers alike would identify issues arise, plan the lesson, execute the lesson, undergo peer observation, evaluate and reflect the lesson, revise and review the lesson plan and engage in mutual discussion to share the findings, ideas and thoughts over a period of time, which in turn would eventually lead to the teachers' professional development (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Stiegler & Hiebert, 1999; Perry & Lewis, 2008; Dudley, 2011). The key ideas of the model are for teachers to engage in mutual discussions when designing research lessons, to hone their professional development and to serve

as a platform for continuous improvement for teachers' content knowledge (Lewis, 2000; Takahashi and Yoshida, 2004; Murata, 2011; Shimizu, 2013). Similarly, Zanaton, Siti, Siti & Effandi (2014) pointed out that "...teaching experience and learning process could help build an effective learning atmosphere for the students" (p. 112). Although lesson plan is undoubtedly successful in Japan and numerous efforts have been made to introduce and adopt lesson study in other parts of the world for educational reform, there are, however, some critical factors in the adaptation and application of the iconic Japanese lesson study that need to be taken into account when brought to foreign countries. This article specifically serves to address the Malaysian university lecturers' dilemmas in context of lesson study model that were focused on the aspects of bureaucracy, teacher readiness and cultural conflict. Further discussions on these dimensions shall be explained later in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesson study has sparked interest among many countries and has provoked non-Japanese educators and researchers to this Japanese approach to professional development. Nevertheless, although countless efforts in the adaptations of the long established and high-status lesson study model were put forth in other countries, the idea is still under-theorized and its applications are deemed limited. Elliot (2012,2019) argued that lesson study has established a strong foundation in Japan but often the pedagogical theories are still vague. Globalization of lesson study model can have serious impact on mindsets, educational systems and policy of the targeted contexts and internalization of a borrowed model may influence the original idea (Ellis et al., 2010; Phillips & Ochs, 2003).

In global context, despite its huge popularity, adaptation of lesson study in countries such as Denmark, as pointed out by Skott & Møller (2020), revealed that there are "culturally sensitive conflicts" with regards to displacement of teacher's work and power relations. They even suggested that "...in order to adapt lesson study in Denmark, it is necessary to address the overriding cultural characteristics..." (p. 1). Moreover, in a research conducted in three Australian schools in 2012, Groves, et. al. (2016) highlighted that major challenges "...includes the difficulty in finding suitable problem solving tasks to match the Australian curriculum, and the teaching culture that emphasizes small-group rather than whole-class teaching". Similarly, in another Lesson Study research by Fernandez (2002) in United States of America, she found out that the participants were unable to go beyond the lesson to see the core values of lesson study and thus hinders the development of lesson study while Grimsæth & Halla's (2015) highlighted several challenges when lesson study was implemented in the Norwegian municipality such as over-exaggeration of success stories that influence the model and the time-consuming process of adapting to the new idea may be an issue. They also argued that local culture needs to be thoroughly taken into account when transforming a global idea into a local practice. Meanwhile, in Philippine context, Ebaegu & Stephens (2014) admitted that "Although there have been several efforts to introduce lesson study to some Philippine schools ..., these attempts to make lesson study a permanent fixture in schools' teacher professional development program have been unsuccessful" (p. 2). They further explained that the failures were due to "a simple transference model" used and that there was no significant effort and attempt to adapt lesson study in the Philippines.

Though lesson study acts as a catalyst that encourages teachers to reflect on their teachings for the benefit of the lessons, these processes demand continuous commitments and time from all

the teachers involved (Emma & Mia, 2020). In Malaysia, adaptation of lesson study is relatively new, with its first introduction in 2011 involving 289 schools (Roback, Chance, Legler, & Moore 2006), while the research lessons mostly cover the subjects of sciences, mathematics and chemistry (Sulaiman, et. al., 2011). Emma & Mia (2020) in their research concluded that;

“While the implementation focused on professional development of teachers in improving the quality of teaching, learning, and practice in class, this method is still considered as unfamiliar and challenging by overall perception. The openness of both the observed groups and the observers to adapt to this method is limited” (p. 38).

Likewise, Zanaton, et. al. (2011, 2014, 2015) in her analysis of comparison on lesson study between Japan and Malaysia highlighted that there were several dilemmas faced by the Malaysian teachers trying to apply lesson study model since it is rather new in Malaysia, as compared to its neighboring countries such as Singapore and Indonesia. Nevertheless, they also faced issues in employing lesson study model in their respective countries. Lee & Tan (2019) in their research conducted in Singapore revealed that;

“Learning practices that produced disturbances to teacher learning in the context of Lesson Study were *focus on logistical issues, rushed discussions, and struggles in note-taking*” (p. 9).

METHODOLOGY

With regards to the purpose of this study, five English lecturers from a private university in Kuala Lumpur and three senior English lecturers from a public university in Terengganu were selected to be the research participants for the target group, ranging from a varied teaching experiences as shown in Table 1. Data were collected over a span of one academic trimester and the lecturers were grouped according to the educational institutions they attached to. They were provided with approximately 1-hour meeting slots on a weekly basis.

TABLE 1: Profile of Teachers

Group A	Teaching Experience (At time of interview)	Group B	Teaching Experience (At time of interview)
Teacher A1	6 years	Teacher B1	12 years
Teacher A2	2 years	Teacher B2	10 years
Teacher A3	5 years	Teacher B3	7 years
Teacher A4	2 years		
Teacher A5	8 months		

The most senior member of each group (based on their teaching experience as reflected in Table 1 above) was selected to be the group leader in their respective institutional lesson study group and also acted as the “knowledgeable other” or the outside specialist in the other institution’s group to provide in-depth curriculum knowledge during post-lesson discussions.

This study employs a qualitative research design through observations and interviews. Collection of data was supplemented with thematic, in-depth interviews with teachers and joint observations in a naturalistic setting. Artifacts generated from the meetings such as notes of the meetings, minutes of the meetings, lesson plans, journal writings, teacher’s report and self-reflection notes were also analyzed. The meet-ups were also video-recorded.

DISCUSSION

1. Bureaucracy

In this context, bureaucracy is viewed as the excessively complicated administrative processes and procedures in the educational system of the targeted institutions where lesson study is being adopted. In Japan, the most popular community group for lesson study is the school-based model or the one set up within the school itself. The bottom-up education system in Japan allows teachers to decide on their own educational reforms to go for the better.

Chiew, Mohd & Lim (2016) pointed out that lesson study group setting in Malaysia, although successful, was dependent on the “...positive support from the school administrators...” (p. 84). In this paper, the authors revealed that the lack of support from the administrators encompasses financial support or funding, logistical issues such as barriers in scheduling systems of the teachers and the limited timeframe provided by the administrators for teacher learning practices. It is found that since the lesson study activities were done voluntarily by teachers and without the proper funding from the administrators, the teachers failed to view the core values or aims of this model to sustain the practice in long-term.

Other than that, few of the teacher respondents admitted that at times, they suffer from burnout as a result of excessive workload from their main duties and other commitments at work. Their typical hectic work schedule limits their engagement in lesson study practices and hinders their understanding on the core values of lesson study as a result of excessive instructional load at work. Apart from that, teachers confessed that it was not easy for them to find time where all teachers can meet concurrently for lesson study activities and post-lesson discussions for even an hour since the administrators were somehow reluctant to set a simultaneous block of free time for all teachers as it might interfere with the current scheduling system. The difficulty in finding a common time for them to meet and discuss has resulted them to secure a time beyond their regular working hours for the purpose of this study.

2. Teacher Readiness

In Japan, lesson study is a bottom-up process whereby the teachers would initiate and put forth enormous efforts to engage in collaborative research lessons. It is also a continuous process over centuries and has become a culture in its country of origin. In Malaysia, as lesson study is rather new, it is difficult to foresee the future of the model in this context as most studies on research lessons were periodical and not continuous as practiced in Japan. Adaptation of lesson study in a foreign venue demands commitment and dedication from group leaders and collegiality among the

members. Chiew, et. al. (2016) in their research on lesson study practices among secondary school teachers in Kedah, Malaysia revealed that “...the degree of knowledge enhancement was dependent upon each participant’s attitude and commitment towards the teaching profession.” (p. 84). It also requires the “knowledgeable others” as the subject-matter expert to give insights from a different perspective with regards to the lessons done by the group, to propagate new ideas and eventually, to establish reforms.

Nevertheless, this study discovered that privacy of teaching and learning practices still governs the mindsets of these teachers, particularly in a high-context culture country like Malaysia, where university teachers were not accustomed to have an external “knowledgeable others” imported from other university to take part in their classroom practices. When asked whether they would feel comfortable working on the research lessons with an internal “knowledgeable others”, one of the teachers responded that they “*might be less comfortable having any observers in their classroom but (they are) optimistic that internal “knowledgeable others” may pose less threat*” and that they “*need more time to be familiar and get used to this new environment*”.

Despite the challenges, throughout this study, the researchers witnessed that mutual collaboration was apparent among all teachers during the different stages of lesson study such as the joint observations and shared discussion. The teachers possessed positive attitudes, spirits and enthusiasm to ensure the success of the lesson study in their teacher learning sessions. However, there were times where teachers feel that they were not ready and ill-prepared in terms of knowledge on lesson study as they are not very familiar with the process and that they do not have the resources and opportunities content knowledge to facilitate lesson study by themselves.

3. Cultural Conflict

Transferability of a global idea to a local context depends much on the cultural contrast between the countries (Ebaegu & Stephens, 2014). In this paper, “culture” is defined as “...any aspect of the ideas, communications, or behaviors of a group of people which give them a distinctive identity and which is used to organize their internal sense of cohesion and membership...” (Scollon & Scollon 1995, p. 127). Culture influences the degree of the relationship and connection among teachers in schools and the network between teachers and students. To employ and adopt a foreign teacher learning model such as lesson study without adaptation may impose challenges to the borrowing country since the education system needs to integrate the above-mentioned cultural elements and the extent of a successful transfer hinges on the cultural orientations of teachers towards the Japanese lesson study model.

The “*focus on learning as a community rather than an individual activity*” and “*teaching as a public activity*” were identified by Groves and Doig (2010) as factors that support the effectiveness of lesson study in Japan. These are a social norm in Japanese classroom culture, but to cultivate lesson study in cross-cultural countries outside Japan with different norms, they may pose constraints and misconceptions. In Malaysia, “*teaching as a public activity*” may be considered as peculiar and as observed in this study, most teachers remained seated at the back and limit their social distance when observing the lesson mainly because they wanted to avoid interrupting the process of teaching and learning that was taking place and out of respect to the privacy of the observed teacher and to keep the natural setting so that the students won’t be distracted by their presence.

Such dilemmas are clear examples where researchers predict that these would indirectly affect the sustainability of lesson study in Malaysia. Similarly, Lim, Teh & Chiew (2018), in their

research on the same context, expressed the challenges faced by practitioners in Malaysia in implementing lesson study and outlined the constraints in sustaining lesson study activities as *lack of awareness on the importance of professional development among teachers, lack of experienced lesson study practitioners to play the role of knowledgeable others, lack of zest in lesson study implementation and misconceptions about lesson study.*

CONCLUSION

Although many believes that lesson study supports teachers' professional development, it is clear that the cultural differences between Japan and Malaysia are a crucial factor in establishing a fruitful employment of lesson study Malaysian context. As reflected in a Japanese proverb "*beginning is easy, continuing is hard*", it can be said that implementing an educational reform in a particular context may seems easy at the beginning, but staying on course and sustaining the journey is the hardest part. Transforming the teaching environment in Malaysia to adapt and sustain lesson study practice is not impossible but having to cope with the long-term cultural practices may pose a serious challenge.

On another note, promoting and facilitating research lesson on a larger scale in Malaysia may seem difficult as practitioners need to be provided with sufficient funding by administrators or other agencies. Furthermore, logistical issues need to be rectified by the administrators for teachers to devote time to lesson study. In addition, teachers involved need ample resources and opportunities to access a lesson study specialist who can provide expert knowledge throughout the process of lesson study. A further study is recommended to examine the dilemmas and constraints revealed in this paper so it can investigate the issues with regards to cultural, social, political and historical differences between countries.

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