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### Biodata:

**Susan Dawson** is in her final year of a PhD at the University of Manchester, UK. Her research focuses on Exploratory Practice as both research methodology and pedagogy with English for Academic Purposes learners. She has taught in various contexts in both the UK and Spain.

Email: [suejdawson@gmail.com](mailto:suejdawson@gmail.com)

# Lesson study in ELT

**Seyit Omer Gok**

## Introduction

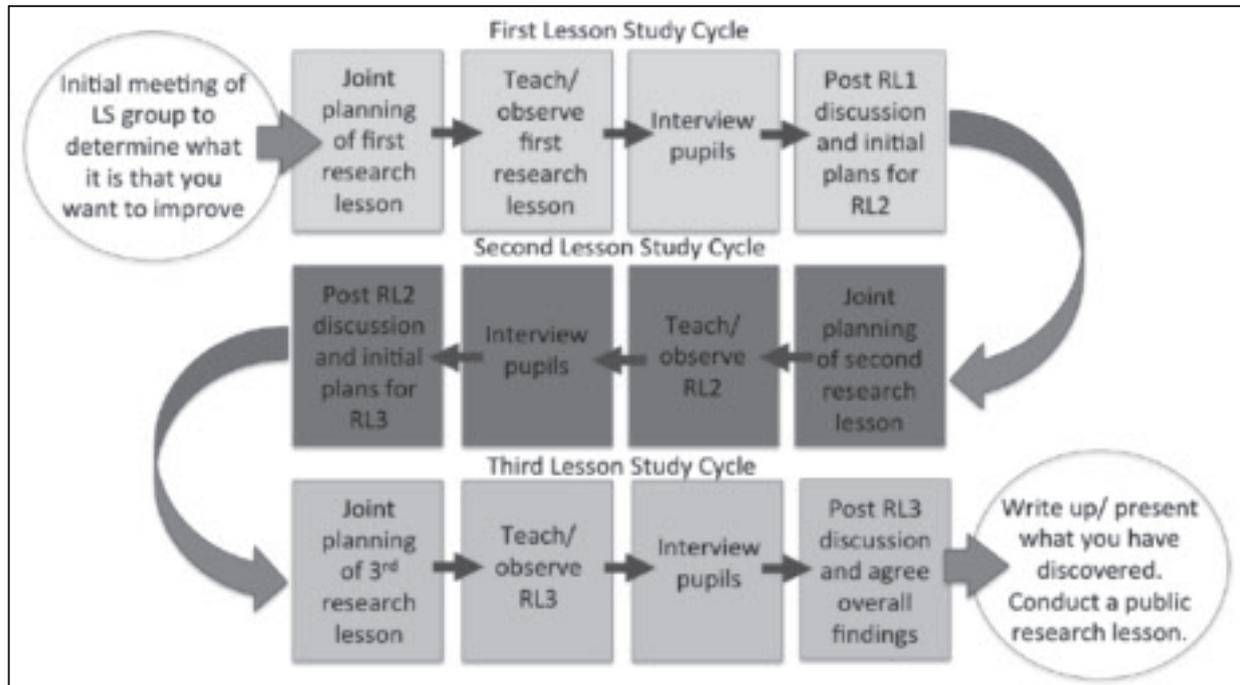
Improving student learning and teacher instruction is always the main aim of any educational institution. It is widely acknowledged that one way of realizing this aim is to encourage teachers to engage in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities and there are a variety of such activities, ranging from conferences to online resources, which are available for teachers. However, though it might not be right to claim that one particular activity is better than another, those requiring continuity, collaboration and reflection are widely acknowledged to be more effective than the ones in which participating teachers are in the role of 'knowledge consumers' (Borg 2015, 5). Traditional transmission-based approaches to CPD expect teachers to receive new ideas from an external expert through workshops, courses or similar activities and directly implement them in their classrooms so that the quality of instruction can be improved. Though some of these types of activities might help teachers develop knowledge considerably, the impact they have on teachers' beliefs and classroom practices is believed to be very limited (Borg 2015). Therefore, approaches enabling teachers to become reflective practitioners and, in turn, change their beliefs and practices to improve the quality of student learning have recently been given considerable attention.

In this paper, I describe how I engaged a group of teachers in Lesson Study (LS), a form of teacher professional development, in an ELT context in Turkey and supported them throughout the entire process. I further share the reflections of those teachers on this process. The project reported here is a pilot application of this form of CPD - LS - which has been conducted under the support and guidance of the Lesson Study Research Group (LSRG) at the School of Education at the University of Leicester in the UK.

## What is Lesson Study?

LS is defined as 'a highly specified form of classroom action research focusing on the development of teacher practice knowledge' (Dudley 2014, 1). It has been practised, predominantly in mainstream education, in Japan for over a century; however, it has gained popularity outside this country only relatively recently. In LS, teachers go through a process or cycle in which they collaboratively plan, teach, observe and analyse teaching and learning in 'research lessons' (Dudley 2014). This cycle offers opportunities to share subject knowledge, improve teaching skills, and has the potential to challenge beliefs that directly influence the way teachers teach. In addition, LS fosters an environment in which teachers continually give constructive feedback to each other to improve their practice. 'A Lesson Study consists of a cycle of at least three 'research lessons' that are jointly planned, taught/observed and analysed by a LS group' (Dudley 2014, 5). (See Figure 1 below)

Figure 1: Lesson Study Process by Dudley (2014)



## The study

### *The Context for the Study*

The setting for this study is an English preparatory school within a university located in Izmir, Turkey. The school provides an intensive English language programme consisting of four modules based on CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1 and B2), each of which lasts eight weeks. The main aim of the programme is to bring students, aged between 18 and 21, to the desired level (B2) before starting their majors. The school currently has sixty-four teachers and seven hundred and fifty students in total. It provides twenty-eight hours of lessons a week in each module and each teacher teaches between twenty-two to twenty-five hours per week.

Fourteen teachers adopted LS after its initial introduction at the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year. Those teachers had differing amounts of teaching experience and qualifications: besides relevant BA degrees, four were CELTA and one DELTA-qualified, while two had MAs. I acted as a mentor and a 'more knowledgeable other (MKO)' (Vygotsky 1930/1978) throughout the process. Through negotiations, the teachers and I first created a schedule to follow throughout the year. As the final step in the schedule, all LS groups presented and shared their experiences and findings with a wider audience at the 'Teachers Research!' IATEFL Research Special Interest Group, Annual International Conference and 5th Gediz University Annual Teacher Research Conference, in Izmir, Turkey on 18-19 June 2015. They also plan to

publish their papers as part of the conference proceedings.

### *Data collection*

The aim of this study is to find out how LS was integrated into this context and what the initial reactions of the teachers were to this form of CPD. The study is qualitative, exploratory and inductive in design (Heigham & Croker 2009). In order to obtain data, I participated in all the observations and meetings teachers conducted as part of the LS cycles, even though it was a time-consuming and daunting process. In addition to the observations, a series of interviews were carried out with the teachers before, while and after the process. Finally, I participated in their presentations at the conference to see the outcomes closely. As I read through the transcripts from the interviews, I categorised the emergent themes and made sense of them with the help of my observations and the teachers' confirmations. It was an advantage for me to take an active part in the project in this sense.

## Findings

### *Teachers' Perspectives on Lesson Study Process Benefits*

The majority of the teachers involved in the LS research project stated that the process shifted their focus from teaching to learning. They pointed out that LS helped them observe and better understand student learning. Moreover, they said that this process showed them ways of improving learning in their classrooms.

*T3: LS is a quick reminder of the main target which is obviously learning.*

T6: *For me, the best thing about LS is that teachers try to understand the students' learning, what kinds of activities help them learn better, what kinds of difficulties they may encounter.*

T10: *It gave us different ideas about how we can improve learning in the classroom.*

Some of them said that LS improved their own learning as a teacher. They think that they developed their teaching skills thanks to this approach.

T12: *(LS is) a wonderful way of learning for teachers. It is a great opportunity for us to observe classroom dynamics in a very different way.*

T9: *To prepare your research lesson, you need to read, think and write a lot. Therefore, it helps our own learning.*

The teachers also emphasised that they benefitted a lot from working collaboratively and sharing ideas. They think that the process helped them learn from each other.

T2: *The collaborative planning and discussions help us learn from each other.*

T7: *Sharing our knowledge with each other makes us more knowledgeable. We can learn new teaching techniques from our colleagues.*

Some of the teachers mentioned that the LS process made them feel more confident as a teacher and gave them opportunities to try new ideas out and see the immediate results.

T1: *I became more encouraged to try new stuff, apply and see the results with other teachers and actually had some very beneficial results, and fun as well.*

One of the teachers wrote that s/he improved herself/himself in terms of observation skills.

T5: *Learning how to do observation is a good side of LS. We need to focus on some students in the class and observe them carefully. Normally, I am not good at observing people for a long time. However, I am improving myself and I can focus on people's attitudes now.*

In addition, the teachers said that the student interviews and the post-observation meetings to review the lesson plans were quite useful for them to adjust the lessons according to the needs of students.

T4: *Student interviews enabled us to see the lessons from the students' perspective. This helped us better cater for their needs.*

T14: *Revising the lesson to meet the needs of students at different ability levels and seeing how minor changes in the lesson plan can affect students positively or negatively (was beneficial).*

Finally, after presenting at the IATEFL ReSIG Annual International Conference and 5th Gediz University Annual Teacher Research Conference in Izmir, the teachers stated that they felt very accomplished and appreciated. They also mentioned that all their efforts turned out to be something fruitful and rewarding, which made them feel encouraged to continue their professional development without any obligation in the future years.

T4: *It was very surprising to see people very interested in a study I conducted for the purpose of my own professional development. I felt myself to be more useful and inspiring.*

T8: *When preparing for our presentations, we looked back at the process we had been through. I think this increased our self-awareness of our own professional development. We noticed that we learnt many useful things not only from each other but also from external sources.*

T11: *Sharing our experiences and the findings of our study at an international conference gave us a great satisfaction. We felt fully accomplished. The audience showed big interest in our topic and they asked a lot of questions, which was exciting. I would like to experience this again and again.*

It can be clearly understood from these teachers' comments that creating opportunities for them to share their experiences and findings with a wider audience can be an enormous contribution to their professional development and its sustainability.

### Challenges

The teachers also reported the difficulties they faced throughout the process. However, the majority of these were related to time. All teachers have very tight teaching schedules in this context and they would like to have had more space and flexibility to carry out these kinds of professional development activities.

T12: *Only our busy schedules limited our group discussion sessions unfortunately. They could've been longer and more detailed.*

T3: *Sometimes we do not have enough time to plan our lesson and do post-discussion. We need to finish everything in a hurry.*

The instructors believe that they could do a better job and in turn benefit more if they were provided more flexibility in terms of time.

T9: *There are not many problems arising from the nature of lesson study but time management and the arrangement of meetings and the collected data require a meticulous prior planning.*

T5: *I think it would be nice to have more time to talk as a team right after a lesson. This was not possible since everyone has a busy schedule.*

In short, the teachers reported not having experienced any problems in relation to the LS procedures; however, their busy schedules constrained their ability to work more intensely.

## Conclusion

This project was intended as a trial to use LS to critically investigate its applicability in this ELT context. Apart from time constraints, the teachers involved in this project reported positive outcomes:

- (1) A shift in focus from teaching to learning, which helped teachers gain insight into the nature of learning
- (2) A significant contribution to the teachers' professional learning
- (3) Learning from each other and sharing ideas whilst working collaboratively
- (4) Confidence-building, motivation and encouragement for trying out new things
- (5) Addressing students' needs more effectively

These findings suggest that LS has potential as a vehicle for the professional development of ELT teachers in this teaching context. However, its application requires that certain conditions and support are provided for teachers, for example time and management support.

On the other hand, this small-scale study draws mostly on the researcher's observations and interviews with the teachers engaged in LS as part of their CPD in one particular ELT context. Therefore, it might be wise to be cautious about generalising beyond the context examined in this study. Besides, it is recommended that future research can aim to explore LS's impact and its sustainability in this and other ELT contexts through a more longitudinal and comprehensive study.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the members of the Lesson Study Research Group at the School of Education, University of Leicester, UK, especially Dr Wasyl Cajkler and Dr Julie Norton, for their guidance and support throughout this project. I would also like to thank my colleagues who volunteered in this project and shared their perspectives on it openly.

## Biodata:

**Seyit Omer Gok** is the director of the English Language Preparatory School at Izmir Gediz University in Turkey. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Education (Applied Linguistics and TESOL) at the University of Leicester in the UK.

E-mail:

[seyit.gok@gediz.edu.tr](mailto:seyit.gok@gediz.edu.tr)



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