

English Teachers' Competencies and the Implementation of Best Practices through the Lesson Study Model in an Elementary School in Nonthaburi Province, Thailand

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Abstract

In Thailand, there have been various problems in English language instruction. One involves how teachers can develop their teaching ability to improve students' English proficiency. The objectives of this study are: 1) to examine English teachers' competencies in learning management using the Lesson Study model in selected elementary schools in Nonthaburi, and 2) to assess the implementation of best practices using the Lesson Study model in schools in Nonthaburi. The study entailed participatory action research. The research participants were six English teachers from three elementary schools in Nonthaburi, who were selected by purposive sampling technique. The research was divided into two phases, i.e., 1) before the use of the Lesson Study, and 2) during the use of Lesson Study. There were three processes in phase two, which were (1) planning the lesson, (2) teaching and observing the lesson, and (3) reflecting on the effects of the lesson. The research instruments included a test and teaching observation, reflection forms, field notes and interviews. The statistics reported include percentages and content analysis. The findings were categorised into two parts in line with the research objectives. In terms of the second objective, the teachers need to adopt the best practices into actual contexts in English language teaching and learning to achieve instructional development. Teachers also need to regularly adopt the best practices as part of their organisational culture.

Keywords: *English Teachers, Lesson Study, Learning Management, Professional Teacher Development, Elementary School*

Introduction

Thai students often experience many difficulties when learning English, with many unable to use English to communicate effectively. This is not a new issue in Thailand, as it has been a problem for many decades. Based on the Education First Standard English Test (EF Set) results, Thailand dropped 11 spots, i.e., from 53rd in 2017 to 64th in 2018 among

the 88 listed countries in the proficiency rankings for non-native English-speaking countries. The 2018 results showed that Thailand obtained a score of 48.54, which was classified as low proficiency (Dumrongkiat Mala, 2018). Education Minister Teerakiat Jareonsettasin said that the development of Thai students' English skills is crucial and needs serious improvement. According to Jareonsettasin, "every Thai student studies English for at least 12 years at primary and secondary school levels, but most are still unable to communicate in English. This is the main obstacle to global competitiveness." (The Nation, 2018).

Many researchers have studied the causes of failure in English instruction in Thailand over several decades. For example, the Ministry of Education (2008) identified that the problems in teaching and learning in Thailand originate from two main factors, i.e., the ways of teaching and learning, and the teachers themselves. The Ministry of Education (2010) stated that teachers had still been using a traditional teaching method focusing mainly on language accuracy, grammar and vocabulary practiced, mainly through rote memorisation rather than a communicative approach. More than half of 88,206 Thai teachers in primary and secondary schools (or 52 per cent) under the supervision of the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education have low English proficiency, while more than 80 per cent of English teachers did not graduate with an English qualification. Therefore, it is difficult for these teachers to effectively develop language curricula, design lesson plans and materials, and carry out English instruction for their students. Collectively, these have continued to be a problem in the present time.

In addition, teachers also play multiple roles at school, ranging from educating the students, building a warm and fun environment, and mentoring and nurturing their students to solve problems in the classroom. Even as they play these roles, they are also required to develop their own capacities as well. Teachers must obtain a teaching certificate, diploma or degree. They must plan their lessons regularly. Since every student learns differently, teachers must have different teaching styles, including learning activities and tools, to serve their students appropriately. Teachers also have to face a variety of circumstances in the classroom by themselves. Moreover, teachers must continuously develop their teaching capacities as their competencies can potentially affect students' effective learning. As a result, it is useful to identify the effective ways for teachers to undergo personal development without adding burden to their jobs and duties, and subsequently enhance students' learning competencies and improve their own competencies in learning management. Ultimately, this should result in improved command of the English language, in which students are at least able to communicate properly and speak better in the classroom.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- i. To examine teachers' competencies in learning management using the Lesson Study among English teachers in elementary schools in Nonthaburi, and
- ii. To assess the implementation of best practices using the Lesson Study in schools in Nonthaburi.

Literature Review

The Lesson Study is an alternative method to develop teaching competencies. It is a Japanese model that encourages teachers, especially those teaching mathematics, to work together with the same objective of developing students' learning competencies. Hollingsworth and Oliver (2005) stated that the Lesson Study is a model for teacher learning

that was initiated in Japan. It involved small groups of teachers meeting regularly to engage in a collaborative process of lesson planning, implementation, evaluation and refinement. Fernandez et al. (2003) described a Lesson Study as a "comprehensive and well-articulated process for examining practice". Meanwhile, Dudley (2012) stated that a Lesson Study consists of a cycle of at least three 'research lessons' that are jointly planned, taught/observed, and analysed by a Lesson Study group. Currently, this form of professional development is also used in the United States and the United Kingdom (Doig & Groves, 2011). It has also been introduced in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia (White & Lim, 2008), countries in South America, as well as South Africa (Ono & Ferreira, 2010) and Australia (Hollingsworth & Oliver, 2005). Further, the Lesson Study is no longer restricted to mathematics groups. It involves teachers in all subject matters who are now creating communities or groups of colleagues as part of their own teaching practices and developing a variety of effective and creative teaching approaches with a universal goal.

In fact, a Lesson Study is not simply a method in the teaching and learning process; it is rather a collaborative and continuous effort to improve the instruction process by a group of teachers, especially in planning a lesson, preparing a lesson plan and tool, observing a class, and discussing the results of the teaching and learning process. Lewis (2000) breaks down the collaborative stages into: 1) planning, 2) observing, and 3) reflecting on the lesson itself. Santyasa (2009) proposed four stages in conducting a Lesson Study, i.e., 1) Goal-Setting and Planning, 2) Research Lesson, 3) Lesson Discussion, and 4) Consolidation of Learning; while Cerbin and Kopp (2006) provided the following six steps:

- i. Form a group of three to six people with similar teaching interests.
- ii. Develop students' learning goals and discuss teaching method.
- iii. Plan the lesson according to the goal and teaching method.
- iv. One group member teaches the lesson while others observe and collect evidence.
- v. The group discusses the results.
- vi. The group repeats the process and shares findings.

Although these processes differ slightly, the core of the Lesson Study remains the same. To provide the readers with a clear idea, a Lesson Study is an action involving a small group of teachers in the same goal to learn together in every relevant process ranging from preparing the lesson, observing, and reflecting on their observation of the lesson.

The aforementioned form of professional development is applied on Thai teachers who teach English Language at the elementary school level. In this study, a Lesson Study consists of three processes: (1) planning the lesson, (2) teaching and observing the lesson, and (3) reflecting on the effects of the lesson. The result and discussion will be described according to the objectives of the study.

Research Method

The study entailed a qualitative research method. This study involved deep learning. Therefore, case studies were selected as an appropriate approach. Elementary schools in Nonthaburi, Thailand served as the setting of this research study, involving six English teachers (n = 6) from three elementary schools who were selected as research samplings by purposive sampling technique. With respect to the research objectives, the teachers must be English teachers teaching in Nonthaburi. In addition, they must demonstrate willingness to participate in the study as there were many processes requiring a lot of time. At the beginning, only three Thai teachers in different contexts (i.e., schools) were selected from three different schools as they were designated as the teachers who would teach in the first and second cycles. They were then assigned to choose others to join their groups, who are

teachers from the same school likely to enjoy the challenge of starting a new professional learning approach in the school, as well as those who have dedicated opportunities to share and learn what they have developed with colleagues whom they meet regularly. They occasionally had to contact each other through "Line application" (a freeware app for instant communications) when they happened to have questions or requests for opinion. Lastly, members of the group must represent a mix of teaching experience. One teacher chose a Thai teacher from the same school, but the other two Thai teachers stated that they felt more comfortable working with Filipino teachers. As such, the six participants in the study were all English teachers: four of whom were Thai and two were Filipino.

Research Procedure

- i. A two-day workshop was conducted for the participants, during which the processes was explained, while Lesson Study and goal, problem statements and a list of questions generated by the teachers.
- ii. The participants were interviewed and a situational judgement test was administered.
- iii. The participants brainstormed aspects of their practice in which they were interested in improving for their students and then set a goal statement. They would later choose Communication as their goal. They adapted existing teaching methods into a more communicative approach to enhance students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.
- iv. The participants worked in three groups with each group consisting of three members including one University faculty member who acted as an external observer:
 - The first group: Eng1 (two Thai teachers and the observer) chose to investigate Grade Two Students.
 - The second group: Eng2 (one Thai teacher, one Filipino teacher, and the observer) chose to investigate Grade Three students.
 - The third group: Eng3 (one Thai teacher, one Filipino teacher, and the observer) chose to investigate Grade Four students.

- The three Lesson Study groups were considered as three separate cases as each team formulated and worked on their own specific goals separately from the others. One member of each group would teach while the others observed.
- v. At each school the school's context, the students and the teachers were studied. The teachers' teaching was observed and notes on four criteria, i.e., instructional design (lesson plan), learning management, teaching tool development and the use of teaching tools, and evaluation were made based on the observation. Subsequently, a Lesson Study was assigned to each group (LS1) and made an appointment for the first teaching session. The teachers were informed that the programmes of the three Lesson Study teams were conducted and closely monitored, and in the process, a large amount of qualitative data in the form of video recordings, field notes and interviews were collected.
 - vi. The participants planned and revised an initial lesson on a communicative approach and the teachers prepared the learning tools after completing the lesson plan. While one teacher taught, the others observed using the observation form. After the lesson, the members reflected on and discussed the instruction. Field notes were recorded throughout the study. Notes were taken during group collaborative sessions, observations of instruction, and after reflection. The purpose of the field notes was to identify changes made by the participants in their instructional practice and to record observation notes. After finishing LS1, a second cycle (LS2) was assigned. The appointment for the second teaching session were made next.

- vii. Next, the participants began working on a second lesson plan (on a commutative approach) based on what was observed and discussed. For the second cycle, they had to retain aspects of the lesson that worked well in the first cycle and adapted the feedback and others elements that did not meet their satisfaction in the first cycle.
- viii. In the second cycle, the same member of the Lesson Study group taught the revised lesson plan, and the others observed, reflected and discussed.
- ix. Finally, the participants were interviewed and a situational judgement test was administered. All six teachers were interviewed (for a period between 30 and 45 minutes each) at the end of the second cycle using a semi-structured interview guide.

Findings and Discussion

For this paper, the analysis is focused on: 1) statistics on knowledge and skills development before the Lesson Study, LS1 and LS2 using a situational judgement test and teaching observation; and 2) qualitative data collected from teaching observation, reflection forms, field notes, video and in-depth interviews with school teachers showing how they learnt from the Lesson Study and its impact on quality teaching. Analysis of the six teachers gave valuable insight into changes in their teaching behaviour before and after the Lesson Study. The findings and discussion will be explained according to the objectives of the study.

Teachers' competencies on learning management after using the Lesson Study

- i. The teachers have developed knowledge and skills in four criteria, which are instructional design (lesson plan), learning management, teaching tool development and the use of teaching tools, and evaluation.

Table 1

The development of knowledge and skills before Lesson Study, LS1 and LS2

	Instructional design (lesson plan)			Learning management			Teaching tool development and the use of teaching tools			Evaluation		
	Before	LS1	LS2	Before	LS1	LS2	Before	LS1	LS2	Before	LS1	LS2
En1/ Group 1	2	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	2	2	3
En2/Group 2	2	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	2	2	3
En3/Group 3	2	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	2	2	3

In the table above, scores were given based on the situational judgement test and teaching observation. The marks allocated for all criteria are 4 = excellent, 3 = good, 2 = fair, and 1 = needs improvement. The results show that all six teachers had improved the way they prepared lesson plans and had better understanding of the curriculum by engaging with the curricular documents. They also had an improved understanding of facilitating student group work as well as the work of individual students. They had better awareness of students who had difficulty in the classroom and developed their own teaching tools to make their lessons more useful and interesting. Last but not least, they learnt how to evaluate students according to the learning objectives.

- ii. The teachers initially did not know how to write an appropriate lesson plan. The plans they prepared lacked the three learning domains of cognitive, affective and psychomotor, and were also teacher-centred. All teachers informed in their final interviews that they felt they had benefited from the Lesson Study, which saved them from isolation while preparing lesson plans, making learning tools, and creating learning activities for the students. They had the support as well as obtained suggestions in the instructional design process. Moreover, when they encountered problems with the lesson plans, they could also obtain recommendations from their team members to solve those problems. Therefore, they could design fun and appropriate lesson plans for the students.

“I didn’t know the lesson plan was teacher-centred until my group pointed that out to me.” (Eng 1)

“I had the chance to share my own experiences in planning and conducting teaching in the classroom, and vice versa. Then, I adapted my lesson plans and tools according to what I learnt from the sharing experience. The group encouraged me to obtain the knowledge I needed to enhance my teaching.” (Eng 2)

“I admit that I forgot the warm up process in the first cycle, so my group suggested I included it in the second cycle and recommended lots of songs and games for the warm up. So, I added one game in my lesson plan in the second cycle.” (Eng 3)

- iii. All teachers reported that they had an improved knowledge of learning management from their Lesson Study group. They could better understand a series of activities: (1) design instructional plan, (2) instructional implementation, and (3) assessment. Moreover, learning management also covered students’ behaviours in the classroom, which is related to the findings of Sass et al. (2016), who stated that learning management includes student control, instructional style, setting rules, and the regulation of student misbehaviours.

“Observations from the Lesson Study are very useful. At first, I was so nervous and didn’t like anyone observing me while I was teaching. With the Lesson Study, we worked together as a team and my buddies helped me a lot in all processes. I didn’t feel like others were keeping their eye on me while I was teaching, rather they were supportive and gave good suggestions. Last but not least, I learnt how to control the class in different ways and they worked.” (Eng 1)

“I learnt my own mistakes in the classroom, both in terms of teaching style and English skills. I didn’t know that asking the same question too many times and expecting the students to have the correct answer scared them. I had many recommendations to improve on those mistakes. They were a kind of teaching habit that I had been practising unconsciously. I felt great that I was being observed by the group and I was satisfied with the discussion we had after the class. It was the only way I could discover my mistakes.” (Eng 2)

“I also had many chances to discuss the different teaching styles that would be appropriate for students with different learning abilities. I thought I knew my students, but actually I didn’t really know them.” (Eng 3)

- iv. All teachers also reported that they have developed new teaching tools and fixed the ones that did not work with the students. Sometimes, the tools were poor; they did not engage students and enhance learning.

"I didn't have time to make new tools, or make better tools as they required additional budget. After the first cycle, I learnt how to make new tools even with a small budget and my group helped me with them. The tools can be used in many classes and we can share them." (Eng 1)

"I noticed the students really liked the picture cards. They also seemed to have fun with games and dared to speak English in the classroom more than they did before." (Eng 2)

"I thought the tools I made were good, but I could see from the videos and pictures that they were too small for the students, especially the ones sitting at the back of the classroom. I made them again in the second cycle, which were of course bigger than the ones I used in the first cycle. I also made a lot more for all the students in class." (Eng 3)

- v. With the lesson plan on communicative approach, the teachers said their students were able to communicate in English in the classroom without any anxiety. The teachers were themselves more confident in correcting their pronunciation. Teaching with a communicative approach is a great idea as it is a natural strategy for language acquisition that will allow students to learn to use the language and communicate real meaning. However, in the beginning of the study the teachers did not understand how to evaluate students according to the learning objectives and communicative approach. They did not cover the three major learning domains, i.e., cognitive, affective and psychomotor. They had no idea that each type of learning outcome required a different type of instruction. After the first cycle of Lesson Study, they learnt how to evaluate the students but there were still some mistakes. Nevertheless, in this study the students' learning achievement was not evaluated. Rather, their behaviour in the classroom was observed.

"First, I didn't really know how to evaluate the students appropriately. I thought I could just evaluate them as I wished. If they could speak English, I was happy. I was not concerned about the learning objectives and communicative approach evaluation at all. I admit that I learnt this after the first cycle of Lesson Study." (Eng 1)

"I remember now I have to evaluate all learning objectives." (Eng 2)

"I evaluated my students but I didn't write the learning objectives in the first cycle. Evaluation is my major mistake." (Eng 3)

The assessment of the implementation of best practices using the Lesson Study

- i. A Lesson Study involves many people working directly within the teaching and learning processes; thus, teachers would not have to perform them alone. Teachers typically work alone when planning lessons, creating instructional activities and all assignments. Even when they face problems with students in the classroom, such as when students fail to achieve learning objectives, teachers have to go through issues individually. With the Lesson Study, teachers can work together, and share the ideas and experiences they discover about teaching and learning in the classroom. They will be able to identify mistakes that they may have not thought about before and can make effective improvements. As

described by Chokshi and Fernandez (2004), "the focus of the Lesson Study remains the collaborative intellectual process rather than the output of isolated products such as a collection of model lessons".

"By having the Lesson Study, I found that I like my teaching career. I have friends who can support me, have the same goals and share my knowledge and difficulties." (Eng1)

"I accept that before the Lesson Study, when I checked my students' worksheets I had no idea if they completed them on their own. I just marked them. I was the one who standing in front of the class and I really didn't know my students at all. After the second cycle, my group suggested that I focus on some students and learn from their worksheets. I started noticing students who had difficulties studying in my class, so I could then help them learn." (Eng3)

- ii. As Fernandez (2002) stated, there are a variety of obstacles to this approach, including teachers' difficulty in finding time to collaborate with their groups, overcoming their fear of having team members observe their teaching demonstrations, and critically analysing their teaching practices. Therefore, they need to choose a group of colleagues that works well together and enjoy the challenge of starting a teachers' professional development group. To work under the Lesson Study approach, teachers needed to go through three processes; as they plan, teach and/or observe, and finally analyse results within their Lesson Study group, they have to work together most of the time. This requires people with whom they can talk to and discuss, as well as people with whom they feel comfortable to observe in the classroom.

"At the initial stage, I did not like the Lesson Study because it takes too much time and the process is difficult. Finally, I realised its importance and I improved a lot. However, I have to set my goals and allocate a schedule that will suit me and my colleagues." (Eng2)

- iii. Teachers must keep an open mind for the Lesson Study. As explained by Burghes and Robinson (2009), "teachers must be open-minded about different strategies and prepared to experiment and innovate and to learn from their colleagues in an ethos of collaboration and cooperation but not competitive and not appraising". Some teachers may blame their students if they fail to follow according to their lesson plans, or if the students could not quickly understand the lesson. If the teachers still strongly believe in what they have done and always have excuses for their mistakes, the Lesson Study approach might not work for them. People who are open-minded will consider suggestions from the reflective stage and put these changes into practice. The other aspect they should bear in mind is that critical self-reflection is very important.

"In the workshop, it was suggested that I learnt to be open-minded. I let my group members observe me while I teach. If I made any mistakes, we just discussed in a respectable manner. They made recommendations on my teaching, were not finding faults, and helped me to correct my mistakes. That is what I like about the Lesson Study. (Eng3)

- iv. In the research, the Lesson Study in the English language team will work well if and when at least one member of the team is from a foreign background. This will give the group a mix of teaching experiences. They can thus exchange their

experiences, as well learning techniques, tools and activities. Moreover, in this specific case, a Thai teacher will have a greater opportunity to speak English and will be able to ask about English language pronunciation and other English aspects at the same time.

"I have known my Filipino colleague for quite a while. but I rarely talked to her. When I was assigned to choose one group member, I thought that I might learn a lot from her as she has a lot of teaching experiences in both Philippines and Thailand. She taught me a lot about learning tools and English language games. She also shared her teaching difficulties and solutions with me." (Eng2)

"I like my Filipino teacher a lot; she is a friendly person. I picked her without any hesitation. Personally, I like speaking English, and she is the only one at school with whom I can speak English all the time. Sometimes, she corrects my pronunciation and helps me with vocabulary. If there are more foreign teachers from other countries, I might pick them too. The limitation for Thai teachers is that we have little chance to speak English." (Eng3)

Following the findings that have been discussed in this paper, the following recommendations could bring further benefit to this study.

- i. Further studies should include students' learning achievement and interviews so that they can better understand the development and attitudes of the students towards the teachers' teaching, teaching tools and evaluation.
- ii. Observation on how school directors support the implementation of the Lesson Study can also be explored in further studies.
- iii. The use of Lesson Study should also be applied for English language subjects with secondary and high school teachers and students.

Conclusion

The Lesson Study may be one of the best options for teachers' long-term professional development. Meetings involving professional learning groups are not rare, but it can become common practice for teachers to meet regularly to discuss learning management and students' learning competencies. There are many benefits of the Lesson Study, such as: (i) Changes in the way teachers work, think and teach students as well as each other as they work together on learning objectives and their students' learning achievement; (ii) Building a trusting relationship with each other in their teaching careers whereby the Lesson Study can be used as a platform to share knowledge and teaching experiences; and (iii) Benefits of drawing teachers' attention to the same goals, which are students' learning outcomes and learning ability. Subsequently, in addition to improving themselves, teachers can also improve students' learning competencies and the national education system. However, speaking English in Thailand is still a big issue, and neglecting it would not be the best idea. Obtaining the cooperation of all teachers in the country remains difficult. Nevertheless, if the English teachers can get together in small groups to help each other in all teaching processes and discuss students' problems, it may be very valuable in helping the teaching and learning of the English language in Thailand, which has been a major issue for several decades.

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