EFL Teacher Development Facilitated by Lesson Study: A Chinese Perspective

HONG ZHANG
Beijing Foreign Studies University
Beijing, China

RUI YUAN
Education University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong

WEI LIAO
Beijing Normal University
Beijing, China

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Lesson study is a powerful teacher development approach that has been widely practiced in many countries around the world. In general, lesson study is an inquiry cycle conducted by a team of teachers to investigate and improve teaching (Lewis & Hurd, 2011). The cycle normally consists of four steps. First, the team studies the curriculum
and identifies the topic of a lesson, such as curricular content, student learning, or teaching approaches. The identified topic is also the focus of subsequent instruction and observation. Second, the team develops a lesson plan. Third, one team member delivers the lesson with others observing the lesson and collecting data for the subsequent reflection and research. Finally, based on the data generated in the third step, the whole team reflects on how to improve teaching and student learning (Akiba & Wilkinson, 2016).

China’s recent English curriculum reforms aim to develop students’ language abilities, communicative competence, problem-solving skills and cultural awareness (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, few teachers know how to translate the curriculum ideas into practice (Wang, 2015). Against the backdrop, lesson study has been localized to be a specific form of teacher learning activity: public lessons. Public lessons are adopted to experiment with and illustrate how curriculum ideas can be embodied in English classroom teaching, and serve as a primary strategy to showcase exemplary teaching practice and promote student learning and English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher development in Chinese schools (Wang, 2015). At the same time, public lessons entail a strong element of evaluation to highlight the public demonstration of a well-refined lesson. Because of public lessons’ emphasis on the teaching performance of individual teachers, the teacher tends to feel under pressure from being evaluated in public.

Despite the widespread use of public lessons in China, there remains a paucity of research examining how such a way of lesson study can promote teacher learning and how teachers engage in public lessons in daily practice. To fill this gap, the current study investigates how mid-career EFL teachers engage in public lessons for professional development.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher development can be conceptualized as a complex, dynamic, and ongoing process derived from teachers’ cognitive learning, social interactions, and emotional experiences (Yuan & Lee, 2015). Teacher cognition refers to the complex, practically oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs that language teachers draw on in their work (Borg, 2006). Within the broad scope of studies on teacher cognition, researchers have linked teachers’ cognitive processes (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, and reflection) to professional development, with a focus on expertise for teaching.

Socially, knowing is inseparable from the embodied experiences of a person as a social participant in the world. Learning to be a teacher
is essentially a socialization process (Williams, 2010). Teachers pursue professional development in part through interacting and collaborating with colleagues, through which they gain a sense of belonging to a community (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

Furthermore, growing attention has been paid to the emotional dimension of teacher development. Emotion can significantly influence teachers’ work, such as by shaping teachers’ professional identities, sustaining or undermining their emotional commitment to students, and influencing their classroom practices (Shapiro, 2010). Teachers’ emotional maturation entails learning to tackle challenges and build positive emotions about their professional practices and development, because teaching involves emotional complexities, tensions, and challenges.

This study adopts an integrated conceptual framework that incorporates teachers’ cognitive development, socialization processes, and emotional experiences and examines how teachers develop over time through participating in lesson study. We ask two research questions: (1) What challenges did the participants experience with lesson study? (2) In what ways did participants’ engagement with lesson study influence their professional development? This study contributes Chinese experiences of lesson study to the international discussion on promoting teacher development.

THE STUDY

The research was conducted in an English department of a selective high school in Beijing. One aspect of its working culture is that mid-career teachers, defined as those with 6–12 years of teaching experience, are expected to deliver one public lesson every year. This practice serves three functions: (1) to demonstrate innovative educational ideas proposed by the new curriculum standards; (2) to be a component of the evaluation of the mid-career teachers; and (3) to trigger department-wide study of lessons. Six teachers in the department met the criteria of mid-career teachers and agreed to participate in the study. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the school, including consent from the teachers. The participants were female, with 6–12 years of teaching experience in English language teaching. Background information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Over two months of fieldwork in the department, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers and made field observations of their public lessons. During this time, the teachers gave public lessons in sequence. The first author observed 24 lessons, comprising one public lesson and three rehearsal lessons by each teacher. She also
audio-recorded the lessons and took observational notes. Apart from teaching, these teachers usually spent the rest of their school time in the staffroom where they prepared lessons, graded assignments, discussed lessons with colleagues, and attended weekly department meetings. Thus, the first author also observed the teachers’ professional work and social interactions (e.g., informal conversations with colleagues and students) in their staffroom.

The interview protocol was developed based on the field notes. Immediately after the public lessons, an individual, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, aiming to explore teachers’ thoughts on their public lessons, interactions with colleagues, and emotional experiences during the process. All the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, which the participants indicated that they felt more comfortable using. The first author translated the interviews, which the other two authors checked for accuracy.

A qualitative, inductive process was adopted for data analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). First, the first author read and coded the data. This step led to several themes deriving from the teachers’ indigenous concepts (Patton, 2015) in response to the research questions, such as “improving classroom instruction” (i.e., cognitive development), “collective wisdom” (social perspective), and “a suffering process” (emotional dimension). To enhance the validity of the findings, the six teachers and the other two authors were invited to comment on the preliminary findings, which then informed the refinement of our emerging claims.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, we present salient findings that depict the complex challenges the teachers experienced with, and their development through, public lessons, including data from interviews (Int) and field observation notes (FON).

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Teaching experience (years)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>T2</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>T3</td>
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<td>T4</td>
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<td>T5</td>
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<td>T6</td>
<td>8</td>
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BRIEF RESEARCH REPORTS
Challenges

The teachers encountered a range of challenges in their experiences with public lessons. Cognitively, teachers had misconceptions about public lessons. For example, in their view, the purpose of public lessons is mainly to promote new curriculum ideas, and thus they feel public lessons should perfectly present innovative practices. Therefore, the teachers usually spend several weeks preparing an idealized lesson. It is challenging to spend so much time and efforts to prepare and demonstrate public lessons. Participants’ perceptions of public lessons are exemplified in this comment:

Public lessons should be perfect, so you need to spend much more time in preparing, rehearsing, listening to colleagues’ feedback, revising and finalizing. And they can only be delivered at most once a year, otherwise we cannot bear it.

(T5, Int)

In T5’s view, public lessons need to be perfect, because if a teacher can demonstrate a perfect lesson he or she will be perceived by colleagues and administrators as a “perfect” teacher. This perception would bring the teacher competitive opportunities such as promotion. Therefore, public lessons become a challenging competition. T5 reports:

Polishing public lessons is important because the headmaster and colleagues in my department will come to observe. If you give a perfect lesson, you can get opportunities to observe or attend national competition.

(Int)

While in social terms participants’ colleagues facilitated their development, they also experienced challenges interacting with colleagues. For instance, different teachers had different beliefs and practices about the teaching demonstrations by participants. When more experienced and authoritative teachers gave suggestions, the less experienced teachers were not sure whether to follow, as this field note suggests:

T2 discussed her public lesson with the department head. T2 wanted to use a task in the warm-up stage, but the department head insisted that the task should be used in the practice stage. When they had the discussion in the staffroom, T2 felt it hard to make a decision and she went to T4 for further suggestions. Finally, she followed the department head’s idea. And T5 said that the department head’s providing suggestions meant forcing you to accept her ideas.
T2 could have made her final decision because the head’s suggestion was more reasonable or because she yielded to the department head’s authority as an expert teacher or the department leader. Often, colleagues’ suggestions were contradictory, and sometimes participating teachers had difficulty making a decision. Some wanted to give up because they knew other teachers could always identify certain problems. The power relations among teachers confused them about what to do. On the one hand, the teachers wanted to insist on their own ideas on teaching. On the other hand, they did not want to displease their leaders or more authoritative colleagues.

Emotionally, all the six teachers felt that giving public lessons is challenging because of the pressure of demonstrating ideal instruction and being evaluated. They all used emotionally intense expressions such as torture and like [a snake] casting off its skin to characterize their experiences, as T2 reports:

Preparing public lessons is suffering and like casting off a skin. You need to spend much more time than preparing routine lessons, and be more rigorous because you are expected to put all your best ideas in the lesson. If you make mistakes, you have no chance to correct them, because it is the only chance to show yourself and you will be evaluated.

Teachers’ Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Development

Nevertheless, the teachers reported that their experiences with public lessons had advanced their professional development. In terms of cognitive development, they all felt that public lessons facilitated their development by changing their educational beliefs, deepening their understanding of the subject matter, and providing an opportunity to try out new teaching methods. T4 spoke highly of the public lesson experience and its impact on her ability to design and adjust lesson plans:

The whole recursive process of preparing, revising, and presenting public lessons remolded me and I felt I suddenly stood on the top of the highest mountain. After that I could design a complete teaching procedure on any lesson within a short time, and flexibly adjust it if the original plan does not work well.
In addition, they formed new understandings of language teaching (e.g., how technology can be used). For example, T2 wanted to integrate electronic dictionaries in teaching emotional vocabulary but did not know how to do it. When developing the public lesson, she searched for related literature, rehearsed lessons in her colleagues’ classes, listened to colleagues’ feedback, and, finally, successfully used electronic dictionaries in her class and started believing that technology could aid her teaching: “Without the opportunity of giving public lessons, I would have never thought about how to integrate technology with my teaching” (T2, Int).

Public lessons also helped participants rethink the subject matter (e.g., linking words are useful in writing paragraphs). After the teachers finished all 24 lessons, they were invited to reflect on their experiences in a department meeting. T3 reported developing a new understanding about linking words: “After my public lesson, I realized that linking words are so important in developing paragraphs logically” (FON). Together, these data capture how the teachers used public lessons as space for piloting new ideas and methods; as a result, they developed their understandings of teaching and improved their practice.

Socially, the teachers frequently interacted with one another during the public lesson process. When a teacher was preparing to deliver a public lesson, her colleagues voluntarily provided resources, suggestions, and their own classes for the teacher to rehearse in. Therefore, the final version of the public lesson integrated other colleagues’ contributions, as T6 reflects: “My public lesson is the crystallization of the whole department’s wisdom, for almost all my colleagues gave me detailed suggestions” (Int). From this description, teachers prepared and delivered public lessons not solely on their own, but benefitted from collaborations: “I revised my teaching plan again and again based on my colleagues’ feedback. Whenever I had problems, others would help me. I benefited much from our communication” (T1, Int).

Teachers who were not delivering public lessons also enhanced their professional development through class observations and joint reflections. Thus, the teachers operated in a learning community in which they could reflect on their teaching through observation of their colleagues’ public lessons: “By observing colleagues’ lessons, I learned some practical instructional methods” (T1, Int). Emotionally, all the teachers felt colleagues’ support and warmth, which helped them experience positive emotions such as confidence, as T5 notes: “After I delivered public lessons and finally was recognized by others, I had a sense of achievement and gradually I began to like giving public lessons. Those times related to public lessons are my job honeymoon” (Int).

The school and the English department claimed that the purpose of the public lessons was mainly for spreading innovative ideas and
teacher learning. In reality, the teachers inevitably faced the pressure of being evaluated because public lessons are observed by all teachers in the department and the school leaders. Some teachers did not do well and received quite harsh feedback in front of others. While some had trouble receiving this criticism, others were receptive to critiques and gradually became emotionally resilient. In other words, they reported becoming stronger in dealing with challenging situations and staying positive toward their jobs after their experiences with the public lesson activities, as T4 exemplifies: “I first suffered from great pressure. However, this process pushed me to think over, refine and theorize my lesson. I learned how to deal with pressure. This process toughened me and helped me become more resilient” (Int).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has presented findings about six EFL teachers’ cognitive learning and socialization processes as well as the emotional experiences of participating in lesson study. The results resonate with the existing research on EFL teacher development supported by public lessons in mainland China (Wang, 2015). Cognitively, public lessons changed the participants’ educational beliefs and helped them develop an improved understanding of the subject matter and language teaching (Lewis & Hurd, 2011). In addition, the participants interacted with their colleagues and learned from one another through discussions. Not only the teachers, but also those who observed lessons benefited from this process. This finding echoes the previous research finding that the quality of teaching can be improved through collaborative processes (Dudley, 2011). The teachers appreciated the support from their colleagues, which made them develop a sense of belonging to a community and regard the final version of public lessons as representing the collective wisdom of the whole department. However, they also encountered social challenges. While the teachers could argue with peers democratically, they found making choices hard when responding to opinions from more authoritative colleagues. Respecting and being obedient to elders and the authoritative remains a part of traditional Chinese culture (Zhang, Yuan, & Wang, 2018). When different views emerged about their lessons, the teachers tended to avoid tensions to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships.

In terms of the emotional aspect of participating in lesson study, the findings show that participants experience the mixture of negative and positive emotions and emotional change as being, in T4’s words, like the process of “a caterpillar passing through the cocoon stage to
become a butterfly” (Int). Participants feared difficulties at the beginning, suffered during the process, but finally developed a sense of achievement and became more resilient. Their negative feelings mainly came from worries about the hidden assessment from their colleagues and leaders, because the teachers did not want to showcase their shortcomings in front of others.

This study sheds light on how public lessons can contribute to language teachers’ continuing development along cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. It also contributes a Chinese perspective on international explorations of lesson study as a tool to develop teachers in various social contexts. Based on these findings, we draw at least three important implications. First, our study suggests that EFL teachers can develop professionally through engaging with public lessons. At the same time, teacher educators should help teachers develop accurate understandings about public lessons, which should not be regarded as idealized lessons, but rather a strategy of promoting teacher learning. Second, a democratic, supportive, and collaborative culture should be nurtured to facilitate the socializing process through which EFL teachers can develop a sense of belonging and learn from one another.

To address the challenge of engaging in power relations, providing suggestions anonymously may be a useful strategy. For example, one teacher collects others’ comments without providing names, and then gives these to the lesson study teacher. In this way, the teacher is not under pressure to obey authority. Finally, to relieve EFL teachers’ pressure and negative emotions, the element of assessment in public lessons should be decreased; instead, the value of teaching and research should be emphasized. School and department leaders may consider establishing a system of public lessons to encourage teachers to collaboratively design lesson plans and randomly invite one of the collaborating teacher to demonstrate the lesson. Thus, even if there is implicit assessment, it regards the lesson itself—not the teacher.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that public lessons, as a Chinese version of lesson study, constitute a promising strategy for facilitating EFL teachers’ cognitive, social, and emotional development. Not only the teachers who deliver public lessons, but also those who assist or observe, can benefit from public lessons, through learning from the success or challenges presented in the public lessons and gaining a sense of belonging in the teaching community. However, using lesson study may be challenging because teachers can feel it as a burden and as generating negative emotions.
The limitations of this study are that it was conducted in one department in one high school, and therefore its findings are not generalizable to other contexts. Whether, to what extent, and in what ways public lessons can facilitate teacher development need to be further explored in relation to the specific contexts in which they are used. We hope that the findings of our study can contribute to such endeavors.

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THE AUTHORS

Hong Zhang is an associate professor in the National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education, Beijing Foreign Studies University. Her main research interests include language teacher education and teacher culture. Her publications have appeared in *Language Teaching Research*, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, and *Journal of Education for Teaching*.

Rui Yuan is an assistant professor in the Department of English Language Education at the Education University of Hong Kong. His research interests include language teacher identity and teacher development. His publications have appeared in *System*, *ELT Journal*, and *Teaching and Teacher Education*.

Wei Liao is an assistant professor at the Center for Teacher Education Research, Beijing Normal University. His research interests include policy issues related to teacher preparation, recruitment, distribution, and professional development. His work has appeared in *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *Journal of Education for Teaching*, and *International Journal of Educational Research*.

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Native and Nonnative Teacher Candidate Perceptions of Professional Language Development in an MA TESOL Program

KELI YERIAN
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon, United States

ANNA MIKHAYLOVA
University of Queensland
Saint Lucia, Queensland, Australia

PATRICIA PASHBY AND MISAKI KATO
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon, United States

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Experiences of nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs) in the TESOL profession have been the focus of a growing number of publications over the past two decades (see Braine, 2010). Topics