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EFL Teachers' Perceptions on the Role of Lesson Study in their Professional Development: Critical Pathways

Linguistics Society of Iran

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ABSTRACT

Lesson Study (LS), as a professional development approach, motivates teachers to develop skills making them aware of the dynamics of students' learning during a lesson. This study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the role of (LS) in their professional development. To this end, five Iranian secondary school EFL teachers took part in the study. Four instruments including a semi-structured interview, diary writing, observation field-notes, and Telegram© notes were used to collect the data. The teachers participated in a (LS) program conducted in 12 face-to-face 90-minute sessions. A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the interview data. The data obtained through diary, observation, and Telegram© platform were subjected to content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Five major themes were emerged including behavioural and psychological effects, collaborative development, raised awareness about pedagogical practice, concerns about LS, and changes to teaching practice. The analysis indicated that lesson courses developed the teaching performances of the participants. The findings call up Iranian EFL teachers and practitioners to pay due attention to the function of LS in teacher growth and teacher development.

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1. Introduction

Today, teacher education and professional development programs need not only to address teachers' concerns for their students' learning, but also to account for learning opportunities for teachers. Unlike traditional top-down approaches in which experts impose models and recipes on teachers, context-imbedded models of professional development encourage teachers to join with other teachers to participate in meaningful discussion about the classroom setting and the teaching practices found in their instructional contexts (Gee, 1996). English language teaching community now considers the professional development not as the idea of an accumulation of skills but as a highly critical and negotiated process.

Lesson Study (LS) (Takemura & Shimizu, 1993), as a context-imbedded approach to professional development, involves groups of teachers meeting regularly over a period of time to collaborate on the planning, designing, implementing, testing, and improving a lesson on a particular content (Elkomy & Elkhaial, 2022; Johnson, 2009; Kristin Aas, 2023; Uştuk & De Costa, 2020; Yoshida, 1999; Zhang & He, 2023). This approach was first applied in the instruction of mathematics in Japanese schools (Cerbin & Kopp, 2006). However, it is now widely used internationally across a variety of school subjects. Teacher education scholars agree that LS is a process that could potentially promote the professional growth of teachers and connect teacher training with teaching practices (Doig & Groves, 2011; Kotelawala, 2012; Kristin Aas, 2023; Zhang & He, 2023). Loose (2014) maintains that "learning that is rooted in the situation, such as authentic classroom instruction, may shape and improve teacher instruction" (p. 3). LS encourages teachers to build a professional community in which their own instruction is improved because of the strengthening of their own content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge along with student learning (Lewis et al., 2009). Through this professional community, learning in significant ways as the teachers make changes in their own instructional practices (Yarema, 2010). Unlike traditional professional development approaches, LS paves the way for collaboration among its participants in a process that can be guided by a facilitator (Stepanek et al., 2006). Throughout a LS, participants, not the expert, drive or control the process within the professional development experience. The participants in a LS group define a question or questions, and drive the direction of the learning. In other words, there is not a hierarchical relationship among the participants in a LS group as there is not a traditional professional development environment (Lee, 2008).

Over the years, professional development has progressed from "random workshops to sustainable forms that are intended to support ongoing changes in teaching and learning" (Wiburg & Brown, 2007, p. 20). There are multiple effective professional development strategies intertwined in the LS process. Lee (2008) identifies several of these strategies: participants' development of subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, ongoing collaboration, self-reflections, and heightened

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awareness of learners' needs and difficulties. Lewis et al., (2009) demonstrated that LS may at first be viewed as a protocol or blueprint for creating better instruction, but teachers begin to put more emphasis on LS as a research tool as the time passes. Teachers soon realize that "through effective data collection" a classroom lesson could become a powerful form of research (Lewis, et al., 2009, p. 12).

In order to obtain a consolidated picture of the effectiveness of any approach for teachers' professional growth, it is essential to explore the issue from the perspective of teachers. As Tillema (1995) rightly acknowledged, beliefs and perceptions play a critical role in teachers' approach toward a piece of information or strategy. Despite the abundance of studies on teachers' perception in general and professional development in particular, research addressing teachers' viewpoints with respect to the potential of LS practice for their professional growth remains scant (Nami et al., 2016). These studies have been conducted on different subject teachers working in various educational contexts including Kindergarten (Elkomy & Elkhaial, 2022), elementary school (Kristin Aas, 2023; Smith, 2008), high school (Arsad et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2021) and universities (Zhang & He, 2023). One line of research probes any possible relationship between LS and the professional growth of teacher students training at different teacher education programs (Arslan, 2019; Kıncal et al., 2016; Zhang & He, 2023). For example, Arslan (2019) studied the influence of LS on the professional development of Turkish EFL preservice teachers. The participants reportedly had never experienced such an approach. The researcher concluded that LS provided these novice teachers with concrete examples of teaching practices causing them to develop their teaching profession. In a recent investigation, Zhang and He (2023) qualitatively explored how LS could contribute into the growth of critical thinking skill among Chinese EFL teacher students. The findings showed that LS helped these participants enhance critical thinking strategy.

The relevant literature reports that most of the conducted studies target on the in-service teachers. Smith (2008), for example, investigated how LS conducted in a Japanese elementary school could enable teachers to direct their own professional growth in the areas that they identified as in need of improvement. It was observed that teachers who were collaboratively involved in a supportive setting such as LS empowered to determine the activities, which would best lead to improvement in teaching. Coskun (2017) applied LS approach in an EFL context in Turkey. The participants were three English instructors and 18 students in the English Preparatory Program at a Turkish university. The instructors prepared a research lesson, and one of the instructors presented the lesson while the others were observing students. Following the first lesson, a post-lesson discussion among the instructors was carried out, and students filled out an open-ended survey about the lesson. After necessary revisions were made in line with the participants' suggestions, the

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lesson was presented to another group of learners at the same level, and the opinions of students and teachers about the revised lesson were collected once again. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that LS led to the improvement of the research lesson. Uştuk and De Costa (2020) investigated how LS could initiate the reflection among EFL in-service teachers in a university context. The study indicated that LS engaged teachers to think over on their practices both individually and collaboratively. It also confirmed that reflection as a meta-action in LS maintained teachers to transform their teacher agency.

It seems that researchers are becoming interested in probing the effects of LS on teachers teaching various subjects to the very young learners. In a recent study, Elkomy and Elkhaial (2022) experimentally investigated the effect of LS approach on developing knowledge and perception of peer mentoring and communities of practice among kindergarten teachers in Egypt. This study confirmed that LS principles provided a rich context for teachers helping them practice peer-mentoring experiences. It also encouraged teachers to collaborate in a particular community of practice. This line of research warrants further scholarly attention since the findings could provide us with very promising insights concerning the role of LS on the development of teaching profession among teachers of very young students. It is probably because of this suggestion that researchers have recently tended to explore the growth of teaching profession in the framework of LS among teachers teaching to young students educating at elementary and secondary schools (Arsad et al., 2023; Kristin Aas, 2023) . In line with this idea, Kristin Aas, (2023) investigated teacher talk in the early and late phases of a 4-year project in a Norwegian elementary school where LS was used as a method for professional development. Results indicated that LS improved teachers' awareness concerning themselves and their work. In other words, LS principles made teachers sensitive to the students' needs and encouraged them to trust to students' ability in the lessons. SL also motivated teachers to become aware of themselves and their influence on each student's learning journey. In another study, Arsad et al. (2023) developed a valid, practical and effective LS-based teaching model in order to increase the digital literacy of high school in a rural school, Indonesia. Findings showed that this approach improved students' digital literacy. The researcher called up the educators to employ LS principles since it could make them creative and promote their pedagogic competence in teaching leading to enhancing the quality of learning in the classroom.

The relevant literature documents that Iranian researchers have also carried out studies to encourage teachers practice based on LS principles. For example, in a case study, Nami et al., (2016) investigated the perception of the impact of LS on five Iranian EFL teachers' professional growth. Participants' responses to interview questions along with their reflection journals were analysed adopting constant comparison method. The findings indicated that participants

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appreciated the teaching practice and peer observation for promoting their knowledge of technology, technological pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of technological glitches, and their confidence in teaching with technology. It was also observed that teachers preferred peer critique to positive feedback for improving the quality of their lesson plans. In a further empirical study, Haghighifard and Marzban (2016) investigated teachers' viewpoints on the practical implementation of LS. To this goal, 15 Iranian EFL teachers were selected through random sampling. A questionnaire was administered to the teachers after the implementation of LS in their classrooms. The results showed that teachers had positive viewpoint toward different parts of the questionnaire that dealt with teaching and learning procedure.

The reviewed and contextualized investigations show that LS is an approach toward professional development, which is in line with the existing themes of teacher development programs. In line with this argument, this study attempts to provide answer to the following research question:

1. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the role of LS in their professional development?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The target population of this study was teachers teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at public Junior Secondary schools, Shahindezh, Iran. Based on convenience sampling, the researchers selected five Iranian English teachers from Junior Secondary Schools of Shahindezh. Four participants were females and one participant was male. The age range of the participants was between 26 and 45 with a mean of 35.40. Their teaching experience varied from 6 to 26 years (with a mean of 14.60 years) in lower as well as upper level secondary school English education. The participants interacted through two channels: face-to-face interaction at school and online interaction in a Telegram Group consisting of six members, including the second author of the present study. Table 1 demonstrates the demographic summary of the participants. The names are pseudonyms due to ethical considerations.

Table 1. *Demographic information of the participants*

Participants	Age (years)	Sex	Experience (years)	Academic degree
Reza	45	Male	26	MA in TEFL
Nesa	28	Female	9	MA in TEFL
Laleh	34	Female	15	MA in TEFL

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Saba	26	Female	6	BA in TEFL
Negar	44	Female	17	BA in TEFL

Instruments

Four data collection tools were used in this study including: semi structured interview, diary writing, observation field notes, and Telegram notes.

Semi-structured Interview

The first instrument used in the present study was a semi-structured interview entailing 10 questions on teachers' Lesson Study experience. The researchers consulted the literature and formulated these questions in terms of the study context. Then, the interview questions were given to a panel of TEFL professors and practitioners in order to check and approve the validity of the interview questions. Each interview session was conducted within a mean length of 21 minutes.

Diary Writing

The participants were asked to use this instrument to record their important subjective experiences during the Lesson Study sessions. It is worth mentioning that this diary writing was unstructured. The unstructured diary enables the researchers to make a deeper analysis. Unlike the structured diary, in unstructured diary the participants are not instructed about what is expected to be recorded, in what time interval, in what extent and with what purpose. Indeed, the participants were required to write down whatsoever they observed and considered as important during the Lesson Study sessions. The diaries were collected at the end of the program.

Observation Field Notes

As the third instrument of the study, the participating researcher used observation field notes to interact with the participants. Therefore, the researcher was able to record all negotiations among participants during Lesson Study sessions. Valerie (1998) maintains that an observation field note "allows one to reflect, to dig deeper if you will into the heart of the words, beliefs, and behaviours, we describe in our journals" (p. 11). The researcher took notes of participants' negotiations during all Lesson Study sessions. The researcher recorded the in Persian language. These notes were used to explore and extract the themes possibly emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the researcher used reflection journals to record all details of his teaching experience directly following each class. These journals were analysed along with the data coding process in order to provide the researchers with adequately credible themes.

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Telegram© Notes

The fourth instrument was a set of notes posted on a Telegram group allowing participants to discuss and communicate with one another. The group was created before the Lesson Study program. The participants were kindly asked to join the group and leave notes or comments about their experiences concerning the Lesson Study before and after each session. Participates posted around 420 notes reflecting their perceptions and feelings toward the LS program. The participants left their comments in both English and Persian.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers followed Lewis and Hurd's (2011) model of LS process and conducted the program in 12 face-to-face sessions. Some online Lesson Study sessions were also held through Telegram group, where teachers consulted and shared the appropriate ways or strategies for improving teaching. The Lesson Study process included the following sessions (Lewis & Hurd, 2011, p. 304):

- Session 1: Group formation
- Session 2: Defining the problem
- Session 3: Lesson planning
- Session 4: Teaching the lesson
- Session 5: Observers' reflection and feedback
- Session 6: Evaluating and reflecting the lesson
- Session 7: Revising the lesson
- Session 8: Teaching the revised lesson
- Session 9: Observers' reflection and feedback again
- Session 10: Evaluating and reflecting the lesson again
- Session 11: Sharing the results
- Session 12: Interview with teachers

The process of teaching was conducted within two sessions: (a) Teaching the lesson (session 4) and (b) Teaching the revised lesson (session 8). In the process of teaching, in the first 30 minutes, teachers collaborated on lesson planning and shared their ideas about the ways of how to hold each session. In the next 30 minutes, one teacher instructed the lesson and the rest observed his/her teaching and took notes. The final 30 minutes were devoted to evaluating and giving

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comments about teachers' instruction. In addition, a day before the beginning of each Lesson Study session, teachers discussed and shared their thoughts concerning the ways of how to enhance their instruction quality. The nature of LS was cyclic and, in each session, one individual teacher taught a specific lesson and the others observed, took notes, and commented on their colleagues' instruction. This process permitted each teacher to become aware of the weak as well as the strong points of his/her teaching.

Data Analysis

The interviews and observation field notes were carried out in English. However, the diary as well as comments left on Telegram were in Persian, and hence, the researcher translated them into English. The observation, diaries, and Telegram posted data were collected during the Lesson Study program, but the interview data were obtained after the LS program. Moreover, the interview data were analysed thematically while the data from observation field notes, Telegram notes, and diaries were subject to content analysis. First, researchers transcribed each interview. Then they followed a thematic approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to explore the possible themes or sub-themes emerged in interview data. The researchers assured the validity of each theme by careful coding and repeatedly returning to the original transcripts and field notes. It is noteworthy that the data obtained via reflection journals, diaries, and documents were used in this stage of analysis to add credibility to the themes and triangulate the results. In addition, the concepts and categories were accredited through member-checking (Petrie, 2003). In this study, the member checking process was run in a final interview, where participants were asked to discern whether they agreed with the descriptions, themes, and interpretation of the findings.

RESULTS

Findings from Interviews

The thematic analysis of the interview data provide us with five themes indicating how the teacher participants viewed Lesson Study program. These themes are *behavioural and psychological effects of Lesson Study, collaborative development, raised awareness about pedagogical practice, concerns about Lesson Study*, and *changes to teaching practice*.

Table 2. *Summary of Themes Extracted from the Interviews*

Themes	Categories	Frequency
Behavioral and psychological effects of Lesson Study	Decreased embarrassment and anxiety	4
	Enhanced self confidence	3
	Enhanced motivation	3
	Getting more friendly with the students	3

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Collaborative development	Learning from the team members	6
	Motivating nature of team work	3
Raised awareness about pedagogical practice	Awareness about one's points of weakness and strength	5
	Awareness about one's potential skills and abilities	2
Concerns about Lesson Study	Concerns about Lesson Study team members	3
	Concerns about officials' support	2
	Concerns about the nature of Lesson Study	1
Changes to teaching practice	General changes	3
	Changes in specific areas	1

Behavioral and Psychological Effects of Lesson Study

As Table 3 shows, "behavioural and psychological effects of Lesson Study" was the most frequent theme. Four teacher participants claimed that the longer they experienced Lesson Study program, the less embarrassed and anxious they became. Teacher one (T1), for instance, maintained that at first he found teaching in front of teachers embarrassing, but as the time went by, he felt more relaxed:

T1: At first, I was stressful. After participating in Lesson Study sessions, I improved my self-confidence and got motivated to participate in Lesson Study program. Because it was interesting for me and I learned many useful strategies in teaching.

The participants also reported that Lesson Study process made them highly self-confident to solve instructional problems in their classrooms. One of the participants (T3) make it explicit of how she became self-confident to notice the week points of her teaching and try to overcome them:

T3: As we let other teachers observe our classes and evaluate our instruction, our self-confidence is boosting. This shows that as teachers we have the courage of being commented and criticized. The more you participate in Lesson Study sessions, the more confident you would be. This is because you would feel the pleasure of understanding your points of weakness along with overcoming them. The sense of achievement that you get from this experience improves your confidence.

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When talking about their experience of Lesson Study, the teachers pointed to engagement and collaboration in relation to the resulted motivation and enjoyment. However, some teachers subtly pointed out the motivation was both the result of and the prerequisite for the participation in the Lesson Study program. Teacher 3 (T3) makes it explicit as below:

T3: When I participate in Lesson Study programs and experience it, the challenges I face specifies my points of weakness but enhances my motivation for doing my job as good as possible.

Somewhere else in the interview, the same teacher maintained that:

T3: [through participating in Lesson Study programs] you feel the pleasure of noticing and ironing out your problems and helping to develop pedagogically.

From these two excerpts from the same participant, one may infer that motivation is not only a prerequisite for LS, but the Lesson Study process could in turn make the participants more motivated. Teacher 4 (T4) articulates this point more clearly:

T4: Motivation is both prerequisite and the outcome of participating in Lesson Study programs.

Furthermore, the teacher participants claimed that they were often strict and behaved mechanically in their classroom; however, Lesson Study process changed their views and directed them to be more optimistic, humanistic, and friendly teachers. They believed that humanistic relationship upgrades the quality of learning process in the classroom:

T1: After doing Lesson Study, I found out the warm and humanistic relationships with the learners positively affects their learning.

Collaborative Development

The analysis of interview data also showed that EFL instructors took a considerably positive attitude toward team working and collaboration. Indeed, *collaborative development* was the second most frequent theme voiced by the participants. Although all participants had positive perceptions toward teacher collaboration, they had different reasons for their positive perception. Some participants appreciated it because they felt collaboration helps members learn new skills from other members of the group. T1, for instance, believed that through team working, one could learn new things from more knowledgeable peers:

T1: Sharing teaching methods and strategies in Lesson Study is only possible when there are more knowledgeable and professional members in the teams.

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This view is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)*, based on which, learning occurs when a more knowledgeable mediator facilitates task performance. However, other participants considered social skills development as the key merit of team working. Teacher five (T5) pointed out that:

T5: When the teachers are involved in the interactions and activities through team working, we are indeed earning collective thinking, cooperation, and social relations to some extent.

Regarding the teachers' perception about the effectiveness of team working, it seems that Lesson Study encourages team members to work together and share their existing experiences with one another.

Raised Awareness about Pedagogical Practice

The third extracted theme from the interview data was "Raised Awareness about Pedagogical Practice". While "awareness about one's points of strength and weakness" was emerged in five situations, "awareness about one's potential skills and abilities" was voiced in two contexts. Regarding the "awareness about one's points of strength and weakness", some participants believed that this awareness is achieved through repeated instruction in the Lesson Study cycles. T4 emphasized this point as:

T4: When I teach something, I notice how successful I was in teaching it, this makes me aware about my points of weakness and strength.

However, other participants believed that this awareness about points of strength and weakness is obtained through the feedback that they receive during the cycles of Lesson Study. Teacher two (T2) stated this point as:

T2: When I am critiqued and commented about my instruction and my points of weakness are reminded, I myself get awareness about them, too. Then, I attempt to resolve the existing issues with the instruction.

Based on the participants' claims about their raised awareness, it seems that the experience of Lesson Study can promote teacher reflection and collaboration in a way of enhancing reflective self-awareness (Attard, 2010). Drawing on Loose's (2014) claim, group critique of instruction, used in Japanese Lesson Study, brings awareness to both teacher discourse and effective instruction. This point was also evident in the interview data. For example, T3 articulates that:

T3: When I teach in front of other teachers, I notice my problems in teaching, and set out to resolve them in a way to make my teaching more efficient.

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Concerns about Lesson Study

In spite of the appreciation of LS by the participants, they voiced some concerns about the process of LS. The main concerns were related to "the Lesson Study team members" (three cases). The lack of motivation among the participated teachers was another concern. All the teachers claimed that LS is an effective means for enhancing professional development revealing the challenging parts of the lesson that students face during the learning journey. They also ponied out that LS is a way of professional development through which teachers learn from one another. However, the participants mentioned that teachers usually do not show tenancy to take part in LS projects. One of the teachers (T2) believed that some teachers are not willing enough to participate in LS programs. She added that LS requires much more time and energy, and teachers could prefer to participate in such program providing that they are adequately motivated to follow LS approach:

T2: Lesson Study requires extra time and energy and this is possible only by making teachers motivated to such a program.

This claim made by T2 can possibly justify why some teachers are not motivated to participate in LS programs. Irregular participation is still another factor for teachers' unwillingness to participate in LS programs:

T3: One of the issues about Lesson Study is the point that the participants do not usually participate the whole program.

The main reason of this behaviour could also be attributed to the lack of motivation among teachers to take part in SL program. In addition to the lack of motivation, other factors such as lack of official support may have led to irregular and incomplete participation.

Changes to Teaching Practice

The last theme in the interview data was related to the changes observed in the practices of teachers experiencing LS. Four teachers pointed out that LS changed their teaching practice. However, there was a slight difference among the teachers concerning their practice. For example, three teachers stated that LS caused them to change the whole process of their teaching in the classroom. On the other hand, one teacher reported that LS has lowered her degree of severity in the classroom.

In addition to above changes, there were some references to the updated instruction in the classroom. T1 maintained that although he was not sure that he had made changes to his pedagogy, he was sure that he updated his knowledge:

T1: Pedagogically, I updated my knowledge of teaching methods.

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Findings from Observation Field Notes, Diary Writing, and Telegram Notes

Researchers followed a qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and analysed the data obtained via observation field notes, diary writing, and Telegram notes. The results of this analysis were 49 codes in open coding and three broader themes in axial coding. The three themes were ranked based on frequency: sense of professional achievement (23 cases), time constraints (17 cases), and significant role of debriefing and reflection (9 cases).

Sense of Professional Achievement

The participated teachers stated that SL program enhanced their relationship assisting them to gradually become comfortable with one another. They also considered LS as an inspiring professional development approach since they believed that they had acquired new ideas that could help them be effective and efficient instructors. They reported that Telegram interactions were effective because they came to realization that teaching requires a team. This point was quite evident in the discourse texted on Telegram platform. Telegram interactions show that teachers had a sense of achievement in their profession inspired by LS program. The collective thinking and interaction in planning lessons and watching the team members also made participants feel more comfortable with their colleagues in the classroom:

T5: I think I was much better this time. The significant role of pre listening and pre reading was not ignored.

T3: Sure, you did it well, working the comments into account

Similar points were also evident in diaries by T5:

T5: It was very alluring experience. I'd like to convey my useful experiences to the teachers weren't present in the project. We collaborated with peers. We came up with a lesson. We revised the lesson to make the lesson better.

At the beginning of LS process, teacher participants were feeling overwhelmed, however, they gradually began to recognize the importance of this type of training. For example, T2 explained the importance of professional development sustained during the program:

T2: LS has to be done often enough so that it becomes our comfort zone. As teachers, it is important to feel comfortable with our peers in our classroom. Japanese LS offers this opportunity for teachers to do this.

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Participants also maintained the value of interaction and collaboration in the classroom among the students. Teacher 2 reflected on this point as follows:

T2: I consider collaboration as the key factor in any language classroom. I need to increase peer collaboration in my classrooms.

Time Constraints

The analysis of Telegram notes revealed that *time constraint* was a recurring theme. The relevant data showed that there were 17 references to time issues in the Telegram discourse. The following is an interaction between two teachers about the time management during the teaching session:

T2: There is a lot of time in there, but here we have only 30 minutes.

T5: Sure!

T2: Time must be limited to around one third (1/3)

T5: Yes!

The following discourse between some teachers also clarifies the time arrangement challenge:

T2: Let's be at Ershad school at 2:30 pm.

T4: Isn't it late? I have to leave before 4. Isn't it better to start earlier?

T1: Set it in a way to start at the time of the second class of the high school [=2:40].

T5: I go at 2

T4: good!

The significant Role of Debriefing and Reflection

The participants maintained that one of the most significant parts of the LS cycle was the ability to debrief and reflect on their instruction after they had taught based on their lesson plan. In her diary, T2 pointed out that her teaching could not be sufficiently effective without taking debrief or doing reflection:

T2: As debriefing and reflection on my teaching was done, I could understand what was going on in the classroom context. Now I know how much better this lesson can be; especially after the debriefing sessions where we talked about the group dynamics. Next year it will be so much easier to teach after I tweak this lesson plan. It builds stronger relationships, which in turn builds stronger teachers. I found reflection to be very valuable in building relationships and trust with my colleagues.

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The value of reflections has also been emphasized in the diaries of teachers. T3 appreciated reflection as:

T3: When I think about the comments which were given by the observing teachers, evaluate their comments and modify my instruction if necessary.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions toward LS, as an approach to teacher professional development. The qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes including behavioural and psychological effects, collaborative development, raised awareness about pedagogical practice, concerns about, and changes to teaching practice. Moreover, the analysis of the observation field notes, Telegram notes, and teacher diaries suggested three theory-driven themes, namely, sense of professional achievement, time constraints, and significant role of debriefing and reflection. Generally, the results indicate that LS approach has positive impacts on participants' teaching performance. This finding is in line with the majority of the studies on LS in the relevant literature (e.g., Haghighifard & Marzban, 2016; Lewis et al., 2004; Loose, 2014; Nami et al., 2016; Taheri et al., 2013; Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004; Tsui & Law, 2007). For instance, Lewis et al. (2004) contended that Japanese LS builds continuous pathways for ongoing improvement of instruction. Put it differently, as teachers plan and observe lessons, they are actively involved in the process of instructional change and curriculum building (Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004). According to Tsui and Law (2007), LS encourages teachers to improve their teaching practice, do deeper reflection on their teaching practice, and engage in professional development. Eraslan (2008) sustained that since one of the participants in the LS group took the role of the teacher while others observe him/her, LS could be beneficial as a way of overcoming the fear of teaching in front of others.

The sense of professional development among the participants of this study support the findings reported by Taheri et al. (2013). More in details, Taheri et al. (2013) observed that 11 factors contributed to the professional development of the participated teachers. The factors were internal and external motivation, teachers' collaboration, length of the programs, and organizational factors. Our study also maintains the Nami et al. (2016) investigation on Iranian EFL teachers' perception of the impact of LS on their professional growth. These scholars concluded that the participants became highly confident in their teaching performances after they were exposed to LS. Along the same vein, Haghighifard and Marzban (2016), in an attempt to investigate teachers' viewpoints on the practical implementation of LS, claimed that Iranian EFL teachers took a positive attitude toward the stages of this professional development.

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Our findings could be further explained from the perspective of *the community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Based on this concept, individual teachers collaboratively form a professional community encouraging them to significantly develop their own content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and achievement (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this angle, learning is viewed as enculturation into a community of practice or an increased participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The findings of this study can also be interpreted from the perspective of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). According to ZPD, learning occurs when a more knowledgeable mediator facilitates task performance. Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995), however, argued that individuals could collaboratively form a ZPD in the absence of an expert assistant (i.e. a more knowledgeable teacher). Accordingly, one may conclude that LS approach could possibly contribute to teachers' professional development since it is dialogic by its nature.

Overall, our findings suggest that LS program could increase the teachers' pedagogical knowledge motivating them to plan, design, and deliver highly efficient lessons. The efficient lessons can in turn be resulted both from the lesson planning stage of LS program and from raised awareness of teachers about teaching practice. The ultimate contribution of this process is that students' achievement could be increased in such classes, where teachers are constantly learning and actively seeking ways to improve their own profession (Antrim, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study could be contributing to the existing literature on LS experience and its function in teachers' professional development. The findings empirically confirmed a relationship between experiencing LS courses and the improvement of their teaching practices. Although the volunteered teachers reported that LS improved their teaching performances, they suggested that professional development programs such as LS needed to be ongoing and give teachers time to internalize and reflect on what they have learned.

The findings of the study have implications for curriculum developers and teacher educators in order to design LS programs for Iranian pre-service and in-service teachers to enhance their professional knowledge. In the present study, reflection and debriefing sessions were among the most central characteristics of the LS program. Hence, EFL teachers or practitioners are suggested to put particular emphasis on these two characteristics of any LS program.

Future researchers are warranted to experimentally investigate the effects of LS courses on teachers' professional development in EFL contexts. Furthermore, one line of research may consider the teachers' demographic characteristics, (e.g., gender, social status, teaching experience,

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or university degree) and qualitatively probe the function of these variables on the conception of the teachers toward SL approach.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed significantly to the research process.

Declaration

We declare that this manuscript is original and has not been submitted to any other journal for publication

Transparency Statements

The authors affirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Any additional data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Consideration

This manuscript adheres to the ethical guidelines provided by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) for ensuring integrity and transparency in the research publication process.

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