

A Case Study of School-Based Lesson Study at a Japanese Public Elementary School for Foreign Language Activities

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Abstract

This paper, based on a case study, documents how Japanese teachers in a public elementary school work collaboratively through lesson study. From this school's case, three factors stand out as important for a collaborative lesson study. One is that under the leadership of the chairperson, all teachers had various roles. The second factor is that all teachers give their own research lesson every year. So they can be involved a lot of lesson study. The third factor is that there are many informal voluntary meetings. The last two factors show that lesson study is very much a part of the school's teacher development culture. The results of the study suggest that school-based lesson study in Japan is highly structured and collaborative.

1. Introduction

According to Lewis and Hurd (2011), lesson study originated in Japan and is spreading internationally. There is a need for research to document lesson study conducted in Japan in English for an international audience these days, because of the growing popularity of lesson study in the world. In Japan, lesson study is usually conducted in teacher development. However, lesson study for Foreign Language Activities in teacher development has not been carried out much, because the inclusion of foreign language learning at elementary schools is a new concept of the national curriculum. Thus, in this paper, I would like to document how teachers work collaboratively through a lesson study cycle for Foreign Language Activities.

2. Background of this study

2.1 What is lesson study ?

According to Lewis and Hurd (2011), lesson study is a process in which teachers jointly plan, observe, analyze, and refine actual classroom lessons called "research lessons." In "research lessons", one team member conducts research lessons, others observe and collect data. And lastly, teachers reflect how students respond to these

lessons using data.

Lesson study has a long history in Japan. It is the most common form of professional development in Japan (Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Murata & Takahashi, 2002; Takahashi, 2000; Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004; Yoshida, 1999). Various forms of lesson study exist, including district- and national-level lesson study (Murata & Takahashi, 2002; Takahashi, 2006). Among them, schools often conduct school-based lesson study with the entire faculty.

According to Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2010), the following are the objectives of lesson study held at schools.

1. To improve the teaching abilities of each teacher and maintain or improve the school's standard of teacher quality.
2. To enhance mutual understanding among teachers, and have them share a common goal for improving their teaching abilities.
3. All teachers share their concerns, problems and challenges through observing pupils during other teachers' lessons.
4. Improve the teaching skills of each teacher by learning, through actual observation of lessons, excellent teaching methods and techniques for developing teaching materials.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology refers to not only teaching abilities of each teacher, but also school's standard of teacher quality and mutual understanding among teachers. Unlike many lesson study projects outside Japan, which are often conducted by a few volunteers within a school and supported externally, teachers traditionally collaborate with each other in a school in Japan. This study focuses on school-based lesson study, which is one of the major professional development components.

2.2 Needs to have more research documented in Japan

Although lesson study is spreading internationally, there are very few published studies on the implementation of lesson study in Japan. Laskowski (2011) wrote that there were a number of published papers and books on a lesson study cycle written by researchers and teachers in America. On the other hand, there has not been much of a need to describe the procedures and merits of a lesson study cycle in Japanese literature on education because it is the most common form of teacher development and therefore implicitly understood. However, the literature can be a rich source of descriptive analyses on lesson study that can be used by Japanese researchers when they are writing about lesson study for an international audience. Stingler & Hiebert (1999) also state "Very little has been written in English about the process of lesson study" (Stingler & Hiebert, 1999, p.111). There have been only a few studies done on math teachers and practically none that focus on English teaching. Thus, the author introduces the case in order to describe a collaborative lesson study for teaching

English in Japan in English.

2.3 Foreign Language Activities in Japan

English education at public elementary schools in Japan started in 1992. From 1992, only pilot schools implemented English classes. From 2002, schools became able to teach English in “Period for integrated studies.” From 2011, every elementary school must teach English to 5th and 6th graders as part of the curriculum to include Foreign Language Activities. The annual number of lessons of Foreign Language Activities is 35.

The objective of Foreign Language Activities written in Course of Study is not to emphasize the structure or grammar of a foreign language, but,

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2010).

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology states the roles of homeroom teachers like this.

The instructors must formulate topics and activities through which pupils will be motivated to convey their thoughts to others and learn more about others. Homeroom teachers are able to do this since they know the interests and daily lives of their pupils and the kind of knowledge and skills their pupils have acquired in other subjects. Even if they do not speak English fluently, their positive attitude toward interaction through English will serve as an extremely important catalyst to enhance pupils’ interest in foreign languages. Thus, homeroom teachers are indispensable in Foreign Language Activities (MEXT, 2010).

Although ministry doesn’t expect that they speak English fluently, the emphasis on communication, pronunciation, languages and cultures are challenging for elementary school teachers. Benesse’s survey (2010) asked 5,883 elementary school teachers to answer a questionnaire. One question is about the confidence of teaching Foreign Language Activities. More than two-thirds (68.1%) of teachers said they don’t have confidence. The next question is about the level of English competence to teach Foreign Language Activities. Again, more than two-thirds (68.0%) of teachers think that they don’t have enough English competence. Even experienced teachers have no images and confidence of teaching Foreign Language Activities which is a new

concept, because it was not part of the elementary school curriculum when the teachers attended and they have never had training for teaching English.

This is a major challenge for teacher development. The ministry formulated an in-service teacher training system. First, the ministry trains leaders nationwide. The leaders train sub leaders in their prefectures. The sub leaders were to train teachers in their schools for 30 hours in 2009 and 2010. According to Benesse's survey (2010), the responses of the question "How many hours did you take in-service training for Foreign Language Activities at your school in 2009 and 2010?" are as follows. Teachers who took training more than 25 hours are only 5%. Surprisingly, teachers who didn't take any training are 20.4%. As the author said before, the ministry requested the sub teachers to do 30 hours of teacher's training at their schools over two years. But many schools didn't do that. Policies made at the top do not always get implemented at the bottom, especially if they do not involve the particular concerns of teachers (Fullan, 1991). Each school needs to understand teachers' anxiety and requests about Foreign Language Activities, and encourage teachers to learn positively. In this paper, the author documents school-based collaborative lesson study for Foreign Language Activities.

3. The case

The purpose of this study is to document how teachers in a Japanese public school work collaboratively through lesson study. Data from the participants and the author's observations are presented.

3.1 About the school

The school for the case is a public elementary school in Fukuoka prefecture. In 2012, there were about 770 students. Grade 1, 2, 3 and 5 have four classes each, and grade 4 and 6 have three classes each, and there are two classes for special needs. There were 31 full-time teachers. Table 1 shows the years of teaching experience among the full-time teachers. Although the percentage of teachers whose experience is more than 25 years is large, the percentage of teachers whose experience is less than five years is also large.

Table 1 The years of teaching experience among the full time teachers at the school (2012-2013 school year)

Teaching experience	Number of the full-time teachers
1 year-less than 5 years	9 (29.0 %)
5 years-less than 10 years	1 (3.2 %)
10 years-less than 15 years	3 (9.7 %)
15 years-less than 20 years	4 (12.9 %)

20 years-less than 25 years	2 (6.4 %)
25 years-less than 30 years	5 (16.1 %)
More than 30 years	7 (22.6 %)
Total	31

Since this school is a sister school with a public elementary school in Korea in 1989, it has studies about international understanding. The sister school has more experience teaching English because English has been part of the national curriculum longer than Japan. Consequently, the Japanese school in this study has been researching the teaching English before it became part of the national curriculum. Whereas schools generally teach English to 5th and 6th graders, this school teaches English to all grade students.

This school studies not only teaching Foreign Language Activities but also teaching Japanese. Teachers are divided into two teams by their requests. Table 2 shows the numbers of teachers in the teams.

Table 2 Numbers of teachers in Foreign Language Activities team and Japanese team

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6
Foreign Language Activities	2	2	2	1	2	2
Japanese	2	2	2	2	2	1

The numbers of both teams are the equal. The school has a research steering committee, which consisted of representatives of both Foreign Language Activities and Japanese teams. The overall structure of the school research organization is shown in Figure 1. The author was the head teacher of Foreign Language Activities Team. In this paper, the author focuses on only Foreign Language Activities team.

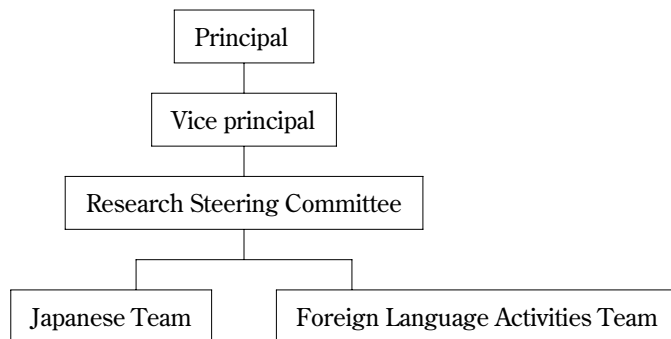


Figure 1 Structure of the school research organization

3.2 Process of school-based lesson study

Afterschool on Fridays is kept for lesson study in this school. Teachers get together every Friday from 3:15 to 4:45. Below is a process of lesson study of this school from April, 2012 to March, 2013.

Friday, April 20

The head teacher of the team proposed a theme to the entire faculty.

Friday, April 27

The team members discussed when they would do their own research lesson, and chose a teacher who does an entire faculty research lesson. Teacher A was selected, because he had never done an entire faculty research lesson yet.

Thursday, May 10

The head teacher explained about a proposal lesson to the entire faculty.

Friday, May 11

The head teacher's proposal lesson and a post lesson discussion were held with the entire faculty.

Friday, May 18

They discussed the next research lessons in the team.

Friday, June 8

Research lessons (3rd grade teacher and 1st grade teacher) and post lesson discussions were held in the team.

Friday, July 6

They discussed the next research lessons in the team.

Friday, July 13

Research lessons (4th grade teacher and 2nd grade teacher) and post lesson discussions were held in the team.

Friday, September 7

They discussed the next research lesson in the team.

Friday, September 14

A research lesson (5th grade teacher) and a post lesson discussion were held in the team.

Friday, September 21

They discussed the next research lesson in the team.

Friday, October 12

A research lesson (1st grade teacher) and a post lesson discussion were held in the team.

Friday, November 16

They discussed an entire faculty research lesson in the team.

Friday, December 6

They discussed an entire faculty research lesson in the team.

Thursday, December 13

Teacher A explained about an entire faculty research lesson to the entire faculty.

Friday, December 14

An entire faculty research lesson (Teacher A: 6th grade teacher) and a post lesson discussion were held. In the post lesson discussion, a supervisor from a board of education provided feedback.

Friday, January 11

They discussed the next research lesson in the team.

Friday, January 18

A research lesson (3rd grade teacher) and a post lesson discussion were held in the team.

Friday, March 8

They reflected this year's theme and lesson study in an entire faculty meeting.

Every year, the school publishes one booklet, which included not only lesson plans but also reflections of the teachers at the end of the year. Having a public open class that gives live research lessons is also common among Japanese public schools. But this school didn't conduct a public open class in that year, because the school did it in the former year.

3.3 Research lesson and post-lesson discussion

Post-lesson discussion is held on the same day of a research lesson for 95 minutes. Table 3 shows the schedule followed by the school on those Friday afternoons.

Table 3 Schedule for a research lesson and post-lesson discussion

2:00-2:45	Research lesson
2:45-3:30	Students' dismissal
3:30-4:45	Post-lesson discussion

Post-lesson discussion starts with self-evaluation of the teacher who gives a research lesson. Then after other teachers ask questions about the lesson, teachers report reactions of three selected children. And they have a discussion. When it is an entire faculty research lesson, an invited supervisor from a board of education provides feedback and final comments at the end of discussion.

4. Findings

4.1 Leadership and shared roles

The teachers at the school shared many responsibilities to make a lesson study

cycle go smoothly. First, the head teacher's role is important. At the beginning of the year, she proposed the following theme and focus to the faculty. The theme coheres with MEXT's Foreign Language Activities objectives.

Research theme

To raise children who enjoy communication with people in English

Focus of study

Establish activities which promote meaningful interaction

She also proposed ideas of students' goals for every grade, how to pick up topics, teaching procedures and how to evaluate. Moreover, she gave a proposal lesson and a post lesson discussion. From these, members can have prospects for their own research lesson. During the year, the head teacher reported every lesson study to the faculty as a newsletter. These newsletters allowed the teachers to share what was discussed. And if they have questions and worries, they could ask her anytime.

Second, other members shared many roles. In each stage of lesson plan development, the members of the team reviewed the lesson plan and provided feedback. The final version of a lesson plan was distributed to the faculty. During research lessons, they took one role among them: taking pictures, taking a video, taking notes of teacher's action and taking notes of three selected students' reactions. Before the research lesson, the aim is to get a cross section view of the learners so the teacher who conducts research lesson selects the students from those, whom the teacher expects good performance, normal and low. The teacher also prepares a sheet on which observing points are written and observers take notes. During the post-lesson discussion, they also shared the roles of facilitator and taking notes of the discussion for the school's official record. The roles rotated. These leadership and shared roles make lesson study collaborative.

4.2 All teachers give their own research lesson every year

Both Foreign Language Activities team and Japanese team do lesson study in their team. And they open lesson study to another team twice a year, including the head teacher's proposal lesson and an entire faculty research lesson.

All full-time teachers do their own research lesson once a year. So each full-time teacher at least has the opportunity to be a part of 13 research lessons, 11 lessons in their team and two lessons in an entire faculty, during the school year. Lesson study can be powerful even for teachers who just observe the research lesson and participate in the post-lesson discussion. This school system is benefit for teacher's learning.

4.3 Informal voluntary meetings

An additional aspect of teacher development at the school that is indirectly related to lesson study and one that demonstrates collaboration is the unofficial or informal

sharing of ideas.

Teacher A has two years teaching experience and teaches 6th graders in that year. He conducted an entire faculty research lesson in December. To prepare the research lesson, first he decided a topic and wrote a lesson plan. Then he proposed his plan to members in Foreign Language Activities team meeting. Finally, he rewrote the lesson plan.

In addition, he asked his grade-level group teachers to have opinions. Although one teacher is a member in Foreign Language Activities team, the other teacher is a member of Japanese Language team. Grade-level groups, meaning teachers who teach the same grades, are important in Japanese elementary schools to run school events and for academic activities. They have desks side by side and have daily conversations of children's conditions and their worries about everyday instructions informally. The teacher who belongs in the Japanese team opened her class to have teacher A do a practice lesson in her class. He could know children's reaction and time keeping. And he adjusted some parts. A head teacher visited to see the practice lesson and gave some advice. This is also informal. Not only teacher A but also all teachers have these relationships with the same grade-level teachers. Like these, there are a lot of informal voluntary meetings to help each other in Japanese schools.

5. Conclusion

Outside Japan, if teachers want to do lesson study, teachers recruit group members and start lesson study on their own. In contrast, this case study illustrates that school-based lesson study in Japan is highly structured and collaborative. It is part of the school's ongoing teacher development culture. From this school's case, the author found three factors as important for a collaborative lesson study. These are "Leadership and shared roles," "All teachers give a research lesson every year" and "Informal voluntary meetings." Although this is a case from one Japanese public elementary school, it shows how the teachers can work together for lesson study. The author believes more studies documenting lesson study are needed as it is now spreading throughout the world.

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