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Challenges and Opportunities of Using Lesson Study in English Language Teaching Among Ecuadorian EFL Teachers

Diego Cajas  and Karina Cherres 

Universidad Nacional de Educación - UNAE
Azogues, Ecuador

Abstract. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of implementing the lesson study model in English language teaching in four schools in Southern Ecuador for four months. Using an action research design through interviews, observations, and journals with a thematic analysis, the researchers were able to identify challenges of limited capacity of reflection and recognition of the activities that required improvement after English classes; limited capacity to provide truthful peer feedback; teachers' incorrect notions about their performance in their classes; difficulties in following a collaborative lesson plan; and disconnection between class activities and the class content. The opportunities identified were teachers' predisposition to collaborate; disposition to attend professional development courses; commitment to work extra hours in planning meetings; openness and desire to be observed in their classes; and willingness to share class materials and knowledge. The authors found a disconnect between teachers' understanding of English language teaching and its proper application in class (from theory to practice). Also, rigid institutional teaching concepts, such as excessive institutional paperwork and activities not connected to developing students' competencies, do not allow teaching innovations.

Keywords: English language teaching; lesson study; teachers' professional development; teachers' collaboration.

1. Introduction

In the English language teaching (ELT) landscape, it is of prime importance to use innovative pedagogical approaches to enhance in-service teachers' practices to achieve students' learning outcomes effectively. One of these innovative approaches is lesson study (LS), which is perceived to be a practical model that facilitates the creation of cooperative environments that promote professional development among educators. The LS model is also considered a research lesson since it is a highly specialized type of classroom action research, focusing on the growth of teacher knowledge and professional practice (Dudley, 2014; Austin, 2017; Byram & Bikmaz, 2021).

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The LS approach is typically carried out by teachers who teach in the same grade level. They meet weekly to plan, execute, and assess a single lesson and select a teacher to teach a class using their plan. After the chosen teacher finishes the class, the subsequent actions include editing the first lesson plan, teaching the lesson again, assessing it, thinking about it once more, and sharing their findings in the LS circle (Taylor et al., 2005; Coenders & Verhoef, 2019; Isoda & Olfos, 2021).

The LS approach is a Japanese professional development method that promotes teacher collaboration (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004). According to Makinae (2019), LS was implemented in Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912), when the government attempted to introduce Western military technologies and scientific revolutions. The country's resources and the school system were altered. Teachers needed to be trained to implement Western arithmetic instead of Japanese arithmetic for mathematics instruction. Understanding the theories and mathematical formulas required teachers to prepare to adopt the new “Gaku-sei” (student) school system. Thus, the object lesson approach was adopted, which was done on the criticism about a lecture. A class was observed, and other students and the teacher discussed the many areas in which they felt the teacher had succeeded or failed. The ‘criticism lesson’ later expanded to what we know now as LS.

The LS approach is carried out through a cyclical process of planning, teaching, reflecting, and modifying a lesson. It strongly focuses on student learning while combining teacher's participation, reflection, and cooperation (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Lewis & Hurd, 2011). It also gives teachers the freedom to work together. In the LS model, they can select the lesson, the subject, the place (a school, a district, or a nation), and the educational objectives of the country (Taylor et al., 2005). Though LS is not widely used in ELT, it has been used in Japan since the 1870s (Dudley, 2014), where educators worked in collaborative networks within a school or district (Taylor et al., 2005). The LS model has proven to be effective in different subjects, such as Mathematics, since it promotes collaboration and other benefits. Hence, it is important to extend its use to other areas, such as ELT, to provide a quality education to students learning English.

The LS approach started to appear in the United States two decades after Stigler and Hiebert (1999; 2009; 2016) identified an existing gap in the teaching methodologies used by teachers in the classroom (Taylor et al., 2005) and recommended considering the world's best ideas to improve teaching. After an comprehensive search for these methodologies, Stigler and Hiebert (1999, 2009, 2016) noticed that LS is a source of teachers' empowerment that leads to further improvement in their classes (Taylor et al., 2005). Additionally, LS has increasingly been implemented in the East and West regions of the United States (Dudley, 2014).

Despite the advantages of LS in teachers' professional development and its widespread adoption in Asia and North America, its use in Latin America is limited, with disparities in access, resources, and support structures (Olfos, 2021). In some Latin American countries, teachers have started using LS spontaneously, as the result of their own curiosity and creativity, rather than as a part of an official national policy. One of the explanations for the limited use of the LS may be

because its implementation often requires curriculum revisions, the provision of specialized training for teachers, and the creation and dissemination of new instructional materials, which usually demand additional budget and time (Estrella et al., 2018).

In the area of ELT, most teaching methods focus primarily on students' oral production of the language, for example, communicative language approach or content and language integrated learning. These methods provide a series of methodological recommendations that teachers need to adopt to facilitate students' language acquisition. The main aim of those methods is to facilitate the interaction between teacher-students and students-students. Few guidelines exist about the interaction among teachers to develop collaboration in planning their classes. To fill this gap, the LS seems to be appropriate to complement the current trends in ELT.

In Ecuador, the integration of LS is emerging slightly as a didactic approach within higher education (Sarmiento et al., 2021), but in pre-service education rather than a professional development method among in-service teachers. This pedagogical strategy is increasingly perceived as a viable instructional method for educators undergoing professional training, whether in traditional face-to-face settings or within the expanding domain of virtual education environments (Sumba, 2022). Teachers in Ecuador have started to recognize the LS approach as a valuable resource for enhancing teaching practices and fortifying pedagogical approaches (Ibarra & García, 2019).

In its multifaceted applications, LS does not only contribute to instructional methods or teachers' professional development. It also serves as a catalyst for fostering reflective practices among educators (Font et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to increase the use of LS in different educational contexts and with various areas, such as ELT. To achieve the practical implementation of LS in Ecuadorian schools, there is a pressing need to address the systemic barriers that impede its implementation and promote more inclusive and sustainable actions to pave the way for teachers, in general, and English foreign language (EFL) teachers, in particular, to use LS in their institutions.

1.1. Lesson Study in English Language Teaching

The studies suggest that LS has been mainly used to teach mathematics and science education (Arslan, 2018) but its use has also gradually extended to other fields, such as EFL across continents (Coşkun, 2017; Yesilcinar & Aykan, 2022) due to its flexibility (Regan et al., 2016). These researchers also conclude that the application of LS in ELT has shown a positive impact on teachers' practices, which has resulted in more practical classes.

The LS approach has also led teachers to improve their teaching practice since they have identified and modified specific teaching techniques (Alwadi et al., 2020). Similarly, when educators use LS, they can better comprehend their teaching materials. Furthermore, through LS, teachers have improved their awareness of their students' learning styles. All of this is possible because the

group of EFL teachers that have participated in the LS processes of implementation have been able to refine their teaching methods through continuous reflection and feedback, which, according to Arslan (2018) leads teachers to improve their confidence and work together to transform their beliefs and attitudes towards the teaching of EFL (Avalos, 2011).

1.2. Challenges in the Implementation of Lesson Study

Lewis and Perry (2006, p. 5) suggested that “lesson study is a simple idea but a complex process” and that one of the biggest challenges is to consider a “premature expertise” of teachers at the moment of its implementation. They also added that mere exposure of teachers to training or participation in the LS cycle does not guarantee they have developed critical thinking or a solid capacity to analyze a subject matter (Lewis & Perry, 2006). This “premature expertise”, which refers to a limited teaching experience, can be reflected in teachers’ incorrect perceptions about their teaching practice.

Some teachers believe that because they have participated in a LS training and been part of its implementation once, they are qualified to positively influence other teachers (Lewis & Perry, 2006). This incorrect notion may have, in fact, opposite effects on other teachers because if a teacher has not been able to acknowledge their own limitations and been able to change them, they may pass the incorrect idea of teaching to their peers. Lewis (2006) affirmed that teachers who have engaged in one cycle of LS and have developed their reflection skills can be mentors for those new to LS. However, if these so-called experts stop seeing themselves as learners, premature expertise may pose a challenge to the development of LS.

An additional challenge is the educators’ tendency to overlook the planning stage of LS as an opportunity for research and knowledge acquisition. This may happen when teachers fail to notice the chronological order of the structure of a lesson. For example, teachers tend to develop attitudes of control and perceived mastery of the subject in the warm-up, the presentation of the class content, practice and evaluation. This gives them incorrect notions of how to teach their classes. In Lewis’ Mills College Lesson Study Group (2005), while participating in a LS cycle, a participant assertively noted that some teachers tended to know everything. This practice prevented the participants from learning and their notions of control created difficulties in creating a collaborative lesson plan.

Another critical challenge is the limited capacity of teachers to provide truthful peer feedback after class observations. According to Lewis (2006, p. 12), “teachers may be too polite to say what they think about research lessons conducted by colleagues.” This attitude prevents teachers from creating an environment that promotes genuine learning. Feedback and constructive criticism during reflection meetings could create tension among participants and lead to conflict (Rock & Wilson, 2005; Adamson & Walker, 2011; Ogegbo et al., 2019). Therefore, knowing how to handle this situation is essential so that providing constructive feedback is not avoided.

1.3 Lesson Study Opportunities on Its implementation

The LS is a cyclical process that involves reflection, emphasizing the importance of collaborative learning settings and the role of social interaction in cognitive development. It also draws the notion of reflective inquiry (Byram & Bikmaz, 2021), advocating for active engagement and meaningful experiences, especially for those teachers undergoing professional development. When teachers are committed, they are willing to share class materials and knowledge (Alwadi et al., 2020), work extra hours in planning meetings, and show openness and desire to be observed in their classes. The LS results in better and more innovative classes for students because the teachers are better prepared. This, in turn, facilitates achieving learning outcomes. It also creates a supportive learning environment that favors students' success by utilizing effective teaching practices identified through collaborative work. The LS process also allows teachers to customize their teaching practices to meet the different learning styles of students.

2. Methodology

This research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges of using LS in EFL classes in public schools in Southern Ecuador?
2. What are the opportunities of using LS in EFL classes in public schools in Southern Ecuador?

This study employed an exploratory action research methodology to answer this research question. The rationale for selecting this methodology is its emphasis on linking theoretical concepts to a practical application, enhancing educational practices, and empowering educators within educational settings (Mertler, 2019). As mentioned earlier, LS is a collaborative process where a group of teachers plan a lesson together, which, later, a member of the group implements. Once the lesson is implemented, teachers analyze, evaluate, modify, and implement the lesson again, following a cycle of implementation, reflection, and evaluation. This cycle aims to improve their teaching practice. Despite LS's positive impact on education, little is known about this strategy by EFL teachers in Ecuador. For this reason, training participants on the process of LS was necessary before immersing them fully in its implementation.

To recruit participants for this study, the researchers invited EFL school teachers from the South of Ecuador to participate in a free workshop on the principles and implementation of LS. This invitation was done through the social networks of the National University of Education; 80 EFL school teachers registered to take part in this workshop. To be accepted in this training, the participants needed to have: a) experienced of one year teaching EFL in public or private schools, b) a B2 level of English, and c) commit to following the workshop guidelines. The workshop guidelines were to: 1) attend all classes, 2) complete assigned homework, and 3) research ELT methodology to include in their lesson plans. After a process of selection, the researchers invited 30 teachers to participate in the training.

The workshop lasted 20 contact hours and was conducted by the researchers on the university's premises for four Saturdays and 20 virtual hours on weekdays. When the course ended, the researchers invited 30 EFL teachers to implement LS in their institutions. After a detailed explanation of the study, seven teachers accepted to be part of the research, and the researchers proceeded to have their informed consent signed and processed the respective permission in their institutions and school districts to carry out this study.

Once all permissions were granted and participants signed their informed consent forms, the researchers started implementing action research design. According to Nazari (2022), the four phases in this design are "plan, act, observe, and reflect", which are carried out in a spiral way until changes are achieved. For this study, the researchers used three phases of the action research (plan, observe and reflect), combined with the LS phases for four months, as shown in Figure 1.

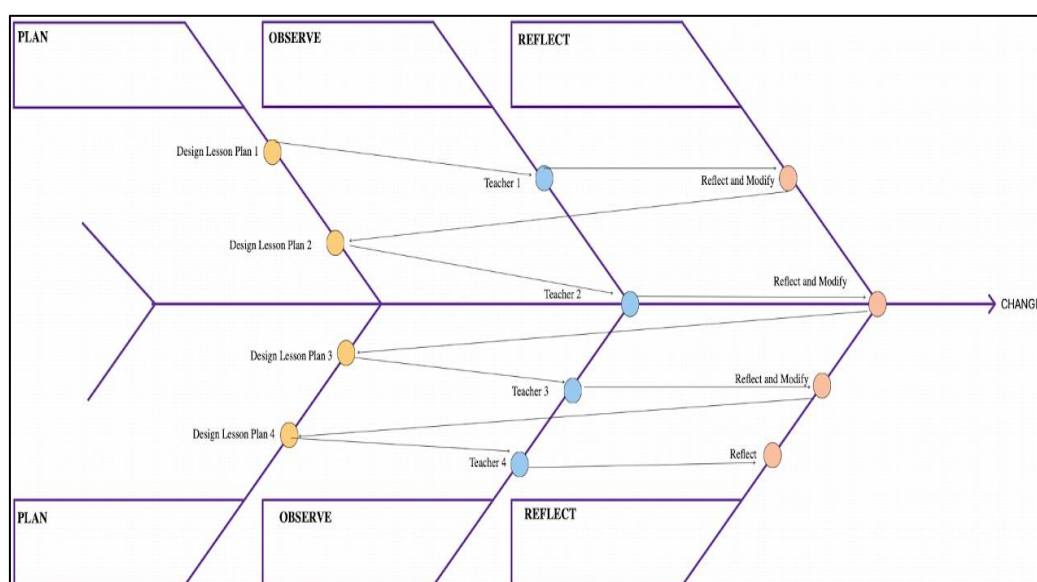


Figure 1: Implementation of the Study

As shown in Figure 1, the three stages of the exploratory action research were followed in this study. The participants planned the lessons virtually through the Zoom platform during the planning phase since the seven teachers belonged to different institutions. In the observation phase, the researchers visited the school and recorded the class of the teacher who volunteered to teach using the lesson plan designed by the group. In the reflection phase, the participants met through Zoom and, consulting the class video, they reflected on the implementation of the lesson plan and, based on their comments, they designed a new lesson plan and chose another teacher to teach. This follows the cycle of LS; all these processes aimed to generate changes in their teaching practice.

During this implementation, the researchers collected data through qualitative observations, memos, journals, and interviews with the participants. Then, using MAXQDA software, data were processed and analyzed employing a thematic analysis.

3. Findings and Discussions

It is essential to highlight the participants' positive predisposition to share their experiences and open their classrooms to be observed and recorded by the researchers. Also, EFL teachers were frank and candid during our planning and reflective sessions. To guarantee the anonymity of the seven participants, the researchers used the following pseudonyms: Teacher 1= Andrea, Teacher 2 = Luis, Teacher 3 = Lucia, Teacher 4 = Anna, Teacher 5 = Alexandra, Teacher 6 = Cristina, and Teacher 7 = Karla.

The data collected were grouped into two overarching themes, namely a) challenges of using LS in ELT and b) opportunities of using LS in ELT according to the research questions set forth in this study. As explained before, LS is a process that comprises organized steps, where teachers plan together a lesson, teach it, observe it, reflect and modify it to form a cycle (Taylor et al., 2005; Coenders & Verhoef, 2019; Isoda & Olfos, 2021). Each of these overarching themes also include two phases related to the implementation of the LS: one, the planning phase, and two, the reflection part, as portrayed in Figure 2.

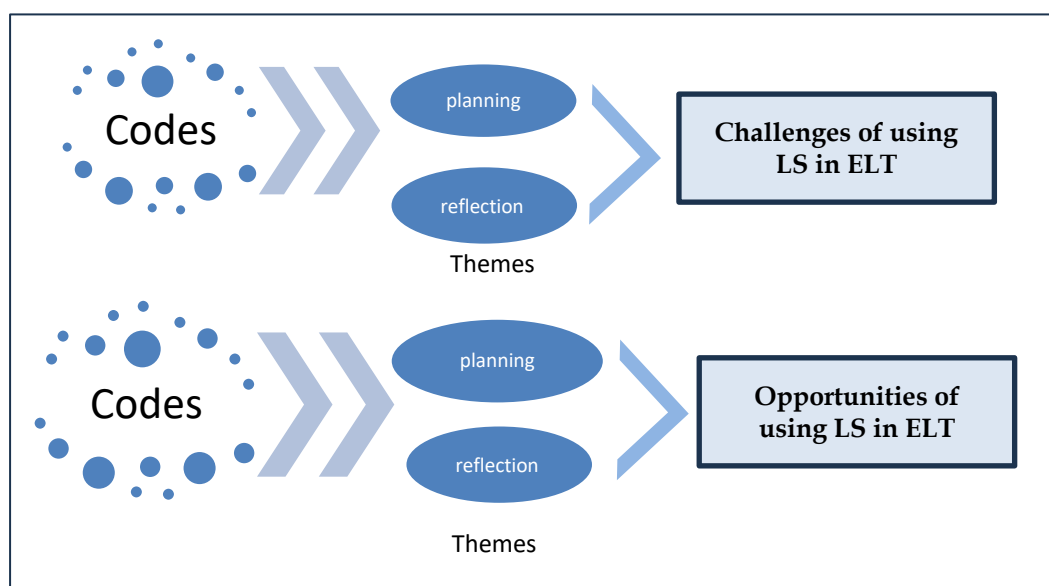


Figure 2: Data processing

To process the qualitative data, as shown in Figure 2, the research questions served as the overarching themes. From these two overarching themes, two themes were created accordingly, and codes were constructed. During the construction of the codes, the researchers used the transcripts of the interviews, observations and journals.

3.1. Challenges of Using LS in ELT

During the phase when EFL teachers planned their lesson plans, the most recurrent challenge they mentioned was designing specific activities for students with special educational needs. All participating teachers had at least one student with special needs in their EFL classes and most of the EFL teachers did not know how to handle special needs. Lucia referred to this situation as follows:

I have a student that I think has autism or something like that; I do not remember his exact diagnosis now. But he is aggressive; he hits all the children in the class. To minimize his behavior, I always ask the student to stay next to me, help me distribute the class materials, and erase the board. I do not allow him to work with the rest of the students; I just keep him beside me. Also, since the student is always next to me, I do not go to the back of the class to prevent him from hitting his classmates.

Based on what Lucia mentioned, it can be inferred that, generally, EFL teachers are not fully prepared to integrate students with special needs in their classes. They do what they believe is proper. However, these practices do not always help students integrate into the class. During the reflection part of the LS and after watching the video of the lesson, Luis provided some recommendations to Lucia:

When you work with students with special needs, you need to give them worksheets to work on. That works for me because the students are busy with these worksheets, and I can work with the rest of the class.

Although the teacher's advice was well-intentioned, it did not promote students' integration either.

According to Ibarra and García, 2019, LS helps strengthen pedagogical approaches since it is a collaborative work. However, when the participants do not sufficiently understand a specific aspect of teaching, it can lead to a 'fossilization' of incorrect teaching practices, as is the case with the inclusion of students with special needs. For this reason, one challenge of LS implementation is identifying proper strategies and methods for implementing EFL in classes. Another challenge that participants faced while implementing LS was related to instructional materials. During the construction of the lesson plans, participants mentioned that the main or, in some cases, the only resource they used in their classes was their EFL textbooks. Considering that the participants of this study belonged to different institutions, they did not have the same EFL textbook to use for the lesson plans. Thus, the teachers had to design their own instructional materials.

During the planning part of the LS, teachers did not include innovative resources; instead, their suggestion throughout this study revolved around the use of flashcards, worksheets, and, on a few occasions, resources that were difficult to use in their classes, as shown in Anna's excerpt during the planning session:

Since I will teach in this class, I was thinking of using my EFL textbook, but I will use some images presented in flashcards and a worksheet. So, my students can talk about daily routines.

Reinforcing what Anna mentioned, Alexandra suggested how to use these worksheets,

We can also look for a worksheet where students can fill in the gaps with their daily routines, and when they complete the activity, they can read their answers.

In another session, when teachers were planning a class about fruit, a participant suggested bringing a fruit basket for each student. Luis said,

You can bring a basket of fruits for each student, and you repeat the name of the fruit. Then, students show the fruit and eat it.

Though this activity seemed innovative, it was challenging to accomplish since the teacher who would teach the class would have had to bring 40 fruit baskets to her class.

Currently, primarily due to the internet, EFL teachers have access to various resources regarding instructional material construction. Innovation is the key to students' attention and class participation but innovation is another challenge for EFL teachers. Based on the data, and as shown previously, the strategies that teachers favor, revolve around the sole use of EFL textbooks, flashcards and worksheets.

Public schools have limited infrastructure and resources so it is important that teachers innovate their classes and instructional materials. When the researchers visited the participants' schools, they witnessed the limitations in physical and technological infrastructure. For example, the classrooms were not big enough to accommodate students. This resulted in limited possibilities for the teachers to rearrange the students' seats or plan activities requiring students to move. Regarding technological infrastructure, most schools did not have a good internet connection and did not have technological resources such as overhead projectors or multimedia classrooms. However, most schools had green areas and sports facilities so teachers could plan outdoor activities. Unfortunately, during the planning meetings, participants limited their lesson plan activities inside the classroom.

As part of LS implementation, teachers had reflection sessions, in which, based on the class videos, they were expected to critically analyze the implementation of the lesson plan and provide constructive feedback. However, this was difficult to achieve because, during the reflection phase, the teachers mentioned that the lesson plan implementation was adequate, and the class activities helped achieve the learning outcome. However, based on the class videos, teachers struggled to implement the lesson plan and, in most cases, completely deviated from what the teachers had collectively planned.

For example, in one lesson plan, the teachers planned to teach 'present simple' using Canva (the online graphic design tool) and present students with images and questions about routines. When the selected teacher was teaching this class, she decided to add content instead of deepening the uses of the simple present. This may have been the result of last minute changes in the lesson plan.

When the teachers analyzed the video of the class, they did not consider that the last-minute changes in the lesson plan could have affected students' learning. Instead, they praised the teachers for having made these changes. Karla referred to these changes:

As a suggestion, I don't know if, for example, when you introduce a certain topic about, I think, what you can teach is "have or has ". Previously, I don't know, but you could have done an activity where you gave them incorrect sentences for part of the materials so that they could find the mistake and correct it. And then let them do their own sentences.

As shown in this excerpt, teachers did not consider the effects of adding extra content to what was planned or if students were ready for it. They did not consider the time allotted to the class or their students' previous knowledge. Instead, they suggested adding more content to the class, which was not officially planned. Although those teachers believed that it was good practice, they did not reflect that, by doing this, the teacher may have lost the objective of the class and might not have achieved the learning outcomes planned for the lesson. This shows that some EFL teachers believed adding more unplanned content to the class was a good practice. However, by doing this, they did not consider that students need time to process and internalize language content.

In general, what was shown in most of the videos is that the participants struggled to follow a lesson plan that was constructed by the entire group. It was also revealed that, in most of the classes, teachers added different activities which were not included in the lesson plan. On this practice, some participants and the teacher teaching the lesson called it "innovation" rather than a problem. This may mean that teachers cannot provide honest feedback and that teachers have difficulties identifying faults in a class. This is a challenge in the use of LS, since one of the conditions is that the teacher selected to teach must follow the lesson plan.

Apart from adding activities that were not planned, teachers have to face rigid policies existing in their schools. For example, when teachers analyzed a class video, a participant noticed that the teacher implementing the lesson plan did not work in groups, despite this being included in the plan. In response to this, the teacher replied that the authorities in her school would not allow teachers to work with their students in groups. The teacher was working with seven year old children and she said that, at that age, teachers had to encourage independence among their students. Thus, working in groups with students of this age prevented them from being independent.

3.2. Opportunities of Using LS in ELT

As mentioned in the literature review, LS promotes teacher's participation, reflection, and cooperation (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002; Lewis & Hurd, 2011), aiming to improve teaching for the benefit of students. The data in this study showed that teachers' predisposition to collaborate was very high by implementing the LS phases. They all connected to most of the virtual planning sessions and afterwards volunteered to implement the lesson plans in their schools. On the few occasions when a teacher could not connect, they would always contact one of the researchers.

Similarly, despite teachers having some difficulties to provide honest feedback to their peers, especially when they did not follow the lesson plan, they did motivate each other. For example, whenever teachers analyzed a certain activity, they always started by saying, "the way you carried out the activity was very good" or "I like the rapport you have with your students. It shows how good a teacher you are". Phrases such as this motivated and empowered teachers to volunteer to teach the following class.

In the planning sessions, teachers were able to exchange their experiences. They said that they have learned to collaborate and that they learn more when they talk to other colleagues. They also added that only during the implementation of the LS they were able to really exchange their experiences without any fear of being criticized. The following is a dialogue of teachers sharing their experiences on how to motivate students.

Andrea: To motivate students when they complete a task, I give them winning cards or stars or circles.

Luis: In my class, I use points. For example, if they speak more, I give them extra points. At the end of the term, they have extra points which increase their grades.

Lucia: When my students must complete a task, I turn it into a competition. I divide my class in groups, and they compete for extra points. I write on the board the number of points that each group has based on the correct answers. The group with the highest number of points wins.

Conversations such as these helped teachers to generate debates about ELT and, as a result, they developed new class activities in the lesson plans, which were mostly implemented by the participants in their EFL classes. The LS implementation also helped teachers share their class materials.

Teachers generally have a lot of work that goes beyond teaching in the classrooms. They need to plan their classes and do administration, such as mark homework, among others. This limits their time to develop teaching materials. Through LS, teachers were able to share their teaching materials and generate a database of resources that they would use beyond the duration of this study.

The weekly exchanges that teachers had during the duration of this study helped consolidate a community of practice. Most teachers did not know each other at the beginning of the training course but, by the end of the study, they developed a professional relationship that may help them continue supporting each other. This support was gradually built when they interacted in the LS sessions. For example, when the teachers were developing lesson plans, they took the opportunity to ask for recommendations on specific concerns they had about their own classes, as shown in a teacher's excerpt when they were planning on how to teach the simple present verb tense:

It's not easy for students to add "s" or "es" at the end of the verbs. It is the same as teaching students the simple past. It is difficult for them to add "ed" at the end of the verbs. They cannot differentiate regular from irregular verbs. So, it's necessary to start step by step. What do you think? How can we teach the simple past?

This excerpt exemplifies how teachers took the opportunity to ask for advice. Although they deviated from the content they were planning, the participants saw these collaborative sessions as the space to listen to recommendations on how to teach their own classes. This exemplifies how LS promotes professional development. As Font et al. (2023) mentioned, this space stimulates participant teachers to question their own practices critically.

4. Conclusions

The challenges identified were the limited capacity for reflection on and recognition of the activities that required improvement after the lesson. Additionally, teachers showed a limited capacity to provide truthful peer feedback as well as wrong notions about their performance in their classes. Regarding planning, teachers had difficulties in following a collaborative lesson plan, and a disconnection between class activities and the class content. The opportunities identified were teachers' predisposition to collaborate, besides their disposition to attend professional development courses. Moreover, this study witnessed their commitment to work extra hours in planning meetings, their openness and desire to be observed in their classes, and their willingness to share class materials and knowledge. In contrast, the results showed that there is a disconnect between teachers' understanding of ELT and its proper application in class (from theory to practice). The researchers concluded that there is a disconnection between teachers' knowledge of ELT and its proper application in class (from theory to practice). There are also rigid institutional conceptions of teaching that do not allow teaching innovation, such as excessive institutional paperwork and activities that are not connected to developing students' competencies.

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