



Seeing is Believing: Use of Peer Observation for Professional Development

KEYWORDS

ESL teacher, Classroom teaching, peer observation, professional development

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ABSTRACT *A college-level teacher of English who was committed to improving her classroom practice set about the task of reflecting on herself and her teaching through peer observation. She found herself gaining a deeper understanding of several classroom issues, and developed, because of the understanding, alternative conceptions of teaching and alternative instructional practices. This led her to try out the alternative ideas in her classrooms and she found the experience empowering and transformative in her personal growth and professional development. Observing this transformative process over a period of a year and a half from the records the teacher have maintained with remarkable perseverance and from the discussions she has had with her, this researcher has drawn some conclusions which have significant implications for ESL teacher learning.*

Introduction

Peer observation is the process of colleagues observing others in their teaching, with the overall aim of improving teaching practice. Many universities have incorporated peer observation (also called peer review) as part of a strategic approach to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning (Bennett & Barp 2008; Byrne, Brown & Challen 2010). Often peer observation is included as part of an introductory or "foundation" program in university teaching and learning targeting new staff, or as an element in an accredited post-graduate program in higher education. In Australia the University of Wollongong has a program in which a staff member can invite a senior colleague accredited as an observer to observe their teaching and write a review for use by the staff member in their probation/promotion application. When the main focus of peer observation is on helping colleagues develop their teaching, the process is often conducted as a reciprocal exercise, with staff observing each other, sharing their insights and providing mutual support (Bell 2005).

The traditional view of the process also includes an assumption that colleagues can learn effectively from each other's explicit, constructive feedback about observed teaching. However, evidence is increasingly emerging that learning from watching a colleague teach can be just as beneficial as, if not more than, receiving feedback, even when that feedback is well constructed.

AIMS OF THIS STUDY

The principal aim of this study is to examine how peer observation enables ESL teachers to make sense of their professional worlds as well as make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Slimani (1987) had observed and tape recorded which had a list of questions about grammar, lexis, spelling, pronunciation and other factors related to language. She made a comparison between her observations and learners' uptake charts.

Malcolm (1991) investigated language teachers' decision making when he observed one hundred classes of Aboriginal students in West Australian primary schools and identified three micro tasks – the management of content, of participants and of face.

Bailey (1996) experimented using lesson plans, classroom observations, audio-recording, observational field notes and through the follow-up interviews and found out reasons why

teachers change their pre decided plans of taking classes.

Katz (1996) used two audio-recorded, formal interviews with each teacher, one at the beginning and one at the end, journal writing and conducted classroom observations, documented via extensive field notes, which were transcribed and conducted research to understand the instruction of writing to both native and non-native users of English.

Richards and Pennington (1986) showed how five graduates of a B.A., TESL course in Hong Kong survived their first year of teaching by developing a simplified working model of teaching consistent with their classroom and the larger educational context.

Sen Gupta (1998) made an exploratory investigation of the secondary school writing class in Hong Kong using peer evaluation technique.

Wang and Seth (1998) have conducted experiments at Qingdao University, in the hope of turning classroom observation into an effective means for teacher development.

Borg (1998) feels that allowing teachers to function as data-analysts in the study of other teachers and ultimately of their own-behaviours and beliefs can promote a more holistic form of self-reflection than those based solely on the behavioural analysis of teaching.

Cosh (1999) followed two models of peer observation.

Model 1: Merit assessment in the USA, for example, in certain districts in Florida, where teacher accountability through peer observation of teaching was linked to pay. The scheme collapsed because of teachers and union opposition.

Model 2: Similar peer observation models in the UK, although linked to appraisal rather than pay. The reaction of teachers seems to be that this is a procedure imposed from above and over which they have no control. It is carried out with minimum of commitment and reflection.

Peer Observation

This involves a teacher being observed by a peer while teaching to gain an understanding of some aspect of teaching, learning or classroom interaction. Observation provides an opportunity for novice teachers to learn from the experienced. The observer records the teaching activity in the form of a narrative, field notes and checklists.

Peer observation of Teacher A

As her colleagues were busy and were reluctant to observe her classes, this researcher herself had to act as her observer. Before observing each class, the researcher had a discussion with the teacher, and the teacher decided on the aspects to be observed by selecting from the observation checklist provided to her. The observer entered the class to be observed five minutes earlier and sat in the last row without disturbing the students.

After the class, the researcher spent 10 minutes discussing her observation with the teacher, allowing the teacher to respond.

The teacher opted for peer observation as a means of reflective practice. Teacher A prefers teamwork. She considers herself as a trainer facilitating her students' language learning in a better and easier manner through interaction. She prefers using why-type questions to test students' comprehension skills.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

An Analysis of Case

Teacher A feels that reflection through peer observation is the liveliest method of professional development for a teacher because the teacher could get feedback directly from the observer through post-observation discussion. She seldom uses the mother tongue of the students but made very good use of newspapers, pictures, and sometimes her own life experiences as teaching aids. She feels unhappy about the linguistic standards of her students and says that they are not able to answer the questions asked in the class in English.

The teacher's choice of statements from the inventory shows that she prefers rule-based, skill-based, and function-based approaches.

This researcher observed six classes of Teacher A. The first class the researcher observed was a I B.Com. class where she was asked to observe the overall teacher behaviour, while the teacher was teaching 'parts of speech'. The teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students, and motivated the class asking questions about the previous lesson. The students responded well and the teacher initiated the day's lesson. For about 30 minutes, the lesson was teacher-fronted. Then the teacher observed that the students were passive and were getting disturbed. Therefore, she cracked a joke, which attracted the attention of the students, and she started teaching again. But the way she wrote on the blackboard was of concern. However, the observer's feedback helped her become more careful about her blackboard work.

The same procedure was followed for the second class also, but the class was interactive and the teacher introduced

some activities as it was a listening class. The observer was asked to observe the teacher-student interaction. While taking part in the activities set by the teacher, many students tried to get their doubts clarified. In the post-observation discussion, the teacher decided to set group activities, so as to involve all the students within the class duration. Thus, the teacher not only introduced interaction responding to feedback but was thinking of ways of making it more effective. But this time she could not evaluate the knowledge gained by the students through the activity. In the post-observation discussion, the observer suggested time management.

In the third class, the teacher was found to be conducting activities on 'voices' in a planned way, by dividing the class into teams of two and setting a transformation exercise in voices. She went round clarifying their doubts, but she failed to reinforce the right response from the students and was also found ineffective in evaluating all the student performances. The teacher was informed even of these two problems by the observer.

While observing the fourth class, the observer noticed that the time given to the students to answer the questions asked by the teacher was limited, and that they found it very discouraging. The teacher was informed of this difficulty by the observer and was taken care of by the teacher in the later session.

While observing the fifth class of Teacher, the observer noticed that the teacher was eliciting the difference between the sentences denoting instruction and the sentences reporting the work done. The teacher through recalling her students' previous knowledge of some chemical process, made her class more effective.

After the sixth observation session, the teacher was also informed of the other suitable authentic sources of teaching aids, which the teacher found to be interesting.

The observation, however, involved some minor constraints, but they were soon overcome. On the first day of observation, the teacher felt a little nervous. However, later, as she found the feedback valuable in effecting improvement in her teaching, she became relaxed.

CONCLUSION

The observer learns about how to perform the practice by seeing it, rather than being told about it, and comes to believe (strengthening their self-efficacy) that they can also teach in this way, and so is motivated to attempt the practice. This study explored academic teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of peer observation for improving their teaching practice, within the context of their participation in a formal foundations program.

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