

Using peer observation as a learning tool for EFL novice teachers to foster their teaching readiness

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating EFL novice teachers' awareness and consulting their attitudes concerning peer observation of teaching as a learning tool to foster their teaching readiness. The data for the study was collected through a questionnaire with a sample of 10 EFL novice teachers and an interview held with 5 EFL experienced teachers at Tlemcen University in Algeria. The findings showed that the majority of the participants know and use peer observation. They confirmed the benefits of peer observation as a tool to help them in improving themselves and their classroom practices. Nevertheless, they do not use it accurately. Therefore, it is recommended that the Algerian EFL novice teachers be trained in peer observation for its significance in their daily teaching and professional development.

Keywords: EFL, learning tool, novice teachers, peer observation, teaching readiness;

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1. Introduction

The quality of the education process depends on many factors. One of the most important factors is having qualified teachers. Having competent teachers needs well-trained and professionally developed (Tzotzou, 2014). Many EFL novice teachers enter classrooms across Algeria. Some of them join with solid preparation, competence, and confidence to help students learn. This group of new teachers is generally provided with some training in special schools or colleges. However, many novice teachers who have graduated from university are unprepared to meet the challenges they face. Thus, novice teachers often find themselves in a problematic state when they enter the profession of teaching.

Consequently, new teachers have to look for other ways that may help them in their classrooms to improve their teaching practices, face their problems and meet the learners' needs. In this piece of research, the researcher tried to shed light on one of those ways that may prepare them for teaching. Peer observation is one of those ways used for many decades by teachers at all levels worldwide.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Peer observation defined

Peer observation is one of the reflective teaching activities that can help teachers improve as teachers and, as a result, improve their teaching practices. It is seen as a viable strategy for developing teachers, pedagogy, and professional skills. Two or more teachers or peers observe each other's teaching to identify strengths and weaknesses, become aware of what they are and are not doing in their classrooms, and acquire new strategies, methods, and tactics that may lead to effective teaching and learning. Peer observation allows teachers to share their teaching experiences.

According to Bell (2005, p. 3), peer observation is a: 'collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions, and feedback and trying out new ideas'. Hendry and Oliver (2012) reaffirm what has been mentioned, describing peer observation as an act in which two teachers collaborate and observe each other's teaching with the primary goal of improving teaching quality.

According to Richards and Farrell (2005), the primary purpose of peer observation is to look more closely at how the lesson is presented and better understand the teaching and learning process. They say that both the observer and the teacher being observed can improve their teaching and build their professional growth through peer observation. Peer observation provides various benefits for both the teachers who participate in it and the students they teach. That is, it results in qualified teachers, high-quality instruction, and, as a result, favorable student outcomes. Bennet and Barp (2008, p. 559) summarise the process and effects of peer observation as follow:

...a process whereby a teacher participates as an observer in a lesson taught by a colleague to explore the learning and teaching process and environment and where this 'observation' leads to reflection and discussion, with the underpinning long-term aim of improving students' learning.

1.1.2. The process of peer observation

Having practical peer observation and being able to improve requires teachers to follow some guidelines and detailed steps. Peer observation should be voluntary before proceeding with the processes of observation. In this context, novice teachers should be willing to observe and be

observed by another teacher to understand how to teach and cope with the various obstacles they may encounter while teaching, allowing them to grow and increase their students' learning. Another factor that contributes to successful teaching observation is the relationship between the observer and the observee. They should have mutual respect and trust so that they can assist each other. So, EFL novice teachers should choose colleagues close to them to communicate with each other and have interchangeable trust and respect. Based on the guidelines mentioned above, the process of peer observation generally consists of three essential stages:

1.1.2.1. Pre-observation meeting

Observations can be a fruitful experience if both the observer and the observee contribute to the event's constructive nature (Ewans, 2001). The more specific the observed teacher, the more pertinent information the observer is likely to supply (Sheal, 1989). The observee determines what will be observed, how it will be observed, and what he hopes to gain from it. During a pre-observation meeting, the observer and observee agree on the acceptability of classroom activities such as group work, lectures, or discussions (Donnelly, 2007) for gathering basic information about the class. Besides that, subjects such as the overall teaching schedule; the arrangement of the observation session(s) and timetable for feedback sessions; the learning outcomes for the agreed-upon session(s); the assessment schedule, and criteria for observation are some of the basic requirements of the pre-observation session, during which the observer and observee discuss the subjects extensively to derive maximum benefit (Donnelly, 2007). As a bonus, it gives observers the opportunity to learn about the culture and problems that are likely to arise in the classroom ahead of time, which significantly aids them in reflecting on what they believe, will happen (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

1.1.2.2. Observation of teaching

Observation is the next stage where the peer observer visits the peer observee's class. It takes place at a predetermined time. It may be necessary to inform students about the observation ahead of time and reassure them that the objective is to assist the teacher or observer's professional skills rather than judge the students (Donnelly, 2007). The observer's focus should be drawn to the students' motivation, listening, comprehension, and learning during the lesson (Donnelly, 2007). The observer needs to be a part of the experience without being drawn into debate or dialogue (Martin & Double, 1998).

Given that the observee initiates this process, the observer should be prepared to allow the critical friendship to develop naturally (Farrell, 2001). The observer and observee agree on how the session will be recorded using the proper documentation. The primary method of capturing observations is written narratives in field notes (Richards & Farrell, 2005). In this respect, Montgomery (1999) recommends using a sampling frame to record classroom observations because it allows the observer to record factual events involving rapid writing. With a written record, the observer should provide accurate feedback and clear evidence for any observations. When writing a narrative, it is prudent to avoid writing everything that happens during the session (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The language used should be objective and accurate, and there should be no indication of judgment. The observer should determine the most effective methods for providing guidance that inspires rather than discourages (Stillwell, 2009, p. 354).

1.1.2.3. Post-observation meeting

Post-observation sessions are critical because they focus on three crucial points: a review of the criteria and agreements, an analysis of the observed lesson's learning results, and a review of the lesson plan (Donnelly, 2007). The observers provide feedback to the observee regarding the observed lesson and determine how the observational data will be discussed and used in the future.

According to Donnelly (2007, p. 122), the post-observation meeting is a model of providing and receiving feedback. Gosling (2005) proposes a dialogue model in which both observer and observee benefit from the interaction instead of the traditional notion of 'giver' and 'receiver'. Ewans (2001) proposes that feedback should be a process that is usually affirmative and encouraging. Feedback could be provided immediately following the observation session or a day later (Hampton, Rhodes, & Stokes, 2004). In the formative assessment process, instant recalling of the observed session could be beneficial.

In contrast, observees may be overwhelmed or underwhelmed by their performance, making it difficult for them to listen to or respond appropriately. At the same time, the follow-up feedback allows additional time for observers to reflect on what they had observed. In addition, it provides observers time to consider how they will report their comments and maybe give a kind of priority to what was observed (Hampton et al., 2004). Nevertheless, delaying feedback for a long time is not recommended because the observee is involved in day-to-day teaching and may not remember all the events due to the identical conditions they encounter every day in the classroom.

1.1.3. The benefits of peer observation

Peer observation has many benefits that may help teachers improve themselves as professionals, their teaching, and their students' learning outcomes. According to Richards and Farrell (2005), there are several benefits of peer observation. First, it helps teachers to become more aware of the problems they may confront in their classrooms. It is contended that through peer observation, teachers will get new insights to enhance their teaching because it allows them to identify some problems that they cannot observe by themselves. It also helps them narrow the gap between the perfect situations of teaching with what happens in reality. According to Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2015), peer observation can be utilised to foster reflection and meet individual development needs. It gives teachers the space to stop and think about their way of teaching and try new methods and strategies. That is, being reflective means looking for what you need to develop or change and knowing your points of strength and the good practices in your teaching to share them with your colleagues.

Moreover, peer observation allows the observee to implement what s/he has learned at university or other forms of professional development like conferences, training courses, or reading. For example, after reading a book that introduced a new strategy, the teacher might use peer observation to get constructive feedback about how well this strategy will work in their particular context. In addition, peer observation develops communication skills among teachers since it encourages them to give constructive and supportive feedback without fear of being judged. Thus, confidence is boosted among teachers to work with each other when knowing that all of them have parts of their teaching that can be developed or changed.

1.2. Purpose of study

The present research explores EFL novice teachers' awareness of peer observation, its benefits, and its process. It also investigates both experiences and prospective EFL teachers' attitudes toward peer observation as a learning tool for novice teachers to foster their teaching readiness. To achieve this purpose, the researchers have opted for a case study. The following research questions were invested:

1. Are novice EFL teachers aware of peer observation?
2. What are the attitudes of both experienced and new EFL teachers toward peer observation as a learning tool?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 10 EFL novice teachers and 5 EFL experienced teachers at Tlemcen University-Algeria. The participants were chosen randomly. All the novice teachers hold Master's degrees in English and are Ph.D. students at the same university, and their experience ranged from 1 to 5 years. They are part-time teachers and are in charge of different modules and levels. All of them specialised in Didactics. On the other side, all the experienced teachers hold a doctorate in various specialties, including Applied Linguistics, Didactics, ESP, Language Sciences, and Educational Psychology. Their teaching experience varies from 7 to 15 years. They are full-time teachers.

2.2. Data collection

This research has adopted a mixed-method approach to accomplish the objective set up before. The fundamental rationale for adopting a mixed method was to achieve a greater depth and understanding of the research phenomenon by utilising quantitative and qualitative methods. As interviews and questionnaires are commonly used as data collection tools in mixed-method designs (Gillham, 2005, 2008), we aimed to exploit these techniques to gather rich and valid data. Questionnaires and interviews suited the nature and purpose of this study. First, the questionnaire was administered to EFL novice teachers, and the interview was held with EFL experienced teachers.

3. Results

The results have been grouped related to the purposes of this study under the following crucial titles:

3.1. The awareness of EFL novice teachers about peer observation

The analysis of the collected data revealed that most novice teachers (8 out of 10) were able to define the term peer observation as a process where two or more peers observe each other's teaching practices to improve themselves as new teachers and their performance. Moreover, the prospective teachers were asked about the benefits of peer observation. All of the respondents (10 out of 10) listed several benefits already mentioned in the previous studies. They included improving teaching practices, gaining confidence in one's ability to teach and learn more about teaching, a shift in instructional views (Bell, 2005), collaboration development, and more respect for colleagues' approaches (Quinlan & Åkerlind, 2000). They added that observing a peer can help us reflect on what we do in our classrooms, evaluate our teaching, and update or change our practices as needed.

Peer observation also claimed to encourage reflection on teaching practices and foster discussion about and sharing of effective practices (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). Besides, the results indicated that these prospective teachers had seen this term either in the Teacher Education Development course when they were would-be teachers, attending conferences or study days, or doing research and reading articles and books in the field. There are three essential stages involved in the process of peer observation. According to Richards and Farrell (2005), when conducting peer observation, the following phases should be considered: the pre-observation meeting, the observation of teaching, and the post-observation meeting. Implementing peer observation should be done in a staged approach so that teachers have the opportunity to reflect and adapt practices as needed.

The results showed that half of the respondents (5 out of 10) were unaware of these necessary stages. They thought that peer observation is just observing a peer in general without focusing and giving feedback or notes to each other at the end of the session. These results indicated that many new teachers did not apply or use peer observation even though they had information about it.

Experienced teachers confirmed that since many of them declared that novice teachers do not usually ask them to organise such observations. The other half of the participants stated that they know the stages of peer observation; they implement it but not accurately. They always skip one of the stages. It means that novice teachers should be aware of peer observation; however, they should be trained to use it adequately to have a successful process.

3.2. Teachers' attitudes about peer observation as a learning tool for EFL novice teachers to foster their teaching readiness

The results revealed that both novice and experienced teachers had positive attitudes toward peer observation as a learning tool. Novice teachers said that peer observation gives them the chance to watch experienced teachers in a real classroom context which offers them a fruitful opportunity to understand the process of teaching-learning. In line with this result, it is mentioned in the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2018, p. 8) that peer observation 'enables teachers to build their capacities and develop a shared understanding of effective classroom practice'. They also stated that they collect evidence of high-quality teaching to support their professional development through peer observation. In other words, novices learn more about effective teaching methods, strategies, and techniques that help their career advancement (Tzotzou, 2014).

Furthermore, both novice and experienced teachers claimed that peer observation teaches the perspective to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In another way, many new teachers learn about the different teaching methods and techniques at university, but they do not know how to apply them in an authentic context. Thus, observing experienced teacher implements them in their classroom enlighten their minds and encourages them to put their theoretical knowledge into practice. Moreover, the participants stated that peer observation assists newbies to become more aware of the problems they may confront while teaching, like overcrowded classes and the unavailability of teaching materials. It was confirmed by Richards and Farrell (2005). Another recurring theme is the role can play in fostering a collaborative spirit. According to Richards and Farrell (2005), it allows teachers to develop a sense of collegiality by sharing and discussing similar or identical teaching concerns, resulting in mutual assistance. Finally, the overwhelming majority of the respondents reported that peer observation allows personal development through a process of reflective practice. All this leads to improvement in the quality of teaching experienced by the students (ProDAIT, 2006).

4. Conclusion

To better learn about teaching, peer observation has been used to train pre-service and beginning teachers in classrooms to investigate instructional processes and obtain a better understanding of teaching (Gebhard, 1990, p. 21). The present paper tries to examine whether or not EFL novice teachers are aware of the concept of peer observation, its benefits, and its process. Besides, it aims also to explore EFL teachers' perceptions concerning peer observation as a learning process that leads new teachers to be ready to teach. The findings revealed that EFL teachers are familiar with peer observation. However, knowing the term without knowing how to use it in a natural context is not enough. Thus, newbie teachers need to be trained in implementing peer observation to self-initiate the process, succeed in it, and have effective results at the end of it.

Concerning teachers' points of view, the results indicated that both novice and experienced teachers had a positive attitude towards peer observation as a learning tool that helps prospective teachers to face the challenges of teaching and develop to be effective teachers. It proved that peer observation is an efficient learning tool to foster teaching readiness. However, it is recommended

that must train novice teachers first. Both training and engaging in the process of peer observation may put newbies on the right track to achieving quality teaching and quality education.

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