

Peer Observation and Reflection in the ELT Practicum

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if peer observation (PO) in an ELT practicum for graduate students led to reflective teaching. The 15 students in the practicum taught EFL at two universities in rural Thailand in eight-week intensive courses. Five questions were investigated: (1) Did PO help the students engage in reflective teaching? (2) What were the students' reactions to PO? (3) Did the students modify their teaching behaviors or practices because of PO? (4) Did the students change any of their teaching beliefs because of PO? (5) Would engaging in reflective teaching in the practicum generalize to subsequent teaching experiences? The data were collected by means of two questionnaires. The findings demonstrate that the students liked PO, and that they reflected on their teaching which helped them modify their teaching practices and beliefs. They also show that the students would engage in reflective teaching in future teaching.

Keywords: peer observation; ELT teacher education; reflective teaching

Introduction

While observation of teachers is a common practice, it is generally done for evaluation and personnel matters such as contract renewal. Teacher observation for such purposes is usually done by a supervisor or someone in a position of authority. This might cause teachers to be overly stressed, nervous, and anxious, which might have a negative impact on their performance. As Crookes claims that when the observer is an administrator it "induces anxiety" (2003, p. 29). To deal with the potential of a negative performance, teachers may plan easy lessons on something that they have already covered in previous lessons, so as to get positive evaluations.

Williams (1989, p.86), in a critique of an in-service teacher-training program in Singapore, found that the traditional format of a teacher trainer observing a teacher was unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons, including:

- The teachers didn't like it. It was threatening, frightening, and regarded as an ordeal.
- The teacher had no responsibility for the assessment.
- It was prescriptive.
- There was no provision for individual pace or wishes.

Another view of teacher observation sees it as a tool for growth and development. Malderez (2003, p. 180) labels this type of observation as "observation for development." This is in

sharp contrast when observation is done for evaluation. Generally, observation for development is done by trusted colleagues or peers in order to remove the supervisory or authoritative aspect.

Cosh (1999, p.25) critiques a number of different models of peer observation. She claims that the models fail to help experienced teachers “since genuine development comes about through self-awareness, reflection, and open-mindedness to other approaches and styles. Cosh (1999, p.25) then offers two models of peer observation that incorporate a reflective component in order to “encourage self-reflection and self-awareness about our own teaching. The first self-reflective peer observation model involves teachers selecting an area of general interest, observing classes, completing an observation form or feedback form. This is followed by a general discussion of the topic by everyone.

Cosh’s second model of reflective peer observation is individual. A teacher observes a class on a topic of concern to her. After the observation, the observer would complete a feedback sheet to help her gain insights in her area of concern.

Another approach to peer observation was used by Carolan and Wang (2012). Both were teaching English, Carolan in Australia and Wang in China. They used video recordings of their classes, email, and Skype to observe and talk about each other’s classes. They report that their transnational peer observation helped them gain insights into their own classrooms and teaching English in the other country.

Richards and Farrell (2005, p.94) claim that peer observation in a pre-service teacher education program has a number of benefits. These include:

- Helping teachers become more aware of the issues they confront and how they can be resolved
- Helping narrowing the gap between a teacher’s imagined view of teaching and what actually happens.

Closely aligned with observation for growth and development is reflection. As noted above, Cosh’s two models involve teacher reflection, as does peer coaching as proposed by Vacilotto and Cummings (2007, p.153). They investigated the effectiveness of peer coaching, which they describe as a reflective approach to teacher development, in a practicum for graduate students teaching ESL. In their study, “teachers share data collected through peer observation as a means for reflection on their individual teaching practices”. Their results demonstrated that their peer coaching model was successful in exchanging teaching methods and materials, developing teaching skills, and rethinking personal teaching practices.

Gün (2011, p.126) discusses the important of reflection training in teacher education programs. She claims, on the basis of her experience in teacher training, that teachers “are unable to do so effectively unless they are specifically trained in how to reflect (they tend to ‘react’ rather than ‘reflect’!). It has also been my experience as a teacher educator that students in ELT teacher education programs need training, guidance and coaching to become reflective teachers.

The Study

This study investigated the effectiveness of the use of peer observation (PO) in a practicum course for graduate students teaching EFL. The purpose of PO was to help the graduate

students become reflective teachers. Five questions guided the study: (1) Did PO help the students engage in reflective teaching? (2) What were the students' reactions to PO? (3) Did the students modify their teaching behaviors or practices because of the PO? (4) Did the students change any of their teaching beliefs because of PO? (5) Would engaging in reflective teaching in the practicum generalize to subsequent teaching experiences?

Setting

This study investigated PO in a practicum for graduate students in the Department of Second Language Studies, University of Hawaii. The practicum is an elective course for students in either the master's or doctoral programs. For five years, I taught it at Ubon Rachathani University (UBU), Thailand. The practicum met twice a week for three hours each time for eight weeks. The students taught EFL courses to students at UBU.

Participants

In the fifth year of the practicum at UBU, there were 15 graduate students, eight females and seven males from six different countries including Japan (2), Korea (4), Oman (1), Taiwan (2), USA (5), and Vietnam (1). One had completed one year of the doctoral program, while the remainder had completed their first year in the MA program. Their teaching experiences ranged from no experience to eight years of experience.

Procedures

I developed PO for the practicum in a manner that incorporated the suggestions by Day (1990), Cosh (1999), Vacilotto and Cummings (2007) and Gün (2011). The planned outcome would be teachers who engaged in reflective thinking about their teaching. The focus of PO is *exploration, description and reflection*. When introducing PO, I discuss the differences between exploring and describing and supervising and evaluating. I relate exploring and describing what the observer sees in a peer's classroom to gaining a greater understanding of the teaching and learning processes.

PO necessarily involves two parties: the observer (peer) and the person being observed, the teacher. Each party has important roles to play. The observer describes what happens in the classroom. The teacher learns about classroom behavior, interactions, management, etc., without having to worry about being judged or evaluated.

Before the students start PO, I introduce reflective teaching, using Richards and Lockhart's definition: A reflective approach to teaching is one in which teachers "collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching" (1996, p. 1). I then assign several articles on reflective teaching (for example, Brandt 2008; Lee 2007) and discuss them in class. The readings and the subsequent class discussions help students gain an understanding of the nature of reflective teaching.

As I use PO in the practicum, there are four phases:

1. Pre-observation conference: Both parties meet to discuss the focus of the observation – what it is that the teacher wants observed (for example, opening the class; transition between activities; feedback on student responses).

This is an important phase of PO. It helps ensure that the focus is exploration and discussion, and not evaluation and judgment. Discussing and agreeing on the focus of the observation

gives the observer a role to play: Try to capture everything that concerns the agreed-upon focus.

The observer and the teacher then discuss how to do or conduct the observation. For example, if the teacher wants to learn about what she does when a student makes an error in speaking, they will discuss how the observer will gather such data.

2. Observation: The observer observes the class and records in detail the focus of the observation agreed on in the pre-observation conference.
3. Post-observation conference: The observer tells the teacher what was observed. The observer's task is to describe what happened and to avoid being evaluative and judgmental.

When I introduce this phase of PO, I stress the importance of the observer being neutral, of simply reporting to the teacher what the observer saw and recorded. For example, if the focus of the observation was what the teacher did when her students were in small groups, the observer would detail the behavior of the teacher during small group discussions. The observer would avoid saying something such as, *"I liked the way you helped that group when it was confused."* Rather, the observer would report something like: *"You answered the students' questions when they asked you for help with the discussion."*

4. PO report: Both parties reflect on the experience, write a report, and give a copy to each other and to me.

Included in the reports is information about the class observed, the focus of the observation, and what was learned. Also, the teacher discusses the impact of having an observer in the classroom. I require everyone to engage in two observations as an observer and two as a teacher.

Instruments

At the end of the eight-week practicum, I distributed a survey which asked the participants to comment on the activities, tasks, and readings that they did in the practicum. One of the activities was PO. The survey was voluntary and done anonymously. Twelve surveys were completed and returned.

Approximately seven months later, I asked the 15 participants to respond to a follow-up survey. The second survey had three statements about the PO with a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (strongly disagree; disagree; agree; and strongly agree). It also asked the participants to explain their responses to the three statements. The second survey also had a question about using PO in future teaching situations.

Results and Discussion

Question 1. Did PO help the students to engage in reflective teaching?

The second survey, as explained, was done approximately seven months after the practicum. Table 1 displays the responses to the three statements. The responses to

the first statement, *The peer observation activity helped me to reflect on my teaching beliefs and practices*, allow us to answer question 2. As can be seen from Table 1, all 15 students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. This finding is significant, as it clearly shows that peer observation in the practicum can result in students engaging in reflective teaching.

The explanations that the students gave to explain their answers help to understand the effectiveness of PO in engaging in reflection on their teaching:

- *The peer observation allowed me to observe other student-teachers' practice in class. Their practice sometimes showed remarkable differences from mine, which gave me an opportunity to think of my motives and accounts for my own teaching practice.*
- *It definitely helped because observing how other peers taught their class made me think of how I was monitoring my class and helped me become more aware and also helped me notice little things that I think I might have done it too when I taught but not realizing it.*
- *Having the pre- and post-conference session was very helpful in examining the teaching beliefs and practices. As it was the goal of having the conferences, letting the observer know what I want him/her to focus on during the observation and getting feedback from the observer allowed me to look at a specific point of my practice and to reflect on that.*

Question 2. What was the students' reaction to PO?

The first survey, given at the end of the eight-week practicum, listed the activities and tasks that the students did in the practicum and were asked to comment on them. The students' reactions to PO were positive. This is an encouraging result as these students do not feel that an observer in the classroom is a threat or a negative experience. Here are some comments from the 12 participants who responded to the first survey:

- *This activity I liked the best! It was great experience, and I learned a lot from being observed and being an observer. I should have done it more.*
- *It's a little hard to keep the objectivity. But, it helps a lot. It might be good if the observation schedule is set before the practicum starts.*
- *Very useful. I wish I could observe more and be observed more.*
- *Non-critical way of observation report actually worked well for me, even though I first wanted critical way of report.*
- *It helped to reflect my teaching.*
- *I like this activity. By doing so, I can closely observe how other teachers think and teach.*

Question 3. Did the students modify their teaching behaviors or practices because of the PO?

The responses to the second statement, *Because of the peer observation activity, I changed some of my teaching behaviors or practices*, show that 12 of the students did indeed change some of their teaching behaviors or practices (Table 1). It is important to stress that the changes in teaching behaviors or practices were the result of peer observation. Given the wording of the statement, the changes may or may not be due to reflection. Here are some representative samples of their explanations:

- *Because of the peer observation I am more aware now about reducing teacher talk time and increasing student talk time. I am also aware that I move a lot in my class which is a positive point. Also, I am aware that I should not use excessively words like good, well-done, and excellent but use them at certain occasions.*
- *All of my colleagues are very passionate about teaching and put so much effort on it, so sometimes I copied their strategies and adapt those to my class needs.*
- *Two of the teachers I have observed showed a greater tendency to bring students' autonomy in class. This affected my own teaching style.*

Two of the three students who disagreed wrote:

- *Although the POA was helpful, it didn't influence much on my teaching behaviors. When I was doing the activity, I asked the observer to focus on some specific things that are most likely to happen only on that class, or something that was not appropriate for the class. One thing noted from the observation reports had to do with the type of feedback I was giving to the students. I do not recall there were any changes on my practice afterwards.*
- *Observing others gave me ideas – particularly observation of more experienced UBU professors. However, the feedback I received from peer-observers of my own class was simply – looks like it's working. I did direct the observation during the pre-observation conference, but the feedback from the observation wasn't very meaningful to me. I believe as a novice teacher, watching others or being observed by more experienced teachers might be more meaningful.*

Question 4. Did the students change any of their teaching beliefs because of PO?

The majority of the students, eight, agreed or strongly agreed with the third statement, *Because of the peer observation activity, I changed some of my teaching beliefs*. Six disagreed and one strongly disagreed. This finding indicates that teacher beliefs are more resistant to change than teacher practices. That is, it might be much easier to change what teachers do in their classrooms than what they believe about teaching and learning. The research on pre-service language teachers' beliefs has mixed results. There is some evidence that shows stability in the pre- and post-course beliefs of student teachers (for example, Borg 2005, Peacock 2001). But other studies (see Clarke 2008, Mattheoudakis 2007) changes in student teachers' beliefs. Here is what some of them wrote in explaining their answers:

- *I always tried to be friendly to students, however I learned that discipline is important by observing other teachers' classes. I learned that the fun atmosphere and serious atmosphere have to be harmonized evenly.*
- *Yes. I am still a new teacher, and my beliefs are constantly being adapted and developed.*
- *I was able to also learn more about how my beliefs and assumptions of teaching were present in my own teaching as well.*
- *I might have changed some of my behaviors or approaches, but I did not think that the assumptions or, especially the beliefs, were changed.*
- *As I can remember, the discussions with my peers touched more on practical issues, such as teaching practice, but little on philosophical issues, such as teaching beliefs.*

Question 5. Would engaging in reflective teaching in the practicum generalize to subsequent teaching experiences?

In order to answer this question, the students were asked to respond to the following question in the second survey:

4. *If you have taught since 690, please answer A. If you have not, please answer B.*

A. *To what extent, if any, did the PO help you engage in reflective teaching?*

B. *Do you think that the PO might help you engage in reflective teaching when you begin to teach?*

There were six students who had subsequent teaching experiences after the practicum course in Thailand; they responded to question 4a. All six reported engaging in reflective teaching. The remaining nine students answered question 4b. All of them reported that they would engage in reflective teaching in future teaching assignments. This is another important finding because it shows that what is done in an ELT practicum can have impact a future teacher's growth and development.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to determine if peer observation in an ELT practicum for graduate students led to reflective teaching. Their reactions to PO were positive. It helped them engage in reflective thinking about the teaching and learning processes, allowing them to gain insights into their own teaching. All 15 reported that they had used or would use reflective teaching practices after the practicum.

These results are encouraging as they demonstrate that what students do in their practicum may have long-term implications for their professional growth and development. More study is needed to determine if these findings are restricted to a practicum done abroad or can be found in other contexts.

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