Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Development through Peer Observation Programme

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to explore the development of peer-observation programme for the use of an extension language school in Hong Kong. The research objectives were to explore teachers' perceptions on a peer observation programme as a means to improve teaching practice, examine how teachers make sense of the peer observation programme after they have taken part in it and to suggest alternative approaches and measures by which schools can improve peer observation programmes in schools.

Data was collected from six teachers who participated in peer observation programme in Hong Kong through an interview process. The research has found out that peer observation can be a good tool for continuous professional development for teachers in order to develop their teaching strategies. This is especially important within the field of language education. From the analysis, most teachers are wary of the practicalities of peer observation due to the sensitivity that is associated with it. The research also found out that teachers think that if the peer observation approach is well developed, it can be potentially interesting or generate excitement among teachers.

Keywords: English language teaching, peer observation, teachers' professional development

1. Introduction

Krashen (1982) argued that teachers play a crucial role in education; they serve as the main medium of instruction in a classroom. Teachers support and produce various work forces in society, and, thus, governments of different countries spend significant amounts of money on the training of teachers. Unfortunately, teacher training is extremely short, and once completed, a teacher may no longer have the luxury to undergo the necessary learning experience again. Thus, seeking relevant approaches to create a sustainable expert training and development programme for educators is necessary to assist them in reaching their full potential as professionals in their field. Peer observation is identified as one of the approaches to achieve this goal; it is an indispensable method intended for the professional development of teachers.

A peer observation programme involves teachers observing the class of their colleagues and subsequently initiating a constructive dialogue regarding possibilities of enhancing their teaching practice. This scholarly exercise may have particular significance for foreign language teachers, considering the recent demands for language educators to advance their pedagogical strategies as an answer to the latest studies concerning second language acquisition.

1.1 Research Question

The current study focuses on one fundamental research question.

How do teachers perceive the peer observation programme as a strategy to enhance teaching practice?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Purpose of Peer Observation

Peer observation mainly aims at facilitating the professional development of teachers. This particular development refers to the possible undertaking of educators of a series of courses to gain personal growth, while

acknowledging the required sustainable presence of peer observation as part of the development process. To attain personal growth, establishing a programme is necessary, including staff development, professional development and in-service education. Peer observation is one of the vital undertakings with the potential to facilitate enrichment of the educators' pedagogical skills (Bailey & Bergthold, 1996).

2.2 Peer Observation in Hong Kong

Sivan and Chan (2009) investigated the on-site peer observation offered by the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme at one of the Hong Kong universities. The PGDE is a two-year part-time programme for in-service secondary school teachers with a bachelor's degree but no formal teaching qualification. The on-site peer observation occurred at the secondary school of student teachers, who were instructed to observe two regular lectures hosted by one of the qualified co-workers. To ensure confidentiality, the observed teachers were simply shadowed and renamed as peers to protect their identities. By capturing learning approaches used by the seasoned educators, this on-site peer observation aims to inspire student teachers to apply these strategies in their own teaching. The process requires the submission of a summary report of each observation through face-to-face discussions and encoded feedback with their university tutors. The research validated that student teachers released positive comments regarding the onsite peer observation, considering the minimal pressure compared with traditional supervised observation. Nevertheless, peer observation is limited because of the novelty of the concept in Hong Kong. Accordingly, school administrators and onsite teachers may encounter difficulties in introducing onsite peer observation at schools. As such, university departments and partnered schools are encouraged to continue working together to improve linkages among student teachers.

2.3 How Peer Observation Assists Professional Development of Teachers

Instructors constantly search for professional paths to guide them in attaining their goals to hone their practice (Richard, 1998). The professional development of teachers may be the answer to this complex occupation (Joyce & Shower, 1995). The reflective model of peer observation is generally followed in several educational institutions for the professional development of teachers in the UK (Cosh, 1999). The Schon Act in 1987 reinforced the demand to enhance the professional teaching practices of both novice and experienced teachers. Kemmis and McTaggert (2005) proposed that the reflective model of peer observation may provide a series of feedback from supportive peers that can be included in the teaching practice; alternately, such model may launch the engagement of a group to gain insights from general questions through practical applications, including constant evaluation, planning and action (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in an extensive educational learning centre in Hong Kong. The programme for the professional development of teachers was implemented in one of the extensive English language learning schools in Hong Kong. In the UK, extensive schools are called cram schools because of the extra preparations and additional courses.

A total of six teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) participated in the study. All teachers possessed the English language teaching qualification(s) such as the Certificate/Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA/DELTA), Master's in Applied Linguistics, Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and the Trinity Certificate in TESOL. All teachers are non-native English speakers and possess near-native proficiency in English.

The purposive and criterion sampling strategy was applied to select a homogenous population of participants. To be engaged with the principle of qualitative inquiry, where research participants should share their understanding and feeling of teachers' professional development programme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Position, academic qualification, teaching qualification, and years of teaching experience were collected as their demographic data. Age and gender were not collected for the data because these were not important for this study. All of the participants were full-time teacher of the site.

As a former worker of the research site, the researcher had access to this site and to the participants. An email invitation letter included the research purpose, research question, nature of the research, data collection steps, analysis management, and the involving time needed from each participant. Participants had the rights to accept or reject the participation of the research. As result, all six teachers agreed to participate to the research.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Name	Position	Academic Qualification	Teaching Qualification	Years of Teaching Experience
Teacher #1	Senior Teacher	Bachelor of Education (Local University in Hong Kong)	DELTA	18
Teacher #2	Senior Teacher	Bachelor of Psychology (Local University in Hong Kong)	DELTA	20
Teacher #3	Senior Teacher	Master of Arts in TESOL (UK University)	DELTA	16
Teacher #4	Mid-level Teacher	Master in Applied Linguistics (UK University)	CELTA	8
Teacher #5	Mid-level Teacher	Master of Arts in TESOL (UK University)	Trinity TESOL	10
Teacher #6	Mid-level Teacher	Master in Applied Linguistics (Australian University)	CELTA	7

3.2 Observation and Pre-Observation Cycles

The fundamental goals of the programme included facilitating the enrichment of the teachers' teaching practice and encouraging their peers to offer feedback. Accordingly, teachers with different years of teaching experience were grouped together to possibly allow additional meaningful exchanges. Adapting the mentor development method of Stillwell (2009), the observation cycle has been established in this study.

Three participants formed one group. The first participant was an experienced teacher. Both the second and third participants could be mid-level or novice teachers. Despite the different numbers of the years of teaching experience among these teachers, their exchanges should be based on equal grounds. Explicitly, the programme was not aimed at offering special attention to experienced teachers by considering their opinions to have more authority over the novice educators when it comes to the identification of best teaching practices. Teachers were deliberately given a clear orientation on this issue. Furthermore, they were informed regarding the process of conducting the observation before the programme started. In each group of three participants, the observation went through the following cycle: Participant #1 observed Participant #2; Participant #2 observed Participant #3; and Participant #3 observed Participant #1 (Figure 1).

Furthermore, we conducted a pre-observation meeting after the briefing to allow all the participants to agree on the order of observation (i.e. who should be observed first), and some areas requiring focus during the observation was established before the start of the observation cycle. For example, the group could decide to notice one specific feature of teaching. A group could opt to place extra emphasis on the effectiveness of enhancing students' interaction in one round of observation, and on the catering of individual differences in another round. Defining the focus of observation would easily offer both the teachers and observers a clear expectation and an area to develop. On the basis of the defined focus, the teachers enumerated a series of criteria they considered appropriate in advancing learning. To illustrate, when the focus was on students' interaction, they might consider devoting at least one third of the class time on interaction useful. Teachers subsequently agreed to use this set of criteria as their guide in teaching and observing.
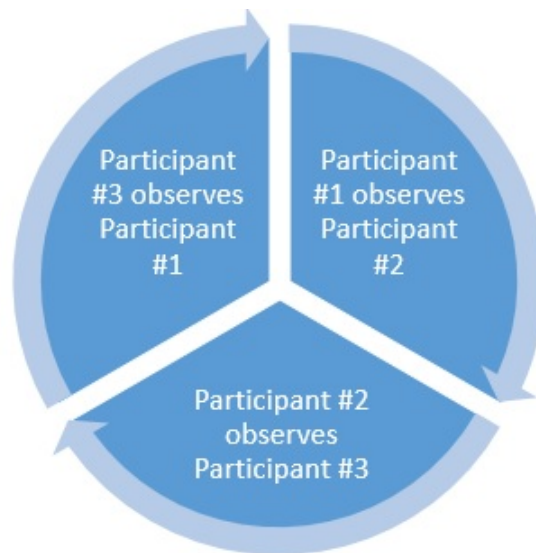
Figure 1. Peer observation cycle

3.3 Actual Observation

The complete observer role was considered the most fitting for the purpose of this study, considering the existence of a set of criteria followed by the observer. Explicitly, the observers must focus on whether or not those criteria were met. Had the observer took on a participatory role, conducting a quality observation could have been difficult. Accordingly, the observers were required to sit in the corner of the classroom without participating in any classroom activities. Furthermore, the teachers were required to take down as many notes as possible during the entire observation.

3.4 Post-Observation Sharing Meeting

After a round of observations, participants were required to participate in a post-observation sharing session. This post-observation sharing meeting afforded the participants an exhaustive understanding and self-awareness regarding their skills. Each participant was given the opportunity to provide positive and negative feedback to their peers. Despite the possible lesser practical experiences of the novice teachers compared with the experienced teachers in the group, the former may have gained modern scholarly knowledge resulting from their comparatively fresh teacher training. Thus, everyone was reminded to be on equal grounds during the discussion. The sharing was not aimed at becoming a sharing session in which one teacher learns from another but as an interactive learning environment.

3.5 Post-Observation Cycle Interview with the Researcher

In attempting to gain answers to the research question, the semi-structured interview was employed as a useful key method, allowing respondents to offer details in their responses regarding complicated matters (Merriam, 2009). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher presented a list of topics and questions for discussion. These topics and questions were prepared before conducting the interview.

The post-observation cycle interview stage presented key interview questions that attempted to explore the perception of the teachers regarding the benefits of a peer observation programme. The plan for the peer observation programme was shared with the participants only if they explicitly asked for the details. The participants were asked to establish their reasons to their answers during the interview. They were deliberately asked to provide specific examples to support a perspective.

4. Finding and Discussion

This chapter contains the presentation and discussions of the findings from the analysis of the qualitative data. This qualitative enquiry enabled the researcher to create an inductive analysis of the data and build themes, answer the research questions and discuss the findings to understand how peer observation affects the teaching practice of teachers (Creswell, 2007). The themes were sourced from the researcher's collective investigation of all data.

The analysis of the interviews yielded the following five themes for the research question:

(1)   Few teachers had experiences in peer observation.

(2)   Teachers may attempt to perform better.

(3)   Only a few know how it must be done exactly.

(4)   Time continues to be an issue.

The current research is driven by one central research question.

What are the teachers' perceptions on a peer observation programme as a means to improve teaching practice?

4.1 Not Many Teachers Had Experience in Peer Observation

In the literature review, it was explained that beside supervisory observation, peer observation is widely used in many educational institutions for the purpose of teachers' professional development. It was asserted that peer observation allows teachers to select co-workers to attend and observe their classroom lesson(s). After the observations, both participants were encouraged to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the lesson following with an implement plan; it encourages teachers to make reflections to their peers for feedback. However the evidence in this research suggest that the position of the literature that peer observation is a wide spread methodology is not supported by the quality of experience demonstrated by the respondents. It was found that half of the participants (i.e. 3 out of 6) did not have any experience in peer observation. For those who did have some experience in peer observation. Such experience did not result from a structured programme. They usually took part in ad hoc observation because they were required to do so by the school. Teacher #3 said summarised it quite appropriately:

'Well. Not many teachers would be interested in such an activity. But we were asked by the school authority to conduct peer observation as a preparation for a quality assurance programme run by the government.'

Teacher #2 explicitly said that peer observation was something that was emphasised in his teacher training, but it almost never existed in his real teaching life.

'There are a lot of things that they talk about in the university, but never happen in reality. Peer observation was definitely one of these things.'

From the findings, it appeared that peer observation was still not common in the teaching practice of Hong Kong schools. Many of the teachers did not have experience in it. However, it was worth noting that some schools would require their teaching staff to conduct peer observation prior to government inspection. This practice implies that peer observation may be one of the indicators of school performance. Indeed, the benefits of peer observation were documented in the literature as discussed in Chapter 2. But it appeared that the practice was not perceived as positively in authentic school contexts.

4.2 Teachers Might Try to Do Better

All feedback from experienced and novice teachers are submitted in both formative and summative reports. The notions of peer observations provide the opportunity for formative and summative sharing and how Chinese instructors handle the workload and stress from peer observations. This notion in the literature seems to be supported by the information that has been collected. This is because given that they thought such a practice of peer observation was not popular among teachers, the participants were asked why they thought some schools may follow this practice. Many of their responses were concerned with pleasing the authorities in that teachers conduct peer observation in order to fulfil requirements set by the school authority and/or the government. Teacher #3 put the notion this way:

'It was a show, basically. Teachers do it for the sake of pleasing their superior. It [peer observation] has been acknowledged as an effective way of promoting professional development. So if we [the teachers] are doing it, it shows to the government inspectors that we [the school] value the professionalism of teachers. This should give a tick in their checklist.'

It has also been suggested that some teachers do it because they really want to improve their teaching. But many participants thought that these would be exceptional cases. Teacher #5 said:

'As I said before, someone needs to be passionate about teaching to want to do so much… there are some people like… but it would be an exceptional case when these people happen to work in the same school.'

Teacher #6 had a similar view:

'It could be that your boss is so passionate about this. And he asks you to do this. In that case, everyone needs to

follow.'

From the data, it appeared that these participants knew that peer observation was a desirable practice from the point of views of the government and often of the management. However, most of did not demonstrate eagerness to do it. The reasons for this reluctance were to be explored.

4.3 Not Many Know How Exactly It May Be Done

Some literature went on to say that classroom observation has obtained a negative reputation among English Language Teaching professions because of its subjective evaluation, human resource decision and assessment. It is known in China, even the subject has completed excellent teaching activities, and the observers must make a few negative comments for further recommendations. Such practice may create strong resistance for teachers to participate to peers observations. Teacher #1 said:

'I believe it's more than sitting into your colleagues' class and observe. I don't know exactly what to pay attention to.'

This notion of not knowing what to do was echoes by Teacher #6 who claimed:

'We learnt about the practice from our pedagogy courses. Since we have little experience actually doing it, we simply don't know what to do.'

The lack of practical knowledge and experience were not limited to the staff members who had not had experience in peer observation. Even for those who reported to have participated in a peer observation programme, they were not very sure if they were doing it 'the right way.' Teacher #4 reported this:

'What we did in the school that I previously served was that we were put into groups by the school authority, before we visited each other's class. We did not have to really do anything, like giving feedback or discussion… I mean we observed each other, but I am pretty sure that's not the right way to do it. At least, there should have been some sort of feedback…'

Teacher #4's assumption is that conducting peer observation may be challenged. It may be worth accentuating that different peer observation programmes may have different aims, and that such programmes could take time to develop. For example, in his case where feedback was expected, it could have been that the school and its staff were completely new to the approach; as a result, asking staff members to sit in each other's class was the very first step to get used to having someone extra in the classroom. It would be unfair to judge that their practice was not the right way. On the contrary, if the teachers did spend extra time on improving his / her teaching because of the peer observation, the programme might have achieved its goal.

Another common remark made by a number of teachers was the understanding of the term 'peer.' Some of them demonstration confusion between evaluative observations, which are often conducted for appraisal purposes, and peer observations, whose aim is seldom to evaluating teachers' performances. Therefore, in the perception of these participants, peer observation could be evaluative, and that was also why they struggle to participate in such a programme. As Teacher #5 said:

'We were observed by our department head from time to time. He had to fill in some kind of report to evaluate our teaching skills. On one hand, we cannot reject, because it is part of the formal appraisal procedure for all staff members. On the other hand, no one wants to be evaluated all the time as if we need to monitor to teach well.'

From this, it was understood that teachers may face a dilemma of accepting or rejecting an invitation to participate in a programme involving observation. It was because, from their experience, observation was the synonyms of evaluation and appraisal. This echoes with the findings reported above that not many teachers had experience in peer observation as a means to improve teaching, or to develop themselves professionally.

4.4 Time Still an Issue

At schools, teachers, regardless of their working institutions, are notoriously busy professionals who need to work from morning to evening without any breaks. Such busy schedules deterred them from taking part in a peer observation programme. As Teacher #1 reported his schedule of the day when the interview was conducted:

'I reported to the school this morning at 7:45. Then I had the morning assembly, and the first 4 lessons. I was then marking some of the students' writing before printing some supplementary worksheets for my other two classes in the afternoon. After these two lessons, students are dismissed but I had to follow up the tutorial activities which I am responsible for… Not to mention the regular extra classes for the students sitting in the public exams.'

He explicitly mentioned that he had to make time for the interview, and that if the researcher had not been able to wait until the late evening, he would not have been able to make it. Also, he said that he could not see how time may be squeezed into extra meetings that participation may entail. This had brought to another issue regarding time.

Teachers thought they may not able to meet for the pre-starting meetings and the post-observation sharing meetings because each of them had a busy schedule. Since the meeting may take at least 60 minutes, teachers may feel less interested to participate. Teacher #3 put this concern into his words:

'Well, I can make it [to this interview] because it is just you [the researcher] and me. If it was…all of us [all participating teachers in the group in question], how can we have a common time slot to meet. Given this, we may be talking about the lunch time or in the late after when everyone sort of finish their duties…'

However, some teachers had a more positive thought about the time constraint. Teacher #6 said this:

'We will have to make time for it. But the key is whether or not we have the support by the management. If we do, we may be able to put aside other duties that are less urgent and less important… After all, the big question is, is it really worth doing? How much can we and students benefit from the programme we spent time on participating?'

Teacher #6 admitted that time was inevitably a major concern, but he also said that if the return (i.e. the benefits) was proportional to the efforts teachers put in, it was still worth for the teachers to take part in such as peer observation programme.

The purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' perceptions on a peer observation programme as a means to improve teaching practice at an extension English language learning centre in Hong Kong. The research questions were addressed through thematic analysis of all of the qualitative data collectively. Analysis of the interview transcript enabled the researcher to obtain a holistic, integrated view of the participants' understanding.

5. Limitation and Conclusion

This research contains its own flaws, requiring considerations before one interprets the findings of the report to avoid generalisations. Understanding the findings should allow for a contextual evaluation of the issues discussed herein. Notably, the entire research focused on the language teachers in Hong Kong. Their evaluation and attitudes might be directly influenced by the cultural context. Thus, conducting the same research among Europeans or Westerners with distinct cultures may produce different results, thereby restricting the generalisations of the study caused by cultural limitations. The next issue concerns the sample used in this study. The views gathered by the researcher as samples of this study only came from six randomly selected teachers. The number may be insignificantly small to create any generalisations of the findings concerning the teachers' perceptions on the peer observation programme as a method of enhancing teaching practice and answering how teachers appreciate the peer observation programme after their participation on the said activity. Accordingly, limited recommendations also exist regarding alternative approaches and measures by which schools can enrich peer observation programmes in schools.

Even if we increase the number of people chosen in a study of this nature, Bryman (2012) explains that research relying on data from what respondents opt to express may be misleading given the lack of honest answers from some respondents with respect to their views. In the study, the researcher personally discussed with the respondents the necessity for complete candidness, given that the study was purely aimed for academic purposes with a promise of utmost confidentially. However, no guarantee exists on how the respondents may respond, thus significantly limiting this research. Furthermore, the researcher has employed many secondary studies (both theoretical and empirical studies) as reference for the study. These secondary studies also have their own weaknesses, affecting the extent to which they have been used. Finally, the research design limits the information because the researcher was not objective but rather constructive in the analysis of the interview data. The use of interpretive research philosophy heavily involves the researcher's personal opinion on data interpretations. Therefore, given the same information, other researchers will interpret such data differently and thus may restrict the generalisation of the findings.

The gathered information assists in addressing all the research questions posed at the start of the study and raises other necessary issues left undiscussed in this research. The latter can be explored further in future studies. A fundamental argument in this research is the teacher's indispensable role in education, considering their task of managing the classroom (Richard, 1998). However, the teacher training is extremely short, with possibly no luxury for the teacher to gain another educational opportunity after fulfilling the said programme. Thus, a

sustainable professional training and development of the teachers is necessary to help them possibly realise their full potential through relevant approaches.

Thus, the research has considered peer observation as one of the various tools available for a sustainable professional development for teachers to enhance their teaching strategies. Recognising this valuable tool is especially significant within the field of language education. Confronted with this challenge within the Hong Kong's educational sector, the research first aims to explore teachers' perceptions on a peer observation programme as a means to enhance teaching practice. After analysing the research responses, some key issues clearly surfaced as far as perception is concerned.

Conversely, most teachers are cautious of the practicality of this approach because of the sensitivity associated with it (Bailey & Bergthold, 1996). Apart from peer observation possibly creating a possibly intimidating atmosphere in the classroom and the potential friction between teachers underscoring their colleagues, the participants suggested that teachers should be given incentives to ensure efficient performance of this task. This recommendation suggests that for peer observation to succeed in schools, compensatory motivations should be offered to teachers by the school authorities (Sivan & Chan, 2009). This motivational strategy is necessary given that most of the teachers in Hong Kong are being paid salaries and wages based on their performance. This finding means that placing the additional task of peer observation without any motivating factors can affect their interest and commitment to it. Without the motivation from the authorities, the teachers' responses will show no resistance if they are compelled to participate, but genuine commitment is bound to suffer. They may only participate to please the authorities.

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