

The Effectiveness and Impact of Post-observation Feedback Sessions in an In-service Training Program

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Abstract: An essential component of any training activity is observations, and in almost any teacher education or professional development context, observations are followed by feedback sessions aimed at improving teaching practices. Nevertheless, whether these sessions accomplish this aim is an issue of concern as it is highly related to how effective it is perceived to be. This study aims to explore how effective post-observation feedback sessions are perceived by the observed instructors, what factors make feedback effective, and whether feedback has any impact on their practices. Data were collected qualitatively by conducting semi-structured interviews with the instructors and Professional Development Unit (PDU) members. The results showed that the feedback was considered effective by the instructors, and it impacted their teaching practices positively, while helping them with their adaptation to their new institution. The results also shed light on the factors that made feedback effective from the instructors' and the PDU members' perspectives.

Keywords: post-observation feedback sessions; in-service teacher education; teacher training; professional development

Introduction

Post-observation feedback sessions (POFSs), commonly held in teacher education courses, institutional evaluations, and continuous professional development programs, provide opportunities for teachers “to talk about themselves and their teaching” (Donaghue, 2020a, p. 402). These meetings are both informative and engaging, and they enable the teacher who has been observed to have a better understanding of “why their teaching appears to be successful (or not) in different contexts” (Copland & Donaghue, 2019, p. 405). Therefore, they may lead to the changes that will improve the teachers' teaching practices, which is one of the major goals of professional development programs (Guskey, 2002). At the institution where this current study was conducted, POFSs are an essential component of the in-service training program as the instructors who take part in the program are observed by the Professional Development Unit (PDU) members several times a year throughout the program, and during these POFSs, the instructors¹ reflect on their lessons together with the PDU member who observed them and engage in a dialogue during which they share their

[1] In this study, instructors refer to full-time teachers of English who teach at an intensive language program of a university.

ideas, concerns or questions related to their teaching. The POFSs are aimed to be developmental and to contribute to the instructor's teaching practices as well as to their adaptation to the teaching context as the instructors in this program are in their first year at this institution, though they may have had teaching experience somewhere else previously. The current study was conducted in this in-service education context, where the program was designed and started to be implemented in 2020. Although this study was not aimed to be an evaluation of this in-service program, the researchers aimed to investigate an essential component of this then recently-established program, the post-observation feedback sessions, in order to better understand their effectiveness. Specifically, the feedback sessions were explored in terms of their effectiveness from the observed instructors' and the PDU members' perspectives and the impact these sessions had on the instructors' teaching practices.

Literature Review

Teacher professional development is considered "a promising intervention" (Liu & Phelps, 2020, p. 537), which teachers engage in due to their belief that they will increase their knowledge, improve their skills, grow themselves as well as their effectiveness with their students (Guskey, 2002). According to Crandall (2000), as part of teacher education programs, it is important to provide teachers with opportunities not only for reflection on beliefs and practices but also for formulating and reformulating their views on teaching and learning. This is also true for professional development programs, and reflection should be an essential component so that teachers can benefit from the program and consider a change in their beliefs and teaching practices. Guskey (2002) states that bringing about a change in teachers's attitudes and beliefs, their classroom practices as well as their students' learning outcomes are the main aims of professional development programs. Nevertheless, in order for the change to occur, he suggests that it is essential to view it as a gradual and hard process for teachers, to provide regular feedback to the teachers, and to ensure there is continuous follow-up, support and pressure so that teachers continue their efforts to change.

In order to ensure that teachers receive continuous feedback, they need to be observed whether it is part of an in-service teacher education program, a teacher education course, an institutional evaluation, or a continuous professional development program. When observations are carried out for developmental purposes rather than evaluation, one of their aims is to find out the impact of the professional development program on the teachers. In this study, observations are carried out as part of an in-service teacher education program. Freeman (1982) offers three approaches to in-service teacher observation, which are *the supervisory approach*, *the alternatives approach*, and *the non-directive approach*. In the context where this study was carried out, a reflective model to teacher education and a non-directive approach to observations during post-observation feedback sessions was embraced.

The focus of this study, POFSs, is a topic of interest to many researchers, and thus have been studied extensively. In literature, most of the studies that have been conducted explored POFSs in relation to reflection (Copland et al., 2009; Crichton & Gil, 2015; Kim & Silver, 2016), teacher identity (Donaghue, 2018, 2020a, 2020b), self-efficacy (Prilop et al., 2021), use of videos for reflection and feedback (Cavanagh, 2021), and its nature and effectiveness (Torun, 2017; White, 2007; Wilkins-Canter, 1997). However, literature abounds with studies that have been conducted in pre-service teacher education context, while studies on in-service teacher education is relatively few (de Paor, 2018; Topal & Yiğitoğlu Aptoula, 2022). While in de Paor's (2018) study, the focus is on teacher induction programmes which are aimed to be a continuum of teacher education for newly-qualified

teachers, the study conducted by Topal and Yiğitoğlu Aptoula (2022) focuses on the language of reflection during the post-observation conferences by utilizing conversation analysis. The current study, on the other hand, was carried out in order to gain insight into how both the instructors and PDU members viewed POFSSs using qualitative data and to contribute to the current literature on feedback by investigating their effectiveness and impact in an in-service education context. In addition, the researchers believe that conducting this study provided them with solid evidence regarding the POFSS component of the in-service training program and thus with an opportunity to critically evaluate what was going well and what needed to be improved based on the data they obtained. As a result, it was hoped that this study would contribute to improving the POFSSs carried out in this particular context, while at the same time, providing insights into other institutions.

Methods

This qualitative study has an exploratory and descriptive design. According to Given (2012), one of the conditions for choosing exploration as a methodological approach is “when a group, process, activity, or situation has received little or no systemic empirical scrutiny” (p. 329). The POFSSs in this in-service training program had not been investigated before this study as it was recently-established then, which led the researchers to explore their effectiveness. In exploratory research, a posteriori hypothesis is formulated by looking into the data and seeking possible relations between variables (Watson, 2018). The research questions below guided the inquiry:

1. What are the instructors’ perspectives on the effectiveness of the feedback provided during the POFSSs?
2. What factors contribute to considering feedback effective from the instructors’ and the PDU members’ perspective?
3. How do the POFSSs impact instructors’ teaching practices?

In order to find out the instructors’ and the PDU members’ perspectives on the effectiveness of the feedback the instructors received during the POFSSs and the factors that contribute to considering feedback effective, data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with the instructors and the PDU members. Interview was chosen as the method of data collection because it is a powerful tool that enables the researchers to understand the participants’ experience of the issue that is being investigated (Seidman, 2006). Semi-structured interviews, which have an open-ended format, are preferred, due to the fact that during these interviews, the participants are “encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner” thanks to the guidance and direction that the interviewer provides (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 136). Therefore, during the interviews, the participants had the chance to elaborate on their perspectives on POFSSs, which enriched the data.

The interviews were conducted online, and each interview lasted around 25 minutes. They were carried out in English with the international instructors and one of the PDU members, while the ones with Turkish instructors were held in Turkish and the parts to be included in this paper were translated into English. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to analyse the data, MAXQDA data analysis software was utilized. The data were uploaded to the software, and thematic analysis was conducted. To this end, first the data was coded for patterns to be able to find to “repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action/data” in the text (Saldana, 2016, p. 5). After the initial coding of each interview was completed, a second cycle of coding was undertaken to be able to manage, filter and focus on important features of the data as suggested by Saldana (2016).

Then, the coded data was categorized, and themes emerged regarding the participants' views on POFSSs.

Setting and the Participants

This study is conducted at a state university in Türkiye. The in-service training program offered at this university by the professional development unit (PDU) is a one-year program with different components, including observations, input sessions, workshops, peer observations, and a reflection and action assignment. When instructors are initially hired by this institution, they are supposed to go through this program in addition to their teaching load. The program starts with an induction period of 15 days at the beginning of the term, and during the induction the newly hired instructors are introduced with the overall structure of the school as well as the programs, materials and practical day-to-day issues. As the in-service program is compulsory and the instructors have to attend it regardless of their teaching experience, the program is designed considering their needs and expectations. Therefore, a needs analysis survey is conducted before the program starts, and the PDU members shape the content of the program taking the needs analysis into account. In addition to that, while designing the input sessions and workshops, the PDU members utilize the data that they have collected during the informal observations. Thus, it can be said that the program has a participant-centered approach in its design.

In the context where the current study is conducted, a reflective model, which aims to follow the principles of a non-directive approach to observations in teacher education, has been adopted. The one-year in-service training program offered at the institution is designed in such a way that reflection is at the heart of the program, and the instructors are encouraged to reflect on their teaching in various occasions.

The participants of the current study (n=11) are instructors of English at the preparatory program of a public university in Türkiye. Their teaching experience varies from 3 years to 12 years, and while most of them have taught at tertiary level before, one of them has previously taught at a primary and secondary school. They all have a master's degree. Some of them are doing their PhDs, and one of them has recently completed it. Among the instructors, two of them are foreigners; one is American and the other one is Albanian. The interviews with the instructors were completed after they all completed the in-service training program.

As for the PDU members, there are three members of the PDU, and one of them is the first author herself. In order to make sure that the instructors would express their honest opinions concerning the POFSSs, this study was conducted after the instructors had completed the in-service training program. Therefore, the evaluation part of the program was completed, and there was no power issues involved with the PDU members and the instructors. Also, all the instructors participated in the study on a voluntary basis, and they were told that they could withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable about answering the interview questions. All the PDU members hold a teacher trainer certificate that they obtained after completing a relevant training program. They have varying years of teaching experience, ranging from 7 to 21 years. The PDU members hold different qualifications, including CELTA, DELTA, and COTE, and while one of them holds a PhD degree, another one of them is doing her PhD in the field of English Language Education, with a focus on Language Teacher Education. One of the PDU members is a native speaker of English. Two of the PDU members were interviewed by the first author.

Results

The Instructors' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of POFSSs

In order to find out the instructors' perspectives on the effectiveness of the POFSSs, they were asked how they would describe the feedback that they received from the PDU members and whether they would consider it effective or ineffective, explaining the reasons why. All the instructors stated that they considered the feedback to be effective. They described the POFSSs as "realistic, to the point, detailed, practical, objective and systematic". The instructors stated that as the PDU members took detailed notes during the observations, and they filled in a form that they shared later on with the instructors, the POFSSs were conducted in a systematic way, and the expectations were clear. The instructors received both written and oral feedback from the PDU members, which they believed made the POFSSs effective. One instructor referred to these feedback forms as a "reflection portfolio", which provided him with historical evidence of how his teaching has improved throughout the program or what areas he may need to work on further.

The instructors also considered the feedback sessions effective because they were provided with guidance and solutions regarding the areas that they needed to improve. One instructor mentioned that during the POFSSs, she was provided with alternatives she can try out in her classes, which prevented her from being uncertain about what to do with the point she needed to work on. She thinks that being all alone and trying to find a way out is hard on one's own, but thanks to the guidance and help from the PDU members, she felt more positive, rather than being defensive about the feedback that she received.

The Factors that make POFSSs Effective from the Instructors' Point of View

The Reflective and Interactive Nature of the POFSSs

During the POFSSs, the instructors appreciated the fact that they had a chance to reflect on the lesson themselves first and then to explain the rationale behind their practices during the lesson. One instructor commented:

Because I mean, we don't expect the PDU members to know absolutely everything. So and ok we give them a lesson plan. But I like how they ask us, "what do you mean by this?" Because it's not enough only what is written on paper, but they also want to know why the rationale behind it, why we did it. For example, if I change something in the classroom, they don't say, "okay, why did you change your plan?" They say, "Wow, that's good, but why did you do it?" "The fact that they're looking for a reason, for a justification for our actions, rather than saying this was right and this was wrong.

In a similar vein, another instructor stated that starting with the strengths or the positive things in the lesson and being encouraged to reflect first made her feel more relaxed and more open to feedback. Therefore, the reflective and interactive approach of the POFSSs contributed to their effectiveness. This helped the instructors see that the PDU members view them as professionals. One of the instructors expressed his point of view on the issue saying that:

It's trying to kind of learn not just what we did, but why did we do what we did. I think that's really critical because even if something wasn't good or it was disagreeable to what would be the best maybe form of teaching, it always allowed us to kind of explain why things went the way it did, which is good. It's very honouring, I guess, to each of us as professionals and as teachers. I guess I tend to expect the feedback to have some points to be improved always. It's not very helpful if everything's perfect, but I also expect it to have some things that

are good and admirable that we can feel good about, and that was always also done.

Due to the dialogic approach during POFSSs, the instructors expressed that they felt themselves more comfortable, and they were able to ask questions and ask for even more detailed feedback in order to obtain further feedback from the PDU members. Therefore, the instructors were involved in the process and more open to the feedback that they received as it was not imposed on them in a top down manner. Regarding the interactive nature of the POFSSs, one instructor noted that:

Well, most of the meetings didn't even feel like they were okay they were feedback meetings, but it felt more like a conversation rather than, "okay, you did this, you did that, this was wrong and this was right." So I really liked the approach of the PDU members, and I think it's the approach of PDU members that makes it less stressful and less painful, let's say the post feedback meetings.

In addition to these advantages of dialogic approach of the POFSSs, some instructors pointed out to the fact that they were able to notice certain things that they had not noticed before the POFSSs. In some cases, what they viewed as a point to improve was not perceived as an area to work on by the PDU member, who supported this idea by making use of concrete evidence based on the detailed notes s/he took during the lessons. Therefore, the interactive nature of the POFSSs helped the instructors find out things that they either had not considered at all or had viewed otherwise. For example, one instructor explained that although he had thought that his teacher talking time (TTT) was high before the POFSS, he said that the feedback he received from the PDU member proved otherwise. The PDU member's notes showed that the instructor actually created many opportunities for the students to exchange and express their opinions during the observed lesson, and thus TTT was not as high as the instructor had contemplated .

Another point that was raised by one of the instructors was the fact that the POFSSs provided an opportunity to share ideas, but this was done in such a way that the instructor did not feel any hierarchy at all imposed on him by the PDU members. This instructor pointed out to the fact that very often in training programs, there is a hierarchy between the trainers and the trainees, yet this was not the case in this particular training program. Another instructor also had a similar point of view on the issue. She stated that the PDU members made it clear that they were there to help them, saying "We are in this together, we are here to help you and help solve the problems. You are all experienced instructors and we are not trying to teach you anything. This is an adaptation process, and we are trying to align your teaching experience with the institution." The instructor considered this attitude invaluable, saying that a top down approach would not help them at all as very often instructors go back to their own practices as soon as a training program is over.

The interactive nature of the POFSSs also enabled the instructors and the PDU members to collaborate. The idea of working together was also highlighted by this instructor who stated that:

Oh, well, they have been very helpful with giving advice. There were times when we sat down with PDU members and said, "okay, this didn't work out." We try to figure out why it doesn't work out and what can we do next. It was like more of a collaboration. I mean, I don't expect them to tell me to do this or do that. I like the approach that the PDU members have. They're like, "Let's come together, let's think about it, let's discuss about it, and what can we do?" It's not like you do this, this, this, and I don't expect them to do that, but they're like, "We think that there is a problem. We are talking about it. Let's come up with solutions together." It was not only one side not coming only from PDU members, but also PDU members, kind of giving us the space to think about our

next steps. So I don't expect the PDU members to tell me, "okay, this is the book on grammar. You are bad at teaching Type 2 [conditionals], so please read this book and learn how to do it." I don't expect them to do that because I am a teacher myself. I should be able to figure out my weaknesses and work on them on my own. But they helped point them out I would say.

The PDU Members' Attitude

Another factor that contributed to the effectiveness of the POFSSs was the attitude of the PDU members. The instructors stated that the feedback that they received from the PDU members was constructive. They felt that the main aim of this program was to help them better adapt to their new institution and rather than being judgmental, it had a developmental approach.

Two people working together, trying to improve something together, helping each other. That attitude and its being developmental. This makes me more enthusiastic because if it had been like the relationship between a student and a teacher, it would have been more stressful and more distanced. But it was constructive. It was as if we were building something together. This helped create an atmosphere more conducive to sharing.

Another instructor also stated that the positive attitude of the PDU members helped her be off-guard during the POFSSs and share whatever went right or wrong in all honesty as she believed that the whole program was based on a developmental approach and that this would help her improve herself as an instructor. Similar to other instructors, this instructor also stated that the aim of the PDU members was to help her, and thanks to the PDU members' attitude, she was more open to feedback. Regarding the PDU members' attitude, it was stated that:

In general, in an in-service training program, one might expect a deficient view of teaching practice. Rather than presenting issues as deficiencies, the PDU members were with us to help us with the overall process. They were there to help us, to help us adapt to the institution. To help us improve ourselves as teachers. Their help in this process and their clear explanations contributed to the attitude perspective even more. And it made it [their feedback] even more effective because if they had approached the process from a deficiency point of view, I think it would not have been efficient. The instructors would have reacted to it negatively. But I can say that I have never experienced such a situation. And I could feel the PDU members' positivity as an instructor.

According to the instructors who participated in this study, the PDU members' experience at the institution and their being knowledgeable about the current literature also contributed to the effectiveness of the in-service training program. In addition, getting feedback from different PDU members who focused on different aspects of teaching was found to be effective.

The instructors also appreciated the fact that they were able to ask for feedback on certain areas of their teaching practices. They liked the idea of getting "personal feedback" and considered themselves lucky as this was offered to them as part of an in-service program, not as part of a commercial training program that they would have to pay for. In addition, the instructors felt that they were encouraged to try out new methods and approaches that they have not tried before and appreciated the feedback they were provided with. For example, after an input session on task-based language teaching, a number of instructors experimented with it, and during the interviews, one instructor said that she liked having the chance to try out new ideas and getting feedback about them.

Although all the instructors stated that the POFSSs were effective for them, there were a few points that were raised by the instructors. One instructor stated that there was only one situation during which she found the feedback ineffective. The instructor said that getting feedback on an issue that she has no control over, such as student attitude when they were not participating, was unnecessary because it was something out of her hand. Another instructor came up with an idea to make the POFSSs more effective by suggesting that the instructors can be sent an email regarding the points that they need to work on so that they can come to the POFSS having considered the issue. The instructor suggested that, rather than the details, the email might include just the main topics such as teacher talking time or student involvement, and in this way the instructor can have the chance to reflect on these issues before meeting the PDU member.

The Factors That Make POFSSs Effective from the PDU Members' Point of View

In order to find out the PDU members' ideas about the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the POFSSs, two of the PDU members were interviewed. One of them pointed out to the fact that instructors' beliefs had an impact the effectiveness of the feedback. She believes that when the instructors are provided with solutions or alternatives that are in line with their beliefs, they welcome the idea and put them into practice. Nevertheless, when there is a mismatch between the instructor's beliefs and the suggestions made by the PDU members, then the feedback is not effective, and even if the instructor implements the solution, it is temporary and does not have a long-lasting effect. Similarly, the importance of instructor beliefs was highlighted by the other PDU member who stated that:

I guess the feedback is mostly effective when something when the teacher recognizes him or herself that there's something that could be done better. And then they embrace the new practice. If it's something that the teacher does and has been doing for a long time, even though maybe it's not the most effective way of doing it, I think that's when feedback is less effective because it's difficult to convince the teacher. That particular instance and stuff like that. So it depends. I think the feedback is effective when the teacher recognizes that it is necessary. And that's why I start the lesson by understanding what the teacher's real intentions were and their perception.

Another factor contributing to the effectiveness of the POFSSs suggested by the PDU members is providing feedback that is informed by theory that is appropriate to the teaching context. To illustrate, this study was conducted at a university; therefore, the students who receive education are young adults. In line with this, the activities suggested by the PDU members need to be appropriate for the learner profile in this context. In order for the feedback to be effective, the PDU member believes that the instructors also need to trust the PDU members and that they have theoretical knowledge in their field. In this way, she believes that the feedback that she has provided can lead to change in behaviour.

The final factor that has an impact on the effectiveness of the feedback provided by the PDU members is the instructors' perceptions regarding the issue that is being discussed. According to one of the PDU members, the feedback is effective when the instructor perceives it to be necessary and believes that it is necessary to improve that particular practice.

Well, first of all, it depends on how the teacher perceives their lesson, because if the teacher doesn't think that there's anything wrong in their lesson, then any feedback that is delivered is going to be ineffective. So that's why it's important to raise awareness, first of all, and make sure that you put the teacher into a

situation where they're looking at their lesson, saying, "Hah, actually, this particular point could have been done differently." And then once you prepare the teacher to be receptive to feedback, because they do recognize that there's something that could have been done better, that's when it's effective.

The Impact of POFs on Instructors' Teaching Practices

The instructors reported that the feedback that they received helped them with their adaptation to the institution and contributed to their improvement in many areas, such as reducing teacher talking time, increasing student involvement, eliciting answers and providing feedback, and giving instructions. In addition to these areas, instructors also mentioned the impact of the POFs on how they taught language skills and systems. Regarding the impact of POFs, one instructor noted that it affected her teaching practices: "Positively. Definitely it has affected my teaching positively and it has made my job easier as well and for my students easier to understand."

Other than these areas, some of the instructors also mentioned that they think that their teaching will continue to be informed by the feedback that they received from the PDU members. One instructor referred to the fact that the feedback that she has received helps her keep alert and be careful about on the points that she has worked on. She thinks it is like a notification that impacts her teaching in a positive way, reminding her to implement the feedback.

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative inquiry looked into POFs conducted at a public university as part of an in-service training program. The POFs are an essential component of this program as the newly-hired instructors are frequently observed by the PDU members, who provide them with feedback regarding their teaching practices. As these POFs are carried out one-on-one and as they are aimed at improving teaching practices, their effectiveness and how they can be better conducted to achieve these aims are crucial. The researchers of this study explored POFs so that they would have empirical evidence as to whether this important component of this program was fulfilling their purpose or not, and if it was not, what would make them effective from the perspective of the instructors and the PDU members. The results of the study provided a perspective on the effectiveness of the POFs in that particular institution and the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the POFs from both parties' point of view. Also, the study shed on light whether the POFs had an impact on the teaching practices of this particular group of instructors.

The findings indicated that the instructors found the feedback that they received during the POFs realistic, to the point, detailed, practical, objective and systematic. This finding is in line with what O'Dwyer and Atli (2015) found in their studies; specifically, the salience of being objective and non-judgmental and showing mutual respect. In addition, the instructors who participated in the current study stated that the reflective and interactive nature of the POFs made them effective. Engin (2013) also draws attention to reflective and dialogic nature of POFs and suggests that there needs to be room for explanations and justifications for the trainee during this process. Another important point that was pointed out by instructors was the fact that they did not feel that there was a hierarchical order and that they needed to do things as suggested by the trainees. They also appreciated the PDU members' attitude, which was developmental and constructive. All these factors also

impacted the instructors' view of POFSSs, and they are also aligned with O'Dwyer and Atlı's (2015) findings.

From the perspective of the PDU members, the POFSSs are effective when there is a match between the instructors' beliefs and what the PDU members suggest. In addition, it needs to be appropriate for the context and informed by theoretical knowledge. Regarding the impact that the POFSS had on their teaching, all the instructors indicated that they had a positive impact on their teaching and their adaptation to the institution, and expressed their willingness to utilize the feedback throughout their teaching career.

In conclusion, based on the findings of the current study, it can be suggested that having a developmental approach to teacher education and POFSSs might impact both the instructors' and the PDU members' point of view on how these sessions are conducted and increase their effectiveness. Such a view is also supported by Freeman's (1982) non-directive approach to POFSSs. When instructors feel that their ideas are valued and they can justify their actions, they are more open to feedback. Also, reflection plays a key role, and instructors need to be encouraged to engage in reflection before, during and after the POFSSs. In this way, they can have a better grasp of their lesson, and by engaging in an interactive POFSS with the PDU member, they can negotiate their views, which in turn might contribute to the effectiveness of the feedback provided. Therefore, while designing the process of post-observation feedback sessions and how they will be carried out by the PDU members, special attention can be paid to encourage reflection and interaction as part of POFSSs in teacher education programs. Further research can consider investigating the students' points of view regarding the new practices that instructors adopt after POFSSs. In this way, in addition to the instructors' and the PDU members' point of view, another important stakeholder can be included in the data. As stated before, when classroom observations are held, they are often followed by POFSSs, and it is crucial that these sessions achieve their aim so that professional development can take place.

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