Research Article

FOSTERING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING
– FROM REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO EFFECTIVE TEACHING[x]

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ABSTRACT

  The study outlined the supportive values of reflective practice within peer observation of teaching using multiple data sources over a 15-week course-Teaching Practice. Teacher trainees reported that the experience of observing and being observed provided them with better reflections on their teaching and even theories of teaching. Additionally, the experience of observing and being observed enabled teacher trainees to improve and enhance their pedagogical competences and knowledge in continuing development.

  Keywords: *professional dvelopment, peer observation, reflective approach, effective teaching.*

1. Introduction & Theoretical Framework

  Classroom observation is traditionally regarded as a means of evaluating teachers' classroom performances rather than supporting teachers in their career paths and therefore as something beyond the practical aim of pedagogical practices. Mercer (2006, p. 266) pointed out that classroom observation is perceived to be subjective, judgmental and threatening and thus become a primary source of discomfort and anxiety for teachers. Due to this evaluative nature of classroom observation, many teachers shared their strong reservations or even oppositions towards classroom observation in most educational settings.

  However, "teaching, by definition, is an activity that is observed" (McMahot, Barrett & O'Neill, 2007, p. 499). It is pointed out that classroom is a location in which many different learning and teaching activities are carried out (Farrell, 2011, p. 265) and hence classroom observation is believed to provide teachers with insightful information in order

to enhance and strengthen their teaching abilities (Hinchey, 2010, p. 6). In this sense, classroom observation is generally moving towards a developmental nature of supporting teachers in their professional development journey and this supportive dimension of observation, to certain extent, alleviates teachers' unwillingness towards the use of observation in their teaching practices.

Having recognized that non-judgmental element is critically significant to developing professionalism in observational teaching and learning, Gosling (2002) proposed a peer observation of teaching (POT) model in which teachers can mutually observe and learn from each other's teaching. Regarding POT, it is indicated that POT promotes professional development (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008, p. 735), enhances the collegial relationships between teaching staff (Chester, 2012, p. 94) and, more importantly, provides a space for reflective teaching (Farrell, 2011, p. 265). Indeed, reflective teaching through POT has been long advocated and confirmed as an essential component to reinforce teaching and learning and foster dissemination of best teaching practices (Carroll & O' Loughlin, 2014, p. 446). On that basis, this paper aims at exploring the supportive values of reflective practice within peer observation in transforming teaching through the experience of both observing and being observed.

1.1. *Peer observation of teaching*

Peer observation is growingly becoming a common practice in educational settings. Bell & Mladenovic (2015) defined peer observation as a collaborative activity between two or more teachers who engage in mutual observation of teaching, provide constructive feedback and ultimately reflect on teaching practices based on both the observation experience and the given feedback (p. 25).

From such developmental nature of the definition of POT, many studies have justified peer observation as a tool for improving teaching abilities. More specifically, novice teachers are offered the opportunity to acknowledge how experienced teachers approach their lessons (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 86). To confirm, Hendry and Oliver (2012) mentioned that learning from observation of colleagues' class is considered to be as beneficial as feedback on teaching (p. 1). More specifically, teachers can realize how their colleagues use the teaching methods, how they interact with students, how they deal with problems arising from their lesson on a daily basis and, to certain extent, can discover effective teaching strategies that the observer has never used in class before. This is conformity with Richards & Farrell's (2011) comment that "what we see when we observe teachers and learners in action is not a mechanical application of methods and techniques, but rather a reflection of how teachers have interpreted these things" (p. 92).

Furthermore, peer observation encompasses a social benefit (Zwart et al., 2007); in other words, teachers have the opportunity to network with each other by sharing their

perspectives and concerns towards teaching. Chester's (2012, p. 94) study pointed out peer partnership programmes strengthen collegial relationships between teachers within institutions. Likewise, Bell & Cooper (2013) mentioned the impact of peer observation on the development of collegial atmosphere within a school (p. 60).

Finally, Hendry and Oliver (2012) noted that a fundamental feature of peer observation as a learning tool is that it stimulates and guides reflective teaching (p. 1). Additionally, reflective teaching is perceived as a central point to teacher development (Hall & Sutherland, 2013, p. 82). Thus, the centrality of reflective teaching in POT should receive more emphasis. To facilitate the peer observation process, the suggested cycle for observing is put forward (Figure 1).
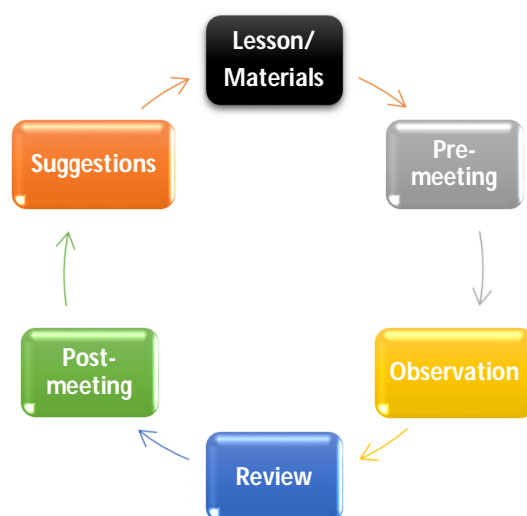
Figure 1. *Peer observation cycle*

1.2. *Reflective teaching within peer observation*

According to Farrell & Ives (2015), reflective teaching, generally, refers to "teachers' thinking about their underlying values and beliefs about teaching and learning and comparing these to classroom practices" (p. 595). Based on this definition, observing a teacher's class, from a reflective teaching's perspectives, might trigger teachers' thinking about their own teaching practices. In this regard, teachers are offered a chance to challenge and improve their own classroom instructions by pondering the classroom procedures carried out by their colleagues. Indeed, Bell & Mladenovic (2015, p. 26) claimed that by observing and being observed teachers in real classroom context, teachers can possibly reflect on their teaching and transfer their learning to their real teaching situations.

Moreover, Danielson (2007, p. 164) argued that reflective practice enables teachers to become more conscious of their classroom instructions since they have the opportunity

to place their teaching under scrutiny. In fact, developing such consciousness is significant to teaching since it allows teachers to minimize the discrepancies between teachers' beliefs on their teaching and their actual performances in the classroom (Knezedivc, 2001, p. 10).

With the view to employing reflective practice in POT to improve teaching practices, the following framework (Figure 2). is proposed.
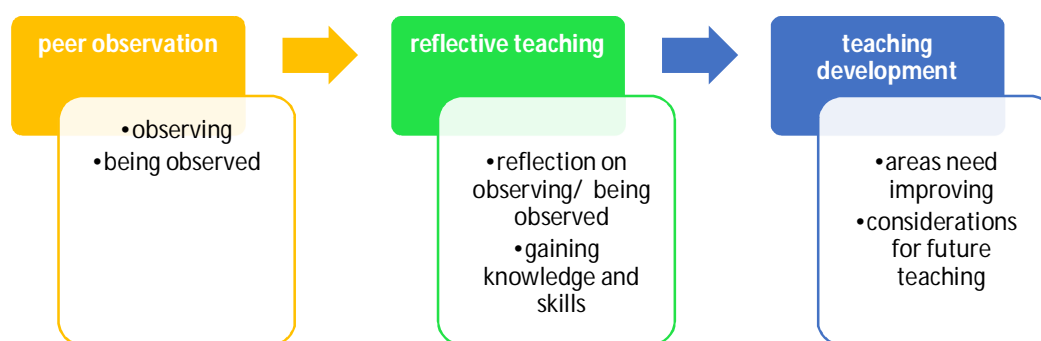

Figure 2. Reflective approach through peer observation

Based on the framework for practicing reflective practice within peer observation, the experience of observing and being observed will be implemented in the Teaching Practice module for teacher trainees.

2. The Study

2.1. Research questions

The study seeks answers to the following research questions.

1. To what extent do pre-service teachers perceive the overall effectiveness of participating in a peer observation process (POT)?

2. How can POT and reflective practice (RP) support teacher development process?

2.2. The Participants

The participants of the study are 38 pre-service teacher trainees attending the Teaching Practice Module at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. They were all trained in Teaching Methodology module 1 and 2 before registering the course in semester II 2018. The profiles of all participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the subjects in terms of number and gender

Class	Male		Female		Total
	Number	**%**	**Number**	**%**	
Teaching Practice	6	15.78	32	84.22	38

2.3. Data Collection Methods

Two weeks after the Teaching Practice course, an introductory announcement was posted in "Google Classroom©" to announce the general purpose of the study (i.e. teacher-

trainees' feedbacks on the process of observing and being observed and their approaches to reflective teaching). The teacher trainees were informed about the primary method of collecting data, which includes survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Of 52 teacher trainees, 38 agreed to undertake the survey questionnaires and five students were asked to participate in in-depth interviews for further discussions on the quantitative results from questionnaires. In particular, the participants were asked to provide answers regarding three main themes: methods of approaching POT, reflective practice for their teaching and professional development strategies.

3.   Findings

3.1. Approaching Peer Observation of Teaching (POT)

The data from question 1 to 12 has indicated the positive results towards POT. In particular, the majority of teacher trainees (98.42%) had full understanding of the reasons behind their process of peer observation before actually embarking on scheduling the time for observing and being observed. Moreover, it was shown that teacher trainees approached peer observation in logical and scientific manners; for example, allocating sufficient time-frame for pre- and post-meetings in the POT process (83.92%), developing good relationships with each other (71.22%), interacting with each other effectively and collaboratively (73.44%). Since they had established good connections with each other, positive data for the question regarding the design, development and evaluation of teaching materials (79.67%) by cooperating with each other in the module was clearly illustrated.

To complement the results from survey questionnaires, data obtained from semi-structured interviews has indicated positive results for students' approaches to POT. All five interviewees admitted that "the POT approach is by nature very beneficial and it is constructive approach rather an evaluative one". However, it is also revealed that the first interviewee was "still uncomfortable despite benefits of POT" as it is quite "awkward" for him to walk in and observe the whole lesson from start to end. One noticeable aspect mentioned by the fourth interviewee is that the POT process was not "intimidating" and POT process did not involve any "types of control" and it is quite "informal" through a lot of conversations and discussions. Interestingly, the fifth interviewee also reported positively towards the process of POT but he emphasized that he only selected the so-called "close" student fellows for conducting observation process. The first and the third interviewees also raised questions on the issue of how to maintain effective POT and doubted the sustainability of POT in their actual teaching career after graduation.

3.2. Reflective Practice (RP)

It is noted that 76.9% of teacher-trainees reflected on teaching even before taking part in their POT process. More interestingly, teacher-trainees also agreed that they were involved in a critical reflection of their own teaching process (88.4%) and were able to

implement and make some changes to their teaching in subsequent teaching periods or lessons both inside and outside the classroom based on conversations and discussions with each other after the POT process. As regards, reflective approach plays a vital role in POT and should be carried out in tandem with POT.

Regarding the interview data, the first and the fourth interviewees claimed that POT offered a chance for self-reflection and such experience was good for them. Specifically, they had chances to "look at the forms that their fellow teachers wrote for them" and was "more critical on their own teaching experience"; in other words, "be mindful of their students' feelings and learning experience". The third interviewee considered POT to be useful for her professional practice as she became more "conscious" of her teaching steps and can "determine the level of effectiveness of some teaching methodologies that she had learned 2 years ago". The fifth interviewee emphasized how interesting it was to find out that some methods do not "work effectively" as indicated in the "teaching methodology" text-book and he needed to ponder how to "overcome certain drawbacks" in his teaching. He also said that the teaching skills and competences have significantly sharpened by engaging in POT procedures as the means of reflecting on teaching and learning.

3.3. *Professional Development (PD)*

The practice of POT has been implemented with the intention of developing PD strategies for teacher-trainees. 87.54 % teacher-trainees agreed that POT is a great opportunity for them to develop their professional activities later in their lives. However, it is interesting to find out that only 62.3% pre-service teacher trainees agreed to continue using POT after graduation. It is quite evident that POT can be of great significance to enhance teacher's proficiency after their graduation and foster the habit of life-long learning in pre-service teachers.

Data from the first interviewee showed that he mentioned that "feedbacks" from other teacher fellows can be a great source of enhancing professional trajectory in the long-term. The second interviewee pointed out that a good collegial relationship can be a good starting point for career advancement since she believed that personal development should be developed and strengthened without the support of colleagues within the same working environment. The third and the fourth interviewees admitted that POT are sometimes "tedious and boring" and reported that although it was mentioned right at the beginning of the course that POT process is "constructive rather than evaluative", the elements of "anxiety and pretentiousness" still existed. As far as the fifth interviewee is concerned, it is highly recognized that enhancement in professionalism was indicated via confident teaching, excellent interactions with students and better awareness of limiting the use of mother tongue in the classroom. However, it is necessary to set a limited number of times for POT within a month or a semester rather than develop POT as a teaching routine.

4.   Discussion

The procedure of reflecting on the experience of peer observation yields insights into how teachers can enhance their teaching abilities. Hence, it is implied that the model of using reflective teaching within peer observation (figure 2) can be integrated into the professional development programmes for teachers. However, a number of potential issues need discussing.

Firstly, it is indicated that one-off peer observation is not sufficient to support improvement in teaching (Byrne, et al., 2010, p. 216) and this poses a question regarding the frequency level of POT for teachers. Since Hiver (2014, p. 214) maintained that "teaching is an occupation fraught with uncertainties and potential stress", my recommendation is that POT should justify itself as an effective means for teaching development so that teachers will become more willing to welcome it in their classroom rather than setting a standard amount of POT for teachers. To enable this, POT should be reciprocal so that teachers not only have the opportunities to gain mutual support from each other's teaching ideas but also to promote mutual trust between teachers (Hendry & Oliver, 2012, p. 8). Furthermore, the principles for "observation etiquette" (Richards & Farrell, 2011, pp. 98-99) in Table 2. should be established between the involved teachers.

Table 2. Principles for "observation etiquette" (Richards & Farrell, 2011, p. 98-99)

1.	Deciding when to visit.
2.	Choosing the best vantage point.
3.	Adopting the best "bedside" manner.
4.	Taking notes.
5.	Giving oral and written feedback

Secondly, as previously mentioned, feedback belongs to one of the "observation etiquette" principles. In fact, feedback, by definition, is highly sensitive (Le & Vasquez, 2011, p. 453); yet, essential for learning and improvement (Thurlings, et al., 2012, p. 193). Thurlings, et al. (2012) also emphasized that "the effectiveness of feedback depends on patterns or chains of interaction between providers and receivers" (p. 206). Thus, it is highly recommended that training on providing feedback should be provided for teachers involve in the observational learning process. Moreover, feedback should be constructive, developmental and non-judgmental (Bell and Mladenovic, 2008, p. 735) and should focus on specified areas (Rees, Davies & Eastwood, 2015, p. 269).

What's more, Richards & Farrell (2011, p. 92) indicated that the observation should have a focus entailing one or two aspects of the lesson. Hence, the focus of peer observation should be clearly drawn out right from the start and should center on one particular aspect of the selected or observed lesson.

Ultimately, it is highly recommended that feedback provision in the post-observation discussion should be carried out in a way that guides teachers towards the process of reflection on teaching as McCormack and Kennelly (2011) pointed out that 'reflective conversations seem to have disappeared from the everyday practice of our colleagues" (p. 515). In such discussion, the responsibility of evaluating in the teaching process will be passed to the observed and the feedback session will be turned into a causal dialogue between teachers rather than an evaluative discussion. This, to a certain degree, can achieve dual objectives of fostering both reflective teaching and collegial relationships between teachers. Consequently, POT will be welcomed by teachers.

5.   Conclusion

Overall, I believe that even when we use the term "student-centered" to characterize any teaching methods we support, the heart of success in language instructions lies in the role of a teacher, not anyone else. Indeed, no matter how excellent the teaching conditions might be or how sound a teaching technique might be, the objectives of a lesson cannot be achieved without a competent teacher. In this sense, more attention should be paid to teachers' expertise. Farrell (2013) emphasized that "teacher expertise is not the direct result of teacher experience; rather it involves teachers taking a critically reflective approach to their work" (pp. 4-5). In this sense, reflective teaching plays a pivotal role in teachers' learning and development. Vehicles that can encourage and promote reflective practice in teaching are critically essential and peer observation process can form a significant part of such developments.

Thus far, the procedures of how to integrate reflective teaching into POT have been discussed in relation to my experience of observing and being observed. Within the scope of this paper, it hopes to provide readers with an argument that reflective teaching within POT is of significant pedagogical value since it not only offers a chance to reflect on the teaching process, but also enables the process of making changes and improvement to future teaching practices. However, like other means of professional development, POT is not without limitations. Studies have expressed concerns towards peer observation, namely being evaluative, damaging teacher's confidence, lacking of confidentiality and, to certain extent, leading to personal vulnerability (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005, p. 222). Thus, to conduct an effective implementation, issues regarding planning, sequencing, and giving feedback should be carefully considered.

❖ ***Conflict of Interest:*** *Author have no conflict of interest to declare.*

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PHÁT TRIỂN KĨ NĂNG SƯ PHẠM THÔNG QUA VIỆC DỰ GIỜ
– TỪ NHÌN NHẬN LẠI QUÁ TRÌNH GIẢNG DẠY ĐẾN VIỆC GIẢNG DẠY HIỆU QUẢ

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết nhằm đưa ra các giá trị tích cực của phương thức tự nhìn nhận trong quá trình quan sát việc giảng dạy của các bạn cùng lớp bằng cách thu thập nhiều nguồn dữ liệu khác nhau trong suốt khóa học Giảng Tập 15 tuần. Giáo sinh cho biết việc quan sát quá trình giảng dạy lẫn nhau đã giúp họ nhìn nhận lại việc dạy học của mình tốt hơn, thậm chí đối với cả lí thuyết giảng dạy. Bên cạnh đó, việc quan sát lẫn nhau trong quá trình dạy học cũng có thể giúp giáo sinh nâng cao cũng như cải thiện năng lực và kiến thức sư phạm của mình thông qua việc bồi dưỡng liên tục.

Từ khóa: *bồi dưỡng giáo viên, dự giờ, giảng dạy hiệu quả, nhìn nhận quá trình giảng dạy.*