Peer Observation As a Tool of Professional Development

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Abstract:

The aim of this exploratory and empirical case study is to investigate the effectiveness of using classroom observation for developing English language teaching skills among teaching assistants in Libyan Universities- Tripoli University. Four teaching assistants and two experienced teachers were randomly chosen for this study. Data was collected through four phases. Phase one: a closed-ended questionnaire was used to find out the teaching assistants' current perceptions of teaching skills. Phase two: the participants were engaged in observing experienced teachers. During the third phase, the participants were involved in teaching to be observed by experienced teachers. In the last phase, teaching assistants' perceptions were re-examined through the same close-ended questionnaire and through the observation of experienced teachers. This project is guided by the following research questions: *how competent are EFL Libyan Teaching Assistants in undergoing teaching?* And h*ow effective is the implementation of Peer Observation in developing those Teaching Assistants?*. The findings of this study indicate that classroom observation is a useful technique for developing English language teaching skills.

Keywords:

Teaching Skills Development – Observation – Teaching Skills – Continued Professional Development.

1- Introduction:

This study is planned to explore the role of Peer Observation in teachers' professional development in Libya. It also gives the reasons why it might be useful to examine this aspect of continuous professional development (henceforth CPD) in the context described.

Teaching Assistants in Higher Education in Libya have a chance to work in the university, to be prepared for a future academic profession in their own field

of specialization. Those Teaching Assistants must go through different experiences to expand their own knowledge about the context of Higher Education in terms of learning and teaching, in addition to professional development. The context of this study is to investigate whether Peer Observation is an effective technique to be used to develop TAs profession of teaching. Therefore, the main purpose of the study is to examine the effectiveness of Peer Observation as a tool for developing TAs teaching skills and if proved a success it could to be adopted by English Language departments for any future development technique.

2- Literature Review:
2.1 Peer Observation.

There is little or may be no experience of teaching to the teaching assistants in higher education and no doubt that teaching in higher education is different from learning in that learning cannot be confined only to school education but also captures the experiences they might go through their teaching profession. and has become more challenging and more complex than before. Teaching assistants have a long way to go to acquire teaching skills and the challenges are enormous before them. The profession is always demanding and self-development is *a* key for staff development. In this article, the researchers are not discussing what constitutes good teaching but rather, what the concepts of teaching assistants for teaching are and whether Peer Observation can help and develop/change their concepts of teaching style. This paper discusses Peer Observation of a teaching scheme in the context of a university level 'Education College'. CPD has been introduced to some staff in the English Department in the faulty of Education- Tripoli University. However, there is no clear focused program by the department to the staff, most of them are aware of some of self-development techniques. Peer Observation is one technique of CPD in which teaching is the formal process by which the good practice of staff engaged in learning and teaching activities is identified, disseminated and developed. Teaching assistants are engaged in a scheme of observation to investigate to what extent their concepts of various aspects of teaching have changed, also to encourage an open debate and dialogue around what constitutes *a* good learning and teaching in the department. Peer Observation can be defined as a process in which teaching staff are paired to undertake observations of teaching, allowing discussion, sharing their ideas and concepts in order to improve their practice. This, of course, will lead to a collegial sharing of insights and techniques that provide both parties with a unique and rich opportunity to enhance the quality of their teaching (Bell, 2001). Peer Observation has been advocated as a means of monitoring and improving the quality of teaching in higher education. The

process of Peer Observation of practice could facilitate improvements in all aspects of practice (Davys, 2007). Other objectives include the identification of strengths and developmental needs, and the formulation of an action plan for further improvement in certain areas (Hammersley, Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005). Peer observing has been described as an authentic, practical, useful, and meaningful way to modify and improve teaching (Maeda, et al, 2009). Brew (2001) has described Peer Observation as a way for Universities to meet the increasing need to demonstrate accountability and assure quality of teaching. Bell (2002) also highlighted some ideas and skills that can be improved in teaching practices, its practical nature, its support for continued self-improvement, and ability to stimulate discussion. The most highlighted benefit of Peer Observation is that peers will experience vicarious learning through the observation of peers' teaching practices and strategies (Hendry & Oliver, 2012).

In the University system, teaching assistants are required to develop their knowledge and skills in order to be prepared for teaching in higher Education. There are many ways and much flexibility in how this can be done, e.g. mentoring, co-teaching, peer review and reflective practice (Bell, 2002). In this article, Peer Observation will provide the opportunity for the teaching assistants to work with the department staff with the aim of observing a real teaching practice and to reflect on their own concepts in a real teaching practice. The researchers will provide a clear short plan for the project taking Peer Observation as a tool of investigation, and this will be mainly based on teaching assistants' concepts of teaching writing. Previous research supports the value of peer partnerships (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Hendry & Oliver, 2012). Peer partnership programs have been described as practical, useful, and meaningful way to modify and improve teaching (Maeda, et al, 2009 cited in Chester et al, 2013). Perceived advantages include the development of new ideas and skills, improvement to teaching practices, its practical nature, its support for continued self-improvement, and ability to stimulate discussion (Bell, 2002). This article will investigate the concepts of teaching and whether those concepts can be developed and improved through Peer Observation or not. This will be based on a format of assessing, teaching assistants'observation, practicing and finally observing teaching assistants practice. This will also be based on teaching writing which is one of core the modules in English departments. The experienced teachers have been chosen as they have at least three years of experience in teaching writing in higher education. Giving constructive feedback is a key behavior in observing but the researchers, however, have located specific aspects of performance to be observed (Appendix A, Teachers' perceptions Questionnaire)

3- Methodology:

The research goal was to find out what role that Peer Observation is fulfilling in this perspective, where inexperienced Teaching Assistants (TAs) were engaged into the context of teaching by undergoing sessions of classroom observation to Experienced Teachers (ETs); teches who have been teaching for five years or more. Throughout this research, the researchers aimed to answer two research questions, the first was *how competent are EFL Libyan Teaching Assistants in undergoing teaching?* and the second was *How effective is the implementation of Peer Observation in developing those Teaching Assistants?* Hence, from the research questions, there was a general tendency that the design forming the research took the form of a triangulation design; where both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. Subsequently, to supplement answers to the previously raised questions, the researchers implemented two methods to be used to gather the needed data for the research. First of which, where (TAs) are presented with a schedule of several sessions of Peer Observations to (ETs). Second, a neatly designed pre-observing Teachers' Perceptions Questionnaire (TPQ) was given to the (TAs) to gather data of their current beliefs and experiences in the context of teaching, and the same TPQ was given as a means of measuring the developed level of performance after the (TAs) went through sessions of classroom observation to the (ETs), where several items in teaching methodology were targeted to be observed. (ETs) were taking part in captivating perceptions about (TAs) and how the progress was taking role in in the actual practice of teaching.

As for the population of the study (6) participants were forming the whole sample. Four Teaching Assistants were randomly selected and targeted to participate as the respondents of the hypothesis, on the other hand, (2) other experienced teachers from the English Department of the Education College, Trablus, were chosen for the purpose to be observed and be observers of the Teaching Assistants (TAs).

The Teaching Assistants were recent graduates of English. The experienced teachers on the other hand, were a lecturer and an assistant lecturer of English from Tripoli University with maximum of (18) years and (5) years' experience of teaching respectively

4- Data Analysis and Discussion:
4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis.
Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Analysis.

Quantitative data was analyzed using Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which is a non-parametric statistical hypothesis test used when comparing two related samples, matched samples, or repeated measurements on a single sample to assess whether their population mean ranks differ (i.e. it is a paired difference test) (Shier, 2004). The pre-and post TPQ results show that there is no change in most of the themes, in which no significant statistical difference is noted to take place. However only in themes (2) and (6) a slight difference is recognized (statistically significant). Figure (1) shows where the change took place in theme (2).
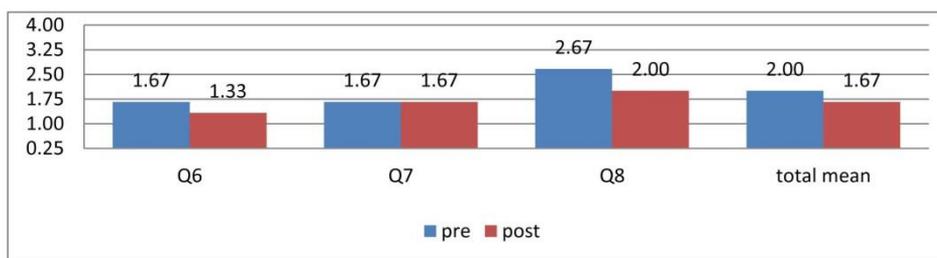
Figure 1 Results of Pre-and Posttest in Theme 2

The change can be clearly seen in Question number (8) (figure 1) where it was expected to investigate about whether students sit in rows, tables, circles and/or in U-shape. The analysis reveals that the change is positively affected in the TAs perceptions.

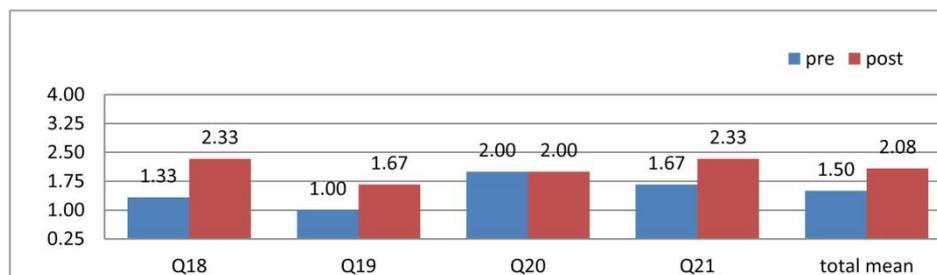On the other hand, figure (2) below shows the change occurring in theme(6).

Figure 2 Results of Pre-and Posttest in Theme 6

From figure 2, the change can be clearly seen in Questions (18), (19) and(21) where the progress is noted to be negatively affected. That is, in checking whether teachers use instructional language, and whether they use questions to

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confirm understanding and teachers explain grammatical structure and vocabulary along their lessons, the results revealed no significant positive progress.

4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis.

4.2.1 Teaching Assistants (TAs) Observing Experienced Teachers (ETs).

TAs each observed two experienced teachers on 2 occasions. This means that each TA attended/observed four lectures given by those experienced teachers. The observation sheets, completed by TAs, revealed that 'all' items in the seven themes have been observed (Appendix A). This means that those experienced teachers have done what is needed to show/demonstrate teaching techniques in practice. This leads us to investigate whether TAs applied any of those teaching techniques in their teaching or not. This can be seen in the teachers observing TAs analysis.

4.2.2 Experienced Teachers (ETs) Observing Teaching Assistants (TAs).

In taking the role of observing the TAs, the ETs conducted equal sessions of Classroom Observation for the TAs. That is, in much the same to TAs four sessions of Observation, ETs observed the TAs in continues four sessions, using the same observation sheet used by the TAs, and hence, several strategies were observed and consequently noted as applied by the TAs along the sessions of practice that they took a role in (AppendixA).This might reveal that the TAs observed what was intended by the ETs to be carefully observed. It also may reveal that notable progress has taken place in TAs practice. It is worth noting that TAs applied most of the teaching techniques they observed with the ETs.

4.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Data Comparison.

In comparing quantitative and qualitative data, it is hoped to identify the items in which the progress took placeas perceived by theTAs, and which is at the same time observed in their practice.

From qualitative data analysis, it was noted that (see sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2) TAs have observed all the techniques used by the teachers, and it is expected to see a significant progress in their perception and practice. Yet, in ETs' observation sheet, some techniques have not been practiced in TAs teaching practice.

In comparing item No. 3 in theme No. 1, (Appendix A) and question No. 3 in the TPQ (Appendix B, Classroom Observation Form), it is obvious to note that there is a significant progress in their perception (qualitatively), however, this progress noted was not to take place in their practice.

It was further noted that item No. 21 in theme No. 6, (Appendix A) observed not to have any practice indication by TAs, however, in the TQ, it was noted from the analysis that there is a negative change (statistically).

To conclude, the items that were affected in their perceptions (negatively or positively) were the same items that have not been practiced.

5- Results and Conclusion:

Quantitively, the change can only be statistically noted in TA's perception of the classroom layout (students sit in row, circles etc). qualitatively, on the other hand, after the TA's have observed the whole techniques under the investigation, they have practiced in their sessions what they have already observed. This can be explained by one of the positive outcomes of their ET's observation. Also, at the same time this can highlight the role of observation in Continuing Professional Development. That is, in terms of practice and in terms of perception, the only significant change in their perception will not happen in the other themes, but may happen by practice of the change that they have seen and practiced.

ملخــــص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة التجريبية إلى دراسة مدى فعالية استخدام الملاحظة الصفية لتطوير مهارات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية بين معيدي اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات الليبية. تم اختيار أربعة معيدين واثنين من المعلمين ذوي الخبرة بشكل عشوائي لهذه الدراسة، وتم جمع البيانات من خلال أربع مراحل. المرحلة الأولى وتم فيها استخدام استبيان مغلق لاكتشاف التصورات الحالية للمعيدين حول مهارات التدريس. المرحلة الثانية؛ وفيها شارك المشاركون في مراقبة المعلمين ذوي الخبرة. وخلال المرحلة الثالثة شارك المعيدون في التدريس ليتم مراقبتهم من قبل المعلمين ذوي الخبرة. وفي المرحلة الأخيرة، تمت إعادة النظر في تصورات المعيدين للمهارات التدريس من خلال نفس الاستبيان المجدول ومن خلال ملاحظة المعلمين ذوي الخبرة. تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أن الملاحظة الصفية هي تقنية مفيدة لتطوير مهارات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية بين المعيدين.

الكلمات الدالة: تنمية مهارات التدريس، الملاحظة، مهارات التدريس، CPD.

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Appendix (A) Classroom Observation Form

Types of Teaching Activities	Classroom Management Strategies	Lesson Structure
☐ Activities are targeted for the whole class together. ☐ Tasks are accomplished by students in-pairs and/or in groups. ☐ Individuals are targeted by tasks as well as pairs and groups.	☐ Students work separately, pairs and/or groups. ☐ The lesson presented within the time frame of the lesson plan. ☐ Students sit in rows, circles and/or in U-shape.	☐ The lesson opens with its objectives. ☐ The lesson develops from main heads to sub-heads. ☐ The lesson closes with a revision of the whole lesson. ☐ Activities are balanced in the lesson. ☐ There is a regular transmission between activities in the lesson.

Teachers' Use of Language	Teachers' Use of Material	Teaching strategies
☐ Teachers use instructional language. ☐ Teachers use questions to confirm understanding. ☐ Teachers get feedback from students. ☐ Teachers explain grammatical structures and vocabulary use.	☐ Teachers use course book only. ☐ Teachers use Supplementary. ☐ Teachers use the sourcebook as supplementary rather than the main one.	☐ Tasks are given with pre-explanations and/or a Pre-solved model is given before asking students to participate in others. ☐ Practice is organized before tasks are established. ☐ Teaching Techniques are used.

	Teacher-Student Interaction	Observers Personal Information
Thank you for your cooperation *Jalal Belshek & Hani Ertemi*	☐ Students use language probably in class ☐ Teachers use the mother tongue whenever there is judicious need ☐ Students are given chance to enroll in a student-to-student interaction. ☐ Teachers correct students' use of language.	Observer Name_____ Age_____ Gender_____ Qualifications_____ Year of Graduation_____ Specialization_____ Teaching Experience_____

Appendix (B) Teachers' Perceptions Questionnaire

Dear Assistants,

This Teachers' Perceptions Questionnaire (TPQ) is part of our empirical case study, conducted in the English Department of the Education College – Trablus, and carried out by Jalal Belshek and Hani Ertemi.

The study concerns Teachers Continuing Professional Development. The researchers came up with claims that "Teachers' Observation" can be an important tool for the teaching assistants in the English Department commencing professional development, and thus conducted the following (TPQ) that would specifically seek to gather teachers' behaviors of teaching.

Thanks for your cooperation

Jalal Ali and Hani Ertemi

Part (1): Personal Information

Kindly write your name and tick ☑ the choice that indicates your age and your gender.
Name(Optional):
_____

Age: ☐ 23 - 30   Gender: ☐ Female
☐ 31 – 35
☐ Male

Part (2): Questionnaire Questions

Please answer by ticking ☑ the classification that you consider best represents your viewpoint. In ticking, remember to use the scale below that will help you to formulate your response.

Key	1 Very Often	2 Often	3 Rarely	4 Never

No.	Group (1): Lesson Structure QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
1.	Do you open your lesson with its objectives?				
2.	Does your lesson develop from main heads to sub heads?				
3.	Does your lesson close with a revision of the whole lesson?				
4.	Do you balance between activities in your lesson?				
5.	In conducting activities, do you link and transit regularly between activities?				

No.	Group (2): Classroom Management Strategies QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
6.	Do you usually set up students to work separately, in pairs, thirds and in groups?				
7.	Do you usually manage your lecture's time within the time frame of the lesson plan?				
8.	Do you arrange the seating in rows, circles, and in a U-shape?				

No.	Group (3): Types of Teaching Activities QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
9.	Do you target your activities for the whole class together?				
10.	Do you usually distribute tasks for students to accomplish in-pairs, and/or in groups?				
11.	Do you conduct activities for individuals as well as for groups and/or pairs?				

No.	Group (4): Teaching Strategies QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
12.	Do you always present tasks with pre-explanations and a pre-solved model?				
13.	Do you usually organize practice when giving tasks in the classroom?				
14.	Do you use the teaching techniques, such as; drills, and modeling?				

No.	Group (5): Teachers' Use of Material QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
15.	Do you stick on using the course book, and try to use all materials within that book?				
16.	Do you usually try to support you course book with supplementary?				
17.	Do you use the course book as an extra source rather than main material in the classroom?				

Group (6): Teachers' Use of Language				
No.	QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
18.	Do you usually intend to instruct students using instructional language?				
19.	Do you use questions to confirm understanding?				
20.	Do you usually intend to get feedback from students?				
21.	Do you usually explain grammatical structures and the vocabulary you use?				

Group (7): Teacher-Student Interaction				
No.	QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4
22.	Do you usually allow a space for your students to use the language probably in classroom?				
23.	Do you use Arabic when you face difficulties while interacting with students?				
24.	Do you allow a space for students to enroll in a student-to-student interaction?				
25.	Do you correct students' use of language?				

Thank you for your cooperation
Jalal Belshek & Hani Ertemi