

Peer Observation: A Professional Learning Tool for English Language Teachers in an EFL Institute

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Abstract

The key aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of English as foreign language (EFL) teachers about peer observation as a tool for professional development that is implemented in an English Language Institute of a Saudi Arabian university. This paper reviews literature on peer observation to develop a conceptual and theoretical understanding of peer observation systems in different contexts. It utilizes a mix-method approach and applies a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as data collection tools. Questionnaire is used to get information about EFL teachers' perceptions whereas semi-structured interviews provide an insight into their practices in the form of peer observation and future amendments for PD. The participants share their lived experiences who consider the current practice of peer observation a consistent professional challenge due to several factors, i.e. their lack of autonomy in deciding about the peers, trust deficit between administration and EFL teachers, rarely held pre-observation conferences due to the loads of teaching hours, observers' insufficient training and qualifications in conducting PO, and the element of threat and insecurity. Based on the findings, recommendations are made to improve the existing peer observation system for the benefit of the EFL teachers, English language learners and the institute.

Keywords: peer observation, professional development, mixed methods, EFL context

1. Introduction

Teachers' development (TD) is not a new concept and it has been accepted as an academic measure since the time of Socrates (Charlotte & McGreal, 2000). Richards and Farrell (2005) believe that teachers need to be able to engage in self-reflection and evaluation, developing specialized knowledge and skills about many aspects of teaching, expanding their knowledge base about research, theory, and issues in teaching, taking on new roles and responsibilities, such as supervisor or mentor teacher, teacher-researcher, or materials writer and developing collaborative relationships with other teachers. As the field of language teaching changes rapidly both as a profession and trends with respect to new educational paradigms and institutions, it faces new challenges as a result of changes in students' needs, curriculum and tests. Consequently, the language teachers require regular opportunities to develop themselves professionally (Wong, 2004; Wallace, 2001).

Institutions around the world have embraced new ways of developing teachers professionally that includes, peer observation (PO), formal observation and professional development (PD) programs (workshops, seminars, presentation of research papers). In the context of the current research, PO is considered a way of professional development of EFL teachers. It is assumed that this approach has compensated for the teachers' lack of training in the Saudi context. However, there is a perception, that Saudi Arabia as compared to other Gulf States offers more training opportunities to EFL teachers (Syed, 2003). On the other hand, Al-Hazmi (2003) posits that very little teacher training is available in the KSA despite the dire need for it. Despite this contradiction, it is established that professional learning and development are needed at every level and EFL teachers should make efforts to keep