Self-regulated Professional Development: A Case of Teacher-led EFL Class Observation

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Abstract

Lesson observations have been frequently used as a tool for teacher appraisal, teacher training, academic research, and professional development, especially in EFL contexts. However, work on self-regulated lesson observations directed purely on collaboration and reflection is not very extensive. So is the want of a study which presents the observation report of a real-time lesson. The present study adopted a teacher-led approach to conduct a peer observation of an EFL lesson on lexis. The researchers identified evaluating the lesson from two dimensions: lesson planning and lesson delivery. The findings based on the observer's report revealed that the lesson had an overall logical shape, clear procedures, active student-teacher interactions, effective use of the instructional materials, especially the whiteboard, productive teaching strategies and techniques such as eliciting through questions and visuals, and supportive feedback. However, there was a need for improvement, especially in regard to managing the stage timings, grading the teacher's language, and engaging the students in an interactive pattern. The study is expected to provide some useful insights to EFL researchers and practitioners interested in further research on the topic or conducting peer observations for professional growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern-day focus on professional development initiatives in academia has witnessed a shift from the top-down approaches to the bottom-up (Tanis and Dikilitas, 2018). The template design interventions have been replaced by more contextualized processes based on reflection, investigation and collaboration, and involving teachers in making decisions about professional development modalities (Borg, 2015). Teacher-led classroom observation is one of the recent forms of professional development activity which is designed by the teachers themselves (Acar, Özpolat, and Çomoğlu, 2023). Teachers' taking control of their development results in enhanced teacher autonomy and better student learning. Despite these merits, teacher-led observations, however, cannot provide for the deficit in regard to the pedagogical knowledge, teaching skillset, and comprehension of the curriculum and materials (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Therefore, recourse to the top-down approaches is also necessary for a fuller analysis of the teacher's performance as well as professional development.

Lesson observation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class is a complex phenomenon. Following Freeman as cited in Gu (2022), an EFL teacher is expected to harness four different types of knowledge. First, he must have disciplinary knowledge which includes

linguistics, psychology, literature, sociology, and anthropology. Secondly, he must be able to translate pedagogical knowledge into language teaching. The third type has two dimensions: knowledge-in-person and knowledge-in-place. Knowledge-in-person concerns the way a teacher utilizes his practical skills, while knowledge-in-place is motivated by the contextual factors which dictate the teacher to make informed decisions appropriate to the teaching situation. The fourth type, called knowledge-for-teaching is identified with teacher agency. Unlike the first three types, this type builds on collaborative reflection between the teacher and the learner, resulting in highly effective learning experiences. Therefore, planning an EFL lesson collaboratively and peer observing it can yield reliable material for reflection and professional development both for the observer and the observed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Observing classroom activity for teaching effectiveness is one of the basic constituents of teacher education programmes (De Paor, 2015). Lesson observations, whether conducted as a component of pre-service teacher training in-service teacher development, or professional development endeavour, have always been considered a significantly important way of enhancing teacher efficiency in terms of both pedagogical knowledge and professional practice (Ahmad, 2020a; O'Leary, 2014). Richard and Farrell (2005) hold a similar opinion about language lesson observations which they believe raise awareness about the teaching methods other teachers use, and the strategies they adopt, leading to the emergence of new solutions to the classroom challenges.

EFL teacher observations can be conducted for several reasons. Zacharias (2012) suggests three motives: observing to learn, observing to describe, and observing to evaluate. This entails that Lesson observations are instrumental in gauging teaching quality (Borg, 2018), recording classroom dynamics (Hinchey, 2010), and obtaining data on teacher performance to be used for formative and summative analysis (Goe, Bell, & Little, 2008). Keig and Waggoner (1995) as cited in Alghamdi et al. (2023) have referred to three benefits of peer observation concerning an appreciation of the teaching process, appraisal of the teaching actions, and enhancement of professional collaboration at the workplace. Apart from formative and summative purposes, recent years have witnessed new applications of peer observation which include enhancing the achievement of learning objectives, employing integrated technology in lesson delivery, and updating teaching skills to make them compatible with the latest practices. Lesson observations have also been exploited for self-directed professional development, the main focus of the present study, and educational supervision (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, as cited in Kani and Yilmaz, 2018).

Typically, lesson observations are conducted in three stages: pre-observation meetings, the recording of the lesson events, and post-observation feedback (Bailey, 2006). Another framework is the Collaborative Observation (CO) also referred to as peer review (Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer, & Carr 2007) where teachers reflect on their teaching after observing each other's lessons. The CO model has been conducive to reducing teacher anxiety as both the teachers assume the role of an assessor, thereby eliminating power relations. More importantly, the model prioritizes reflective observation which tends to be non-judgmental.

Chien (2015) found that observing experienced teachers had a significant impact on pre-service teachers' teaching content, subject knowledge, and classroom management skills. Yuan (2018) found teacher modelling instrumental in improving trainee teachers' teaching methods when they observed the expert teacher synthesizing theory with practice. In addition to skills and knowledge development, lesson observations have also promoted critical reflection among the practitioners (Brookfield, 1995). Many lesson observations include teacher reflection as an essential part of the lesson observation process (Ahmad, 2020). This

provision for the post-lesson reflections mostly in the form of a collaborative dialogue or a write-up has inspired the co-construction of knowledge to the benefit of the observer and the observed.

Although lesson observations have been an integral feature of teacher training programmes, there is little empirical evidence to establish the extent to which teachers actually learn from observations (Xu, 2017). There seems to be a discernible research gap between the incidence of observations and the processing of the observed information (Gu, 2022). A study by Gu (2022) identified four causes that inhibited the collaborative construction of language teaching knowledge between peers during lesson observations. These included their assumed aim of the modelled lessons, their method of constructing meaning, their notion of observer–observed relationship, and their cognizance of professional learning.

Teachers and researchers have expressed their concerns about some of the prevalent issues with lesson observations. Variations have been found in findings of the same lesson when observed by different observers (Bell et al. 2014) and this challenges the notion of observer reliability. Borg (2018) refers to preplanned observations which do not provide an accurate measure of a teacher's actual classroom practice. On the other hand, random observations have been reported to cause disruption in the teaching process as well as a sense of insecurity among the teachers (Pennington and Young, 1989). Similarly, novice and expert teachers cannot be evaluated on the same standards as the former might be more concerned about their skills in lesson planning, classroom control, feedback and interaction patterns, and professional prestige than their more experienced colleagues. A study by Ali (2012) questioned the provision for observed teachers' voices in the peer observation process. He also raised concerns about the validity of the teacher evaluation tools for it was not clear that the assessment forms had received any sort of approval from the higher management. Another study on lesson observations by Tawalbeh (2020) revealed that the teachers preferred constructive but collaborative feedback only on strengths. This was further corroborated by Alghamdi, Al-Nofaie & Alkhammash (2023) who observed the negative attitude of Saudi EFL teachers towards peer observation as they did not embrace the idea of being observed and evaluated. A research study by Alshehri (2018) also found class observation as a cause of negative anxiety among the observed, as they believed it did not correlate with their routine teaching practices.

Owing to the complex nature of EFL classrooms, it is also quite challenging to observe teachers on a stringently consistent criterion. Richards and Farrell (2005) find language classes continually changing and erratic events which are diversely populated and undergoing a variety of functions at the same time. These events sometimes unveil themselves randomly, thereby making the recording of many different happenings at one time very challenging. Student teachers' own cognition, which Borg (2003 p.81) describes as an "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think" also makes class observations difficult. This unobservable domain is partially the consequence of the transformation student teachers undergo while starting careers as trained teachers. Moreover, research has shown that positive experiences during teacher observations of student teachers facilitate their entry into practical teaching (Devos, 2014). However, many newly inducted teachers have correlated classroom observations with negative anxiety.

In order to reduce nervous excitement during the teaching observation, Richards and Farrell (2005 p.94) propose the availability of impartial systems and standards for the observer and the observed: "Because observation involves an intrusion into a colleague's classroom, procedures for carrying out observations need to be carefully negotiated between the

participating parties". Teacher development programmes which use classroom observation as a measurement tool of performance must focus on ensuring sustainable change and enhancing positive learning experiences (Medvedev, 2024). It is the change in teacher beliefs and practices, though gradual and sequential, which helps the development of teachers from novice to expert (Ahmad, 2020; Yuliasri, et al., 2023).

2.1. Significance of the Study

Contemporary studies predominantly focus on measuring teachers' attitudes and perceptions about peer observation through surveys, interviews, or panel discussions (Tawalbeh 2020). There is, in fact, a dearth of research work which reports an evaluation of actual lesson observation which was organized on a certain framework. This study intends to address this research vacuum by investigating a real-time EFL class on vocabulary on an adapted framework for lesson observation. The findings are expected to provide a reliable account of the teacher's performance as enunciated in the observation criteria. Both EFL teachers and researchers interested in further studying professional development, peer observations or lesson planning may benefit from the observation report.

2.2. Aims and Objectives

The study was designed to receive peer observation on teaching vocabulary to beginner-level EFL students at a Saudi university. The lesson aims were, therefore, generated keeping in view the contextual factors such as the learner profile, coursebook specifications, course design and course learning objectives, and assessment policy. It was also ensured that the proposed lesson plan fits well in the overall course design to avoid any disruption in the teaching and the learning process. Hence, students' previous learning experiences and future lessons were duly considered during the planning stage.

More specifically, the study was premised on one main aim and one main objective. The main aim was to conduct a self-regulated peer observation lesson to find out the extent to which lesson planning and teaching delivery lead to a professional understanding of an EFL lesson on lexis. This aim was achieved through the lesson plan (Appendix) which was created with the idea of familiarizing students with the meaning and the use of a few nouns that were frequently used at the airport while travelling.

3. METHOD

The lesson was planned for beginner-level Saudi EFL learners at the University of Jeddah. The target group of learners could be assumed to have a false beginner proficiency, with only a few students who could make reasonable use of the target language. So, teaching them some basic vocabulary that related to their real-time use was deemed effective. Learning basic nouns for travelling would lead them to learn lexical collocations in their future lessons and develop their lexical range (Ahmad, 2019). The researchers proposed to use travel words because these Saudi students had a frequent travelling experience, and therefore, would easily relate the lesson to real-life use.

Since the lesson observation was planned to be a collaborative effort aimed primarily at reflection and professional development, other dimensions of peer observation, as suggested, for instance, by Maldrerez (2003) about training, evaluation and research were overlooked. A framework applied previously by Ahmad (2020b) was adapted to be used for receiving a holistic analysis of the classroom events regarding lesson planning and lesson delivery. Following Bailey (2006) the lesson observation was administered in three stages: The pre-observation meeting; the recording of the lesson events; and the observer report.

The observed class was organized at the English Language Institute (ELI), University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The second author was observed by the first author. Both have been in EFL for almost two decades now, and are qualified, trained, and experienced in planning and managing class observations. It was decided that the second author would design the lesson and tasks as well as create materials which would be shared with the observer a day before the lesson. The observation criteria were set through collaboration, and it was decided that the observer would share a written report on his findings.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The observer found the lesson plan (Appendix) to have a fairly clear procedure with a clear context, some variety and opportunities for different interactions. Generally, there was a logical shape to the lesson, with consolidation of the meaning of the target vocabulary in terms of meaning and spelling. Some further communicative practice or use of the target language would also have been useful. The procedure stages were generally well-presented and organised. Bullet points helped to break down the steps of most stages clearly, and interaction patterns were clearly shown. Stage aims were learner-focused, and the stage timings were clearly indicated.

However, the observer felt that some procedures needed to be more clearly explained to show what the learners were expected to do and how. In addition, some stage aims needed further attention, e.g. the "controlled practice" – since the learners were not actually doing anything with the target language in these stages, these would be better described as the consolidation of meaning, whilst the "free practice" of spelling was not free at all – it was controlled since in each case there was only one correct answer. It would also help if the teacher had labelled handouts – HO1, HO2, etc. to show what would be used. In addition, some minor proofreading of handouts was needed, and the teacher said that the first match had been done, but it had not been. Similarly, some timings seemed a little unbalanced in the later stages of the lesson, especially the spelling stage, which was quite long.

The observer found the teacher to have a very strong, positive classroom presence and to encourage the learners well. There was a clear context for this lesson and generally good use of visuals. The teacher had some effective techniques in place – eliciting, discreet monitoring and drilling – and made excellent use of the board to support his instructions. There was also some variety in tasks and interactions, including some movement. The learners generally seemed to grasp the vocabulary, but the teacher had to consider his own accuracy in some of these, as some of his presentations of meaning were not correct. There was also the need to grade the language to the learners' level better and try to elicit as much as possible rather than just spoon-feeding language.

The teacher maintained a relaxed, confident, and friendly manner and did well in encouraging equal participation through good nominations and appropriate gestures. The learners were generally well-engaged, as the teacher varied his role at times and there were opportunities for different interactions. The students were listened to attentively and responded effectively by the teacher. The teacher's language was mostly accurate, and, at times, appropriately graded with clear delivery and natural speed. The visuals and practice activities helped to convey the meaning of the target lexis, and the teacher did some useful work on spelling and pronunciation with some good drilling. Moreover, he also used some good paraphrasing techniques to show how items of lexis were connected. The teacher was particular as far as motivating the students to self or peer-correct was concerned.

The basic sequence of the lesson was logical and there was a clear context set and maintained. Apart from eliciting, drilling and supportive monitoring, the building up of a mind map with the pictures on the whiteboard was a good idea for maintaining context, and the teacher supported his presentation with some different worksheets to help the learners think about meaning in different ways. Similarly, the jumbled words for the spelling activity added

a nice kinaesthetic element to the lesson, and it was an effective strategy to get the learners to the board. All of these made the lesson coherent and added variety in tasks and interactions. Teacher monitoring of the lesson was discreet but supportive and feedback was given on all tasks. Most stages of the lesson were implemented as planned, making a time-related decision not to include one activity. The use of the whiteboard for giving task instructions was very impressive as it not only helped as a demonstration and comprehension check technique but also ensured learners' focus and achievement of the lesson aims. The teacher had a very positive attitude to spoken feedback was aware of his teaching, and was able to reflect and responded well to suggestions.

However, the lesson was not without its weaknesses and the observer referred to certain areas that needed improvement in future lessons. First, he felt that the learners could have been better engaged if the teacher had aimed to elicit more and involved them more in the learning process. He thought that they were also a little unsure as to why they were learning this lexis, especially so early on at such a low level and this perhaps prevented them from being as fully engaged as they might have. Secondly, the teacher's language was somewhat ungraded at times and above the level of the class, e.g. using "immigration" to explain a much simpler word, "passport" (and a cognate in many languages). The teacher should aim to work on simplifying introductions, etc. so the learners can follow better. This was also true of the handouts, which both included language that was above the level of the class. The matching activity, in particular, though a nice idea in theory, included some rather indirect word associations for learners at this level to cope with. Moreover, the teacher's definition of one item - "*departure gate*" - was incorrect, and the term "*boarding desk*" is not normally used – it is usually "*check-in*". The teacher needed to be careful also about how he asked the learners to explain items. They were not at a level to answer "*What is passport*?", but would probably be able to answer simple concept check questions about when/where it was used. Meaning could also have been consolidated if the teacher had asked the learners to sequence the items according to how they passed through an airport, which would have made a good supporting consolidation activity and added further variety. The teacher should also consider how to set up tasks to maintain the flow. The spelling activity would have been more fun for the learners if it had been set up as a race to complete all words, rather than interrupting each one to take feedback. All feedback was taken through the teacher, and he could have varied this to involve the learners more; for instance, in the use of answer keys and peer-checking. Also, the teacher should consider when to stage feedback. Finally, if he did use whole-class feedback, he should think about who got the practice. In the matching activity, he called out the lexis while the learners only called out the corresponding matching letter. As mentioned, some instructions needed simplifying, and care should be taken about how the teacher held handouts before he gave them to the learners. Ideally, he should aim to show them the handouts first so they could see what they would do.

5. CONCLUSION

Learning to teach impactfully is a lifelong process, and so is professional development. Classroom dynamics are ever-evolving, and offer new challenges and learning experiences which are being continually influenced by advances in instructional paraphernalia, institutional policies, and curriculum designs. Staying updated with the contemporaneous trends in the domain of EFL is, therefore, challenging and can only be realized through sustained planning for continuous professional development. Collaboration among the teachers can facilitate the goal of self-regulated teacher development. Peer observations are one of the most easily accessible tools for professional development. Collaborative peer observations dispel the notion of power relationships that typically exist between the observer and the observed in teacher observation for appraisal, for instance. Hence, there could be a highly congenial cooperative effort by the peers which would ensure optimum professional growth and sustained practice.

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Appendix: Lesson Plan

Time	Stage/Stage Aim(s)	Procedure	Interaction	Materials
5 min	Lead-in: - to activate the schemata of the students for the target lesson - to introduce the topic.	1. Greet students. 2. Show them a picture handout of an airport. Ask students a few questions about the picture. E.g., what do you see? What does the picture say? Etc. Relate the students' responses to the topic. Write the topic on the whiteboard Introduce the topic	T ↔ SS	Picture hand-out Whiteboard

10 min	Context set-up: - to develop a clear and meaningful context which could help students understand and use the target vocabulary in the lesson.	1. Show students the pictures of different activities at the airport. Elicit what types of situations these pictures represent Support students with difficulties of pronunciation and meaning. Write students' response on the board.	T ↔ SS	Picture hand-outs White board
13 min	Controlled Practice - to give students definition/expalnation of the target vocabulary - to reinforce the understanding developed with the aid of pictures - to provide students practice in the use of the target words	Task 1 The students use their understanding of the key vocabulary items in answering a set of multiple-choice statements. The first will be done for them. The student response will be checked and feedback given	T ↔ SS S+S (pw) T ↔ SS	Hand-outs White board
07 min	Controlled Practice to further reinforce the meaning of the target vocabulary items - to prepare students for the free practice	Task 2 Students match column A with column B. One is done for them. The student response will be checked and feedback given	T ↔ SS S+S (pw) T ↔ SS	Hand-outs White board
15 min	Free Practice To allow students do a task independently in groups	Task 3 Spelling practice	T ↔ SS SS – SS (GW) T -- SS	Hand-outs White board
05 min	Round-up To recapitulate the target vocabulary To check whether the lesson objectives have been met	Back-up plan: The students will fill in the missing words in a passage about air travel.		