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PEER OBSERVATION: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As the field of language teaching changes rapidly the language teachers require regular opportunities to develop themselves professionally. Constant emergence of new learning methods and educational technologies encourage teachers to search for effective ways in their continuous professional development. Continuous professional development (CPD) is an important part of ongoing teacher education and professional growth. One of the most common forms of continuous professional development is peer observation. For teachers it is important to get constructive feedback and support from their peers in order to improve teaching quality. Peer observation is a powerful tool to help teachers share best teaching practices among colleagues. Observing and being observed encourage teachers to learn from each other, develop a more reflective approach to their teaching, improve their learning and teaching practice, spread a spirit of collegiality and provide mutual support. The article explores the literature related to peer observation to develop a theoretical understanding of the term “peer observation”, describes the benefits and the stages of implementing peer observation in an educational process. This process combines the following guidelines recommended to assist in peer observation: 1) observation should have a focus; 2) observers should use specific procedures; 3) observation should involve: a pre-observation discussion, observation of the lesson and a post-observation reflection. The article highlights the importance of peer observation in the field of language teaching and suggests the ways how to carry it effectively. The findings can be used in the field of English language teaching to organize regular peer support for novice and experienced teachers as a part of teachers’ continuous professional development.

Key words: peer observation, continuous professional development, peer support, lifelong learning, observer, observee.

Introduction. The process of teaching today is a process of lifelong learning and development [10, p. 2]. It is often said that the best teachers are those that do not stop learning. Teaching English today stresses the need for the lifelong development of teachers.” Teacher development is the process of becoming the best teacher one is able to be, a process that can be started but never finished” [15]. Continuous Professional development (CPD) is not a new phenomenon and describes a process of “continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers ... it suggests that teachers should continue to develop in the use, change, and application of their profession” [9, p. 250]. 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. Consequently, the language teachers require regular opportunities to develop themselves professionally [17]. Teachers should constantly be in search of improving and extending their skills, be aware

of the need to change, reflect on their own teaching for a better learning outcomes. This can be achieved through a variety of professional development activities such as workshops, seminars, webinars, conferences, training events, classroom or peer observations.

The insights into the latest research. Peer observation is one of the most common forms of continuous professional development and a means to help teachers share best teaching practices among colleagues. “It involves teachers observing each other’s practice and learning from one another, focusing on teacher’s individual needs and the opportunity to both learn from other’s practice and offer constructive feedback to peers. Peer observation aims to support the sharing of practice and builds self-awareness about the impact of one’s teaching practice in order to affect others.” [20, p. 8]. Many research studies speak to the effectiveness of the process of peer observation. Murray [10] discusses the benefits of peer observation in empowering teachers through their professional development. Hammersly-Fletcher and Orsmond [6]

write how to deliver the peer observation process effectively to reap all the benefits and state that peer observation should have clear goals. Jack C. Richards describes peer observation “as an opportunity for teachers to develop a critically reflective stance to their own teaching” [13].

The purpose of the article. Within the scope of this paper, we focus on peer observation for language teachers as a powerful tool for continuous professional development and a valuable strategy of improving the quality of teaching and learning. “Peer can be any colleague willing to support you. It’s a two-way process that can benefit both the observer and the teacher being observed, with the goal of improving learning and teaching” [19]. Observation provides an opportunity for both novice and experienced teachers though an experienced teacher is likely to have different needs and priorities than a teacher who is just starting. Observing another teacher may also trigger reflections about one’s own teaching, provides a chance to see how others teach, get feedback on one’s teaching and discover effective teaching strategies that the observer has never tried. It is understood that observing other teachers to learn about their approaches will provide significant insights into one’s own growth as a teacher [2]. For the teacher being observed, it allows them to gather data about classroom processes from a new perspective, which they may use to modify their teaching practices [13]. Therefore, a key component of the peer observation process is the opportunity for mutual benefit.

The main layout. The purpose of the observation is to collect information that later could be used in a post- observation reflection. “Normally you should focus on only one or two aspects of the lesson since you cannot focus on too many things at the same time” [13]. In developing goals for the peer observation, a variety of different aspects of the lessons can be identified for observation and collecting information on. These could include:

1. Lesson structure – the entry, structuring and closure of the lesson.
2. Classroom management strategies- setting up groups, seating arrangements, maintaining order.
3. Types of teaching activities- whole-class activities, pair and group work, individual activities.
4. Teacher’s use of materials- use of textbooks and other resources.
5. Teacher’s time management- distribution of time to different activities during the lesson.
6. Students’ use of language- use of the mother tongue during class, problems with grammar or pronunciation.

7. Students’ performance and time-on-tasks – what strategies and procedures students employ in completing a task, to which extent students were actively involved during a task.

8. Teacher’s use of language- use of instructional language, explanations of grammar and vocabulary, the types of questions teachers asked during a lesson, feedback techniques.

9. Classroom interaction- student-to-student talk, questioning behaviour, teacher- student and student interaction patterns during a lesson.

10. New teaching activity- class performance during a new teaching activity

11. Group work- the dynamics of group activities.

Peer observation may involve the teacher:

- Being observed
- Observing others
- Observing him/herself via filming or evidence collection
- Team teaching (which involves switching the observer/observed role during a class/ series of classes
- A combination of all of these [21]

Choosing an Observer

“Teachers who are committed to the teaching profession and interested in their professional development should be willing to allow other peers to observe their teaching and also be ready for their peer’s teaching” [12]. The relationship between the observer and the observee is the key to a successful observation of teaching. Studies of peer observation suggest that “colleagues who respect and trust each other can be invaluable in helping improve each other’s teaching” [8, p.68]. The following aspects may be considered important when choosing an observer:

1. Knowledge of the teaching context (classroom, online, seminar, etc.)
2. Familiarity with a subject area (the observer should understand the basic concept of the class they enter into). This can be provided in the pre-observation meeting.
3. Knowledge of teaching techniques suitable to the teaching context.
4. Ability to provide constructive feedback to the observee.

Peer observation may be implemented in a variety of ways depending on the needs and goals of the teachers. The key goal of observation is to learn from the experience of observation [13]. To achieve it, the observer needs to know that the process of peer observation involves the following stages:

- Pre-observation discussion of the lesson and focus of observation

- Observation of the lesson
- Post-observation reflection on the lesson, learning points and action plans

Pre-observation discussion. Before observation two teachers, the observer and the observed meet to discuss the class to be observed, the material being taught, class participation and intended outcomes for the lesson. The aim of pre-observation discussion for the observer is to learn more about the class and for the observed to identify a focus for the observation. The more specific the observed teacher can be, the more useful information the observer is likely to provide [14]. The observer and the observee decide on observation procedures and arrange a schedule for observations. Pre-observation meeting also provides an opportunity to know beforehand the culture and expected problems in the classroom which really helps to reflect on expected events [13].

Observation of the Lesson. The observer conducts the observation using the procedures agreed during the pre-observation discussion. Donnelly [4] recommends informing the students about the observation in advance and assuring them that

the purpose is to assist teacher’s professional skills and not to evaluate the students. Beigy and Woodin [1] suggest that introducing the observer and explaining their role will help mitigate any tension and allow the lesson to unfold as naturally as possible. The observer should focus on student’s motivation, listening, understanding and learning.

Post-observation reflection. Richards & Lockhart suggest that teachers meet as soon as possible after the observation in order to debrief [13]. The goal is to reconstruct and analyze one’s teaching context and performance to identify teaching strength and areas for improvement. Reflection is a vital part of learning and studies show that the most effective peer observations involve self-reflection on the part of both the observer and the observee. This reflective practice “involves the process of teaching and the thinking behind it, rather than simply evaluating the teaching itself.” The feedback should generally be an affirming and encouraging process [6]. The table below provides the example of reflective questions following the observation. They are based on “Learning by doing” by Graham Gibbs [5].

Reflective questions for the teacher being observed	Reflective questions for the observer
What happened?	What did I see?
What was I thinking and feeling?	What did I hear?
What did I do well?	What questions occurred to me about what I observed?
How do I know this?	What evidence do I have?
What could I do even better?	How does the evidence relate to the observation focus?
What can I do to find out more about my areas for development?	What did I learn for the observation?
What do I feel my next steps could be?	Based on the evidence, what constructive suggestions for changes could I make?

Procedures of peer observation

In order to make peer observation effective, it should be decided how to make a record of the information. Depending on the purpose of the observation Jack C. Richards suggests the following procedures for peer observation: written narrative, field notes and checklists [13].

Written narrative provides an account of the main structure and development of the lesson, the strategies and techniques used by the teacher, how the teacher implemented or departed from his or her lesson plan. The account should contain as much information as possible but should not contain any evaluation of the lesson. One more method of recording the peer observation is ethnography-style observation. This type of observation records factual descriptions of what the teacher is doing and what the students are doing. The aim is to gather as many details as

possible during the observation, but not to make any judgements or comments. It is a good way of staying neutral and allows to talk about specific choices the teacher made during the lesson. The following questions are adapted from Chism [3] and can help focus the written narrative by being utilized in particular moment in time:

- What is the teacher speaking about?
- What specific comments are being made? (Student & Teacher)
- What types of questions are being asked? (Student & Teacher)
- How are classroom learning activities organized?
- What is the level of student interaction?
- What teaching strategies are being used?

Field notes are brief descriptions in note form of key events during the lesson. It is an informal way

of taking notes of the key activities that occur during the lesson and a flexible way of observing it.

Checklists are a systematic way of collecting information on specific aspects of a lesson. It is a useful, quick recording method of noting identified teaching and learning techniques. It may involve a list of all the different roles a teacher takes during the lesson, from presenter to facilitator to assessor [11]. Some teacher education programs offer checklists for observation but it is often difficult to find specific checklists for subject areas, such as second language teaching. However, some specific things that one can look for observing may include the following:

- Does the teacher have a lesson plan?
- How does the teacher start the lesson?
- What interaction does the teacher establish with the students?
- Are students engaged?
- At what level and in what ways?
- How does the teacher structure an activity? Are the instructions given in English or the learners' L1?
- How does the teacher maintain and adjust the course when unexpected events happened?
- How does the teacher close the lesson?
- What does the class tell you about the teacher's philosophy and educational goals?

Using video camera to carry out a peer observation can be an effective way of recording the information, as the recording can form the basis of a powerful discussion and reflection. Watching recording many times helps to be objective for both the observer and the teacher being observed. It may be a good idea to sit down together to watch the video to make sure that the analysis of what has been filmed is impartial. This type of observation is good for a focus on:

- class dynamics, student participation, teacher attention
- teacher talk (questioning, language grading, amount and purpose of teacher talk)
- instruction-giving
- response times allowed to students
- paralinguistic features of communication/ interaction

Benefits of peer observation

Scholars have suggested a number of benefits of the peer observation process both for the observer and the teacher being observed. Peer observation can:

- boost confidence and support the sharing of ideas and expertise among teachers
- encourage reflection and honest conversation with trusted colleagues
- provide a new way of developing self-awareness of one's own teaching
- work alongside other forms of professional development
- develop communication skills and help to reflect on teaching and student learning
- prevent teachers from becoming isolated and teaching from becoming routine

“Peer observation provides an opportunity to open up the doors and reveal what is taking place on everyday basis. Opening up the classroom through peer observation also gave confidence to some teachers. This confidence stemmed from confirmation that what they were doing was acceptable” [16].

Conclusions. Peer observation plays a valuable role in the English language classroom, since it has immediate practical benefits for novice as well as experienced teachers. It should be approached as a regular opportunity for teachers to collaborate for each other's benefit. It helps teachers develop a deeper understanding of themselves as teachers and be better prepared to make decisions about their own teaching. Learning through peer observation is an important part in teaching. By observing new methods and strategies from other colleague teachers you reflect on and identify the strength and weakness of your teaching methods. Peer observation is an effective strategy in developing teachers' professional competencies. Feedback from peer observations is an effective way for providing teachers with the information they need about their classroom behaviour and it can help them in their continuous professional development. It is a powerful tool in higher education to help teachers improve their teaching quality.

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Сабат С. І. ВЗАЄМОВІДВІДУВАННЯ ЗАНЯТЬ – ПОТУЖНИЙ ІНСТРУМЕНТ БЕЗПЕРЕРВНОГО ПРОФЕСІЙНОГО РОЗВИТКУ ВИКЛАДАЧА АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

Безперервний професійний розвиток – це важливий складник постійного навчання та професійного зростання викладача. Оскільки сфера викладання іноземних мов швидко змінюється, викладачі потребують регулярних можливостей для свого професійного розвитку. Зростаючі вимоги до професорсько-викладацького складу та рівня компетентності, які пов’язані з появою нових методів навчання, вимагають запровадження додаткових форм професійного розвитку викладачів та пошуку ефективних засобів підвищення якості навчального процесу. Взаємовідвідування занять є однією з форм взаємонавчання, яка сприяє підвищенню рівня професійних навиків, якщо її використовувати як інструмент підтримки та розвитку професорсько-викладацького складу. Для викладачів критично важливим є конструктивний зворотній зв’язок та взаємодопомога з метою вдосконалення якості викладання та вивчення досвіду колег. Взаємовідвідування занять заохочує навчатись один в одного, розвивати рефлексивний підхід щодо викладання, вдосконалювати методи викладання та розвивати дух колегіальності та взаємодопомоги. Метою статті є критичний аналіз та зміст терміну «взаємовідвідування занять». Описуються переваги використання та етапи процесу відвідування занять та пропонуються ефективні методи їх проведення для викладачів англійської мови закладів вищої освіти. Подаються рекомендації щодо забезпечення якісного процесу взаємовідвідування: 1) наявність чіткої мети; 2) дотримання відповідних процедур; 3) дотримання відповідних етапів у проведенні: а) обговорення перед проведенням заняття; б) спостереження під час заняття; в) рефлексія та зворотній зв’язок після заняття. Результати дослідження можна використовувати в сфері викладання іноземних мов в системі вищої освіти для сприяння професійному становленню та зростанню викладачів.

Ключові слова : взаємовідвідування занять, безперервний професійний розвиток, взаємopідтримка, навчання впродовж життя, спостерігач, спостережуваний.