

The effect and affect of reciprocal observation

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Abstract

The primary aim of this extended reciprocal observation project was to improve teaching practice through reflection and critical discussion. The author and a colleague observed each other teaching once a week for one semester. Both had similar training backgrounds and had frequently been observed during their teaching careers. Ground rules for behaviour in the classroom were established for the observer, but unlike most peer observation of teaching, there was no focus on any particular aspect of teaching. A reflective journal was kept throughout the observation period. It was expected that both participants would acquire some anecdotes, games and activities to add to their armory of classroom techniques; but neither predicted the major outcome of this extended research project: something more important than any of the gains made professionally.

Keywords

Peer observation of teaching, reciprocal observation

The inspiration for undertaking this action research stemmed from a desire to improve teaching practice. Expectations for improvement were based on three main beliefs. First, that observing an experienced and well-qualified teacher would be a rich source of ideas to adopt in one's own teaching. Second, the opportunity to focus on learners during another teacher's class would enable one to concentrate on the students and their learning. Third, the feedback provided

by the observers would enable the observees to reflect on their actual teaching practice.

It was hoped that the research would be both heuristic, enabling the participants to discover something that they were not aware of; and illuminative, i.e. aiming to throw light on some aspect of the teaching and learning process.

Peer observation of teaching (POT) tends to be asymmetrical with the observer being a more senior member of staff. Most peer observation of

teaching is not reciprocal. This paper, however, focuses on reciprocal observation in which both participants observed and were observed by each other. There is some research on reciprocal POT in clinical teaching (Snydman, Chandler, Rencic, & Sung, 2013) and higher education (Pressick-Kilborn & te Riele, 2008; Scott & Miner, 2008), but to date there is a paucity of research on this area in the realm of English language teaching.

Literature review

Peer observation of teaching is one form of professional development designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning (e.g. Bennett & Barp, 2008; Byrne, Brown & Challen, 2010). Lublin (2002) defines peer observation of teaching for development purposes as “a collaborative and reciprocal process whereby one peer observes another’s teaching ...and provides supportive and constructive feedback”. Bell (2005) provides a more specific definition peer observation of teaching, namely:

collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas. (p. 3)

McMahon, Barrett & O’Neill (2007, p.505) describe peer observation of teaching as subjecting oneself to “scrutiny by peers, and use the professional dialogue and shared reflection that follows to improve professional practice”.

Among the varied models of POT, there is one collaborative model that emphasizes the desire to learn from each other with no imposed agenda. Peer observation in this model is genuinely collaborative with no “clear distinction between the one who is the developer and the one being developed” (Gosling & O’Connor, 2005, p.13).

Observers typically create written accounts or observation notes of the observed class. Malderez (2003) describes three types of accounts of observation notes, namely descriptive, interpretative and evaluative, the differences between which are exemplified in Figure 1.

Each of the types of account could be beneficial, but descriptive ones are less likely to be interpreted negatively, and avoid the need for any sugaring of the pill that could be necessary in more evaluative feedback. Descriptive feedback is often recommended in the literature for effective teacher development (Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky & Atkinson, 2012; Wiggins, 2012)

Numerous benefits of POT have been reported in the literature. Hendry & Oliver (2012) assert that evidence is emerging that “the process of observing is just as if not more valuable than being observed and given feedback”. Peer observation has been found to develop collegiality (Bell, 2005; Quinlan & Åkerlind, 2000). Peer observation enables sharing of ideas and teaching activities (D’Andrea, 2002; Martin & Double, 1998). Kemp & Gosling (2000) suggest that a significant benefit of peer observation of teaching is the promotion of critical discussion on all aspects of teaching.

Type of account	Example of observation notes	Example of observation notes
Descriptive	The girl cried.	The girl cried.
Interpretive	She was sad.	She was happy.
Evaluative	The teacher upset her.	The teacher made her feel happy.

Figure 1: Examples of different types of accounts of observation

Blake, Reciprocal observation

There are, however, potential drawbacks of engaging in POT. According to Cosh (1998, p.172), the process could become “a form of mutual back-patting, meaningless for genuine professional development”. Cosh (1998) also notes teachers may attempt to give model lessons rather than show the type of lessons that they normally deliver. Any power imbalance can negatively affect the developmental nature of POT (MacKinnon, 2001). POT could also become or be viewed as intrusive and restricting academic freedom (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005).

In the literature, a number of ways have been suggested to ameliorate potential drawbacks. Fullerton (2003) notes that a supportive and encouraging environment provides the ideal setting for teachers to learn. Jones (1993, p.12) advocates establishing ground rules for behaviour. Once such ground rule could be the use of descriptive rather than evaluative feedback.

The Study

Both participant-observers, the author and a colleague, are qualified teacher trainers and have been observed extensively albeit mainly by pre-service teachers. Reciprocal observation of a credit-bearing business English course for undergraduates in a Hong Kong university was arranged for one 50-minute teaching period a week for twelve weeks.

Before each observation, short briefings of between 2 and 15 minutes took place during which aims, activities and anticipated problems were described. In the first class, students were told that the observer was present for professional development and were asked not to direct questions to him. Observers made handwritten notes during the class, which mainly consisted of narrative descriptions of the teacher and/or student actions. A photocopy of the notes was made after the observation and passed to the

observee. After each observation, there was a debriefing lasting an average of 10 minutes, at which discussion ensued on any aspect of student or teacher behaviour.

Adopting an introspective approach, a participant observation journal was kept to record reflective thoughts and feelings regarding the observations. To analyse the affective data, notes in the journal were coded using a grounded approach. The code expanded to over 20 items.

Results

The 13 most frequently mentioned items, measured by the number of coded occurrences and account for over 80% of the total items, are categorized below into non-affective and affective results.

Non-affective (Behavioural and Cognitive) results

Teaching ideas: Rather than relying on tried-and-tested techniques, we were both inspired to experiment and try out ideas gleaned from the observations. As anticipated, a significant amount of borrowing, adapting and adopting of teaching activities and materials occurred during the observation period.

Learner-centred: The observed teacher effectively handed over to students tasks traditionally associated with the teacher, such as taking the register and writing on the whiteboard. This freed him up to focus on enabling students to achieve the lesson’s objectives. This was an area that deserved more focus in my own classes.

L1 usage: Hearing the students’ mother tongue used in the classroom by the teacher provided the stimulus to reflect on my own language policy and review the related experimental and empirical research literature.

Recalling the forgotten: In the observation notes, my colleague often recorded verbatim

examples used on the spur of the moment, which I had forgotten. One such example was an off-the-cuff example of an ergative verb, which inspired me to create a practice activity using common ergative verbs.

Visuals: Focusing on the students in the observed class enabled me to notice that the glare of the sun, the cursive writing and the size of the letters made reading words on the whiteboard difficult. Afterwards, in my own class, much to my chagrin, I noticed that my students had similar difficulties in deciphering my handwriting.

Physical contact: Having worked in regions and institutions in which any physical contact with students, particularly the opposing gender was banned, I had continued to completely avoid touching students. This practice was re-assessed for the local context once I noticed the positive response from the students of my colleague who infrequently, but yet sometimes used an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

Physical environment: In summer, the effect of the tilt of the blinds and the thermostat setting of the air conditioner and comments such as “blinds down – cool”, brought home the importance of the physical environment and was a timely reminder of the Maslowian hierarchy of needs in which students’ physiological needs have to be satisfied before learning can be effective.

Openness: Both of us wanted honest and direct feedback. In the second week of observations, we agreed on “no mutual backslapping”. This was followed by a frank disclosure and discussion of our perceived weaknesses. Intriguingly, none of these had been noted during the observations, and despite disclosing them, none were ever noted by the other party during any subsequent observations.

Affective results

Anxiety: Although I had been observed numerous times during my teaching career prior to the commencement of this reciprocal observation, there was still some effect on my teaching. There were no butterflies in my stomach nor worries about any ‘hidden’ weaknesses being discovered. However, there was a knowingness that I would be observed by a critical colleague whose opinion I respected. This meant that any planning done was slightly more thorough and it seemed to me that I was more conscientious during my observed classes. This may, however, have been due to a heightened degree of self-reflection during the class to attempt to anticipate what the observer’s slant would be on micro-decisions made during class. As the weeks turned into months, this anxiety reduced greatly, yet I was always conscious that there was an observer present.

Content choice: When planning lessons for the week, I was highly aware of the particular teaching period that would be observed. We had agreed not to do anything different to show each other, but there was a feeling that the observer’s time would be better spent if I taught a particular aspect planned for later in the week rather than that allocated for the teaching hour.

Use of names: Noticing the usage of students’ names throughout my colleague’s classes gave me the impetus to try to learn all of my students’ names, which was no small undertaking given that I taught over a thousand students each year.

Positive attitude: Participating in this project resulted in a renewed confidence and enthusiasm in my teaching - not due to any compliments received - but simply as a result of the heightened awareness from simply being involved in this action research.

Friendship: At the beginning of the research period our relationship was collegial. We worked

in the same department, exchanged social niceties, and on rare occasions swapped teaching tips or worksheets. We were not, however, lunchtime buddies nor drinking partners. As the observations and discussions continued, our collegial relationship developed into a truer friendship in which we could frankly discuss any aspect of our work or personal lives.

Conclusion

In line with the assertion by Hendry & Oliver (2012), the act of observing was extremely beneficial in terms of professional development for the observer possibly more so than for the observee. However, above any of the gains in professional development, the most important outcome of this project is the friendship and trust of a colleague. I would wholeheartedly echo the suggestion of Penny Ur (2012) to make a “mutual arrangement with a like-minded colleague” to observe and give feedback to each other.

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