Peer Observation as a Means to Develop Teachers' Professionalism

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Abstract

The emergence of reflective practice in promoting teacher professional development has been discussed in many literatures. Research studies showed the benefits of conducting reflective practice to improve teachers' classroom instruction. Peer observation as one of the reflective practice activities is viewed as an effective strategy in developing teachers' pedagogy and professional competences. Peer observation refers to the act of teachers collaborate to identify the strength and the weakness of their teachings. By doing so, it is expected there will be improvement in learning outcomes. This study explored EFL teachers' perceptions on peer observation as means to develop teachers' professionalism. Two EFL teachers who worked as English teachers were purposively selected as the respondents of the study. The participating teachers got at least 1 year teaching experience to assure their involvement in peer observation. To meet the objectives of the study, the data were gained through classroom observation, and followed by in depth interview. Then, they were analyzed by using interactive model data analysis for qualitative study. The results of the study indicated teachers' positive perceptions on peer observation as professional development tool. Peer observation brought some benefits for teachers. It helped teachers solve the problems they encountered in their teachings, instead it also could be used as learning opportunity by observing new teaching method/strategy from other colleagues.

Keywords: Reflective practice; Peer observation; Classroom instruction; Professional development tool

Introduction

A quality education demands quality teachers to accomplish the educational goals. As long life learners, teachers should not stop learning. To this point, they are expected to engage in some professional activities to develop their pedagogy skill, extend their understanding on classroom instruction, and reflect the quality of their teachings for a better learning outcomes. One of the professional development activities teachers can engage in to evaluate their teaching is reflective practice.

John Dewey is generally recognized as the founding father of the reflective practice theory. Reflection or reflective practice is a relatively old concept in teacher education. According to Dewey (1933), "Reflection is an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of

knowledge, of the grounds that support that knowledge, and the further conclusions to which that knowledge leads." (p.9). Dewey's concept of reflective practice inspired many other researchers in the field to revise or expand the term. One of the researchers who expands the theory is Schon. He recommended reflective practice as a way for beginners in a discipline to recognize consonance between their own individual practices and those of successful practitioners. As defined by Schon, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline (Schon., 1983). Later, Schon added the terms; reflection in action and reflection on action as part of reflective activity. Another expert, van Manen (1991) completed the categories by adding the term "reflection for action". Today, those three categories were found effective and complementary each other (Farrell., 2012).

There are so many forms of reflective practice activities, such as ; learning journal, peer observation, students' feedback, peer coaching, teacher working group, video/audio recording, and action research (Fatemipour., 2013; Lee., 2007; Susoy., 2015; & Soisangwarn & Wongwanich., 2014). This study is focusing on peer observation. Hendry & Oliver (2012) argued peer observation as the act of two teachers collaborated and observed other's teaching with main goal to improve the quality of teaching. While, Richards & Farrel (2005) said the key points of peer observation are looking deeper at the way the lesson is delivered and gaining some understandings related to teaching and learning process.

Indonesian teachers have been quite familiar with the term "observation" because it is a regular program conducted at schools. By the end of the semester, teachers' performances in teaching will be evaluated. This kind of activity is called as" super intendent/principal supervision" and it often leads to some negative attitude from the teachers under supervision. Kayaoglu (2012) asserted teachers' negative attitude toward traditional supervision conducted at school, and this study also revealed this activity has no pedagogy and professional implications. The same result yielded by Moradi, Sepehrivar, & Khadiv (2014), their study uncovered teachers' "discomfort" of being supervised since some supervisor criticize their teachings in directive ways. In contrast to principal supervision which leads to teachers' anxiety, peer observation can be conducted in more relaxed way since it removes the feeling of being evaluated, thus, Richards & Farrel (2005) expected through peer observation the observer and teacher being observed, both can learn how to improve their teachings and to develop their professional growth.

Basically, there are 3 approaches of classroom observation that could be conducted in educational field, namely; directive approach, alternative approach, and non-directive approach (Freeman in Richards' & Nunan's Chapter., 1990). Gebhard, in Richards' and Nunan's Chapter (1990), later on classified the non-directive approach into non-directive observation and collaborative observation. There are some differences among those approaches, in directive approach, the supervisor is commonly someone who has authority and a source of expertise. It shows different status between trainee and trainer. On alternative approach, the focus changes from observer and his criteria to teacher and his creativity. However, in this approach the observer still has the control over the teacher, since observer questions will lead teacher's attention to the specific problem emerged from the class being observed. The non-directive approach focuses on the teachers' views of teaching and creates opportunities for them to discuss their perceptions of their teaching practice, to address the problems they identify, and to generate their own solutions. And the last is collaborative observation. According to the fundamental principles of collaborative supervision the observer renounces his omniscient position, no longer telling the teacher what should have been done in class for a more effective lesson. Thus, in collaborative observation, observer tries to look at a classroom from teachers' perspectives with a positive non-judgmental attitude. In this kind of observation, teacher and observer are on equal position, as the result of this approach, a class may become a result of cooperative decision making.

Conducting peer observation is considered essential. Zacharias (2012) proposed 3 reasons why peer observation is needed; to learn, to describe, and to evaluate teachers' pedagogy competences.

Further, Cakir (2010) contended that through peer observation teachers will get new insights to improve their teachings because it provides teachers opportunity to identify some problems they cannot observe by themselves. While Richards & Farrel (2005) claimed peer observation has a number of benefits; it helps teacher become more aware of the problem they confront, and it also help teachers narrow the gap between the ideal condition of teaching with what actually happen. Thus, for its meaningfulness, peer observation should be managed well. In general, there are 3 steps in conducting peer observation. Those are planning, conducting the observation, and reflecting (Bell, 2010). Quite similar to the previously mentioned steps, Richards (2006) stated in conducting peer observation following steps need to be taken into account: observing the event, recollection of the event and review and response to the event.

The role of reflective practice in promoting teacher professional development has been discussed in many research studies. The study conducted in Turkey by Susoy (2015) revealed that pre-service teachers are benefitted by watching their teaching videos. By assessing themselves through recorded teaching videos, the pre-service teachers became conscious of the events that occurred during their teaching which they could not realize in the classroom. On the other hand, a study by Merc (2015) informed us about the positive attitude of EFL teachers on classroom peer observation, even though they are lack of experiences. Instead, this study also confirmed conducting classroom observation has more advantages than disadvantages. In Macau, Santos in 2017 conducted a study entitled how do teachers make sense of peer observation professional development in an urban school, the study disclosed peer observation can be a good tool for teachers' professional development, especially for language education. The research also indicated that classroom observation can generate excitement among teachers when it is managed well. Another study, talking about the use of journal writing as reflective practice, was conducted by Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad, & Ganbari (2013). This research revealed several advantages of using journal in making reflection, those are fostering self-awareness, constructing and expanding personal understanding, developing reflection and reasoning skills, and engaging in dialog with the teacher educator.

This current study explored EFL in service teachers' perceptions on peer observation as a means to develop teachers' professionalism. There have been several studies talking about this issue, but only few studies involving in service teachers as the respondents of the study and there is a tendency that peer observation is only suitable for pre service teachers, who are lack of experiences in teaching. Interestingly, there are only few studies examining this field in Indonesian EFL teaching context. The idea of conducting this study arose from researchers' experiences as ELT instructors for several years. We believe that as 21st century educators, the evaluation on teachers' pedagogy competency is necessary. That is why educators need to reflect and evaluate their teachings. There are limitless ways in doing the reflection whether it is in formal or informal way. Peer observation enables teachers to conduct the reflection in "less-stressed" way. In the real educational context, we found teachers rarely engaged in peer observation. It was conducted only in certain schools. Through this study, we expect to find new insights from the teachers who practiced peer observation as part of their teachings. Those, to reach this purpose, the research questions of this study are formulated as follows: 1) How do EFL teachers perceive peer observation as a means to develop teachers' professionalism? 2) What are the benefits of getting involved in peer observation in relation to teachers' professional development?

Methodology

This study was a qualitative case study. It explored the EFL teachers' perceptions on peer observation as a reflective practice activity to develop their professionalism. Two EFL teachers who were selected purposively were involved as the participant of the study. The participating teachers should pose at least 1 year teaching experience, it was to make sure that they got experiences of conducting peer observation. Two questions guided this study: 1) What are teachers' perceptions on peer observation as a

means to develop teachers' professionalism? 2) What are the benefits of getting involved in peer observation in relation to teachers' professional development? To reach the objectives of the study, the data were gathered through classroom observation followed by an in depth semi-structured interview. Then, the data were analyzed by using interactive model data analysis by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014). It involved data collection, data display, data condensation, and drawing conclusion. The participating teachers were Mrs. Diana and Mr. Indra (pseudonyms). Both of them worked as English teachers at a senior high school, with more than 4 years teaching experience.

Discussion

Several themes appeared as the results of observation and interview. The participating teachers showed their positive perceptions on peer observation as means to develop their professionalism.

"As we live in the technological era which offers changes on the way people live, changes are also needed in our teachings. We cannot stay longer with teaching method used by our teachers 50 or 60 years ago. I think classroom observation facilitates me to explore my teachings. It helps me evaluate the way I deliver my subject, it also helps me how to overcome some problems related to classroom matters, such as students' disruptive behavior. Mr. Indra, Interview on November, 2017".

Another respondent, Mrs. Diana argued:

"Teachers are humans, and they are very close to mistake and error. Thus, they need others to remind, to check their performance. In my opinion peer observation is really beneficial for teachers' development, because we will get some constructive feedbacks from our peer. The best way to evaluate our classroom is by bringing other to observe it. Unluckily, many teachers in our country are reluctant to be observed. It threat their comfort zone. But, above all, it is a positive addition. It brings more benefits to my teaching. To engage in peer observation, teachers must get the training, so they know how to comment on others because basically peer observation is not about judging."

Instead, the participants also showed their awareness of the benefits of conducting peer observation in improving their pedagogy and professional competences.

As stated by Mrs. Diana in our interview:

"Conducting peer or classroom is really useful for both observer and teacher being observed. Both can learn many things. As I conducted this activity regularly, I feel positive with its benefits. When I supervised others, I learnt new things from them. I learn their teaching technique, how they deliver their topics, and many others. The same thing happened when I was under observation. I got useful input on teachings. My peer also informed my weakness and my strength. Honestly, there are so many benefits we can gain from peer observation. Instead providing us with useful information related to our teaching skill, it also provide us with opportunity to create a positive and better relationship with others."

While, Mr. Indra commented on the impact of conducting peer observation in his teaching.

"When conducting peer observation, I actually come to the classroom with checklist in my hand. It deals with classroom activity. I find it useful, personally. I learn many things from my peer. When I was observed, I really expected the feedbacks from my observer. I found peer

observation benefitted me in developing my teaching strategy. Through this activity, I learn new teaching techniques, I also get the evaluation on my teaching strategy if it is still applicable. Feedback given by the observer is really useful for my professional life, I think teachers should involve in reflective practice for the better classroom teaching and classroom environment".

This study had explored teachers' perception on peer observation as a means to develop teachers' professionalism. The analysis of data revealed teachers' positive perceptions concerning peer observation in language teaching and learning. Based on the results of collected data, we presented the analysis as follows: In relation to teachers' perception on the use of peer observation to promote professional development, we concluded that the participants held positive attitude toward this activity. They considered an effective peer observation could enhance their teachings. Instead, they also recommended other teachers to integrate peer observation as a part of their routine to develop a better instruction. The finding of this study was in line with what Shukri (2014) found in her research. It showed most of the teachers agreed that peer observation was a good tool to make some gradual improvements on teachers' teachings. The study we were conducted indicated teachers' awareness of the importance of getting involved in any professional activities to develop their professionalism. As stated by Heidari & Abassian (2016) as the main angle of the educational field, teachers should keep learning to do well with educational goals. Kennedy (2016) also reinforced through professional development teachers could develop their teachings.

Peer observation is the most common form of collaborative professional development and it could be a source of reflective analysis for teachers (Todd., 2017). As a part of reflective practice activities, peer observation provided teachers with some insightful feedbacks related to professional and personal competence. Peer observation should stimulate a *reflective review* on the basis of others' performances (Cosh., 1999; Farrell., 2001). Our study found in order to be meaningful, peer observation should be well-designed, teachers needed to be trained how to conduct peer observation since its goal was not to judge others but rather as a learning common. Wallace (1991) argued without prior training or accurate information about how to do peer observation, there was a risk of giving offence. In conducting peer observation the participating teachers expressed they followed 3 stages of conducting peer observation; pre observation, observation, and post observation. We assumed, they followed those three stages to make the activity run well.

There were several benefits of conducting peer observation for teachers' development. Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2015) claimed that peer observation might be used to promote reflection to accomplish individual development needs. Tzotzou (2014) said peer observation was an effective tool that EFL teachers could utilize to build awareness of using a wide variety teaching techniques to run the class more effectively and exchange idea related to teaching method and materials. This current study finding was correspond with Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond's, and Tzotzou's. The participants elaborated that by conducting peer observation they could learn new teaching techniques, teaching materials, and useful strategies on how to deal with students. It was hypothesized feedbacks from the observer were really constructive, so they found peer observation was really beneficial. Instead, based on the observation, both observer and teacher under observation collaborated really well. Instead, they also used polite language when giving feedbacks, so both side thought peer observation as learning tool. It was relevant with Zacharias (2012), Cakir (2010), and Richards & Farrell (2005) related to the purposes and benefits of conducting peer observation.

Conclusion

This current study focused on teachers' perceptions on the application of peer observation as a tool to conduct reflection. Peer observation deals with colleagues observing each other's classroom with

the main goal improving each other's teaching. Peer observation is non evaluative program. To be a professional teacher, an educator should engage in activities that triggered the development of the aspects related to teachers' professionalism. As mandated by the regulation of Indonesian government (UU no 14 tahun., 2005) in Dikti (2016), a professional teacher must be able to develop their pedagogy, social, personal, and professional competences. One strategy that promotes the development of professional competency was by engaging in reflection through peer observation. Peer observation was proven to be an effective tool to evaluate one's classroom instruction.

As a tool for conducting reflection, peer observation brings some benefits to teachers. By providing some constructive feedbacks, teachers can make improvement in their classroom. Peer observation also allows teachers to exchange the ideas about teaching methods, strategies, and materials. As we know, 21st century educators face more challenging problems. Problems related to students, learning outcomes, classroom management, or integration teaching techniques in the classroom. So, they really need to regularly make some reflections to be more skillful.

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