

REFLEXIONES CRÍTICAS DESDE LA OBSERVACIÓN POR PARES: UNA EXPERIENCIA SIGNIFICATIVA DE DESARROLLO PROFESIONAL DOCENTE

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM RECIPROCAL PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING: A
MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCE

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Resumen

La observación por pares es una oportunidad para que los docentes optimicen su aprendizaje y entendimiento en aspectos relacionados a su práctica. La observación es valiosa pues el espectador percibe todo el proceso de enseñanza de su colega desde la planeación, implementación y evaluación. El anfitrión por su parte, se beneficia con la retroalimentación que provee su colega. Sin embargo, la experiencia es hasta cierto punto incompleta. La evidencia demuestra que los docentes obtienen mayor comprensión cuando se involucran en un esquema de observación recíproca. El presente estudio involucró a seis docentes de inglés como Lengua Extranjera que laboran en la Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo-Ecuador quienes participaron por seis meses en un proyecto piloto de observación mutua con veinte y cuatro clases observadas. Datos cuantitativos y cualitativos se recogieron del proceso de aplicación. El artículo discute el componente cualitativo del estudio para explicar las reflexiones de los docentes en relación a su aprendizaje profesional y el beneficio recibido por los estudiantes de la experiencia. Se discute también la evolución de sus opiniones respecto de la observación y las dificultades para una efectiva implementación. Los resultados de las encuestas y entrevistas sugieren que la experiencia fue significativa en términos de aprendizaje a largo plazo, crecimiento profesional y la posibilidad de abrir espacios para que los docentes mejoren su práctica basados en la evidencia recabada de la observación. Las implicaciones apuntan a implementar políticas de observación recíproca por pares como plataforma para generar mejoramiento substancial en la calidad de la enseñanza

Palabras Clave: *observación recíproca, observación por pares, desarrollo profesional, reflexión*

ABSTRACT

Peer observation is an opportunity for teachers to enhance their learning and understanding of several issues related to their practice. Observation is valuable since the viewer perceives in detail the teaching procedure of a colleague from the planning, implementation and evaluation while the host gets benefit from the feedback provided by the observer. However, experience is incomplete to some extent. Evidence shows that teachers get more understanding when they get involved in such an observation program that is mutual. In this study six English teachers of Foreign Language at “Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo-Ecuador” participated for six months in a reciprocal peer observation pilot project. A total of twenty four classes were observed and data was collected both for quantitative and qualitative purposes. This paper discusses the qualitative component aimed to explain teachers’ reflections regarding the professional learning outcomes achieved and the practical use they might give to the knowledge obtained along the process as well as how students benefitted from the experience. Other topics were also examined as the extent to which their biases towards peer observation changed and the difficulties to an effective application. Results from surveys and interviews applied to participants suggest that the experience was meaningful in terms of long term learning, professional growth and the possibility to open new venues for teachers to advance their profession based on the evidence derived from observation. Implications advocate implementing reciprocal peer observation policies as a rationale to generate significant improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.

Keywords: *reciprocal observation, peer observation, professional development, reflection.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional development in educational settings is usually conceived as the one shot workshop or seminar where participants listen to the presenter and take notes with the intention of converting all that information into practice. However, this is very unlikely to happen because there is not a real involvement of the teacher who eventually considers the contents addressed by the instructor as coming from imported realities. It does not mean that these events do not support teachers in their intend to keep professionally updated but it is necessary to consider the adverse side of this approach which deems educators as consumers of knowledge instead of being active participants of their transformation and professional growth. In consequence, teachers are not given the opportunity to contribute in the kind of development they need. This assertion is supported by (Darling-Hammond, Powerful Learning: What we know about Teaching for Understanding, 2010) stating that most teachers only experience traditional, workshop-based professional development, even though research shows it is ineffective. This stands in stark contrast to teachers’ minimal exposure to other forms of professional development.

The past twenty years have flourished in providing alternatives for teachers who want to obtain meaningful learning derived from their involvement in professional development. New trends focus on giving professional development a more dynamic integrative perspective. They also support the formative character that a good program should exhibit because teachers are more interested in the sharing of ideas, discussion and collaboration that can result from their immersion in an active professional development event than in the quantitative judgmental product. Reciprocal observation of teaching encompasses many of the desirable characteristics that teachers look for in a professional development program given that it adds a plus to the conventional observation experience. Reciprocal observation implies the give-and-take reflection of practice that provides participants with an exceptional opportunity to stimulate the sharing of ideas. In addition, it also intends to help maintain and grow quality teaching and learning by spreading good practice, encouraging the exchange of views and providing openings for staff to learn about and discuss new or alternative teaching approaches (CESD Learning Services LST, 2016).

Until now there has not been an initiative at Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo that seeks to provide teachers with alternative approaches to deal with their professional development. Given the interest of a group of English as Foreign Language teachers in the Languages Center of participating actively in their professional development; they volunteered to join in a reciprocal observation pilot project. This paper aims to report evidence from the reflections and expectations for improvement done by faculty members involved in reciprocal observation regarding the quality of professional learning outcomes achieved, the benefit their students received from such learning experience, the extent to which their opinions regarding observation varied along the process and the downsides to an effective application.

The contribution of the study focuses on both improving teaching practices and realizing the need of managing professional development from an active and more participatory perspective where teachers can generate significant learning from each other in an environment that fosters collaboration and collegiality.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study intended to gain a deep understanding of the experience that a group of teachers had regarding their participation in groups of reciprocal observation. The approach adopted was inductive since the researcher moved from the analysis of specific facts in order to reach a global perspective of the issue under inquiry. Six out of twelve faculty members at the Languages Department of the Health and Sciences College at Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo participated voluntarily in the project. The chart below summarizes participants' attributes.

Chart 1. Summary of participants

Code	Gender	Field Experience	Higher Education Experience	Undergraduate degree	Postgraduate degree
023	M	6	4	Bachelor's in Education	No
012	F	31	14	Bachelor's in Education	Master's degree in Applied Linguistics
006	F	9	6	Bachelor's in Education	No
041	F	5	3	Bachelor's in Education	No
009	F	29	8	Bachelor's in Education	Master's degree in Education
018	F	7	4	Bachelor's in Education	No

Source: Languages Center Professional Record – Health and Sciences College

By: Researcher

Participants were assigned a code to keep results confidential they also signed up a compromise letter with their acceptance to work for six months on the project. The study was divided into four phases. In phase one, professors were surveyed in topics related to observation, effectiveness and quality of traditional professional development they had been involved in terms of learning, and their expectations regarding the study. The second phase consisted in providing them with substantial information related to observation and professional development as well as training in the use of observation and reflection protocols. The third moment consisted in faculty members' reciprocal observation engagement. A total of 24 class observations were done along five months in which teachers performed roles as guest (observer) and host observee. They use the protocols provided by the researcher to record their insights and opinions. The observation procedure is explained in the following chart.

Chart 2. Observation Procedure

Stage	Teacher's task
1 Pre-observation meeting	Teachers meet before the observation. They discuss issues regarding the objectives, activities to be done in class and evaluation. Pre-observation protocol provided by researcher.
2 Observation	On the observation protocol, the observer takes notes on five considerations: 1. Preparation, organization, content and resources used in class. 2. The process of instruction 3. The management of class, interactions, practice and application of methods. 4. The review, monitoring and assessment. 5. The class environment.
3 Post-observation meeting and feedback	Teachers meet after the observation. They discuss the characteristics of the session. They review and consider the notes done by the observer. The observee receives feedback on what went well in the session and possible aspects for improvement. The researcher takes notes regarding the opinions.
4 Reflection	Teachers write a reflection paper of the experience.

Source: Observation Protocols

Teachers were also interviewed by the researcher after the critical reflection phase. Their opinions were recorded and transcribed to be contrasted with the reflection report for consistency. The nature of the study generated qualitative data from the opinions given by participants. Their views were carefully analyzed and interpreted in order to accurately identify themes, opinions, biases and attitudes towards the topics posed in the protocols.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four main issues that emerged from the qualitative data collected along the process were summarized in: 1. The quality of learning professional outcomes achieved and the practical use of learning. 2. The direct benefit students received from their teachers' learning experience. 3. The extent to which their biases towards peer observation changed and 4. Identified drawbacks to implementation.

Quality of learning, professional outcomes and practical use

Participants agreed in the fact that before joining the pilot project they described professional development as the opportunity to attend to a course or seminar. They believed that the more courses they attended, the more learning and better teaching practice they could achieve. The active and involving nature of reciprocal observation as a way to grow professionally called their attention from the very beginning since they thought their voices were not listened before. They also found their participation as very challenging in terms of having to discuss issues related to a colleague's and their own practice. Their view about the quality of learning they were exposed to was very positive. They considered the experience to be effective because it provided a deeper understanding of their abilities as teachers and the principles that orientate their practice. This is an opinion derived from the talks with the observer:

"I acquired more knowledge of how to have a greater impact on students and to have more control of situations that are difficult to manage in class as discipline and motivation. All teachers no matter the subject they impart should embark in a reciprocal observation that helps them to heighten their practice".

Another contributor wrote about long-life learning:

"I loved the way my colleague started the session. After five minutes students were totally engaged and ready to work. I want to try some of her warm-up activities in my classes too. I will never forget what I learned in her class".

This teacher refers to the outcomes of the experience:

"I was a little worried about being observed because it was the first time I had a colleague in my class but my nervousness changed with the feedback meeting and reflection. My colleague could identify many positive aspects of my teaching as well as some drawbacks I had never thought about before" Although it was difficult to accept critics; I think with the

time I was more open to constructive comments that will benefit me and my students. This was a big and important step in my teaching experience”.

About readiness to apply what was learned one teacher said:

“I found interesting the way my colleague used the principles of cooperative learning in her class because students had more spaces to interact in class. I think I should also use cooperative activities in my lessons”

Additionally, opinions indicated that teachers were very involved and enthusiastic when talking about their interests and concerns with somebody who understands their standpoints. It is important to state that participants who had more teaching experience (more than 20 years) did not find the exercise as fruitful as those who have been in the field for more than five years.

Teachers’ enriched experience that benefitted students

Teacher’s learning should be replicated in the improvement of students’ learning. According to (Darling-Hammond, Teacher Learning That Supports Student Learning: What Teachers Need to Know, 2016) teachers learn best by doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. When asked about the extent to which students benefitted from their improvement of knowledge teachers coincided in one aspect summarized in this opinion:

“There was not much academic learning as the one we might receive in a lecture but a practical one. The new ideas I could pick during observation were easy to rehearse. My students reacted positively to the different activities I applied”.

Another benefit for students is described as

“I am certain that students could notice some changes in my practice since they were more involved in the class. I also improved the nature of the assignments I gave my students making them more productive instead of repetitive, so I gave my students more challenging tasks to perform. They felt the assignments were purposeful”.

Although it is not possible to ignore the importance of having a broad knowledge about educational issues and the need to keep updated with new trends and approaches; teachers demand more hands-on professional development events where they can learn practical ideas from direct sources.

Another benefit students received from their teacher’s involvement in reciprocal observation is explained below:

“I think that this was an interesting experience. I liked to listen to all my colleagues’ suggestions in order to improve my way of teaching. In one of our discussions my colleague

said that my students needed to participate more actively in my classes and that I needed to offer a variety of activities in class that generate more effective learning. I did some changes on the way and in the future I will prepare more interactive activities for my classes such as: games, describing pictures, etc.”

This teacher had the possibility to appraise the type of activities students were asked to develop in class. Thanks to the feedback given by his colleague, he was able to renovate his classes in favor of his students.

The following opinion adds more elements to the benefits students received from their teacher’s reciprocal observation experience:

“I have difficulties to maintain appropriate control of my class. Sometimes I feel like students do not respect me. Thanks to my observer’s advice I have done some improvements to keep discipline under control. Likewise, I did not know if I was giving appropriate answers to my students’ questions.” The analysis done to this aspect helped me to handle their questions properly”.

The opinions stated above confirm the point made in this study that effective teacher’s learning has a direct influence in enhancing and improving students’ learning.

Change of teacher’s biases and beliefs towards observation

An early insight provided by teachers at the beginning of the study led to the identification of their prejudices regarding having an observer in their classes. They basically associated observation with summative and judgmental evaluation. They did not consider it as a possibility to get formative assessment of their practice. These are some examples of how they changed their minds along the process:

“I was very nervous about having a colleague in my class. When I decided to participate in the project I thought it would be a good idea to prepare everything and even rehearse the class in advance. The training sessions before the observation phase and participating as an observer taught me that the best thing to do is to be as natural as possible so that the guest can realize what is actually happening in the class and provide valuable guidance for improvement”.

Another participant stated:

“I felt very unsafe. I did not want to see a low mark in my observation report. It took time for me to understand that I was not going to be evaluated with a figure but with valuable comments from my peer. What I really liked about the experience was the confidentiality policy that we signed before participating in the reciprocal observation project. Now I know that I can trust my colleagues and the information coming from my performance. I did not feel judged at all. Our feedback sessions were a moment to share opinions”.

“I understood that I do not need to impress anybody by presenting an unreal class if I really wanted to improve my teaching practices. I think my class was real and I was totally confident about what I was teaching and the way I presented the class. This experience helped me to feel confident about myself”

Teachers progressed from trying to cover some limitations or drawbacks in their practice to avoid criticism to expose themselves with veracity and accept their colleague's comments which ultimately led them to the key consideration of obtaining significant learning.

Drawbacks to implementation

Although reciprocal observation proved to be effective in terms of learning and practical application for teachers; it also represented some problems that made difficult the appropriate implementation. Participants' criteria are condensed as follows:

“I feel we still need to break the barrier that limits us to say what we believe is wrong. I was expecting more feedback or critiques about what to improve in my class. The comments my colleagues did were not really what I expected. I believe they were afraid of hurting my feelings. We have to accept criticism as part of our professional enhancement. We need to work more on this aspect”.

“There were time constraints that impeded teachers to fully participate in observation. Going to the meetings and writing my reflection took a lot of time. In addition, if we needed to have a broader understanding of a colleague's work, it would be necessary to observe more classes which is difficult to do”.

“I could feel an unnatural environment in the first class I observed. I believe that my colleague wanted to show me that her work was perfect”.

Since this was the first attempt to do reciprocal observation; there were obviously many constraints to effective implementation. The most common was teachers' prejudices towards observation. If this kind of professional development initiative wants to be fruitful, teachers need to be mature enough to accept criticism and show their work genuinely so that they can get the most of their colleagues' comments. Observation is about discussion and comments; not about praising.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study looked at teacher's opinions when embarking in reciprocal observation of teaching. The experience demonstrated to be beneficial in terms of substantial reflection and learning that allowed participants to assess the effectiveness and achievement of objectives proposed in the lessons. Another element of deep analysis was class delivery. Teachers were able to discuss the usefulness of strategies and the implementation of innovative ones as part of their daily practice. Based on their discussions, they were more informed to make appropriate decisions before, during and after the class. The improvements were of benefit for students who eventually noticed a substantial difference.

Peer observation of teaching was valuable because of its collegial and collaborative potentials. Teachers cherished the opportunity to share their experiences and concerns with a colleague who understood their context. They felt supported especially when undergoing doubts or hesitations regarding their performance. An environment of union and empathy was evident among participants.

Teachers agreed to state that some of their misconceptions about observation changed as they got more involved in the process. They did not feel judged but supported in every phase of the process. Reciprocal observation according to the teachers helped to reinforce positive practices and improve or even abandon undesirable ones. The confidentiality of this kind of observation exercise contributed to provide participants an atmosphere of comfort and privacy.

The drawbacks in this process were mainly related to overcoming prejudices towards observation and the fear to be criticized that made some teachers to try to mask their work. Time constraint was also an issue for successful application.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

According to participants, reciprocal observation programs should be implemented in the institution to generate a culture formative assessment and mutual collaboration to achieve high educational goals.

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