

Learning Through a Reciprocal Peer Observation Experience: Perspectives of EFL Instructors and Professional Development Unit Head at a Private University

Cansu DİNÇ-AYAZ

Yeditepe University

Evrım EYİK-AYDIN

Yeditepe University

Abstract

This study investigated how four EFL instructors and the head of professional development unit in the preparatory school of a private university evaluated a reciprocal peer observation of teaching process (POT) in terms of its contribution to their teaching practices. The analysis of qualitative data collected through peer-observation forms, post observation discussions, reflective journals, and interviews conducted at the end of the process revealed that reciprocal POT has significant benefits to offer for the professional development of instructors having the role of an observee and observer, and for the institution. The study also has important implications for the future planning and implementation of POT process both in this institution and in similar higher education contexts considering the perspectives and suggestions of those involved in this process.

Keywords: peer observation of teaching, reciprocal peer observation, professional development unit, higher education, EFL instructors

Introduction

Teaching is a complex cognitive process. What makes it even more complex is teachers' constant need to improve or expand their professional knowledge to increase their teaching

Author Note

The study presented here is based on data collected to complete an MA thesis submitted to Yeditepe University in 2019.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Evrim Eveyik-Aydın, Yeditepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language Teaching, Kayisdagi Cad., 34755, Istanbul, Turkey. Email: evrimaydin@yeditepe.edu.tr

quality. A considerable amount of work has shown the importance of professional development for teachers and the most effective activities and tools that support it (Cosh, 1999; Farrell, 1999; Freeman, 1982; Harris et al., 2008; Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; Munson, 1998; Peel, 2005). As research provides ample evidence for the role of collegial interaction, collaboration, and observation in such activities (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001; Shortland, 2004), institutions encourage their instructors more for observational practices to enhance their teachings (Peel, 2005).

Observation of teaching has been used for decades as a significant tool for professional development (Blase & Blase, 2006; Bozak, 2018; Freeman, 1982; Gosling, 2005; McMahon et al., 2007). Briefly, it is to observe the teaching practices of a colleague and get observed by a colleague to give and receive feedback on the pre-determined aspects of teaching (Eraut, 1995). Over the years, it has been classified into different types: Some have focused on the way it is implemented and classified it as directive supervision, self-help explorative supervision, supervisory observation, peer coaching, and peer observation (Gebhard, 1984; Munson, 1998). Some others, on the other hand, have focused on their aims and classified the models of observation as evaluative, developmental, and collaborative (Cosh, 1998; Gosling, 2002).

Evaluative models of observation (e.g. supervisory observation) is mainly implemented for managerial purposes with the involvement of a senior manager or an academic staff to ensure that the teaching practices comply with the standards of the program. Despite its popularity in 1960s, it is not preferred today due to its explicit judgemental nature (Munson, 1998; Yiend et al., 2014). It is usually perceived to be an assessment tool that threatens instructors emotionally rather than a professional development tool (Çağlar, 2013; Harris et al., 2008). The developmental and collaborative models, on the other hand, are less judgemental, formative and collegial in nature. Developmental models (e.g. peer coaching) involve an educational expert or an experienced teacher observing novice or pre-service teachers to give them support, suggestions, and immediate feedback on their teaching practices (Ackland, 1991; Bowman & McCormick, 2000). Even though this developmental model of observation is useful for training purposes, it has also been criticised on the grounds that it is more evaluative than cooperative (Blase & Blase, 2006; Çağlar, 2013).

However, in collaborative peer review models, namely peer observation of teaching (POT), colleagues with a shared knowledge of a discipline observe each other in a reciprocal manner. Such an observation in which observer and observee are equal partners is acknowledged to offer more benefits for the improvement of teaching than the other models (Bozak, 2018; Richards & Farrell, 2005). First, voluntary participation of colleagues with mutual trust fosters the dissemination of good practice through discussions and self – development through personal reflection (Cosh, 1998; Sullivan & Glanz, 2000). As peer observation naturally involves dialogue and reflection on teaching practices thanks to its cyclic nature that includes the steps of pre-observation, observation and post-observation, it encourages teachers to interact and collaborate with each other not only during the observation, but also before and after the observation (Martin & Double, 1998; Yiend et al., 2014). Second, even though the information

shared during the observations stay confidential, teachers sometimes feel nervous about being observed by an outsider (Cosh, 1999; Norrish, 1996). Especially when the observations are held for administrative reasons, teachers may develop a negative attitude, which limits the expected positive outcome of observation procedure (Richards & Lockhart, 1992; Shortland, 2010). Therefore, in order to demolish the anxiety of being observed and improve self-efficacy, it is suggested that teachers should be part of this process both as an observer and an observee (Blase & Blase, 2006; Cosh, 1999; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; McMahon et al., 2007; Peel, 2005). Third, POT has more benefits to offer to the institutions as it creates a sharing environment for teachers in which they develop institutional identity and feel valuable (Cosh, 1999; Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; McMahon et al., 2007; Peel, 2005). Hence, unlike evaluative or judgemental observations led by an administrative agent, a senior academic or an educational expert, POT becomes a powerful tool of sharing insights (Bell, 2005), and of mutual development (Richards & Farrell, 2005) in a less threatening and more motivating way (Fletcher, 2018; Gosling, 2005).

However, like all types of observation, POT is subject to limitations. Kohut et al. (2007) documented that lecturers involved in peer observation in a higher education institution were not comfortable in making critical comments on their colleagues' teaching practices, which raised the doubt in the contribution of peer observation to the development of critical reflection in teachers. In a sense, the success of POT implementations can be affected by the capacity of teachers to evaluate the practices of other teachers with a critical perspective (Cosh, 1998). To eliminate this factor, instructors' training on peer observation can be inevitable as often suggested in the literature.

Research on POT Implementations

POT implementations and their benefits within the context of higher education have been documented from the perspectives of stakeholders including staff members, administrators, and coordinators in a variety of programs and departments in different contexts (eg. Bell & Cooper, 2013, in an engineering program, and Bell & Mladenovic, 2015, in the Business School of a university in Australia; Byrne et al., 2010, at a department in a university in the South of England; Santos, 2017, in an extensive language school in ESL context in Hong Kong, etc.). University lecturers in a study conducted by Hendry and Oliver (2012) stated that while they learned new strategies of teaching and tactics by watching their peers, seeing them use the same techniques they used affirmed their self-efficacy. The lecturers thought receiving feedback on their practices was useful, but not more beneficial than what they observed in a peer teaching.

Research studies on peer observation in university setting in Turkish EFL context are rather limited. While a few of them involved the use of observation models with pre-service teachers to see the impact of peer observation on prospective teachers' self-efficacy, instructional skills,

and language teaching skills (Göker, 2006; Yüksel, 2011), a few were conducted with in-service teachers observing each other for professional development purposes. For instance, in an action research Yeşilbursa (2009) investigated how three university ELT instructors improved their teaching practices through peer observation and reflective journals. Their involvement in this process both as an observer and observee allowed them to make discoveries about their teachings and provided them with an alternative perspective to solve their problems. Similarly, in her study with seven EFL instructors, Gökmen (2014) found that POT and collaborative action research contributed to reflectivity.

In a study by Çağlar (2013) ELT teachers, coordinator, and head of professional development unit found POT a beneficial and desirable activity for the institution. However, the study highlighted the importance of voluntary participation, peer cycles, and training before observations as issues to be handled in peer observations and suggested a model for POT implementation. Finally, Trotman (2015) who had 24 teachers observe each other concluded that peer observation was a highly qualified strategy for professional development realized in a less-hierarchical manner.

Academic staff in many universities go through a peer observation of teaching each academic year (Byrne et al., 2010). In other words, POT has increasingly become a practice in higher education institutions in many contexts, but this is not the case in Turkey despite the studies on POT initiatives mentioned above. Therefore, the present study was designed to pilot larger-scale peer observations planned to be used by the Professional Development Unit (PDU) of a private university as regular practices to sustain teaching quality. Reciprocal peer observations were designed and implemented for the purpose of the study, and evaluated from the perspectives of PDU head and EFL instructors involved in the process both as an observer and an observee. More specifically, the following questions were addressed in this case study:

1. What did EFL instructors gain from engagement in the reciprocal peer observation of teaching process as an observer?
2. What did they gain from this process as an observee?
3. How does the head of PDU perceive the contribution of POT process to instructors' teaching practices?

Method

Setting

The study was conducted at the preparatory school of a private, English-medium university in Istanbul. The preparatory programme aimed to develop competent and autonomous users of English language, and offered courses at four proficiency levels, namely A1 (Elementary), A2 (Pre-intermediate), B1 (Intermediate) and B2 (Upper-intermediate), designed based on the

Common European Framework (CEFR) outputs. Each level had eight – week modules in which students were offered skills-based and grammar courses 25 hours a week.

Preparatory program had five units with different responsibilities: Curriculum and Material Development Unit, Testing Unit, Digital Support Unit, Student and Instructors' Affairs Unit, and Professional Development Unit. The PDU had been recently established to provide instructors with in-service trainings on a variety of issues (e.g. classroom management, effective lesson preparation etc.), and to arrange peer observations throughout the year. Although the institution had a tradition of making formal observations in which the coordinator observed the instructors for appraisal in the past, the PDU aimed to replace such evaluative observations with more collaborative peer observation of teachings.

Participants

The participants of the study were four English language instructors and the head of professional development unit, all with L1 Turkish background. These instructors who got involved in POT both as an observer and an observee were nominated out of 30 instructors as a result of a series of formal observations made by the PDU head and the coordinator. Then their informed consent was obtained to participate in the study. These instructors were teaching young adult learners at A2 and B1 levels for 20 hours a week.

Instructors were given pseudonym names to provide anonymity. Melda was a 30-year old English instructor with nine years of teaching experience. She graduated from the department of American Studies and participated in a European funded project on intercultural communication as a project coordinator upon her graduation. After the completion of the project, she began her career in education and had Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA). She has been working at the current program as an instructor since 2015, and teaching skills and grammar courses at various levels. At the time of data collection, she was teaching a class with 24 students at A2 level.

Beril was 26-year old English instructor with a BA degree in ELT and with two years of teaching experience. At the time of data collection, she was teaching grammar course at a class with 23 students at B1 level.

Müge, who was at the age of 32, received her BA degree in English Language and Literature. She had seven years of teaching experience in various high schools. She has been working in the current institution for about a year and teaching grammar-based courses to a class with 20 students at A2 level.

Yeliz, who was at the age of 30, held a BA degree in ELT and an MA degree in Creative Drama in Education. She had worked in various private institutions as an instructor and coordinator for 11 years. She has been working at the current institution for five years and teaching skills and grammar courses to a class with 23 students at B1 level.

The head of PDU had started to work as an instructor at the beginning of the Fall semester and been appointed as the head of professional development unit established in response to an emerging need to support teachers' professional development for the accreditation process. Holding her BA and MA degrees in English Language and Literature, she had seven years of experience as an instructor and group head at another university. Before getting appointed to this position at the current institution after two years of teaching, she was sent to attend a short-term in-service training programme on teacher training held by Cambridge University.

Procedure

Choosing Observation Themes for Pot Implementations

For peer observation to be beneficial as a professional development tool, teachers need to be aware of possible aspects of teaching to get focused during the lessons to be able to give each other effective feedback. Therefore, determination of the focus of observation had been an essential stage not only for this research study but also for the PDU that aimed to train all instructors on the process of POT in the long-run after this study.

For this purpose, the coordinator, the PDU head, and all of the instructors came together to discuss the needs of the prep program from the perspectives of all stakeholders in line with CEFR outcomes. Instructors were also asked to complete a form with two open-ended questions prepared by PDU head to find out how they would define a good language classroom and a qualified teaching process. Their responses included aspects of teaching that were initially classified under the themes of the *organization of lesson, presentation of lesson, teaching approach and aids, student response, and general observation of the current lesson*.

The observability of these themes were checked in pilot observations of two non – participant instructors by the coordinator, the PDU head, and the first researcher who also worked in this unit before. The piloting showed that the aspects of teaching to observe under these themes were not clear to the observers. Therefore, these initial themes were revised by the researchers in collaboration with the PDU head and in reference with the literature to create a more useful tool for POT implementations. Based on the themes of classroom observation tasks suggested by Wajnryb (1992), the observation focus was defined by the themes of *a) engaging learners, b) learning, c) lesson structure, d) teaching techniques, and e) resources and materials*. After the discussion of what each involves, four instructors, not the actual participants of the study, were randomly selected to pilot these themes in a session of peer observation. Hence, the final scheme was approved by the coordinator and the PDU head.

Development of a Shared Understanding

Next stage was a two-hour training session with participating instructors to develop a shared understanding of the meanings and definitions of these themes.

Engaging learner was defined as the active participation and the readiness level of the students for learning. It involved the sub-themes of active involvement (*Are students engaged actively?*), student interest (*Are students interested?*), feedback (*Do students receive effective feedback?*), critical thinking skills of the learners, and communication (*Are they encouraged for communication and critical thinking?*).

Learning was defined by the factors affecting students' learning in the classroom (*What kind of learning environment does the teacher create, controlled/ or relaxed? Is environment appropriate to achieve the objectives? Does teacher monitor student learning effectively? Does teacher provide scaffolding?*).

Lesson structure focused on how teachers planned and organized their lessons. It included the subthemes of timing, sequencing, planning, and transition (*How is the lesson organized / sequenced? Does teacher allocate enough time for the activities? Does teacher use individual, pair and group work activities effectively? Does teacher make smooth transitions between the activities?*)

Teaching techniques included the sub-themes of teacher instructions, error correction, connections, teacher talking time (TTT), and asking questions. As part of this theme, the following questions were directed to create a clear and better understanding; *Are instructions clear and appropriate to the age and the proficiency level of the students? Does teacher use effective error correction techniques? How much does teacher talk? Does teacher ask any questions during the lesson to evaluate the understanding of the learners?*

The final theme, *the resources and materials*, included the use of course book, classroom aids like smart board, extra materials, and technology in classes during a lesson. Questions to guide observation were; *Is technology used effectively in the class? Does teacher use supplementary material effectively? and Does teacher use course book effectively?*

At the end of the training session, participants explained their understanding of each theme to make sure a shared understanding was achieved through the discussions.

POT Implementations

After the development of observation scheme, participants' reciprocal observation schedule was planned during the last module of the Spring semester considering their teaching hours. Their weekly teaching workloads were reduced to 20 hours by the coordinator so they could have time for peer observations. Each of four instructors became observing partners for six weeks as shown in Table 1 and made a total of 24 hours of observation. The feedback was given and taken through post-discussions and reflective journals were kept twice a week.

Table 1

Peer Observation Cycle

Time	Observee	Observer
Week 1-2	Beril	Yeliz
	Yeliz	Beril
	Melda	Müge
	Müge	Melda
Week 3-4	Beril	Melda
	Melda	Beril
	Müge	Yeliz
	Yeliz	Müge
Week 5-6	Beril	Müge
	Müge	Beril
	Yeliz	Melda
	Melda	Yeliz

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through multiple tools:

Pre-observation form: Pre-observation form was filled by the observee basically to inform the observer of the teaching objectives and the organization of the lesson to be observed. The observee also indicated the grade level of the classroom, materials and teaching aids to be used as well as the anticipated problems and solutions on this form. This tool was given to the observer at least one hour before the lesson started. This way the observer had an initial idea about the class to be observed.

Peer observation form: Peer observation form included six questions with regard to the five focus themes that had been discussed before with the participating teachers, and asked them about their comments on issues other than those included in pre-determined themes. At the end of the lesson, the observer used these notes to give her peer feedback.

Post-observation discussions: Post-observation discussions aimed at giving immediate feedback to the observee right after the observations. The purpose was to exchange opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of the observed lesson. These audio – recorded discussion sessions generally took 10 minutes. Hence, approximately 8 hours of recorded data were obtained.

Post observation reflective journals: These were weekly accounts of reflections on the weaknesses and strengths realized during the observations, how they felt giving and receiving feedback, and what they learned through this process. Although participants indicated that they were all familiar with reflective journal keeping, they were informed about reflective

writing and given guiding prompts both for the role of observer and observee. Each participant submitted one weekly writing to the researcher, which meant 24 journal entries in total.

Semi-structured focus group interview: At the end of six weeks, all four instructors were brought together for a semi-structured focus group interview to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of POT experience. The instructors were given the chance to express their thoughts in the language of their own choice. The data included approximately one hour of recorded data.

Interview with PDU Head: At the end of the observations, PDU head had a chance to discuss the ongoing project with the instructors to have an insight about the observation process. Besides, she had the opportunity to observe one hour of each pair, in total four hours, to check the applicability of the reciprocal peer observation process in the classes as well. Therefore, an interview was conducted with her in order to find out how she evaluated the implementation of this process. Interview questions included the purpose of POT process planned by the professional development unit, the observed attitudes of the instructors toward this process, and her perceptions regarding the weaknesses and strengths of the POT implemented. She was also asked to make comments on the contribution of POT to the collaborative working environment and the professional development of the instructors, and on her plans regarding the future POT implementations.

Data Analysis

The current study used qualitative methods to analyse data collected through post – observation discussions, reflective journals, and interviews. Data analysis procedure started with the transcription of the audio recorded data. Once the transcriptions were completed, the raw data was ready for the content analysis that is a systematic classification procedure of coding and identifying themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Open-coding was performed to find the themes that emerged from the data. The emerging categories were checked by a second coder to ensure the dependability of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Results

Instructors' Gains from the Pot Process as an Observee

The content analysis of data gathered through reflective journals, and post – observation discussions and interviews with participating instructors to answer the first research question revealed the following themes: Being observed by their peers 1) raised instructors' awareness on their teaching practices, 2) changed their attitudes towards peer observation of teaching practices, and 3) increased their self-confidence as teachers.

Awareness on Teaching Practices

All of the participants thought that getting engaged in peer observations helped them become more aware of their actions. Upon receiving some collegial feedback on the positive assets of their teaching like how well they encouraged students for classroom discussions, and how well they sequenced the activities by making them more meaningful to the students, they said they realized their strengths. One instructor stated, *“as my peer mentioned, I used body language and intonation a lot to engage students in the lesson. I didn’t see that as a positive asset before”* (group interview data). Another instructor realized how good she was at managing unexpected things in classroom: *“I realized that things can go out of control, and I was able to manage these unexpected things while teaching”* (reflective journal data).

Similarly, being criticised on issues like the amount of talk in the classroom, losing the control of students, and ineffective use of technology, they admitted they happened to realize the aspects of their teachings that needed to be improved. One instructor stated in her reflective journal *“as a weakness, I can say that I realized that I could encourage and praise my students more.”* So, being observed made them realize their strengths and weaknesses that they had not thought of before.

One of the observee stated *“I started to be more aware of the details in the classroom thanks to my peer (group interview data)”* referring to the fact that observation let her become more alert and sensitive to what went on in the classroom. She found herself more responsive to students’ questions, how they feel, and how well they are actually learning. Besides, they also realized how they could justify their actions better when reflecting on their teaching in their post-observation journal keeping.

Changes in Attitudes Toward Pot

During the post-observation discussions and group interviews instructors often mentioned how they felt while being observed by their peers. Getting constructive and non – judgmental feedback from their equal peers instead of a coordinator or a supervisor made them feel more relaxed emotionally, and enabled them to see the value of peer observation in terms of its contribution to their teaching. One of the instructors expressed her feelings of relief by saying *“It was nice to explain yourself without any hesitation or fear...”* while another stated *“the more feedback I got, the more I felt relaxed”* (reflective journal data). Their initial feelings of nervousness caused by the idea of being observed was replaced with a positive attitude towards POT as they started to perceive it as a means to exchange their professional knowledge. Through this change in their attitude, they expressed how well they received the ideas suggested by their colleagues as in *“When Yeliz came to observed me in my class, she gave me some suggestions about vocabulary teaching, like highlighting and underlying... I tried to do it and it worked really well...”*, and *“...after I got the same genuine feedback on this (timing) issue from each observer, I tried to be more careful on this”* (group interview data).

Increased Self-Confidence

Affirming comments received from a colleague having a shared knowledge of the same field increased instructors' self-confidence. One instructor said *"I mostly got, you know, positive feedback from my observers, and if there are.. like three teachers telling you that you are doing something good, you just keep doing it and eventually become more enthusiastic"* (group interview data). Another one stated in her reflective journal *"After going through today's lesson, I felt more confident because being observed by another teacher raises a kind of self-awareness"*.

Instructors' Gains from the POT Process as an Observer

Instructors' evaluation of the reciprocal peer observations in terms of what they gained professionally from the perspective of an observer revealed different themes as well. The data analysed to answer our second research question showed that observing a colleague within the same institution 1) elevated their level of distress during initial feedback sessions, but 2) encouraged them to try new ideas they gained by watching various examples of teaching practices, 3) helped them develop a more critical perspective on their own practices, and 4) let them feel more valuable as a colleague.

Elevated Level of Distress While Giving Initial Feedback

Interestingly, although instructors did not mention any elevated level of distress while hearing comments of their peers on their own teaching, they said giving the initial feedback during the first observations were very stressful for them as they did not know how well it would be received by their colleagues. They stated in their journals and during the interview *"I knew that my peer was very open to criticism, but still I felt really stressed out while giving feedback this week"*, *"You need to have a poker face, and this was really disturbing for me,... I wondered if my facial expression affected my peer negatively or not"*, and *"... I was afraid if she got offended by what I suggested as an observer"*. However, the instructors felt relieved after the first feedback giving sessions as they were convinced that their feedback was received well by their peers.

Getting Encouraged to Try New Ideas Gained by Watching

All instructors admitted that engaging in observation of their colleagues gave them many practical and useful ideas that they could try in their own settings. One of the instructors said *"I have collected lots of beneficial ideas, even the use of her body language was very inspiring for me"* (group interview data). Another said *"even if the techniques we use are the same, observing other classes help you think different options"* and *"... after I observed lots of classes, I started to develop more creative ideas for my learners, such as games which I hadn't used in my classes before"*. By referring to that every teacher has a different style of her own even when they teach the same thing, one of the participants said *"I took the best parts of each lesson and created a*

combination of all for myself". Having seen that some techniques had already worked in others' classes, they admitted they had the courage to try them as well.

Developing a Critical Perspective on Their Own Practices

Having the role of an observer gave the instructors a more critical perspective on their own teachings as can be observed in one of the instructors' comments: *"while giving feedback, you focus on the details and you start thinking about your own teaching practices and actions..."*, *"I also felt that I'm also kind of learning how to create a more constructive teaching for my learners through discussion"*, and *"in a post-discussion with my peer, I realized that I started to think deeper, and definitely benefitted from this experience"*. The observers eventually started developing a more self-critical mind-set on issues they criticised in their peers' teaching, thinking of their own actions on similar accounts.

Feeling More Valuable

The instructors giving feedback to their peers explicitly stated how valuable they felt when they saw their suggestions were well received and put into action by their colleagues in their next sessions as in the following quotation:

"I felt very valuable and proud when I saw my peer applied what I had suggested the previous week... I have realized that all of us tried to use the ideas we gave each other, ..and it is a great feeling... it also felt great to see improvements in their teachings "

Another instructor stated that when they worked in collaboration to give each other feedback they developed a collegial bond and felt more valuable as part of their institution. She reflected on her feelings in her journal by stating that *"I believe observation got people close to each other, because you don't only talk about your lesson but also about the problems you face on any issue"*.

POT Implementation from the Perspective of PDU Head

The data obtained through an interview with the PDU head to answer our third research questions revealed that while evaluating the current reciprocal POT implementations, PDU head often referred to previous formal observations conducted for appraisal purposes with the involvement of a coordinator or an administrator having the role of an observer. She asserted that although instructors were not willing to get engaged in such observations in the past, they developed a better attitude towards being observed by their peers in a reciprocal manner. She observed the positive consequences of such attitude change reflected in a few aspects of their teachings and behaviours.

First, she believed that teachers realized they were not giving feedback to judge or evaluate each other, but to contribute to their own and their peers' professional development as they learned new techniques and strategies by watching each other. Their prejudice was dissipated by the non-judgemental nature of such observations. Besides, she said she noticed teachers engaged in POT became more reflective on their own weaknesses. She believed instructors started to perceive reciprocal POT as a professional development tool not as an assessment tool.

Second, she observed that teachers establishing better rapport throughout the POT process became more collaborative in the program, which in return affected the work environment positively. Hence, she was convinced on the possible positive effects of POT on the collegial climate of the institution as well.

After this small-scale implementation of POT, the PDU head had some ideas for the future observations of teaching like giving participant instructors fewer teaching hours so they have more time to get together for post-observation discussions, arranging their teaching timetables to allow more peer observations, and having them exposed to a more intensive training before the actual observations.

Discussion

The study investigated the perceptions on reciprocal peer observations implemented in a higher education institution in Turkey from the perspectives of involved instructors and the PDU head. The literature presents consensual evidence for the benefits of such activities both for the professional development of teachers and their institutions (Cosh, 1999; Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; McMahon et al., 2007; Peel, 2005). Therefore, the intentions of the PDU to make it a regular professional development activity within that setting in the long run has inspired this study as a pilot project of POT implementation to see how such practices will be perceived by their instructors. More specifically, this paper explored how participating teachers would benefit from this process when they gave and received collegial feedback on some aspects of their teaching that the institution expected them to improve including engaging learner, lesson planning and presentation, use of learning activities, learning technologies and instructional materials and so on. While the nature and the frequency of the feedback they received and gave on these issues have also been investigated and will be the topic of another paper, the current paper limited its scope to the report of perceived benefits to draw some suggestions for future POT implementations.

The reciprocal nature of POT implementation in the present study offered some complementary benefits to the participating instructors of the study, which concurred with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Yiend et al., 2014):

As observees

- instructors became more aware of the aspects of their teaching that needed improvement in a non-judgemental and non-evaluative way, and they became
- more cooperative and willing to discuss them with their observing peers (Bell, 2005; Bell and Mladenovic, 2015; Cosh, 1998).
- they became more aware of the positive aspects of their teachings. Getting an affirmative feedback from a colleague on their strengths increased their self – confidence (Chester, 2012; Donnelly, 2007).
- Having been observed by an equal partner not by an administrator as in formerly held evaluative observations, and having the chance of discussing their actions with a colleague changed their attitudes towards observations, and let them see POT as a professional development tool (Gosling, 2005; Peel, 2005).

As observers

- Teachers found giving feedback on the practices of their colleagues very distressing during the initial observations. Later on reciprocal nature of observations dissipated their nervousness (Martin & Double, 1998).
- Teachers obtained new ideas on teaching techniques and strategies by watching their peers. They admitted they could try these in their teachings (Yiend et al., 2014).
- Teachers seeing peers using the same or similar techniques affirmed their current practices (Hendry & Oliver, 2012)
- Watching their peers and thinking on their practices help them develop a critical perspective on their own practices as well (Byrne et al., 2010)
- They felt as valuable members of the institution (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001; Shortland, 2010).

These findings provide strong evidence for the potential benefits of having reciprocal roles in peer observation. As argued by Chester (2012) who acknowledged reciprocity as one of the core features of his model of peer partnership in teaching, the mutual nature of peer observation in this study, which assigned the same instructors both to the role of an observee and observer, provided them with the opportunity for having a genuinely collegial exchange. Hence, instructors contributed to the process more meaningfully and enjoyed complementary benefits. In other words, while instructors as observers learned from the practices of their colleagues having different years of teaching experience, they also found an opportunity to discuss their own practices with them as observees. Similarly, while the instructors developed a self-evaluative and questioning perspective on their own practices by observing other colleagues, they became more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses as observees thanks to their ‘critical helper’ (Brookfield, 1987, p. 29) holding a mirror on to their actions. In other words, colleagues became helpers who are not judging but encouraging each other

to explore their actions. At this point the study provides evidence for the importance of reflective practice in peer observations and concurs with the claims of previous authors (Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Cosh, 1998; Peel, 2005; Richards & Lockhart, 1992). Instructors of the current study who got engaged in reflective discussions with their equal peers before and after each observation developed a more critical perspective on their approaches to teaching, and this change in perspective has also been observed by the head of professional development unit. Therefore, it would not be wrong to argue that the reflective aspect of POT process is in fact what makes it a developmental tool, because the personal growth of teachers can be achieved through such awareness raising reflective exchanges (Peel, 2005).

The perceptions of the instructors and head of professional development unit also suggest that POT planned with equal partners in a sharing environment foster institutional identity (Lomas & Kinchin, 2006; McMahon et al. 2007; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001; Shortland, 2010). Instructors contributing to the professional development of each other, feel more valuable members of that community and institution.

Conclusion

Peer observations can be perceived as professional development tools by the instructors if they are well-developed and planned within the institutions. In that sense, the study has significant implications for the instructors, institutions and other organizational units that aim to use POT to enhance and sustain teaching quality.

First, the observations involving equal peers, not an authority, having the role of an observer and observee increase participants' motivation to benefit from the feedback provided to them, because such observations are not perceived as evaluative but development tools.

Second, POT implementations should include the use of observation tools to provide some structure and focus teachers' attention to possible aspects of teaching as suggested in previous studies (e.g. Clark et al., 2010; Donnelly, 2007). In this study, the observation tools were created through a discussion with the participation of instructors and stakeholders who have the shared knowledge of their professional development needs as well as the needs of their institution. Hence, the teachers knew that the feedback they would give and receive on these agreed aspects of teachings would eventually benefit them in relation to their needs.

Next, the peers had pre-observation and post-observation discussions that enabled them to reflect upon their practices. Such activities should be an important component of POT implementations not only to encourage teachers to think critically about their actions, but also to increase collaboration and dialogue among them.

As emphasized by O'Sullivan et al. (1998) and Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2004), participant instructors should be supported with some training on the components of peer

observation before they are expected to get involved in it. We also suggest that PDUs or institutions should take action to offer regular trainings on how to conduct observations.

Otherwise, participant instructors may feel unconfident, which was occasionally the case during this study despite the initial two-hour training. Hence, having acknowledged the duration of our initial training as one of the limitations our study, our suggestions would be to extend the duration of trainings and repeat them as needed. Besides, to gain better insight into the effects of POT implementations and to support teachers' professional development, peer observations should be done regularly throughout the year. However, teachers' working hours, and teaching load should be adjusted to offer them a more flexible observation cycle schedule and to make some room for such professional development activities.

In addition to the limited number of training on POT the study has other limitations, too. As this is basically a case study conducted with limited number of participants, transferability has been an issue that is inherent in the nature of qualitative approach to research. Besides, although voluntary participation is often acknowledged as a significant aspect of peer observations (Chester, 2012; Fletcher, 2018), the participants in this study were selected on the basis of some initial observations made by the head of professional development unit and coordinator; and later their consents were taken before the observation cycles started. These cycles should be repeated with volunteers for a better understanding of the benefits of POT.

MARMARA
ÜNİVERSİTESİ

References

- Ackland, R. (1991). A review of peer coaching literature. *Journal of Staff Development*, 12(1), 22-27.
- Bell, M. (2005). *Peer observation partnerships in higher education*. Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc.
- Bell, M., & Cooper, P. (2013). Peer observation of teaching in university departments: A framework for implementation. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18(1), 60-73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.633753>
- Bell, A., & Mladenovic, R. (2015). Situated learning, reflective practice and conceptual expansion: Effective peer observation for tutor development. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(1), 24-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562.517.2014.945163>
- Blase, J., & Blase, J. (2006). *Teachers bringing out the best in teachers: A guide to peer consultation for administrators and teachers*. Corwin Press.
- Bozak, A. (2018). The points of school directors on peer observation as a new professional development and supervision model for teachers in Turkey. *World Journal of Education*, 8(5), 75-87.
- Bowman, C. L., & McCormick, S. (2000). Comparison of peer coaching versus traditional supervision effects. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 93(4), 256-261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/002.206.70009598714>
- Brookfield, S. D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*. Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Byrne, J., Brown, H., & Challen, D. (2010). Peer development as an alternative to peer observation: A tool to enhance professional development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 15(3), 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2010.497685>
- Chester, A. (2012). Peer partnerships in teaching: Evaluation of a voluntary model of professional development in tertiary education. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 12(2), 94-108.
- Clark, R. W., Threeton, M. D., & Ewing, J. C. (2010). The potential of experiential learning models and practices in career and technical education and career and technical teacher education. *Journal of Career and Technical Education*, 25(2), 46-62.
- Cosh, J. (1998). Peer observation in higher education – A reflective approach. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 35(2), 171-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135.580.0980350211>
- Cosh, J. (1999). Peer observation: A reflective model. *ELT Journal*, 53(1), 22-27.
- Çağlar, E. (2013). *A qualitative study of peer observation of teaching as a job-embedded professional development tool* (Publication No. 347339) [Master's thesis, Middle East Technical University]. Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu Ulusal Tez Merkezi.
- Donnelly, R. (2007). Perceived Impact of Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 117-129.
- Eraut, M. (1995). Developing professional knowledge within a client-centred orientation. In Guskey & M. Huberman (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms & practices* (pp. 227-252). Teachers College Press.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (1999). Reflective practice in an EFL teacher development group. *System*, 27(2), 157-172. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X\(99\)00014-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(99)00014-7)
- Fletcher, J. A., (2018). Peer observation of teaching: A practical tool in higher education. *Journal of Faculty Development*, 32(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19455.82084>
- Freeman, D. (1982). Observing teachers: Three approaches to in-service training and development. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(1), 21-28.

- Gebhard, J. G. (1984). Models of Supervision. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18(3), 501-514.
- Gosling, D. (2002). Models of peer observation of teaching, paper for LTSN Generic Centre. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/David_Gosling/publication/267687499_Models_of_Peer_Observation_of_Teaching/links/545b64810cf249070a7955d3.pdf
- Gosling, D. (2005). *Peer observation of teaching*. SEDA Paper 118. Birmingham, SEDA.
- Göker, S. D. (2006). Impact of peer coaching on self-efficacy and instructional skills in TEFL teacher education. *System*, 34(2), 239-254.
- Gökmen, M. (2014). *Developing EFL instructors' reflective teaching through collaborative action research and peer observation* (Publication No.358364) [Masters thesis, Çağ University]. Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu Ulusal Tez Merkezi.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage.
- Hammersley-Fletcher, L., & Orsmond, P. (2004). Evaluating our peers: Is peer observation a meaningful process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(4), 489-503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030.750.7042000236380>
- Harris, K., Farrell, K., Bell, M., Devlin, M., & James, R. (2008). *Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Higher Education*. Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
- Hendry, G.D., & Oliver, G.R. (2012). Seeing is Believing: The Benefits of Peer Observation. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 9(1), 7-19.
- Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104.973.2305276687>
- Kohut, G., Burnap C., & Yon, M. (2007). Peer observation of teaching: Perceptions of the observer and the observed. *College Teaching*, 55(1), 19-25.
- Lomas, L., & Kinchin, I. (2006). Developing a Peer Observation Program with University Teachers. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 18(3), 204-214.
- Martin, G. A. and Double, J. M. (1998) Developing Higher Education Teaching Skills Through Peer Observation and Collaborative Reflection. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 35(2), 161 – 176.
- McMahon, T., Barrett, T., & O'Neill, G. (2007). Using observation of teaching to improve quality: finding your way through the muddle of competing conceptions, confusion of practice and mutually exclusive intentions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(4), 499 – 511.
- Munson, B. R. (1998). Peers Observing Peers: The Better Way to Observe Teachers, *Contemporary Education*. 69(2), 108 – 110.
- Norrish, J. (1996). Mind the gap: Thoughts on self-help and non-judgemental observation in the classroom. *TESL-EJ* 2(1), 1-11.
- Peel, M. (2005). Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4), 489-504.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1992). Teacher development through peer observation. *TESOL Journal*, 1, 7-11.
- Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). Peer Observation. In J.C. Richards & T. S. C. Farrell (Eds.), *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning* (85-97). Cambridge University Press.
- Santos, L.M.D. (2017). How do teachers make sense of peer observation professional development in an urban school? *International Education Studies*, 10(1). 255-265.
- Saroyan, A., & Amundsen, C. (2001) Evaluating university teaching: Time to take stock. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26(4), 341-353.

- Shortland, S. (2004). Peer observation: A tool for staff development or compliance? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28(2), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030.987.7042000206778>
- Shortland, S. (2010). Feedback within peer observation: Continuing professional development and unexpected consequences. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(3), 295–304.
- Sullivan, S., & Glanz, J. (2000). Alternative approaches to supervision: Cases from the field. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 15(3), 212–235.
- Trotman, W. (2015). Reflective Peer Observations. In S. Borg (Ed.) *Professional development for language teachers: Perspectives from higher education in Turkey* (pp. 87–96) British Council.
- O’Sullivan, F., Jones, K., & Reid, K. (1988). *Staff development in secondary schools*. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Wajnryb, R. (1992). *Classroom observation tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yeşilbursa, A. (2009). Language teaching beliefs, problems and solutions: Reflecting and growing together. *Proceedings of the 10th METU ELT Convention*. <http://dbe.metu.edu.tr/convention/proceedingsweb/Beliefs.pdf>
- Yiend, J., Weller, S., & Kinchin, I. (2014). Peer observation of teaching: The interaction between peer review and developmental models of practice. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 38(4), 465–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2012.726967>
- Yüksel, I. (2011). The effects of post-observational reflective modes on teaching beliefs: Peer vs. teacher-mediated feedback. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(1), 38–56.