



Reimagining the Korean University Classroom Observational Process (COP): NES Stakeholder Concerns and Expectations in the TEFL Context

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Introduction

Necessary for meeting student learning needs, particularly in the light of a decreasing population of local students (Yoo & Sobotka, 2018), is the role of teacher professional development. This is tied to classroom observation in the Korean EFL teaching context (Choi & Park, 2016; Jung, 2011). However, such contexts at the university level, where English language education is provided by native-English-speaking (NES) instructors, are vastly underexplored. To this end, this study seeks to build upon previous research by Kent and Lee (2018) which, to date, is the only study on the NES classroom observational process (COP) at this level. Here, focus is placed on a call for organizational change and the need to develop professional development using a low-stakes peer-based discussion-led process. Any development and implementation of such a COP in this context would provide a more holistic approach to teacher evaluation (Ali, 2012), as opposed to employing punitive or yardstick measures (Metcalf, 1999). This would also guide instructors in improving and meeting standards while developing student learning (Hayes, 1995). As such, the case-study presented here seeks to explore the essentials behind implementing a low-stakes peer-observation discussion-led COP in the Korean tertiary context, based upon focus-group findings, in terms of the purpose, practice, and concerns of NES stakeholders (administrators and teachers). Results come to determine the potential for university-wide implementation of such a process with these instructors. Such an endeavor is important since local teacher associations have recently begun to provide NES members with a means of informally conducting such a COP amongst themselves (KOTESOL, 2019). This serves to legitimize the importance of further research into this topic, as well as the need for the provision of this type of process for such instructors. Further, for this process to emerge amongst teachers themselves clearly highlights a desire for this kind of COP, and one that many workplaces are leaving unfulfilled.

Literature Review

To meet the needs of the workplace, and to continually deliver effective teaching (Santos, 2016), it has long been recognized that faculty require ongoing support (Danielson & McGreal, 2000) and access to professional development (Richards & Farrell, 2005), particularly via COP (Richards & Lockhart, 1991). Regular opportunities to develop professionally, based on feedback, are also required (Wallace, 2001) in order to be able to maintain levels of quality assurance (Donnelly, 2007). This is particularly true for those NES teachers working in the EFL context, as unique cultural and societal challenges are present (Ali, 2012). There is also the need to adapt to workplace demands, curriculum constraints, and the rapidly changing semester-to-semester needs of students (Ahmed, Nordin, Shah, & Channa, 2018). To this end, peer observation as part of any COP is important as it can lead to the transformation of educational viewpoints (Bell, 2005), promote colleague collegiality and collaboration, and method and approach improvements stemming from the effective modeling of teaching techniques (Quinlan & Akerlind, 2000). Although it can be used for other purposes such as research, evaluation, and training, peer observation is particularly effective in the support of embedded professional development (Malderez, 2003), where teachers learn from other teachers from within their workplaces (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

However, in the EFL context of Korea, as Kent and Lee (2018) posit, the contradiction remains that many NES language instructors are employed without teaching qualifications and then often remain starved of professional development opportunities. In light of this, there is clearly a need for the development and implementation of professional development for NES language instructors in the Korean tertiary sector (KOTESOL, 2019), particularly if institutions are serious about providing quality education to an ever-shrinking client base (Yoo & Sobotka, 2018). The latter of which is becoming an important aspect for instructors to understand, as with fewer students there will be fewer teaching positions available, resulting in higher competition involved in both securing and keeping a job. Professional development therefore becomes more than just providing good teaching, it becomes a process where individuals become good teachers that institutions want to hire and keep. In the higher education setting, a low-stakes peer-based discussion-led classroom observational process offers the ability to meet such a need (Ali, 2012). Low-stakes because it would move away from models that are threatening (Richards & Lockhart, 1991), anxiety-driven (Crookes, 2003), and prescriptive (Williams, 1989); and discussion-based because it could then be used as a tool for growth (Malderez, 2003), and reflection (Santos, 2016). Such a process is preferred by teachers over other kinds of observation (Motallebzadeh, et al., 2017), and could be implemented following stages akin to Goldhammer (1969) which would see: (1) teacher and observer pre-observation discussion, followed by (2) clinical supervision and observer analysis of the lesson, with outcomes then negotiated with the teacher in a (3) post-observation discussion, prior to (4) teacher post-conference self-reflection of their craft. Consequently, to determine what Korea-based NES stakeholders regard as essential elements for the development of such a COP at the tertiary level, the central research questions are:

1. What purpose should observations serve?
2. How should observational practice be undertaken?
3. What are the major concerns regarding the classroom observational process?

Methodology

This case study relies upon a qualitative approach to analyze the value, place and impact of classroom observations in the workplace in light of purpose, practice, and stakeholder concerns. To this end, focus groups were relied upon to provide a purposive sample of the population (Zhu & Flaitz, 2005) and to generate a 'collective conversation' (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011), one that affords prominence to

respondents' perspectives (Liamputtong, 2009) while also granting follow-up opportunities and cross-checking in a more interactive manner than that of other approaches such as survey-based research.

Participants and setting

Participants were derived from a pool of 107 NES language instructors employed by the foreign language education center of a Korean university. Two focus groups were held in the pre-Semester 1 break consisting of an administrator group (including teacher-coordinator observers, $n = 10$) and an instructor group (including teacher-only observees, $n = 10$).

Focus Groups

Each focus group was conducted over a 90-minute period, during which time one researcher served as a co-moderator and the other as a group coordinator. Questions were prepared beforehand and conducted in line with recommendations from Nagle and Williams (2013) with groups audio-recorded, and notes taken throughout each session. This data was then consolidated into a coherent whole in the form of two reports as part of a member-checking process.

Discussion and Findings

Themes emerging from the focus groups are covered in Table 1, and revolve around aspects of observational purpose, practice, and concerns.

TABLE 1
Focus Group Themes

Themes	Subthemes
Purpose	Mentorship and professional development Remediation and recognition
Practice	Teacher-driven outcomes Prescriptive to developmental shift High-stakes to low-stakes Discussion-based process Observational considerations
Concerns	Accountability and archivability Teacher-observer reliability Piloting provisions of any new observational model

Purpose

Goals of a new observational context were considered, by all stakeholders, to be those of delivering *mentorship to junior and underperforming instructors* (Teacher 8) with an aim to *best support student learning and teacher professional development* (Administrator 3). To this end, restructuring observations *to be between instructors* (senior teachers observing junior teachers) (Teacher 10), and *tied to reflective discussions involving constructive feedback* (Administrator 7) were considered essential. This is important because a more reflective teacher is better able to respond to the changing needs of learners (Santos, 2016), and is able to go beyond personal reflection to reflecting upon subject-matter knowledge and the use of new teaching trends and theories (Ahmed, Nordin, Shah, & Channa, 2018). It also ensures a more teacher-centric observation over one obtained from the limited perspective of students and administrators, who may not possess the necessary views of teaching or the time to evaluate or observe it effectively (Kohut, Burnap, & Yon, 2007).

It was also considered important to have, alongside any new COP, a remedial system for identifying and removing underperforming teachers, particularly one based upon a minimum level of proficiency *with support provided for teachers to improve, through multiple observations and attendance at targeted CPD sessions* (Teacher 2), *rather than establishing a single observational score for purposes of dismissal, contract (non)renewal and/or promotion* (Administrator 1). In this regard, a peer-based zero-stakes discussion-based model was viewed as *favoring such an outcome* (Teacher 5). Also, removing human resource administrators from the observational process would allow teacher-observers to increasingly focus upon developmental over evaluative outcomes, and provide a CPD development-led observation over one with punitive focus. Such teacher-driven models are recognized in the literature (Ahmed, Nordin, Shah & Channa, 2018), and can lead to the development of teaching strategies specifically “derived from classroom experience” (Hayes, 1995, p.257). Further considered important by stakeholders was seeing observations able to identify excellent teachers for reward, *perhaps providing a certificate of excellence* (Teacher 9) as well as establishing stronger links to workplace CPD sessions. In this regard, teacher-observers would be responsible for *identifying any new or interesting strategies* (Administrator 8) that instructors might employ and establish a mechanism *where the needs of observed teachers lead the professional development process* (Teacher 1). This was reiterated by administration, in that *good teachers want to show, and they want us to see, and they can be invited to do so at CPD sessions*. By the same token, poor teachers might need ‘to see’, and could also be invited to CPD sessions for such purposes. Such mechanisms are also recognized in the literature as assisting in retaining teachers while maintaining the skill set of both senior and junior teachers and developing that of any teacher employed without experience (Ali, 2012).

Practice

Stakeholders were clear that any new observation model would need to fit the teacher, to no longer be prescriptive, and to no longer see the teacher come to fit it, particularly since teachers would previously have *an observation lesson ready to pull out* (Administrator 5), as they were responding to a prescriptive-based rubric containing such items as *use three additional resources alongside the textbook* (Teacher 7). This is one reason why interest in the development of a discussion-based COP is high. It was also recognized that this kind of COP allows for *skills development from what was observed over what was prescribed* (Teacher 3), while perhaps allowing individuals to more easily *identify areas for self-improvement* (Administrator 2).

For the implementation of such a COP, however, it was recognized that instructors would *need to be given more than 24 hours’ notice* as per the old process (Teacher 6), *extending this to one week* (Administrator 10) in which pre-observation meetings could be held, with post-observation meetings conducted *within 48 hours of* (Teacher 6), but preferably *straight after, observed lessons* (Administrator 4), which is in line with the literature (Rhodes, Stokes & Hampton, 2004). Ideally, it was suggested that instructors could be made aware of the weeks of the semester in which they may be observed. i.e., *weeks 4 to 6 for renewed teachers* (Teacher 4) and *weeks 9 to 13 for those newly employed* (Administrator 9), with the latter teachers first observed with no score attached during their probationary period and in light of CPD requirements during their second observation. In this regard, such instructors could *find their footing* (Administrator 6) and be guided during their *adjustment to the workplace* (Teacher 8). These instructors would then undergo a single observation per annum over four years, with the intent being the development of good teachers to be continually retained. This also led to a decision that any teacher maintaining student evaluations of $\frac{4}{5}$ (80%) would no longer require observation – that is, if the three previous observations were satisfactory, and if there were no professional development concerns (e.g., student complaints). Additionally, *for quality control purposes, such teachers should be randomly selected for observation at least once every five years* (Administrator 7), with *the needs of these teachers’ annual performance evaluation met by averaging the scores of their last three observations* (Teacher 3).

In this way also, the high-stakes nature of the observation can be eased, so that it no longer *feels like a hatchet hanging over one's neck* (Teacher 5).

Ultimately, the proposed stakeholder observational process was viewed as one where a pre-observation template/lesson plan would be talked through with a teacher-observer, covering what would be undertaken in the lesson based on previous work, aiming at promoting a degree of thoughtfulness, *to stop the putting on of a show* (Administrator 3), and establishing a mechanism for teacher-observers to present any misgivings prior to lesson delivery. The observation itself would then rely on a rubric and a note sheet to be completed by teacher-observers throughout a lesson, with the aim to identify points that could be covered or presented during CPD sessions, along with aspects of teaching that consequent observers might then need to consider. Teacher-observer note-taking and timely post-lesson discussion would also allow instructors to point out anything that they feel teacher-observers might have missed. This then sees the post-discussion process becoming one where immediate feedback can be given, and one that is delivered based upon stakeholder negotiated observational standards (Ahmed, Nordid, Shah & Channa, 2018).

The observational standards that stakeholders came to highlight as important were also the ones ultimately used in the development of the new COP, and these include: professionalism, administrative procedures, student engagement, and teaching methodology. Professionalism involves adherence to workplace policies, e.g., dress code, student-teacher conduct, and use of facilities (erasing the board, resetting equipment, classroom layout). Administrative aspects focus on punctuality, attendance, classroom management, adhering to lesson duration, and completion of observational forms/lesson plans. Engagement covers student involvement, rapport, feedback, monitoring, and other aspects that tie in with the university-mandated end-of-semester student evaluations. Finally, methodology focuses upon implementation of lesson components that are important for enhancing student academic achievement (Walberg, 1995), which includes daily review, introduction of content/materials, guided- and/or independent-practice, lesson flow, assessment, and summary.

Ultimately too, it was found that during the process of implementation, administrators wanted to make the process completely trackable (e.g., lesson location/time, detailed lesson plans/outlines, lists of texts/materials used, documented teacher/student responses to content/delivery), with all data archived on Google Drive via Google Forms. Such a need was also identified by instructors who, along with transparency, wanted to be provided with an easily archivable system granting perpetual access to observational records.

Concerns

Going forward, major concerns for stakeholders were the establishment of observational interrater reliability and holding teacher-observers accountable. This is reflected in the clear understanding of the need for *calibration sessions to train teacher-observers to the same standards* (Administrator 4). Ultimately, stakeholders view the challenge for teacher-observers in a discussion-based COP as more comprehensive, more focused, and one where *the onus is placed on them to show how they are being fair* (Teacher 9), and how they conduct observations according to previously negotiated workplace guidelines and stakeholder standards. To this end, stakeholder-developed templates for use with the new proprietary COP were viewed as necessary in order to prepare teacher-observers pre-, during, and post-observation. Guidelines were also developed where observers would undertake training using video-based lesson observation as a group, along with mock observations role-played over a four-hour faculty training session. Feedback strategies and discussion of observer notes were then undertaken to address any outliers found throughout the process. Such a technique is viewed by Ahmed, Nordin, Shah and Channa (2018) as essential for ensuring standardization and maximizing COP value.

Ultimately, it was recognized that any newly developed model would need construction based on instructor and administrator feedback (aspects of which have been highlighted in this section) and a piloting program. The pilot would serve to identify any areas of concern when developing a proprietary

observational process for departmental implementation. Such a process, and how it comes to align with stakeholder expectations during implementation, has the potential to become the focus of a follow-up report.

Conclusion

Implementation of a low-stakes discussion-based classroom-observational process over a punitively-focused score-based checklist was suggested by previous workplace-based research (Kent & Lee, 2018). This process, prior to the observation itself, involves a pre-observation meeting to discuss the teacher's lesson plan, and to state how the observation process will be conducted, as well as a post-observation discussion focusing on things that instructors do well and areas of potential improvement. In this case study, such a process is clearly one that all stakeholders would prefer. Understanding this is a step in the right direction, seeing the current process as one that could, after some redevelopment and piloting, potentially be implemented with NES language instructors university-wide. A major benefit of this is seeing the institutional observational processes align with Korean government policies at the compulsory education level (Choi & Park, 2016; Jung, 2011). Results of the study also build specifically upon the literature centering on COP and NES instructors, and it is, to date, the second study to do so in the Korean tertiary context. Moving forward then, it is hoped that future scholars will build upon the outcomes presented herein, particularly in terms of the professional and pedagogical implications resulting from the workplace-wide implementation of low-stakes discussion-based classroom observational processes at the tertiary level. This would then support the Korean conversation regarding observer and observees in working together to provide what Mette, et al. (2015) regard as important, "engaging instruction to drive increased student achievement while implementing school reform and improvement efforts" (p. 16).

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