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Exploring Native-English-Speaking EFL Teacher Classroom Observations: Perspectives and Expectations

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Introduction

Classroom observation of and by teachers is viewed as integral, especially at the practicum level with student teachers (Borg, 2006), and as a critical aspect of teacher training (Clarke & Collins, 2007; Farrell, 2007). Supervisor observation at this level and with that of seasoned teachers is also recognized as important for quality assurance (Bailey, 2006) and for ongoing teacher education or professional development (Choi & Park, 2016). However, many native-English-speaker (NES) English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers are employed without teaching credentials or experience, with the role of classroom observation in the EFL sector often conducted, if at all, as an annual review of performance, with supervisors using a checklist, and post-observation discussion model (Moradi, Sepehrifar, & Khadiv, 2014). This process, Kayaoglu and Naci (2012) have found, often fails to live up to teacher expectations in that it provides neither a positive impact on teacher performance or increased pedagogical value. In this regard, but missing from the literature, are studies concerning NES EFL teachers. This report fills that void, serving as an exploratory study conducted in Korea, that parallels the work of others focusing on non-native English speakers (NNES) in Asia (Lam, 2001), Europe (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011), and the Middle East (Moradi, Sepehrifar, & Khadiv, 2014). Guiding questions are:

1. How is the classroom observation process perceived by both trained and untrained native-English-speaking EFL teachers?
2. Does the classroom observation process live up to these teachers' expectations?

Literature Review

A variety of models for classroom observation are discussed in the literature. Gebhard (1994) introduces five models of supervision: (a) directive – informing, modeling, and evaluating; (b) alternative – providing various substitutes for performance; (c) collaborative – working together, but not being directive; (d) non-directive – seeing the teacher provide solutions to perceived problems; and (e) creative

– combining models, shifting responsibility to the teacher, and/or introducing insights from other fields. These five models reflect those of the three that Freeman (1982) suggests where supervisory roles rely on (a) authority, (b) providing alternate viewpoints, or (c) being non-directive. Goldsberry (1988) also introduces three models: (a) nominal – seeking to maintain the status quo; (b) correcting – focusing on fixing perceived problems; and (c) reflective – to refine performance based on teacher contemplation. Clark (1990), also focusing on the role of supervisor, introduces: (a) judgmental; (b) non-judgmental; (c) clerical; (d) cooperative; (e) responsive; and, (f) clinical supervision. Additionally, supervision as leadership, as well as that of being a coach, consultant, cooperating teacher, counselor, inspector, or mentor have been introduced (Acheson & Gall, 1997). What is common among each model is that the supervisor can select from different roles or approaches based on having either high or low teaching and evaluating skillsets. This is recognized by Moradi, Sepehrifar, and Khadiv (2014) as they point out that many supervisors carry out their roles without any formal training or preparation, and that empirical analysis of the various models available to supervisors is lacking. This may see some supervisors selecting a model that matches their cultural background (Hofstede, 1986) or current EFL teaching or classroom experience level which, in the case of an administrator, business owner, parent, or student, may at times be none.

The EFL Tertiary and Lifelong Education Context

No literature could be found regarding the classroom observation of NES EFL teachers in the Korean college, university, or life-long learning contexts. However, a number of resources highlight the context of observation in the compulsory education sector (Choi & Park, 2016; Jung, 2011; Seo, 2012; Van de Grift, Chun, Maulana, et al., 2017). So it is clear that the importance of observation with locally trained teachers in the compulsory education sector is long recognized, with various iterations of evaluation in place since the 1960s which have moved from summative to formative assessment (Choi & Park, 2016); in other words, from incentive-based to professional development focused, with the current system involving various stakeholders and having moved from provider- to consumer-centric (Jung, 2011). Nonetheless, in the EFL tertiary and lifelong learning sectors, and not just in Korea, faculty members are often employed without teacher certification or a language-teaching specialization, without having completed a teaching practicum, or without any provision of professional development from the hiring organization. In the EFL, and at times in the English as a second language (ESL) teaching field, there has also been a steady hiring (and firing) of inexperienced native English speakers (Wong, 2009), including volunteers. Some businesses such as institutes seek opportunities to exploit cheap labor (Hassey, 2017; Ok, 2015), which supports both the profit business goal and the continual flow of this kind of teacher into the sector. With a decreasing population leading to an ever-shrinking pool of potential local students (Yoo & Sobotka, 2018), the role of professional development, supervision, and classroom observation in the Korean EFL teaching environment where an employer is seeking long-term stable faculty who are trained, can teach well, and who are able to impress their knowledge upon incoming and retained students should become increasingly important. The goal of the classroom observation process at the tertiary level would then need to move toward conducting it as a means to develop, support, and retain effective teachers. It would also be important to examine current processes from the teacher perspective in terms of a cognitive dimension (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001), where perception is a process by which people attach meaning to experiences, and from these particular experiences, potentially develop their teaching skills – especially since observations grant supervisors the chance to provide instructional opportunities while learning from teachers and students (DeWitt, 2015).

Method

A mixed-method study was employed to elicit quantitative and qualitative data for analysis regarding

the classroom observation process of NES EFL teachers (hereafter referred to as teachers). Quantitative data was gathered by questionnaire, augmented by qualitative data gathered via a semi-structured interview.

Participants and Setting

A total of 44 teachers employed to teach compulsory subjects in the general English language program (GELP) of a Korean university participated in this study (see Table 1). These teachers maintain long-standing language-teaching careers, but 30% (n = 13) of them are untrained. mixed-method study was employed to elicit quantitative and qualitative data for analysis regarding the classroom

TABLE 1
Participant Demographics

Total		44	100%
Trained Teachers	Language teaching major/certification	31	70%
Untrained Teachers	Non-education major/certification	13	30%
Average English Language Teaching Career		12 years	

For these teachers, classroom observation scores are used to form part of a quantitative teacher annual-performance value (APV). A supervisor observation score is created by native English-speaking coordinators during a whole lesson in-class observation, conducted during the semester utilizing native-English speaker GELP management-created rubrics. It is normally conducted once or twice a year for new-hires and those on probation, and once per annual contract for those who have renewed. Combined with student evaluation results, these scores are generally used to justify high-stakes administrative decisions (e.g., contract renewal, and raises).

Instruments

Questionnaire

A 10-item questionnaire (based on Moradi, Sepehrifar, & Khadiv, 2014) was employed to determine how the classroom observation process is perceived by teachers with training compared to those without. As this is an initial exploratory study, frequency and descriptive statistics along with the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test of independence (Fleiss, 1981), was employed to interpret trained and untrained teachers' agreement, disagreement, or no-opinion responses based on their perception of the observation process in terms of the following constructs:

1.   Observation overview (general outlook),
2.   Practical considerations (pre-observation),
3.   Process outcomes (during and post-observation).

Interview

To collect qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with ten teachers (five trained, and five untrained), undertaken to help inform on questionnaire data while acquiring an understanding of the experiences and expectations regarding the observation process. Interviews underwent member validation before coding and analysis, with a second sample of teachers selected to affirm transferability (Grbich, 2017). Three over-arching themes emerged, with two subthemes each:

1.   Observation: importance, impact

2.   Observers: professionalism, qualifications
3.   Process: improvement, recommendations

Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire

The alternative hypothesis is accepted for 9 of the 10 questionnaire items, meaning that trained and untrained teachers align with each other on 90% of the items. Only the item *I would prefer no warning, as unexpected teaching shows real performance*, under the 'practical consideration: pre-observation' construct provided a significant result (16.1, *df*=2, *p*<0.001), see Table 2. What is interesting here is that no untrained teacher agreed with this item, 46.2% (*n*=6) disagreed, and 53.8% (*n*=7) had no opinion. One third of trained teachers agreed (32.3%, *n*=10), 64.5% (*n*=20) disagreed, and 3.2% (*n*=1) had no opinion, which highlights that some trained teachers exhibit confidence in their instructional abilities and are willing to be unexpectedly observed, while untrained teachers are not. It is a surprising result as all trained teachers should recognize the value of pre-observation briefings in pinpointing shortcomings of lessons and encouraging discussion on teacher practice (Gall & Acheson, 2010). Nonetheless, taking these results into account with interview data, it is clear that teachers much prefer a firmly scheduled inspection over an unexpected observation, which are currently carried out in the workplace with teachers given a 48-hour window in which observations may occur.

TABLE 2
Results of Fisher's Exact Test and Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Groupings Regarding Warning Prior to Classroom Observation

Item	Trained Teachers (*n*=31)			Untrained Teachers (*n*=13)			Total	*Fisher's Statistic*	*df*	*p*
	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree				
I would prefer no warning, as unexpected observation shows real performance	20 (64.5%)	1 (3.2%)	10 (32.3%)	6 (46.2%)	7 (53.8%)	0 (0%)	44 (100%)	16.1	2	.001

Note. Significant at the p < 0.01 level. Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages.

Under this same construct, *prior provision of criteria* was highly regarded by trained (96.8%, *n*=30) and untrained (84.6%, *n*=11) teachers alike. Understandably, it is important for teachers to know how they will be observed, and the use of a rubric can provide concepts and standards to focus upon. The danger here is that teachers will teach to the criteria to gain a high score, and this explains why there is a large majority of trained (90.3%, *n*=28) and untrained teachers (84.6%, *n*=11), who under the 'process outcomes: during observation' construct follow the *ensure to adhere to program policy* item when being observed. Also, data for experiencing *anxiety re punitive outcomes* during observation shows that 46.2% (*n*=6) of the untrained teachers and 61.3% (*n*=19) of the trained experience this. This is a long-recognized response arising from the judgmental nature of classroom observations (Borich, 2008), and is also an indicator that teachers might feel the need to teach to the criteria in order to obtain higher scores, which interview data reveals is the case. High anxiety levels in trained teachers may also result from perceived lack of observer qualifications, where evaluation is undertaken with checklists and no understanding of methods employed during practice, which pushes teachers into fragile and defensive positions (Kayaoglu, 2007).

In the remaining questionnaire items, under the 'observation overview' construct, there is high recognition of the value of classroom observations by both trained (64.5%, *n*=20) and untrained (53.8%, *n*=7) teachers in regard to being *necessary for novices* (or incoming) teachers, and this could reflect prior experience: practicum exposure for trained teachers; sink or swim for the untrained. Again, prior practicum experience, the aim of which is to provide aspects of professional wisdom (Richards &

Crookes, 1988), or 'on the job (self-)training', may see 38.7% (*n*=12) of trained teachers and 7.7% (*n*=1) of untrained teachers recognize overall value in the *usefulness of conducting observations*. However, the almost equal split of teachers who disagree or who had no opinion hints that the process at this workplace might need some improvement, as interviews indeed bear out. These responses also coincide with 41.9% (*n*=13) of trained and 30.8% (*n*=4) of untrained teachers disagreeing with the process leading to the *development of teaching skills*, with 46.2% (*n*=6) of untrained teachers having no opinion compared to 35.8% (*n*=8) of their counterparts.

This also matches with trained (38.7%, *n*=12) and untrained (53.8%, *n*=7) teachers disagreement regarding the *provision of educational leadership*, and although 35.5% (*n*=11) of trained teachers did agree, it indicates that more could be done to guide the talent and energy of teachers toward achieving common educational aims. That said, 48.4% (*n*=15) of the trained and 30.8% (*n*=4) of the untrained teachers found the process *collaborative rather than inspectional*, highlighting that a good number of teachers feel that they could talk through the process and outcomes with an observer rather than just being provided with results. Still, Cockburn's (2005) claim that organizational arrangements lead an imbalance of power relationships where observees tend to (publicly) avoid questioning verdicts from observers and accepting what is put forth, especially when results are high-stakes, also appears to hold true here. Meanwhile post-observation sees 74.2% (*n*=23) of trained teachers and 84.6% (*n*=11) of untrained *use observation feedback to improve*, which does align with interview findings but not in the way expected, as the following section highlights.

Interview

All teachers interviewed feel that the observation process has value, and that it is important to be observed for professional development (first and foremost) and for a quality-control check (second, if required) "especially for incoming teachers" (teacher 6). This is also useful as they may need assistance adjusting to a new country/culture and workplace environment. The current classroom observations are considered by most teachers to be a fair process in terms of being provided with positive feedback, and a post-observation meeting that provides good insights in relation to the rubric used in the process. However, it is not perceived as useful, or a fair assessment, of overall teaching ability, as anything outside of rubric parameters results in loss of points (translating to being a poor teacher) seeing "all teachers focus on the score" (teacher 1). For many, the process is a "fair reflection of the rubric, but not a fair reflection of teaching" (teacher 5), leading to a punitive perception of the process, "as if they are trying to catch us out" (teacher 7) by "focusing on what we're not doing over what we actually are" (teacher 10). This feeling is potentially exacerbated as the observation outcomes are tied to high-stakes results, with the anxiety and frustrations regarding this summed up by teacher 3 "Look at the teaching not at the lesson!", and teacher 4 "observations should get a sense of how teachers plan and prepare – what they are going to do, as opposed to what they didn't do on a rubric". This has culminated in faculty developing dual lesson plans, one for actual lessons and one for when observations are undertaken, constructed based on prior rubric provision and feedback concerning items not met on the rubric. "Incoming teachers soon figure this out" (teacher 2), "so it isn't actually a real snapshot of teaching performance, but instead representative of how well teachers can develop and teach a lesson to a checklist" (teacher 9). This of course "distracts from where teacher energy and focus should be placed", and ultimately "makes teachers lose respect for observers" (teacher 8).

This is interesting, as a contention among teachers is the professionalism and qualifications of observers, especially because observers themselves are exempt from being observed. Many teachers prefer an external observer: "someone from another department with teacher education training" (teacher 8), or "a Korean rather than a native-speaker coordinator/director" (teacher 3). This could provide teachers with observers who are content-area experts, provide relevant feedback, implement research-based coaching strategies, and establish a non-judgmental professional relationship free of personal dynamics (Moody, 2015). This leads into the importance of observer qualifications, with teachers

preferring those who are experienced adult educators with a teacher training background, as "it is difficult to justify the use of my professional skills to someone who has no understanding of the techniques I'm employing or the rationale behind the use of different approaches but is simply arguing the rubric *must* be followed" (teacher 7). "Korean teaching experience at a variety of levels" (teacher 6) is also a characteristic felt lacking among observers but recognized as important for them to possess. There is also a sense of a lack of accountability from observers, "as anything taken to them isn't really dealt with as there are no real ramifications if they don't, since there is no rubric that can potentially be used to fire or reprimand them". Having a "run-in" with an observer before they gain observer-privilege likely means "they'll later score you down", with "a number of teachers aiming to become coordinators just to become exempt from observations" (teacher 5). A final point of contention regarding observers is the importance of professionalism as "some have yelled at teachers, and some have been late" (teacher 10), leading to points being deducted for things the observer did not see completed according to the rubric. This power differential undermines the developmental potential of the whole observation process (Chamberlin, 2000) and as Mercer (2006) describes, the process then becomes one that is ineffectual, due to its impressionistic, judgmental, and subjective nature.

These factors aside, there is recognition that administration is working to improve the process, and in terms of improvement, all teachers feel that the focus of the observation should be changed to be more relational, "with the goal of making the teacher better and helping students" (teacher 2) and "without the enforcement of a generic approach to what is an organic, constantly changing environment" (teacher 10). Here, teachers are highlighting that there is no recognition for individualized teaching and learning, and that the process should be opened up to accommodate a variance in teaching styles and the application of a variety of methodologies and approaches that might be required of different lessons and classes. To this end, all teachers were clear about aspects of their teaching that they felt should be a focus of improvement during any observation. These include teacher-student rapport and student engagement, followed by classroom management skills, teacher professionalism, and demonstrative student learning. They also consider it important to initiate pre-observation briefings "to go over lesson plans with observers, and justify what is being taught and how" (teacher 4), followed by the observation itself, "where observers see what was taught compared to what was planned, and how any deviations or unexpected incidents were handled" (teacher 9), with a timely post-observation meeting thereafter "where teacher and observer reflect on the lesson and offer insights" (teacher 5) – serving to take away the need for a rubric, or allowing for a more simplified one focusing on teacher strengths. This, many teachers thought, could be followed up with "leadership providing more modeling of good lessons", and "teaching techniques" (teacher 10), along with "teacher observation of observers' classes" (teacher 2) as "observation should not be punitive but focus on training and development" (teacher 4) with untrained teachers clearly stressing they want training. This potentially highlights a mismatch between the desires of those observed, with the role of those carrying out the process, and in turn, those applying the results.

Conclusion

Classroom observation processes promise to assist in the development of professional practice and assist teachers in developing their strengths and weaknesses (Farrell, 2007), yet they are mainly used as a yardstick to evaluate the competency and skills of trained and untrained teachers (Metcalfe, 1999). Although this study comes to agree with this notion, it also contributes to the literature by highlighting how trained and untrained NES teachers' perspectives mostly align to view the observation process similarly and affirms, as other studies with NNES EFL teachers do (Kayaoglu, 2012; Shah & Harthi, 2014), that a lot is expected of the observation process but little is delivered. The study also provides the first look into the workings and perceptions of classroom observations at the university level with NES EFL teachers, earmarking an under-researched topic rich for wider exploration. These teachers call for increased professional development from the classroom observation process, if implemented, would see

the workplace align with Korean government policy changes implemented with locally trained teachers employed in the compulsory education sector, in terms of establishing an observational process that Choi and Park (2016) indicate emphasizes corrective feedback along with the development of professional competence. Limitations of the study are the nature of its small scale and confinement to a single workplace, but for all those involved, it points to the need for organizational change, and perhaps, initially, the development of a focus group to advance such changes and explore the issues further.

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