

ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ НАУКИ

THE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PEER OBSERVATION

DOI: 10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2021.1.87.1396

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' belief, attitude and experience of peer observation considerably affect their willingness to observe their colleagues or be observed by other faculty members. Peer observation is regarded as a sensitive practice in many higher educational institutions due to its overshadowed values and teachers' intimidation of being judged by their colleagues. This study reveals how peer observation is perceived and employed by university teachers examining their attitude towards the process. Data was collected based on a quantitative method; a survey questionnaire was distributed among 230 teachers of local and international universities in Uzbekistan. The findings show that most teachers treat peer observation as a compulsory part of the annual workload (appraisal). Based on the results, the researchers provide recommendations for educators to benefit from this vital tool to improve their teaching skills.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Вовлеченность учителей, отношение и опыт классного наблюдения значительно влияют на их готовность наблюдать уроки коллег или пригласить преподавателей на свои уроки в качестве наблюдателей. Классное наблюдение коллег считается чувствительной практикой во многих высших учебных заведениях из-за его скрытых ценностей и волнения учителей быть осужденными своими коллегами. Настоящее исследование показывает, как классное наблюдение коллег воспринимается и используется преподавателями университетов, изучающими их отношение к процессу. Данные были собраны на основе количественного метода; вопросник был роздан 230 преподавателям местных и зарубежных университетов Узбекистана. Полученные данные показывают, что большинство учителей рассматривают наблюдение сверстников как обязательную часть годовой нагрузки. Основываясь на результатах, исследователи дают педагогам рекомендации по использованию этого жизненно важного инструмента для улучшения своих преподавательских навыков.

Keywords: peer observation, university teachers, feedback, pre-and post-observation meeting, professional development

Ключевые слова: классное наблюдение, преподаватели вузов, обратная связь, встречи до и после наблюдения, профессиональное развитие.

Introduction

In pedagogy, peer observation is believed to help educators reflect on their teaching strategies and methods through experts' formative and evaluative feedback. However, some may resist being observed due to anxiety or a lack of confidence in their own professional skills. Current research intends to explore the university teachers' perceptions of peer observation in the context of Uzbekistan.

The reasons for peer observation

There are several reasons why peer observation occurs in higher educational institutions, including for CPD purposes and to evaluate teachers' performance during their probationary periods upon completing the Post-graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning (Bell and Madenovic, 2008). In addition, in some countries, peer observation is used to "inform personnel decisions such as promotion, contract renewal, tenure, or merit pay" (Zeng, 2020).

Benefits of peer observation

In HE, peer observation can be beneficial for both observers and observees if conducted appropriately and purposefully under supportive conditions (Bell and Mladenovic, 2007). It enables them to identify the

strengths and weaknesses in their own teaching, set realistic professional goals to succeed in their teaching, build their confidence and enhance the faculty collegiality (Whipp and Pengelley, 2017). Also, teachers can understand pedagogy deeper (Bell and Mladenovic, 2007; Whipp and Pengelley, 2017) and identify the areas for improvement in their teaching (McDaniel et al., 2019). Teachers can disseminate best practices among colleagues. Bell (2001) and McDaniel et al. (2019) observed that after peer observation, teachers tend to improve their teaching strategies and the design of teaching materials; also start reflecting on their teaching.

Teachers' reluctance for peer observation

Although there are numerous benefits and positive evaluations of peer observation, several reasons for avoiding this pedagogical practice have also been reported. The research shows that teachers may consider this tool as a bureaucratic process (Shortland, 2004); they can also refer to the process as a part of annual teacher performance appraisal. According to Esterhazy et al. (2021), the majority of practitioners underestimate the value of peer observation by treating it as a one-time event rather than linking it to a broader

understanding. This evaluative method can be regarded as challenging practice as it requires reflecting critically, detecting the pros and cons of teaching, providing constructive feedback and accepting negative comments (Bell, 2005). Some reported that when their teaching is observed, they felt “a threat to their academic freedom” (Keig and Waggoner, 1994). Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) state that there is a tendency among teachers to accept colleagues’ critical comments negatively rather than using this feedback for improving their teaching. Kell and Annetts (2009) indicated several reasons for teachers’ reluctance for peer observation: teachers are overloaded that they can barely allocate time for observing peers’ classes. Another important factor that is also mentioned by many other researchers (McDaniel et al., 2019) is the lack of standardized and validated instruments for peer observation.

Tips for practical peer observation

To have successful results in peer observation, teachers need to develop “a very high degree of professional ethics and objectivity, and training in observational and analytical skills” (Kohut, Burnap and Yon, 2007). The available literature provides particular suggestions to follow, such as communicating openly with colleagues, organizing pre and post-observation meetings to give and receive feedback, being ready for negative feedback, and accepting constructive comments. Furthermore, during the pre-observation conference, colleagues can decide on pro-forma (or guidelines) that can be used to reflect on the lesson later in the post-observation meeting (ibid). According to Darling-Hammond (2006) and Kane and Straiger (2012), quality feedback on peers helps them to enhance their professional skills. Moreover, peer observation should be designed “to be non-judgemental and developmental rather than evaluative and externally” in order to overcome the negative aspects (Lomas and Nicholls, 2005). Any kind of critical feedback should be provided in a manner that is “constructive and will lead to new understandings and improved practice” (Hammersley- Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005). Bell and Mladenovic (2007) found that many tutors in their study prefer to be observed by experts; the authors assume that this might be because peers cannot provide as effective feedback as the experts.

Interesting views

Available literature suggests some interesting views regarding the gender and age of educators in terms of peer observation. According to McDaniel et al. (2019), female and junior teachers have a propensity to find feedback from peer observation beneficial.

Having reviewed the existing plethora of literature on peer observation, we discovered that little research had been conducted on this topic in the context of Uzbekistan. Thus, the current study aims to fill the gap based on the following research question:

What is the perception of the university teachers of peer observation?

Methodology

Overview

This section introduces the participants of the research, ethical considerations, and the tool used to collect the data.

Participants

230 university teachers participated in the current study. Teachers are employed in local (60%) and international (40%) universities in Uzbekistan (Figure 1). 77% of the participants are female and the rest are male (23%) (Figure 2). As for the working experience, the most considerable portion (31,3%) of participants had up to 5 years of teaching experience, followed by teachers with 11-15 years (almost 26 %) and 6-10 years (one fifth) experience. Over one-fifth of teachers have 16-20 and 21+ years of experience (12,2% and 10,4% respectively) (Figure 3). 193 respondents teach language-related modules (ESL, EAP, Turkish, Contemporary Linguistics, etc.), and the rest 37 respondents teach different modules (Economics, Project Management, Law, Introduction to Statistics, etc.).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations included receiving official approval of the Research Panel of Westminster International University in Tashkent confirming that the survey to be conducted in its presented form was in compliance with the University’s Research Ethics Policy. Initially, the survey was carried out among the university academic staff on 48 lecturers. Later, to obtain a broader view of various perceptions, the questionnaire was disseminated among other teachers of higher educational institutions of Uzbekistan. The respondents were notified about voluntary participation and anonymity of their answers.

Methods

The main research instrument is a survey that questions the perceived views of university teachers on frequency, usefulness, purposes, and benefits of peer observation along with teachers’ typical reactions to observations and feedback. The survey illustrated the views and experiences of novice as well as experienced teachers. The questionnaire consisted of overall 16 questions, including open-ended, closed-ended, mixed and multiple choice types.

Though most questions suggested multiple possible answers, respondents were offered to provide their own opinions too.

Results

This research suggests that university teachers have diverse perceptions of peer observation, namely, frequency and usefulness of observation, benefits to gain from them, purposes to visit other colleagues’ classes, feelings and emotional behaviour they experience, and feedback.

Obligation and frequency of observations

As can be seen from the results, more than half of the participants confirmed that observing colleagues’ classes is compulsory in most higher educational institutions. In contrast, more than 40% of teachers stated that it is not obligatory. Among the 3% responses, some stated as follows:

Rarely, only when they have an open lesson, usually teachers bring their good acquaintances or friends who don't disappoint them with their feedback.

Yes, compulsory, but teachers do not often observe each other's classes.

Not sure whether this year it's compulsory or optional.

It used to be compulsory, then optional.

Can't give a definite answer.

When it comes to the frequency of observing other colleagues' classes, the results demonstrate that the percentage of university teachers who observe their colleagues' lectures and seminars once a month is identical (34.3%) to those who observe once a semester. It can be generalized that at least once a semester, an academic staff attends colleagues' classes in higher educational institutions. In contrast, less than a fifth of respondents have this practice once a year (13%), and nearly one in ten never do observations. Also, as was indicated in small percentages, a minority of respondents observe their colleagues' classes when they are invited or twice a year or very often for professional development purposes (Figure 4).

To the question *How often are your classes observed by your colleagues?*, two fifths (40%) of the teachers responded as once a semester; less than a third (28,7%) stated once a month; a minority of respondents (15,7%) indicated as once a year. There were also some teachers whose classes have never been observed by their colleagues (10,4%). A minimal number (about 7 %) of teachers generated different responses such as (Figure 5):

Since the beginning of my career, my classes have been observed a maximum of 10 times.

When they think they need it, which doesn't happen very often.

Twice per semester.

Usefulness and purposes of observations

Teachers' considerations on the usefulness of peer observations are relatively close. Two-fifths of the respondents (40.4%) find the peer observation simply useful while a nearly close number of people (37.8%) believe that it plays a crucial role in teaching and learning being very useful. Also, less than a fifth find observations useful to some extent. A minimal number of teachers do not acknowledge the usefulness of the observation, or they do not have any specific idea about them. Overall, as can be interpreted from the results, most teachers approach peer observations with a positive attitude, believing it is useful.

In reference to purposes of observations, analysis of the responses illustrates that a greater part (65.7) aims at learning a lot from their experienced colleagues. Just under half of the respondents (48.3%) wish to see how a certain activity is conducted in their colleagues' classes. Moreover, 13% of teachers examine this practice as it is compulsory in their institutes and universities, whereas approximately the same number of people (12.6) visit the classes of their colleagues just because they are invited. Minority academic staff relate their purposes of observations with receiving valuable feedback, learning from their colleagues no matter how many years of experience they have, learning other colleagues' classroom management, presentation skills and developing professionally.

Benefits of observations

Those teachers, who indicated that peer observation is a valuable tool in professional development, were asked to specify the benefits they mostly gain. The findings show that a significant proportion of teachers believe that the more they observe, the better strategies they explore to implement in their teaching. The majority of respondents deem that observers' feedback is helpful for them to reflect on their teaching. Another group of the respondents considers that peer observation strengthens their self-efficacy and self-confidence, and some think that peer observation helps to disseminate best teaching practices. A considerable number of respondents observe others' classes with the hope of enhancing collegiality. The rest of the teachers stated that they can find out their own flaws in teaching or learn from others' mistakes; some think peer observation is beneficial for newly joined academics.

Another question encouraged the teachers to explain the reasons for finding peer observation not useful that was specifically designed for those teachers who found peer observation useless. The most popular explanation for not considering peer observation beneficial was that teachers' nervousness while being observed affects their lesson delivery, which is followed by the belief that peer observation is held only for the sake of formality. Some indicated that the feedback given by the observers is not considered by many teachers.

Teachers' emotional reactions

The teachers were also asked about their colleagues' first common reactions when they were notified about observers' visits. According to the results of the study, teachers showed different reactions when they were informed about the lesson observers' wish to visit. More than half of the respondents (53.9%) are welcomed as observers, 22% of respondents are questioned being asked "why?", one fifth does not feel any specific reactions of the observees. Interestingly, 15.7 % of teachers are informed about the delay of observation dates by observees due to various reasons. Very few participants replied that sometimes they do not ask permission to observe classes. A small number of teachers mentioned that their colleagues expressed anger knowing about the visit of observers.

Correspondingly, respondents were asked about their own feelings and behavior when they were observed by their colleagues. The results showed that more than half of the respondents are always ready to be observed by other teachers as they feel confident about their teaching. 27.8% of teachers feel happy believing that their colleagues help them to see their mistakes. Remarkably, 23.5 % of respondents feel insecure and not natural as if they are simulating their role. Almost the same number of people are more concerned about their teaching and students than usual. There were various answers in a small quantity commenting that they do not feel anything specific, do not care about observations, feel nervous, and are more concerned about their students' learning during the lesson. Sometimes their feelings depend on their readiness for the class.

Before and after observations

In response to the questions about the necessity of meetings before observations, 60% of teachers consider that teachers need to be informed before they are observed, whereas 36.1 % believe that unexpected observation is more realistic. The minority has no idea and believes that it depends on the situation. As for meeting after the observation, the majority of teachers think it is important to meet to provide constructive feedback on teacher performance. However, a small minority of participants (7%) indicated that it is unnecessary to meet as post-session feedback is of no importance. Other responses suggest that it depends on the situation and agreement; teachers do not like when colleagues look indifferent and forget about post-session meetings. If certain things are signaling, then a meeting is necessary; in other cases, a written report is sufficient.

Discussion

The current research revealed specific key findings of the university teachers' perceptions of peer observation. These findings will be compared to the available literature results, i.e., the similarities and the differences will be presented in this section.

Similarities

One of the significant findings is that most respondents find peer observation an essential and beneficial professional tool. The results showed different reasons for thinking so, such as identifying their weaknesses and strengths, improving teaching practices, learning professional skills from experienced colleagues, etc. This pattern of results is consistent with the range of previously conducted research studies, namely, Bell and Mladenovic (2007), Whipp and Pengelley (2017) and McDaniel et al. (2019). Although very small numbers, some believe that peer observation is especially important for newly joined academics which is in good agreement with Bell and Madenovic's (2008) opinion that observation is an evaluative tool during teachers' probationary periods. This can be explained by the fact that most novice teachers are eager to learn from their senior colleagues to enhance their teaching strategies and methods. Another result is that a considerable number of respondents refer to this evaluative method as a bureaucratic process which lends support to the findings of Shortland (2004). This might be because those teachers who hold this belief are not aware of the values of peer observation.

Differences

Regarding the findings that contrast with previous evidence, it was found that most teachers are indifferent or reluctant to participate in post-observation meetings, whereas Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007) emphasize the importance of such arrangements as they are helpful for observees to understand the quality of their classes. From the respondents' comments, it can be deduced that teachers are overloaded with paperwork and have little or almost no time to allocate for such arrangements. Another assumption is that, in some institutions, there is a lack of proper proformas to use for observation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to highlight teachers' perception of peer observation in the context of Uzbekistan higher education institutions. It is crucial to understand the necessity of peer observations since this practice brings long-term and substantial benefits for teachers, such as developing professionally, increasing self-efficacy and upgrading teaching tools.

Limitations and Implications

These research findings can be helpful for policymakers to review the compulsoriness of peer observation in higher educational institutions of Uzbekistan. That is to say that teachers in higher education should be encouraged to treat peer observation not as an imperative part of their teaching but also as a beneficial tool to grow professionally. Nevertheless, we consider that our research may have two limitations. The first is that the study is conducted on teachers of Uzbekistan who primarily teach language-related modules (193 out of 230 respondents). This restraint was probably a result of using the English language in the survey. Further and larger-scale studies could be carried out with more university teachers of different subject areas in various provinces of the country. Notwithstanding, we believe that our work could be an essential starting point to a deeper investigation of the state of implementation of peer observation in Uzbekistan. The second limitation can be that the questionnaire is applied as the only and prominent tool to research the university teachers' perceptions of peer observation. Further research can be conducted by using research tools such as interviews, observing recorded lessons to determine how teachers view observations in their teaching practice.

Recommendations

Having studied and analyzed university teachers' perceptions in Uzbekistan, we would like to share some recommendations for observers and observees.

As for observers, pre and post-observation meetings should be part and parcel of observation processes. Such arrangements enable colleagues to have better collegiality and mutual understanding. Also, they should avoid judgemental comments and harsh verdicts as it is widely believed that many teachers find unjustified criticism as demotivation. Thus any statement should be considered wisely before uttered. Above all, observees should provide constructive feedback in a supportive manner that can be useful for teacher development.

When it comes to observees, they also need to set themselves for further improvements when they expect visitors to their classrooms. Firstly, it is suggested that observees should get free of negative expectations and stereotypes of peer observation. These kinds of feelings may hinder them from conducting their classes properly. Secondly, they need to be open-minded to receive both positive and negative feedback. Observees should understand that every comment they receive can contribute to their professional development.

Last but not least, teachers should continuously reflect and be able to analyze their teaching critically,

as reflection is a powerful tool to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses.

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Appendix

Link to the Questionnaire

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1CwxdhYBhG_W8_ueWPm7UAIL4iqix8-WMEyiHB11_KI64/edit

3. What kind of Higher Education Institution do you work for?

230 ответов

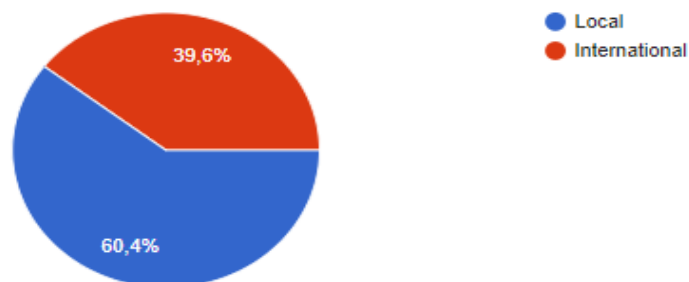


Figure 1. University

1. What is your gender?

230 ответов

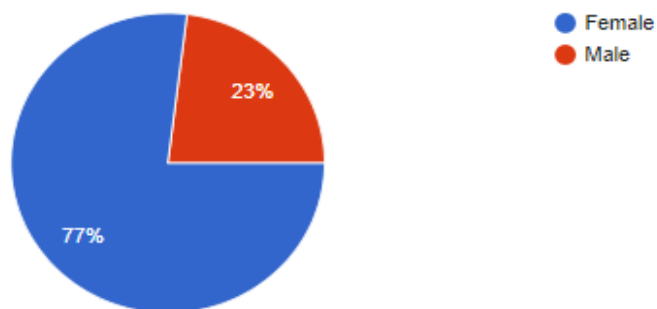


Figure 2. Gender

2. What is your teaching experience?

230 ответов

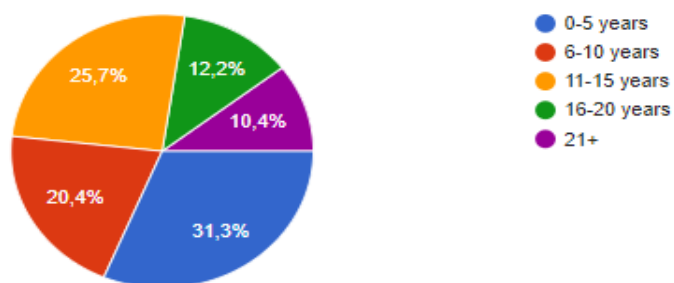


Figure 3. Experience

6. How often do you observe your colleagues' classes?

230 ответов

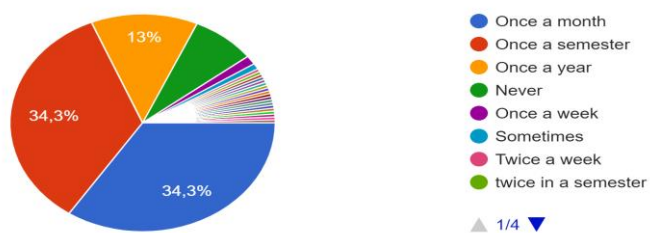


Figure 4. Frequency of observing

7. How often are your classes observed by your colleagues?

230 ответов



Figure 5. Frequency of being observed