

Classroom Observation: A Factor for Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Development and Their Students' Achievements

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Abstract

The present paper describes the processes used to examine the effectiveness of less experienced teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes on students' achievements in terms of their proficiency levels in both Elementary and Pre-intermediate levels. This quasi-experimental design study was conducted in KISH Language School in Bojnurd, a city in the Northeast of Iran. Between July 2011 and October 2011, twenty-one EFL teachers were selected as experienced and less experienced ones. Also 169 male and female students (age range 15_45 years) taking Elementary and Pre-intermediate courses formed the participants of this study. The participants assigned into experimental and control group. In order to test students' performance in English before the treatment, a Key English Test (KET) and a Preliminary English Test (PET) were employed to check students' English proficiency. There was a statistically significant increase in KET experimental group' final scores before (M=53.87, SD= 2.822), and after treatment (M=70.81, SD=3.113), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 15.81863 to 18.06599. Also there was a statistically significant increase in PET scores before (M=44.36, SD= 2.114), and after treatment (M=59.27, SD=1.835), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 14.233 to 15.767. Data analysis and statistical calculations through T-TEST and one way ANOVA revealed that, although both control and experimental group students' proficiency in English enhanced, there was a significant difference in experimental group students' final scores before and after treatment.

Keywords: Observation, Professional development, less experienced teachers, Learners' achievement

Introduction

The final aim of any educational planning is to grow students in various cognitive, individual and social skills and knowledge necessary to function occupationally and socio-politically in society (Fullan, 2001). Teachers' role in successful preparation of students is indisputable. Whether the students will be the open-minded and the informed people of tomorrow or unaware members of society will depend on teacher knowledge, teacher education and especially teacher professional development (Rizvi, 2010). One issue related to professionalism of the teaching force refers to the necessity to bridge the gap between knowledge acquired during formal pre-service studies and further developments accruing while teachers are employed (Nir & Bogler, 2007).

On-the-job professional development programs effort to bridge this gap by allowing teachers to develop new idea that will improve their teaching experience (Mtetwa & Thompson, 2000), in-

crease and renew their teaching skills and practices (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002), change their thoughts, beliefs and perceptions (Guskey, 2002) and bring about improvements in their teaching in their students achievements (Blandford, 2000). It is believed that the poor quality of EFL teachers is partly attributable to a lack of teacher training and teacher professional development (Vo& Nguyen, 2011). As a result, observation has been introduced as one of the teachers' professional activities to help teachers to improve their teaching strategies through peer observation or observing experienced teachers classes. As Sara Bubb (2005) maintains: *"Observation is a powerful tool for assessing and monitoring a teacher's progress. Used well, it can also be a way to support teachers, because observation gives such a detailed picture and enables very specific objectives to be set. Observing someone teach gives a really detailed picture and is an opportunity to stimulate some really useful reflection on teaching and learning"* (P.45). Successful teachers make the most of any opportunities to observe others. They watch a range of teachers' classrooms. It is very encouraging to see that everyone has similar problems and it is interesting to study the different ways people manage them (Bubb, 2005). Observation may also be helpful for teachers who are beginners in teaching and it can help them to monitor experienced teachers' classroom in order to improve their own skills and bring about changes in their own way of teaching and dealing with problems which they may face during their teaching. Researches show constantly that teacher quality is the crucial factor in student learning, the frequent problem is to identify the important characteristics of teacher quality and help teachers to develop these characteristics, though (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Wenglinsky, 2000). Viewing the problem of improving student performance from this point of view makes the development of systematic and objective methods of classroom observation a critical component in improving teacher quality in every subject area. In order to move along the recent progress in teacher observation the researchers did investigations in this regard. The important point motivating a work in this area is the position of teachers observation in many countries like Iran where teachers' observation has not occupied the place it merits, whether in second language class, in school or in different EFL institutes (Akbari, Ghafar Samar & Tajik, 2007). Also, as far as observation during the period of teaching practice is concerned, it can be seen as a method for current training and learning (Wajnryb, 1992). Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate whether less experienced EFL teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes has any effect on students' learning.

Review of literature

In a quickly changing world, where almost everything is rapidly changing education has also been exposed to some essential alterations (Wallace, 1991). Learning quality in the classroom doesn't rely on students cognitive ability alone, teachers' role in creating motivating learning environments is essential (Brophy, 2004; Dornyei, 2001). Teachers are responsible for creating and increasing learning chances in very complex ways, fulfilling both academic and social roles (Kumara-vadivelu, 2003). They can renew their knowledge and teaching skills by taking part in professional development activities (PD).

Since teachers' role is really important in changes to teaching methodology and leads to improvements in quality of education, especially EFL teachers who have to meet the needs and standards of English as an international language, several research and development efforts have been driven over the years to define and improve the quality of teaching (Hargreaves, 1994). Many educators (Freeman, 2000 & Nunan, 2003) have called for improvement and changes in EFL teacher education in order to increase the quality of teaching and learning. So it is important that for the best

student's outcomes, teachers need to take on in continuous professional development (Vo & Nguyen, 2011).

A professional development (PD) model is defined as a pattern or plan used to conduct the designing of a program (Joyce & Weil, 1972). Drago-Severson (2002), Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) and Marczely (1996) in their broad reviews of the research have found out that seven different PD models are used for teachers: (1) in-service training, (2) observation/assessment, (3) development/improvement process, (4) study groups, (5) inquiry/action research, (6) individually guided activities, and (7) mentoring and coaching. Observation/assessment is a model of PD that involves colleagues who give feedback based on observations about the performance of colleague educators. Both the observers and the observed learn from the process of observation. The most common form of teacher evaluation is classroom observation and differs broadly in how they are performed and what they evaluate. They can be conducted by a school administrator or, another assessor. They can evaluate general teaching practices or subject specific techniques. They can be formally planned or unannounced and can occur once or several times per year or term. The type of observation method adopted, its focus, and its frequency should depend on what the administration would like to learn from the process (Little, Goe, Abaell, 2009).

Most of the studies consider some form of impact of professional development on teachers' knowledge and practice which includes; the effectiveness of programs on personal changes of teachers cognitions, beliefs, practice and teachers' satisfaction as well as pupil change (Avolas, 2011). There are different results on the relationship between teachers' participation in professional development activities and student outcomes.

Some studies have found no relationship between teachers' participation in professional development activity and student achievement (Jacob & Lefgren, 2004). Other studies have found higher levels of students' achievements related to teachers' professional development directly related to the area in which they are teaching (Brown, Smith, & Stein, 1995; Cohen & Hill, 1977; Wiley & Yoon, 1995; Angrist, & Lavy, 2001).

Over a dozen studies have estimated models of the relationship between teacher's education/training and student achievement using data on the change in student test scores between two points in time that confirm the results of the present study. The first is what Darling-Hammond (2000) claims that teachers with more preparation for teaching are more confident and successful with students than teachers who have little preparation or none (As cited in Garcia, 2011).

Additionally, (Douglas, Harris and Sass, 2007) state that, classroom observation is beneficial, resulting in higher proficiency score. They mention that, the experimental group students are usually much better in performance when compared with control group. Another aspect is what Ashton & Webb (1986) explained that teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement.

Also Hanushek (1986) mentioned that, in early work on teacher productivity, researchers estimated education production functions by regressing aggregate student achievement levels on measures of teacher training.

According to Wenglinsky (2000) there is a positive correlation between professional development activities aimed at the needs of special education students, and students' higher-order skills. More recently, Harris and Sass (2007) recognized what they call the "*lagged effect of professional development*," that is, the larger effect of teachers' professional development on student outcomes not becoming clear until three years after the teachers had completed their courses. The interpretation of the positive effect of participation in teacher professional development activities is not clear, as this variable is confounded with other teacher attributes, that is, teachers who participate in these

activities are also likely to be more motivated and, usually, more specialized in the subjects they teach of tool refinement.

Statement of problem

Some studies suggest that learners will not achieve their learning goals successfully until they are given regular and systematic instruction. They also suggest that teachers can improve their teaching strategies by participating in more professional development activities in order to help students to reach their learning goals (Hayes, 2011).

Teacher education is presently facing a number of anxieties as pressures have come from many parts in the last decades, with perhaps the most powerful focus being on the issue of teacher quality (Tony & Richard, 2001).

Researches show constantly that teacher quality is the crucial factor in student learning, the frequent problem is to identify the important characteristics of teacher quality and help teachers to develop these characteristics, (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Wenglinsky, 2000). As education advocates state, the emphasis should be placed on providing educators with the skills necessary to make a meaningful impact on student learning, then Egelson and McCoskey (1998) assert that an evaluation system designed to encourage individual teacher growth is not a luxury but a necessity. Viewing the problem of improving student performance from this point of view makes the development of systematic and objective methods of classroom observation a critical component in improving teacher quality in every subject area.

Also, despite the increasing impact of observation as a professional development (PD) activity on teachers and students' development, it remains unclear how the process of observation will be implemented in the classroom and how it can help teachers to develop their teaching strategies in a collaborative way. Therefore this study will help less-experienced teachers to make use of experienced teachers' classroom through observation to improve their own teaching skills.

Purpose and research question

The increasing awareness of new approaches in teacher training has made the researchers interested in the notion of classroom observation as a tool which less-experienced teachers can use to develop as effective teachers. Therefore this study has examined how development of less-experienced teachers' skills through observing experienced teachers classes can affect students' outcomes. Thus, the following research question was raised:

Does classroom observation have any effect on learners' outcomes in terms of their proficiency levels?

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants were 21 teachers including; seven males and 14 females. To carry out the experiment, two groups of teachers were selected as experimental groups (13) having university education (Bachelor or Master degree) with minimum of 5 years of teaching. Eight teachers were less experienced, novice ones teaching at elementary (4) and Pre intermediate (4) levels. One group was assigned as control group (8) who were beginner in teaching Elementary (4) and Pre-intermediate (4), having educational degree in English, though. The total number of students participated in less-experienced teachers' classes(both experimental and control group) were (169) both male and female.

Instruments

To investigate the effect of classroom observation on students' outcomes and teachers' skills, three instruments were employed by the researchers.

A sample of TOEFL test was used to assess the teachers' proficiency in English. It was selected from Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL test book published by Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc (2001). The number of questions were 60 multiple items, divided into grammar (30 items), vocabulary (20 items) and reading (10 items) sections. The TOEFL sample was piloted on (n=22) EFL teachers to determine the reliability of the test. Analyzing the result of the study using SPSS (Ver.18), the reliability was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha as 0.732.

The second instrument used in this study was Key English Test (KET) and Preliminary English Test (PET) tests: In order to test students' general English proficiency before the treatment two general English tests (KET & PET) were employed as pre-test (KET for Elementary levels and PET for Pre-intermediate levels). These two tests were piloted on a random sample (n=40) of students to estimate reliability and time allocated to complete these tests. The results of the study using SPSS (Ver. 15) show a reliability of 0.820 for KET and 0.775 for PET.

Procedure

The results of students' final exams in experimental group were compared to the results of students' exams in control group to assess the effect of classroom observation on students' outcomes. Prior to the experiment, the participants (teachers) were given a sample of TOEFL test to evaluate their language proficiency. Among teachers with higher scores some were considered as less-experienced and some were selected as experienced teachers based on the years they have taught English in language schools. Two groups of less-experienced EFL teachers who had and did not have the targeted treatment (classroom observation) were chosen to determine the effect of treatment on Elementary and Pre-intermediate students' achievements. Less experienced teachers in control groups have already participated in Teachers Training Courses but they had no observation of experienced teachers' classes, while less experienced teachers in experimental groups participated in both training courses and experienced teachers' classes.

In order to test students' performance in English before the treatment, The KET and PET tests were employed for both control and experimental groups. They consist of a number of multiple questions and certain skills were measured: listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading and speaking which was measured through interview.

This study required at least 10 sessions with less-experienced teachers attendance in experienced teachers' classes. Teachers observed a class on an area particularly relevant to their own area of teaching. They were supposed to fill an observation checklist in order to choose the focused areas of observations according to teachers' needs and particular teaching situations. At the end of experiment the same tests (KET & PET) were conducted as post-test to measure the effect of treatment on students' performance. First the student's performance in experimental groups was evaluated. Then students' performance in experimental group was compared to the students' performance in control group

In order to analyze the collected data of this study, the data were examined through the use of SPSS (Version.15), Excel (Version 2007). In this study the differences in achievement scores of students taught by teachers who participated in one of the professional development activities (class observation) were used as the measure of effectiveness of classroom observation on students' outcomes. The students' final exams' scores in two different levels (Elementary and Pre intermediate) were compared via two different instruments (KET&PET) before and after treatment.

Results and discussion

Before investigating the results on the scores of pretest and posttest, descriptive statistics were presented in order to summarize the available data and describe the main features of the data. Table 1 shows its results.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of all groups in KET and PET

	N	Mean	Variance
exp group scores in ket post test	52	70.81	9.688
exp group scores in ket pretest	52	53.87	7.962
control group scores in ket post test	38	68.24	9.321
control group scores in ket pretest	38	54.68	10.114
exp group scores in pet post test	44	59.27	3.366
exp group scores in pet pretest	44	44.27	3.552
control group scores in pet post test	35	57.43	5.723
control group scores in pet t pretest	35	45.11	5.869

Table 1 shows that there is not a significant difference in mean of scores in KET pretest in experimental (M=53.87) and control group (M=54.68), since they are close to each other. Also the mean score of post test in KET control group is 68.24 and in KET experimental group is 70.81. It seems there are differences between the mean scores. It is the same for pet pretest and posttest, in which the mean score of experimental group is 44.27 in pretest and 59.27 in posttest in experimental group and in control group the mean score is 45.11 in pretest and 57.43 in posttest.

In table 2, the paired differences between two control groups in KET are observable.

Table 2. Comparison of two control groups in KET

paired Differences		Std.		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	sig. (2-tailed)
Mean	Deviation	Error Mean	Lower	Upper				
Paired control group								
	13.553	4.542	.737	12.060	15.046	18.393	37	.000

There is a statistically increase in KET scores before (M=54.68, SD= 3.180) and after treatment (M=68.24, SD=3.053), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 12.060 to 15.046. This increase is not statistically significant.

Also, the paired differences between two experimental groups are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of two experimental groups in KET

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	paired Differences 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	sig. (2- tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Paired experimental group	16.94231	4.03618	.55972	15.81863	18.06599	30.269	51	.000

There is a statistically significant increase in KET scores before ($M=53.87$, $SD= 2.822$) and after treatment ($M=70.81$, $SD=3.113$), p -value=.000 which is $< .05$. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 15.81863 to 18.06599. This shows a positive result. Therefore, we concluded that the means between two groups are not equal and there is a significant difference between them.

Table 4 and 5 respectively show paired differences in PET control group and experimental group.

Table 4. The comparison of two control groups in PET

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	paired Differences 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	sig. (2- tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Paired control group scores in pet test post test	12.314	3.402	.575	11.146	13.483	21.413	34	.000

There is a statistically increase in PET scores before ($M=45.11$, $SD= 2.423$) and after treatment ($M=57.43$, $SD=2.392$), p -value=.000 which is $< .05$. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 11.146 to 13.483.

There is a statistically significant increase in PET scores before ($M=44.36$, $SD= 2.114$), and after treatment ($M=59.27$, $SD=1.835$), p -value=.000 which is $< .05$. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 14.233 to 15767. We can conclude that the mean between the groups are not equal and there is a significant difference between them. P -value=0.000 < 0.05. Accordingly we can say that teachers' observation had significant effect on students' scores as we had an increase in mean scores of experimental group.

Table 5. Comparison of two experimental groups in pet

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	paired Differences 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	sig. (2- tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Paired Experimental group scores	15.000	2.524	.381	14.233	15.767	39.416	43	.000

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of classroom observation on students' outcomes and to explore if it is feasible to apply it in educational setting in Iran. Three groups of teachers and students (Elementary and Pre-intermediate) were selected. Only teachers in experimental group were given the opportunity to improve their teaching methods and strategies via participating in experienced teachers classes. And both experimental and control groups of students were given the chance to improve their English performance.

The findings of this study show that teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes had a significant effect on students' outcomes.

The results of students' scores in experimental group was compared to the scores of students in control group in order to investigate, if, class observation had any significant effects on students' outcomes. A significant increase in the use of observation was noted with regard to experimental group. Therefore, statistically significant differences were found on the experimental group when compared to control group.

Although learning outcomes are influenced by a complex interplay of factors particular to an institution, teaching context, and student disposition, when employed carefully and thoughtfully, student outcomes may contribute to judgments of teaching.

Following in the study, the teachers were interviewed to reveal their specific ideas regarding the effect of experienced teachers' class observation on their professional development. Almost all, teachers reported high satisfaction with their participation in experienced teachers' classes and processes in which they were involved. They had become more creative in enlarging their teaching in order to make their lessons more interesting. The participants said that they have become more motivated in teaching as a result of observation. The fact of observing teachers in many different settings will likely suggest variations they can try to improve their strategy. In other words, as they observe teachers implementing a strategy in different ways, they, too, can gain the ability to see and act more flexibly in their own teaching.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, we can conclude, experienced teachers' class observation is acceptable for EFL less experienced teachers and its introduction is beneficial for both teachers and students.

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