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**CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT: BEING A REFLECTIVE ESL
TEACHER**

Liliya A. Latypova (a)*, Oksana V. Polyakova (b), Niyaz R. Latypov (c)

*Corresponding author

(a) Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya str., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russia, melilek@yandex.ru

(b) Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya str., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russia,
oksanapolyakova16@gmail.com

(c) Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya str., 18, 420008, Kazan, Russia, inyazlat@yandex.ru

Abstract

The importance of language teachers' lifelong professional development is undeniable. Reflective teaching has recently become an epitome in ESL teacher education. It indicates self-observation and self-evaluation and implies a systematic process of collecting, recording and analysing teachers' thoughts and observations, as well as those of a student. One of the ways to provoke self-analysis and reflection that leads to powerful insights is peer observation. The paper describes the results of the experiment to establish a peer feedback pattern on a regular basis that aimed to create a climate where both givers and receivers of feedback enhance their understanding of best teaching practices which encourage effective learning.

The experiment took three years and involved 30 ESL teachers of Kazan Federal University. The participants observed two peer-teachers every semester (four in total over one academic year). It was crucial for the authors to ensure a constructive and productive feedback process. To provide feedback there was established a set of criteria to analyse peer-observation manuals, guidelines for selecting peer observers, a questionnaire targeted to discover the level of self-content with peer-reviewing practice and the depth of reflection.

The results of the experiment showed significant improvements in learning from others and better teaching. Findings of the study suggest that peer observation can be fully recommended to ESL teachers to guarantee their continuous development and to conduct the so-called self-audit, or reflection.

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Keywords: ESL teacher, reflective teacher, reflection, peer observation, peer observation manuals, professional growth.



1. Introduction

Education nowadays is the most powerful instrument that can guarantee any country sustainable development and prosperity. The Fourth Industrial Revolution characterized by a fusion of technologies blurs the lines between physical, digital, and biological spheres. Thus, the role of education has shifted from transferring already existing knowledge to molding the competencies needed to acquire and create advanced competences and skills. Greater international competitiveness emphasises the importance of continuous development. Educational system needs to react to these changes and to equip a student with tools to stay self-confident, adaptive, intelligent and creative.

The role of teachers in the process of new specialist generation formation is unquestionable since they are the main tools of knowledge transfer. New ways of learning make teachers reflect on the ways to provide it. The necessity to keep abreast of the latest teaching methodology, cultural aspects of educational process, technological novelties accentuates the priority of teachers' reflection formation. It is recognized that only critically thinking mediator can train students that are aware of how to learn throughout their lives.

2. Problem Statement

Over the last decade higher education in Russia and in many other countries has undergone a process of radical reform or structural readjustment, where the key element was the introduction of mechanisms to measure teaching performance and teaching quality – mechanisms to ensure teaching effectiveness (Hopkins & Stern, 1996; Kalimullin, 2014; Latypova et al., 2016; Masalimova & Galishnikova, 2016; McBer, 2000; Nuthall, 2004; Solodkova & Ismagilova, 2016; Ur, 1996; Valeev et al., 2015; Valeeva et al., 2016; Zalyaeva & Solodkova, 2014). This is why considerable attention has been paid to reflection in many studies. Though reflective practice was already studied earlier in the 20th century by John Dewey (Dewey, 1933), it is still universally acknowledged to be the crucial element in teachers' professional growth. The reflective process includes reviewing, reconstructing, re-enacting and critically analysing one's own teaching abilities and then grouping these reflected explanations into evidence of changes that need to be made to become a better teacher (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Ur (1996) is also interested in teachers' professional development, but she is “concerned that some approaches of reflective practice rely on teachers' existing knowledge as the only source of input; so, she argues for “enriched reflection”, which is the incorporation of vicarious experience, other people's observation, other people's experiments, and input from professional research, theorizing, into the various stages of the reflective cycle” (Ur, 1996, p. 6). According to Farrell, “teacher reflection refers to teachers subjecting their beliefs and practices of teaching and learning to a critical analysis” (Farrell, 2013a, p. 465).

Larrivee proposes the term *critical reflection*, which “merges critical inquiry, the conscious consideration of the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about human potential and learning (Larrivee, 2010, p. 293). Hopkins and Stern (1996) alongside with passionate commitment to doing the best for students, love of children enacted in warm, caring relationships, pedagogical content knowledge, use of a variety of models of teaching and learning and collaborative working style with colleagues focus mostly on reflective practice as characteristics of excellent teachers. However, Nuthall (2004) pointed out that these

factors are not sufficient to tell exactly which teacher behaviors can lead to student learning. As reported by Larrivee (2010, p. 293), “unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations.

Approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct.” Cochran-Smith (2001, p. 36) even suggested that “we need outcomes measures that ... make teaching harder and more complicated for teacher candidates (rather than easier and more straight-forward)...Linear models of teaching will not suffice here, nor will constructions of outcomes that push only for clarity and certainty”. All scholars agree on the point that in case teachers do not reflect and see no reason to be involved in this process in their teaching, motivation and enthusiasm from both teachers and eventually learners dwindles to nothing and lessons become repetitive, uninteresting and less productive for all involved. Farrell claims that teachers “can explore critical incidents via four dimensions: orientation, complication, evaluation, and results, which may help teachers gain a deeper appreciation of their own approaches and, importantly, reflect on their long-term outcomes” (Payant, 2014). Farrell convinces readers of the benefits of adopting a reflective stance for personal professional development (Farrell, 2013b). Additionally, he claims that reflective practice has become the leading paradigm in ESL teaching and development programs worldwide (Farrell, 2013a, p. 465). The reason why reflection is the key to the permanent process of change and growth is, probably, because “reflective practices offer us a way of trying to make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces and the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos...” (Ghaye, 2000, p.7).

Quite recently, teachers’ professional development trend pushed self-analysis and reflection to the fore. The ways to provoke self-analysis and reflection that lead to powerful insights vary from keeping teacher diaries, getting student feedback (questionnaires and surveys), watching others teach or peer observation, recording (audiotaping / videotaping lessons) to reading professional journals/books, writing textbooks, attending conferences and seminars or submitting papers/ workshops for a teachers’ association meetings. Besides, Vacilotto and Cummings promote peer coaching, “a reflective approach to teacher development, which proposes that teachers share data collected through peer observation as a means for reflection on their individual teaching practices” (Vacilotto & Cummings, 2007, p. 153). Though all ways mentioned are effective and promote future improvement, the authors of the current study feel peer observation guarantees ESL teachers better insights for continuous development. The act of providing feedback to peer-teachers is a powerful impetus to deeper analysis about what constitutes quality. Torres et al. (2017) emphasize the merit of peer observation in disseminating, sharing and clarifying quality teaching practices.

3. Research Questions

Having deep understanding of the educational process in general and ESL teaching in particular the authors of the article have come up with the following research questions:

3.1 How to develop as a critically reflective ESL teacher?

3.2. Does peer observation facilitate reflection in ESL teaching?

4. Purpose of the Study

Although there have been plenty of studies on peer observation (Cosh, 1999; Farrell, 2001, 2007, 2013; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Showers, & Joyce, 1996; Torres et al., 2017; Vacilotto & Cummings, 2007), peer feedback has not been used in ESL teaching in many universities. The present study scrutinized the origins of the reluctance to make peer observation a regular-based practice, which might be rooted in privacy around teaching and vulnerability of teachers to get feedback from peer teachers. It seemed a pity to waive its potential for professional and personal growth as an ESL teacher and the chance to create a collaborative culture to critique, inform and support language teaching.

Thus, the purpose of the study was to analyze the roots of ESL teachers' resilience to participate in peer assessment, to develop a set of measures to foster this process, to enhance better understanding of the benefits each participant of the reflective process can get and to create an environment that will embody reflective thinking as an integral part of the teaching process. To structure the process of critical reflection during and after ESL classes the authors suggested Gibbs' reflective cycle: *description; feelings; evaluation; analysis; conclusion; action plan* (Gibbs, 1988), as it seemed efficient in making teachers and students think through all the phases of their experience or activity. Gibbs' reflective cycle served as an impetus to think systematically, as "theory and practice enrich each other in a never-ending circle" (Finlay, 2008, p.8). This paper provides productive insights into the practical application of Gibbs' reflective cycle in ESL classroom assessment.

5. Research Methods

The experiment took three years (2014-2016) and involved 30 ESL teachers of Kazan Federal University. To meet the formulated goal the authors divided the research process into three stages. The first part of the research was aimed to reveal the origins of teachers' unwillingness to do reflection. To do this the authors conducted a survey. The total amount of teachers asked was 53, aged 23 to 65 with 95% female and 3% male ones. Based on the survey results the interactive problem-solving seminar was initiated where the most sensitive issues were discussed.

The second stage of the research was connected with creating the environment that will make peer-reviewing culture the part of the teaching process. To realize the idea 30 teachers participated in peer review practice throughout a year visiting two colleagues' lessons during the term (totaling four per year). Each participant completed a specially developed register. Researchers did the analyses of these registers at the end of stage two.

Stage three of the study was to measure students' progress of those teachers who participated in the peer-reviewing practice and to compare the level of their satisfaction with those ones whose teachers were not part of the experiment.

6. Findings

Understanding the potential of peer-observation and anticipating the difficulties that will arise while making the culture of reflection the integral part of the teaching process researchers launched two surveys. The main objective of the first one was to identify the attitude of the teacher towards peer

observation. The total number of teachers that were asked was 53. The results showed strong dependency between age and enthusiasm to be observed: 32% of those who oppose to be observed are 50 years and up.

The researchers initiated the second survey to find out the reasons that make teachers reluctant to participate in peer reviewing. After analyzing the answers to ten questions given in the survey it became obvious that the majority, namely 88% of those who would not welcome peer observation, consider peer-reviewing as a threat to their further career with the University. They see the feedback provided by peers as a tool to be used by University authorities to terminate the contract or to influence career advancement decisions. Teachers feel uncomfortable about peers visiting their lessons since they consider it will have a direct influence on their promotion. This issue is especially acute in the current competitive environment when many people feel insecure about their future.

At the end of stage one the researchers organized the interactive problem-solving seminar. The main objective of the session was to immerse all ESL teachers participating in two-phase survey into reflection process about the benefits of learning with and from their peers. The interactive activities conducted by researchers boosted understanding of providing feedback to others as a powerful spur to a deeper analysis about what constitutes quality of teaching. This outcome is proved by the end of the seminar questionnaire where 95% of participants provided a positive answer on their attitude to peer observation.

The second stage that started the next academic year was devoted to incorporating peer reviewing into education process. To provide confidentiality and to ensure ESL teacher are judged fairly and objectively, the authors developed guidelines for peer observers selection and the rules to protect individuals participating in the experiment. It was also important to make the feedback process constructive and productive for everybody including the teachers involved, the department as a whole and the students' learning experience. The guidelines included the following aspects: *a set of criteria for providing feedback; the option of further help in interpreting peer feedback; the option of additional support to incorporate peer feedback in teaching improvements; protocols around confidentiality, an agreement about when, how and by whom the feedback information can be used.*

The process of incorporating peer assessment into educational process (stage two of the research) started with getting support from the Department authorities to assist this process and to stimulate peer observation by creating welcoming and no-consequences atmosphere among ESL teachers who volunteered to be members of the experiment, ensuring that negative feedback and low assessment results wouldn't entail redundancies.

The next important stage was to foster friendly environment among peers themselves. The teaching process is traditionally private by its nature and characterized by sensitivity people have about being observed. That is why selecting an appropriate person to undertake the observation and provide feedback on teaching, is obviously very important for the success of the process. The authors adopted the strategy that enabled a person to choose someone from the department they would like to be an observer and to provide feedback on their teaching. It helped improve the comfort levels of everyone involved. The authors used guidelines offered by Jarzabkowski and Bone to select a peer observer that suggested the process was reciprocal: *mutual interest in teaching and appraisal; expertise in the relevant discipline; expertise in the field of teaching and learning; mutual trust and respect* (Jarzabkowski, & Bone, 1998).

Finally, the criteria and protocol for peer observation and feedback were developed and made obligatory for all participants to fulfill.

To maximize the reflection opportunity, the teacher being observed was invited to write his/her own self-reflections in relation to the chosen criteria on the basis of Gibbs' reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988). The researchers consider this process as an advantage that enables a dialogue rather than a judgement on the educational process. After all participants had observed four lessons of their peers during one academic year they were welcomed to answer the questionnaire targeted to discover the level of self-content with peer-reviewing practice and the depth of reflection on their own teaching process: *“Describe your experience. Reflect on a recent class. What worked well and why? Were all the students on task (i.e. doing what they were supposed to be doing)? Which parts of the lesson did the students seem to enjoy most? And least? If I taught this lesson again, what would I do differently?”*; *“What were the key processes (for reflection) in this experience?”*; *“What was I trying to achieve during my ESL class and did I respond effectively?”*; *“How might I respond more effectively given this situation again?”*; *“How have I made sense of this experience in the light of past experiences and future teaching practice?”*; *“What were the consequences of my actions for myself and my students?”*; *“Can I state one thing that the students took back with them after your lesson?”*; *“What internal and external factors influenced my decision-making process?”*; *“What insights have I gained through this reflection?”*; *“How do I NOW feel about this experience?”* *What are my two greatest strengths/weaknesses as a teacher?”*; *“What does reflection look like in teaching a foreign language? Describe a reflective ESL teacher.”*; etc. The results showed that 77% of participants were more than satisfied with the outcomes of the experiment. More than a half of those who volunteered in the experiment, namely 62%, emphasized that they received a greater visibility of the importance of peer observation process to improve teaching practice in general and their classes in particular.

To prove the effectiveness of reflection on the quality of teaching at the end of the third year of the research students whose teachers were members of the peer observation process were asked to complete a survey that was aimed to analyze the level of their satisfaction with the teaching process and to check its quality. Some of the questions the students were addressed are as follows: *“Did the teacher deliver a structured and well-thought-out lesson?”*; *“Did the teacher monitor students' progress?”*; *“Did the teacher establish a task-orientated classroom environment?”*; *“Did the teacher encourage students' participation and get the whole class involved?”* etc. According to the results obtained, 58% described the changes in the education process as significant ones, 32% named the improvements visible, 8% experienced some changes that they were unable to describe and only 2% noticed no alterations in the ESL teaching practice.

Thus, we come to the conclusion that carefully developed and blended into educational process peer-reviewing fosters ESL teachers' reflection, has a positive effect on the language acquisition and make lessons more student-oriented and challenging both for teachers and learners.

7. Conclusion

It is reasonable to conclude that reflection plays a central role in developing and maintaining competency across a teacher's career path. The research makes it clear that peer observation provides

teachers with systematic insights necessary for continuous improvement. The evidence seems to be strong that Gibbs' reflective cycle proved effective in organizing the reflection process to enhance the quality of ESL teaching. The research offered by the authors helped members of the ESL teaching staff eliminate the resistance to peer-observation, take greater responsibility for their professional learning and demonstrate a commitment to self-evaluation and continuing professional development. The findings of the study may be helpful to develop ways and strategies to promote high-quality teaching in ESL classrooms and raise smart, cultured and flexible personalities. On this basis it may be inferred that only a reflective ESL teacher is able to form language competence alongside with surging students' cultural awareness and tolerance.

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