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Peer Observation as a Tool for Professional Development

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Peer Observation as a Tool for Professional Development

by

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Abstract

Peer observation of teaching represents an opportunity for colleagues to observe one another and gain insights into their professional practice (Richards and Farrell, 2005). However, drawbacks to peer observation emerge when it is not perceived to be supportive and practical (Cosh, 1998). Peer observation is a requirement for Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) enrolled in the M.A. TESL practicum course at an Upper Midwest state university. The aim of this study is to examine the TAs' perceptions of peer observation as a tool for their own professional development. It also examines if novice and experienced teachers hold different views of the peer observation process. Out of eight participants, four were identified as novice teachers and four were identified as experienced teachers. Both groups met in separate focus groups to discuss a series of questions designed to elicit their views and experiences of peer observation. From these focus groups, it was found that TAs considered peer observation to beneficial for their professional growth, allowing them to learn new instructional practices and build collegial relationships. However, participants also perceived many obstacles to peer observation, such as anxieties about being observed, the time involved, and uncertainties about its purpose, including whether the teacher being observed was meant to receive feedback on their instruction. Experienced and novice teachers held similar views of the efficacy of peer observation, with one notable difference being the greater sense of vulnerability shared by the novice teachers about being observed and receiving feedback on their practice. This discrepancy is tentatively attributed to the possibility that more experienced teachers have a higher level of self-efficacy, making them less vulnerable to the anxiety associated with being observed. The study concludes with some suggestions for improved peer observation protocol.

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Chapter I: Introduction

It is often said that the best teachers are those that do not stop learning. To this end, teachers are expected to engage in some form of professional development that allows them to reflect on their current practice, develop and extend their skills, and challenge their assumptions about the teaching or learning process. Whether it is mandated by their institution or conducted as a personal endeavor, teachers may find professional development to be particularly effective when it involves working with other professionals, giving them a chance to exchange ideas and opinions, and in turn encourage each other to think more deeply about their teaching practices. Indeed, many researchers have identified collaboration as a hallmark of effective professional learning for teachers (Desimone, 2009, 2011; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).

Classroom observation is perhaps one of the most common forms of collaborative professional development. The traditional observation involves a supervisor or someone in a position of authority attending a teacher's class and providing feedback on their instruction, which may be evaluative in nature (Day, 2013). As such, it can be a source of anxiety for the observed teacher, hindering their performance or their willingness to see the observation as a professional development opportunity. In contrast, peer observation presents an opportunity for colleagues to observe one another and gain insights into their professional practice without the specter of authority or evaluation. As the observer or the observed, it can help teachers learn from each other, develop a more reflective approach to their teaching, and identify goals for professional growth (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Background to the Study

Professional development is the overarching goal of the MA TESL practicum at an Upper Midwest state university. The practicum is designed for students who are teaching classes as Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) in one of two programs: an Intensive English program (IEP) and an ESL Bridge program. While a practicum is traditionally considered an extended "field-based" experience where a student works under the supervision of a co-operating teacher, this practicum is simply a supplementary course that TAs enroll in during the semesters they are assigned to teach classes.   Exact course requirements vary by semester, but TAs are generally expected to submit teaching reflections, attend workshops, compile materials related to their classes, and complete a series of classroom observations each semester. For this particular practicum, first-semester TAs complete five observations of their colleagues' classes while returning TAs complete two. All TAs are encouraged to contact the teacher they plan on observing to discuss the upcoming lesson, and to meet after the observation to exchange questions or comments related to the observed class. Following each observation, the TAs are required to submit a reflective report to their supervisor, commenting on what they learned from the experience.

Problem Statement

As outlined above, peer observation is a key component of the practicum, described in the course material as "one of the best instructional tools for learning how to teach" (see Appendix A). However, in my own experience as a TA, I felt somewhat ambivalent about the peer observation process: on one hand, I enjoyed the experience of observing another teacher and comparing their instructional approaches to my own, and I welcomed visits from other TAs who

were interested in observing my teaching; but on the other hand, I felt I could have derived greater benefit from the observations in which I participated. Given the fact that a practicum course is considered "one of the most important aspects of a learner teacher's education" (Farrell, 2008, p.228), I felt it was important that TAs' attitudes towards a requirement as common as peer observation be investigated to see if TAs actually perceived it as beneficial for their professional growth. In addition, TAs enrolled in the practicum have a myriad of prior professional experiences: some are teaching for the very first time while others have worked as professional teachers for many years. For me, it was at least somewhat questionable that a novice teacher would have the exact same needs for professional learning as one who had been working for several years. Therefore, I suspected that both categories of teacher may have slightly different expectations for the peer observation process.

Considering the issues raised above, I decided to address the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. Is peer observation perceived by Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) as an effective tool for professional development?

2. Are there any differences between novice and experienced TAs in their views of peer observation?

Chapter II: Literature Review

This section provides a background on the literature related to the study, beginning with an introduction to professional development and the purpose of classroom observation. The section continues with a discussion of the limitations and benefits of classroom observation, and how peer observation is structured for developmental purposes. Research investigating the perceptions of peer observation in in-service and pre-service teaching contexts is also examined.

Professional Development

A common value held by English language educators is that teaching is a process of lifelong learning and development (Murray, 2010). The term 'professional development' describes a process of "continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers…it suggests that teachers should continue to develop in the use, change, and application of their profession" (Lange, 1990, p. 250). This definition suggests that teachers should not cling to the practices acquired at the beginning of their careers; rather, they should constantly be in search of improving and extending their skills. In the same vein, Underhill (1999) defines professional development as "the process of becoming the best teacher one is able to be, a process that can be started but never finished" (p.17). These definitions highlight the individual teacher as the subject of professional development, and imply that a certain level of personal commitment is required. Indeed, if professional development is based on the notion of changing one's practice, then a teacher's awareness of the need to change is a prerequisite for any meaningful changes to occur. As Wajnryb (1992) argues:

> [T]eachers themselves are the primary initiators of their own development. The spirit of
> inquiry, the wish to reflect on one's own teaching, perhaps to explore other paths, comes

from within the practitioner: it cannot be imposed from outside and then measured by

some objective tool. (p. 10)

If a teacher recognizes the need for improvement, then their "spirit of inquiry" can be channeled

through a variety of developmental tools such as workshops, conferences, reflective journals or

classroom observations. It is through these professional development activities that teachers gain

awareness of their instructional practices and start to think critically about what they do in the

classroom, and why.

Moreover, professional development is considered effective when it aligns with the

particular needs of the practicing teacher, much in the same way that effective language teaching

addresses the specific needs of learners (Crandall & Miller, 2014). One obvious factor that

influences the learning needs of a teacher is the amount of time they have spent in the profession:

an experienced teacher is likely to have different needs and priorities than a teacher who is just

starting. For instance, a novice teacher may be more attentive to immediate goals such as

learning how to implement instructional strategies or adapt course materials, while an

experienced teacher may be concerned with longer-term goals involving reflection on and

analysis of their instructional practices (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Regardless of experience or

expertise, researchers consider professional development to be most effective when it provides

teachers with learning opportunities over an extended period of time, engaging them in

strengthening their skills, challenging assumptions about learning, and interacting with their

colleagues (Desimonde, 2009, 2011; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung,

2007).

Classroom Observation

In the context of the classroom, observation of teaching can be used in a myriad of ways to facilitate the development of the professional teacher. Researchers have highlighted a continuum of approaches ranging from observing for the purpose of evaluating to observing for the purpose of increasing self-awareness (Freeman, 1982; Gebhard, 1990). Most teachers are familiar with a "supervisory approach" in which the observation is carried out by a mentor, trainer, or an individual with a position of responsibility (Freeman, 1982). While this kind of observation may be used to appraise an individual teacher's performance, it is more commonly accepted as a way of providing teachers with the insights needed to make improvements to their instruction. The goal then is to train or develop the teacher being observed (Beigy & Woodin, 1999). However, literature in the field of observation has highlighted many limitations associated with supervisor observation. If the purpose of the observation is assessment, it may compromise the opportunity to learn. As Wajnryb (1992) states, this kind of observation may be "value-based, directive, externally imposed, and colored by facts not necessarily related to learning" (p. 2). In addition, both pre-service and in-service teachers tend to perceive observation as evaluative, regardless of how it is framed by the institution. It is therefore perceived as threatening, and may induce anxiety in the teachers being observed (Freeman, 1982; Williams 1989; Crookes, 2003).

In contrast, observation conducted by a colleague or peer may enable the supervisory or authoritative aspect of observation to be mitigated, allowing for more equitable power between participants (Day, 2013). Peer observation is defined as a teacher "closely watching and monitoring a language lesson in order to gain an understanding of some aspect of teaching,

learning or classroom interaction" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 85). While it may be used for accountability or evaluative purposes, peer observation has many benefits when its main purpose is for teachers to reflect on and improve their teaching with little to no oversight from the institution (Cosh, 1998). Firstly, the value of observation in any profession is the opportunity for practitioners to learn what is considered important in the field and how professionals in that field respond to and behave in a variety of situations. It is therefore understood that observing other teachers to learn about their approaches will provide significant insights into one's own growth as a teacher (Borich, 1999). For the teacher being observed, it allows them to gather data about classroom processes from a new perspective, which they may then use to modify their teaching practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005). On the benefit for both the observer and the observed, Wragg (1994) states: "skillfully handled, classroom observation can benefit both the observer and the person observed, serving to form and enhance the professional skill of both people" (p. 6). Likewise, Armitage et al. (2003) assert that "observation of and by others can be the basis of some of the most useful professional reflection you can undertake in order to improve performance" (p.47). The opportunity for mutual benefit is therefore a key component of the peer observation process.

Structure of Peer Observation

Peer observation may be implemented in a variety of ways depending on the needs and goals of the teachers involved or their institution. As a developmental tool, the most commonly-used model for peer observation is based on clinical supervision, a practice that emphasizes the improvement of pedagogic practice through the direct observation of teaching (Gaies & Bower,

1990). It comprises three stages: a pre-observation consultation, the observation itself and a post-observation discussion.

Pre-observation consultation. Typically, two teachers, the observer and the observed, come together to discuss the anticipated observation. The observer will typically share background information about the class, intended outcomes for the lesson, materials to be used, the teacher's approach to instruction, the kinds of students in the class, and typical patterns of classroom interaction (Richards & Lockhart, 1991). The purpose of this discussion is usually to establish what exactly is to be observed such as classroom management, use of materials, questioning strategies etc. The meeting also allows both teachers to agree on observation procedures or instruments to be used depending on the agreed point of focus.

Classroom observation. At this stage, the observer visits the teacher's class and conducts the observation using the procedures agreed upon in the initial meeting. Beigy and Woodin (1999) recommend informing students that someone will be coming to observe the class. They suggest that introducing the observer and explaining their role will help mitigate any tension and allow the lesson to unfold as naturally as possible. Another consideration is whether to involve the observer in the class. The accepted point of view among researchers (Beigy & Woodin, 1999; Richards & Lockhart, 1991) is that the observer should remain as neutral as possible as any involvement could compromise their ability to observe effectively.

Post-observation discussion. It is recommended that teachers meet as soon as possible after the observation in order to debrief (Richards & Lockhart, 1991). Some time may be required between the observation and post-observation session in order for the teachers involved to collect their thoughts and reflect. However, if too much time lapses between the two events

then details of the class may be forgotten or misremembered, resulting in misunderstandings between the two participants. In any event, the observer's task is to provide a descriptive account of the lesson, attending to the agreed point of focus and avoiding evaluative comments (Day, 2013).

The aforementioned three-stage model is generally recommended for participants in peer observation as it optimizes the opportunity for professional dialogue, reflection, and subsequent development as a teacher. In their studies with two departments at a British university, Fletcher and Orsmond (2004) reported that:

> [I[f it is the reflective process where the greatest inroads into the quality of learning and teaching are seen, then reflection needs to be emphasized … This process can be supported through a clear structure, with emphasis placed on the pre- and post-observation sessions where appropriate time and thought is allocated. (p. 502)

Participants of a peer observation program at the University of Carolina also affirmed the importance of the pre- and post-observation sessions in deriving the most benefit from the observation process (Kohut, Burnap & Yon, 2007).

Efficacy of Peer Observation

Research related to the efficacy of peer observation is extensive, with many studies investigating how its usefulness is perceived by participating teachers. These studies reveal that peer observation can function as a valuable developmental tool for both observers and observed teachers. Bell (2001) investigated the perceptions of college instructors who participated in peer observation as part of a teacher development program. The majority of participants reported that they made immediate changes to their instructional practices and increased their repertoire of

teaching strategies. In a study by Norbury (2001), the participants viewed peer observation as significantly improving the quality of teaching irrespective of the discipline or subject being taught. Blackmore's (2005) study of higher education faculty engaged in a peer review program revealed the availability of feedback to be an advantage, with one participant responding: "[it] can be reassuring that you are doing a reasonable job and can identify areas for improvement" (p. 228). Participants also found peer observation to be useful in offering fresh perspectives on familiar classroom routines, and encouraging them to reflect on their teaching practice.

While both observers and observed teachers remarked on benefits in several studies, some studies revealed a greater emphasis on learning by watching a colleague. For example, in a quantitative study, Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007) found that the observers felt stronger about the peer observation process developing their own teaching than they did about improving the teaching of the observed teachers. Similarly, Bell and Mladenovic (2008) reported that one of the principal benefits of the peer observation process examined in their study was the opportunity to watch a colleague leading their class.

Another common theme is the contribution that peer observation can make in fostering a spirit of collaboration. Richards and Farrell (2005) claim that it can allow teachers to build a collegiality where the same or similar teaching concerns are shared and discussed, leading to mutual assistance. This is reflected in several research studies (Atkinson & Bolt, 2010; Bell, 2001) where participants acknowledged the benefits of peer observation in helping them develop professional relationships and thus avoid the feelings of burnout and isolation associated with the teaching profession. Many participants in Bell and Mladenovic's (2008) study also appreciated

the opportunity to share best practices and work collaboratively by taking part in classroom observations.

However, some studies revealed indifferent or negative attitudes towards peer observation programs. Chamberlain, D'Artrey and Rowe (2011) conducted a study with academic teaching staff in the Higher Education sector in the UK. They found that teachers were wary of peer observation as they felt it could be overly bureaucratic, with observation forms and records having to be submitted to those overseeing the process. Overall, there seemed to be "an emphasis on complying with institutional requirements…rather than on engaging with [peer observation] as a continuing professional developmental tool" (p. 197). Moreover, many participants felt there was ambiguity about the purpose of peer observation and therefore wanted clarification from university management. As one participant explained: "I think . . . the main weakness as far as I'm concerned is that it doesn't know what it is. Well, just what is its purpose? What does the university see as its purpose?" (p. 197). Varying expectations and practices between different academic departments also contributed to a lack of clarity regarding the intended outcomes of the peer observation process.

Practical concerns about time and workload also represent a significant drawback to peer observation. A study conducted by Adshead, White and Stephenson (2006) investigated the attitudes of medical instructors towards a proposed peer observation program. The study was carried out through a questionnaire survey at four universities in England, obtaining approximately 3,900 responses. It was found that most of the teachers had positive views of peer observation as a developmental tool and considered it helpful in setting clearer learning goals

with their students. However, they did not feel ready to commit to peer observation as it required time and the participation of another colleague.

Other concerns raised in previous studies relate to the relationship between participants. While peer observation is lauded as a 'friendly' alternative to being observed by a supervisor, teachers may perceive it as a kind of scrutiny that is not constructive or supportive (Cosh 1999). For instance, several participants in Blackmore's (2005) study found their experience with peer observation to be fraught with anxiety: they were concerned that their peers, as subject "specialists", may be overly focused on the content of their classes and pay too little attention to the instructional strategies used. These participants agreed that a non-subject specialist observing them might be less intimidating as "they would not be able to focus on content" (p. 229). Despite the risk of being scrutinized, many participants displayed an openness to receiving feedback that could be used to inform and improve their professional practice. However, they also stated that peers may be reluctant to provide corrective feedback so as not to be perceived as judgmental, and therefore provide only positive comments. This corresponds with Cosh's (1998) view that peer observation risks being reduced to "mutual back-patting" (p. 172) if it is perceived as being evaluative. Cole (2003) argues that a culture of criticism should be fostered within an institution so that peers are comfortable with the giving and receiving of constructive feedback. Donnelly (2007) also highlights the building of trust among staff to be a key element of a successful peer observation system.

Finally, it is worth considering the impact that teaching experience has on attitudes towards peer observation as a developmental tool. Blackmore (2005) found that most of the teachers who had been working in Higher Education for over ten years "endured the process" (p.

227) of having their teaching observed. This stood in contrast to staff with less than three years of experience who claimed to "enjoy the process more" (p. 227), attributing this to the fact that they were still on a "learning curve". However, some staff in the experienced category did find the observation process to be valuable, seeing it as an opportunity to reflect on their teaching. Bell (2001) reported that while experienced and new teachers shared similar views on the efficacy of peer observation, there was some evidence that the experienced teachers valued it more as a tool for reflection, compared with the novice teachers who cited learning about instructional techniques and routines as a key benefit.

While the above studies detail the experience of in-service teachers with the peer observation of teaching, it is worth acknowledging its role in the training of pre-service teachers. Indeed, classroom observations have been integrated as a component in many pre-service language teacher programs (Wallace, 1996). However, empirical research studies investigating how it is perceived in such programs has been rather limited. A recent study investigated the effectiveness of the use of peer observation in an eight-week practicum course for graduate students teaching EFL in Thailand (Day, 2013). The peer observation protocol followed the clinical supervision model and students shared observation reports with each other following the observations. A post-practicum survey revealed that students had largely positive views of peer observation: it helped them engage in reflective thinking about teaching and learning processes, allowing them to gain insights into their own teaching. An earlier study by Vacilotto and Cummings (2007) investigated the efficacy of peer coaching in a practicum for graduate students teaching ESL. The purpose of peer coaching was to create teacher dyads that would "share data collected through peer observation as a means for reflection on their individual teaching

practices" (p. 153). Their results demonstrated that their peer coaching model was successful in "facilitating the exchange of teaching methods and materials", "fostering development of teaching skills" and "stimulating the rethinking of personal teaching methods and styles." (p. 158). It should be noted that the peer observation protocol in this study was part of a broader framework that used the sharing of lesson plans, discussion of video-recordings of classes, and reflective journals to facilitate the reflective practice of both teachers.

Furthermore, the background of the participants in these studies warrants some consideration. Both studies focused on the attitudes of graduate students who had a range of teaching experiences. The participants in Vacilotto and Cummings's study (2007) had experience ranging from none to ten years of experience while those in Day's (2013) study had experience ranging from no experience to eight years of experience. A comparison of the perceptions of peer observation between novice and experienced teachers was not an explicit focus of either study, and little consideration was given to how prior teaching experience shaped participants' views of the peer observation process. The work of these two researchers therefore provided a stimulus for the line of inquiry established by the current study.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter describes the research design of the study, including information about the participants, data collection instruments and procedures, and how the data were analyzed. Both a background questionnaire and focus groups were used to collect data relevant to the following research questions:

1. Is peer observation perceived by Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) as an effective tool for professional development?

2. Are there any differences between novice and experienced TAs in their views of peer observation?

Participants

The participants in this study were TAs enrolled in the MA TESL Practicum at an Upper Midwest state university. Out of a total of thirty-four TAs, eight agreed to participate, six from the Intensive English program (IEP) and two from the ESL Bridge program. In terms of their teaching load, TAs in the IEP teach six hours of class a week while the TAs in the ESL Bridge program teach four. In the IEP, TAs are expected to provide instruction to international students who are developing their English language skills before commencing their undergraduate or graduate studies. It is a pre-academic program. In the ESL Bridge program, TAs are responsible for teaching credit-bearing classes for undergraduate students already admitted to the university who need additional language support. TAs participating in this study had all completed at least one semester of teaching and participating in peer observations as required by the TESL practicum. In addition to their time as TAs, the participants had a range of previous teaching experiences. Four participants had six or more years of additional teaching experience, mostly

teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) at the university level, whereas four participants had experience ranging from zero to two years, mostly as substitute teachers in local school districts in the United States. For this study, time spent as a tutor or classroom support staff was not considered part of their additional years of teaching experience. In terms of language background, out of the eight participants, three described themselves as native speakers of English and five as native speakers of Spanish.

Table 1

Participant Data

Participant	Gender	First Language	Number of semesters as TAs	Years of Additional Teaching Experience	Type of Previous Experience	Previous Experience with Peer Observation
NP* 1	F	English	3	1	Substitute teacher	No
NP 2	F	English	4	0	Tutor; teacher's aide	Yes
NP 3	F	Spanish	1	1	EFL; university	No
NP 4	M	English	1	2	Tutor; substitute teacher	No
EP** 1	F	Spanish	2	6	EFL; university	No
EP 2	F	Spanish	1	6	EFL; university	Yes
EP 3	F	Spanish	1	8	EFL; university	Yes
EP 4	M	Spanish	1	10	EFL; university	Yes

Note: *NP – novice participant (little to no previous teaching experience); **EP – experienced participant (significant previous teaching experience).

Instruments

According to Dörnyei (2003), questionnaires allow researchers to collect information about demographics and behaviors in a way that is flexible, efficient, and easy to administer. For this study, the researcher developed a background questionnaire that would elicit information about the participants' gender, first language background, numbers of semesters completed as a TA, and additional years of teaching experience (see Appendix B). An open-ended item was included at the end of the questionnaire for participants to describe any experience they had with peer observation outside of their role as a TA.

Focus groups were selected as the principal method of data collection in this study. Focus groups are defined as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan 1997, p.6). As a qualitative method, focus groups have many of the same advantages as in-depth interviews in that they allow the researcher to interact directly with the participants, adjusting questions and eliciting more elaborate responses than may be possible with a questionnaire (Nunan & Bailey, 2009). During the focus groups, the researcher (and moderator) asked questions that would elicit the participants' views of peer observation, including their thoughts on best practical arrangements, benefits and limitations for both the observing and observed teacher, and the relationship between peer observation and their overall practicum and/or professional development experience (see Appendix C). It should be noted that, owing to the interaction and synergy between participants, focus groups may produce "powerful interpretive insights" that most likely could not be obtained from individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadas, 2005, p. 903). By using the focus group method, the researcher allowed the participants to share their perceptions and points of view related to peer observation,

with the group dynamic enabling them to compare their own individual experiences of this practice with those of other teachers, thereby providing more enriched insights. To answer the second research question, the researcher decided to arrange the participants into two separate groups: one group for TAs with little to no previous teaching experience (NP 1, NP 2, NP 3, NP 4) and one group for TAs with significant previous experience (EP 1, EP 2, EP 3, EP 4). Again, this enabled the participants to share both individual and collective insights into the efficacy of peer observation while also revealing the extent to which they felt the practice was meeting their professional learning needs as novice or experienced teachers.

Moreover, the researcher was required to carefully monitor the group discussion and elicit the broadest range of responses from each participant. Firstly, in preparing for the focus groups, the researcher made every attempt to formulate questions that were clear and open-ended, adjusting them as appropriate to elicit explanations, descriptions, or illustrations. Despite the semi-structured nature of the focus groups, the researcher tried to keep questions consistent so that they could compare responses across the two groups. Additionally, it is worth pointing out that the researcher is a colleague and fellow MA student of the participants, and therefore had a pre-established relationship with many of them; as peers, they exchanged opinions, shared ideas, and provided support for one another in their professional lives. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) observe, "when we share a common culture with our research participants, and sometimes even if we don't share the same culture, we, as researchers, often have life experiences that are similar to those of our participants" (p. 80). Therefore, a level of mutual trust fostered through shared experiences between the researcher and participants allowed the latter to share their viewpoints honestly and freely.

Procedures

The researcher contacted TAs to request their participation in the study and to set up an initial meeting. During this meeting, participants were provided with an informed consent letter notifying them of the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Participants also completed the background questionnaire and provided times they were available for the focus groups. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the researcher organized the eight participants into two groups of four: one for novice teachers and one for experienced teachers. The focus groups were conducted once per week for three weeks and lasted around sixty minutes each time. They were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Following the transcription, the researcher carefully studied the focus group discussion to identify the themes that would address the research questions. The first step of the analytic process was "open-coding", that is, the process in which "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared for similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.62). As the researcher read the transcripts and labelled the phenomena, patterns began to emerge and allowed for the identification of categories. This enabled the researcher to move from description to interpretation. Rather than being fixed, the categories were constantly modified by the researcher, and variation within each category was also examined. For example, a broad category of 'feedback' was identified and later parsed into 'giving feedback' and 'receiving feedback', which both included the subcategories of 'obstacles' and 'best practices'. Such a process, referred to as "constant comparative analysis" enables any researcher to "link and integrate

categories in such a way that all instances of variation are captured by the emerging theory" (Willig, 2013, p. 71).

Chapter IV: Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) towards peer observation as a tool for professional development. It further examined whether novice and experienced teachers held different views on the peer observation process. Out of eight participants, four were identified as novice teachers, and four were identified as more experienced teachers. These two categories of teachers participated in two separate focus groups where they shared a range of opinions and perceptions. The following is a response to the research questions given in the introduction and will be organized around several emergent themes, broadly characterized as the perceived benefits and limitations of peer observation as well as the elements perceived as necessary for ensuring its efficacy as a developmental tool.

Benefits of Peer Observation

The participants all affirmed that peer observation was a worthwhile and valuable activity for their growth as professional teachers. The themes that emerged from the focus groups in how TAs benefit from peer observation were learning by watching, constructive feedback, collegiality, and student learning.

Learning by watching. The TAs consider peer observation to be an opportunity to learn new approaches or strategies to incorporate into their own teaching practices. For NP 3 and NP 4, observing colleagues who implemented a more student-centered approach helped them become aware of their tendencies to dominate their classes. They claimed that this experience led them to make changes to their instruction, decreasing their talk time and having students complete more active learning tasks. For NP 3, in particular, it became a question of building more variety into her instruction than she had done previously:

From teaching in Korea, I got way too used to teacher-orientated teaching, more lecturing

and not integrating the students and so by observing these other teachers I was like oh I

need to mix it up a bit…because I'm like involuntarily focusing on this style and not

switching it up…that really helped me a lot.

NP 3's statement also hints at how instructional practices may be culturally-embedded, with

"teacher-orientated" instruction being associated with her teaching experience in South Korea.

As her position as a TA is NP 3's first time teaching in the U.S., peer observation has become an

additional opportunity for her to learn about the student-centered practices valued in the

American classroom.

In addition to modes of instruction, participants also focused on the way their colleagues

matched certain strategies with the language proficiency of their students. EP 3, EP 4, and NP 2

mentioned their observations of beginner-level classes and how the teachers successfully

modified instruction in order to facilitate communication. EP 4 commended the teacher he

observed for "trying to make every word as clear as possible and using pictures" and EP 3 liked

the use of simple yet high-interest materials in the class she observed to engage students in basic

reading practice. NP 2 was especially praiseworthy of a basic vocabulary lesson she observed

and how she often thinks of the strategies she saw the teacher using: "I still have my notes from

watching…just this one class…. It's so ridiculous that one experience I refer back to but I do."

Evidently, TAs value the insights they gain from classroom observation long after they have

happened.

Rather than simply observing a colleague and hoping for these insights to arise, NP 3 and

EP 4 spoke of using peer observation as a tool in accomplishing their own goals for professional

learning. For example, NP 3 admitted that she struggled with teaching listening skills and actively sought out listening classes in the IEP so she could get a better idea of how to teach these skills in a way that "wasn't boring or that could be assessed properly." Similarly, EP 4 chose to observe writing teachers last semester so that he could learn specific strategies for teaching the skill as well as overcome his apathy towards it: "it is a challenge when you have to teach something you don't like. And when you come to observe a class you get some ideas on how to do it." These TAs, therefore, perceive peer observation as beneficial in that it allows them to address concerns they have about teaching specific skills and to potentially remedy the weaknesses in their own instruction.

As the TAs are currently teaching classes while being enrolled in an MA TESOL program, there is an opportunity to take the theory they are exposed to in their own studies and apply it in their daily teaching. With regards to peer observation, watching colleagues helped NP 4 and EP 2 bridge the gap between the instructional practices they read about, or heard their teachers lecture on, and those that work best in the classroom. For example, EP 2 shared that her supervisor has consistently highlighted the importance of routines in the classroom: "training your students in a way so that they already know what to do and as an instructor it takes away… some of your worries." EP 2 went on to praise the use of routines in a class that she observed, revealing how it illuminated her understanding of her supervisors' comments:

> This instructor…. she had them [the students] really well trained, so she didn't have to give that many instructions. It just was like 'okay you know what to do, we 're going to have this activity' and that's it. So they already knew what they were supposed to do, so it was a very organized class.

Moreover, NP 4 drew attention to the value of writing a reflective report following an observation by explaining that it enabled him to make connections between the teacher's instruction and "what we're doing in our methods class." For EP 2 and NP 4, narrowing the gap between theory and practice represented a significant advantage of watching other people teach.

While both the novice and experienced teachers gave equally rich insights into what they learned from their observations, it was NP 1 and NP 2 from the novice group that explicitly stated the value of observation in relation to their level of teaching experience. NP 1 confessed to having a lot of "anxiety" about the teaching she was doing in her first semester as a TA. However, she felt that watching other teachers in the classroom helped build her confidence, especially when it came to her classroom management skills:

> Sometimes I'm afraid to do certain things because…I tend to be really rigid when I come up with a rule…and I don't want to impose that on my class and so sometimes I try different ways of cell phone stuff….so it's nice to see someone who I don't think of as a rigid person implement a rule and I see it is ok to do that.

For NP 1, watching another teacher implement a rule helped her recognize the value of having procedures in a classroom, while also helping her release the fear of being overly strict. NP 2 supported this comment and added that peer observation helped her realize that what may work for one teacher may not work for another. She went on to give two examples:

> I watched an instructor teach grammar and his teaching style was very, what's the word, kind of challenging the students, kind of badgering them, not literally saying what's wrong with you, but almost like that…it seemed to work well with these students to get them motivated to try harder, but I don't think it would work for me. There's another

example, one teacher had music up really loud, it worked well for her and her group but I

think it would drive me crazy: she was playing a YouTube list of rock songs, the students

were doing a quiz, the students proposed the idea so they wouldn't hear each other and

cheat, but for me that would drive me nuts.

By recognizing these divergent teaching styles, NP 2 moved past evaluating teacher's choices as

right or wrong and instead discussed them in terms of preferences. Peer observation helped NP 2

accept that she had her own teaching "personality" and preferences, and that these would

inevitably influence what she choose to do in the classroom. As novice teachers, it appears that

peer observation held a somewhat exploratory aspect for both NP 1 and NP 2, helping them

discover and shape their own individual teaching styles at this formative stage of their career.

Having discussed the benefits of learning as an observer, the second emergent theme

focuses on benefits for the observed teacher.

Constructive feedback. In contrast to praise or criticism, feedback that is constructive

addresses specific issues and gives the receiver enough information to make improvements.

While the majority of the participants felt they had benefitted more as an observer than from

being observed, two TAs shared their experiences of receiving feedback that was valuable in

improving their instructional practices. EP 1 was very appreciative of the constructive feedback

she received from those who observed her classes:

I got teachers telling me for this activity maybe you should have them read something so

they can have some input before talking. I had another teacher tell me that…It was kind

of unexpected…the computer wasn't working and she gave me feedback on the way I

dealt with that situation which is something very important because you have to be

flexible.

As seen in the second example about the use of technology, rather than blindly accepting her

peer's suggestions, EP 1 was able to evaluate the usefulness of their advice because she

connected it with her own view on the importance of flexibility in teaching. EP 3 also described

an observation where the teacher approached her afterwards and shared comments about her

lesson. Although the observer did not share any suggestions for improving the lesson, EP 3 was

encouraged by the observers' informed comments about the way she paced her lesson and her

use of materials. It helped her feel more confident about her approach to that particular class. As

will be discussed in a later section, it is significant that these two TAs specifically invited

feedback on their instructional choices from their peers. The third emergent theme considers the

wider impact of TAs observing one another.

Collegiality. Collegiality refers to cooperative relationships among those who work

together. NP 1 mentioned the stresses of teaching classes and completing a graduate program at

the same time, and how peer observation was an opportunity to get to know her colleagues and

"go through this vulnerable stage together." NP 3 specifically choose teachers to observe with

whom she wanted to "break the ice" and develop a professional relationship. NP 1 added that

having TAs both observe and be observed by others helped mitigate any discomfort that might

be felt during the peer observation process:

I kind of feel like we are all empathetic with each other or sensitive to each other's and

respectful of each other's classroom because we have to be on both sides so we know

what both sides feel like. I haven't had it affect negatively. Like on the contrary it kind of

brings us closer I guess.

In addition, NP 2, NP 4, and EP 1 all used the word "team-building" to describe their experience

with peer observation, and highlighted the benefit of meeting the teacher they observed before or

after the class so that they could have conversations about their teaching practices and other

issues or concerns. That peer observation can help foster rapport between the TAs underscores

its value as a developmental tool, and suggests that TAs see the building of positive working

relationships as a priority. Another significant relationship is the one TAs have with their

students, which is the focus of the fourth emergent theme.

Student learning. The purpose of effective instruction is to provide learning

opportunities to students so that they can acquire essential knowledge and develop their skills.

When asked about peer observation and the potential benefits for students, TAs reflected on the

fact that, while being primarily focused on their growth as teachers, peer observation may

indirectly support their students' learning. For example, NP 4 stated that if a teacher is able to

recognize good practices used by another colleague and incorporated that into their own

teaching, then it will "trickle down" and lead to enhanced learning among the students. Likewise,

EP 2 and EP 4 stated that if the observed teacher gets some feedback on their teaching, they can

make positive changes to their instruction, which will benefit the students. NP 3 felt that peer

observation can "make things more connected" in that if she observes the same group of student

she teaches but with another instructor, it gives her an opportunity to see the meaningful

connections she can make between the content of her class and that of the other teacher's class.

EP 1 shared a more global perspective by speculating on the impact peer observation can have on student perception and motivation:

> If [the students] see other teachers observing other classes, they get a kind of feeling like ok the teachers are developing their professional skills, there is some need to improve, they want to improve themselves as teachers. I feel that it's like an institutional thing that maybe benefits them. I mean the perception they have of you, I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but if they see you trying to do this, ok they care about what they're doing, they want to improve, I have the feeling that it's better for the institution, but it's perception-wise, if you feel like things are being done well in an institution, you are little bit more motivated.

EP 1 therefore perceived the efficacy of peer observation in the wider context of the institution and the students who are part of and learning in that institution. From the above, if the ultimate goal of any professional development activity for teachers is to bring about enriched learning experiences for their students, then peer observation, as explained by the participants' comments, can have a positive impact.

While the TAs acknowledged several aspects of peer observation that were beneficial for their growth as teachers, they also discussed a number of disadvantages related to observing and being observed by their peers.

Limitations of Peer Observation

The participants' experience with peer observation led them to identify parts of the peer observation process that prevented them from reaping its benefits as a developmental tool. The

themes that emerged from the focus groups in how TAs felt limited by peer observation were anxiety, practical considerations, shortcomings of observation, and a lack of clear purpose.

Anxiety. People may experience feelings of worry or unease in anticipation of or during an activity in which they are closely observed. When asked how they felt while being observed by a peer, several TAs used the word "pressure" or "nervous" to describe their feelings during the experience. EP 1 admitted she felt a certain pressure to perform and that she was more careful in planning lessons when she knew another teacher was coming to observe: "sometimes you over prepare if you know somebody is coming." EP 4 and NP 1 agreed with this point, with NP 1 stating that she does not want to give poor impression to the person observing, and will often plan to do activities that she does not normally do. As she remarked, "I just don't wake up and be like oh we'll just go over their test." NP 4 considered this to be an advantage of observation in that it motivates the teacher being observed to plan a more engaging lesson. EP 4, however, used the word "circus" and "show" to describe the process of adapting novel practices for the sake of an observation, suggesting that it takes away from the insights that could be generated from observing consistently and thoughtfully implemented teaching practices.

Moreover, the TAs' remarks about being observed appeared to vary with their level of teaching experience. As experienced teachers, EP 2, EP 3, and EP 3 admitted to feeling some kind of pressure while being observed but all three qualified their statements with the phrase "not nervous." The fourth participant in the experienced group, EP 1, felt she successfully deals with any pressure associated with having an observer in the classroom by trying to forget the person is there. In contrast, the novice teachers made clear the extent of their anxious feelings, with NP 2 using the word "nervous", NP 3, the word "nerve-wracking", and NP 4, the phrase "out of my

comfort zone." NP 1 fears she may be silently scrutinized by the person watching, leading her to have concerns about the quality of her instruction: "I'm under a microscope…I hear everything I say wrong." NP 2 sympathized with this comment and went on to say that any perceived scrutiny on the part of novice teachers may represent a significant limitation of being observed:

> I think it's important for new teachers to feel like they can experiment and try different things and if there's too much emphasis on observation it could be…it makes you feel kind of inhibited…you're just going to be by the book…and then that's boring you know.

For NP 2, it appears that being observed can potentially hinder rather than enhance the professional development of a new teacher as it can result in increased anxiety and the perceived need to deliver a perfect lesson. In contrast to the novice teachers, the experienced teachers' comments revealed a confidence in their ability to lead a class successfully, regardless if another teacher was observing or not.

An additional concern raised by some of the participants involved the anxiety that may be experienced by non-native speakers of English when the observer is a native-speaker of the language. On this scenario, EP 4, a non-native speaker, observed, "when you have somebody who speaks English only you feel pressure I guess, a little bit at least." EP 2 agreed that she tends to be more aware of the language she is using when a native-speaker observes her classes, joking that "it would be embarrassing if you forget an 's' or something." The implication of these participants' remarks is that teachers who are non-native speakers may feel their language proficiency is under scrutiny when being observed by a peer in addition to their instructional practices. While such anxieties may be broadly a question of attitude, other concerns about peer observation may be related to the practical aspect, the sixth emergent theme.

Practical considerations. It is widely recognized that ideal practices can often be difficult to implement in reality. Participants pointed out that the existence of the peer observation requirement and the way observations were arranged in their program often led to practical difficulties, namely issues related to time, number of observations, and poor etiquette.

Time. As graduate students who are also teaching classes, the TAs have several demands on their time, and feel that, despite its value, peer observation can sometimes feel like yet another task to be completed. NP 1 and NP 3 admitted that due to everyone's different schedules, it can be difficult to find time to communicate about the class they observe, either before or afterwards. If some teachers need to make time for other priorities, or simply procrastinate, then TAs are faced with the prospect of other teachers scrambling to observe their classes towards the end of the semester. As NP 2 stated, "It can be a little annoying at the end of semester when you get a bunch of people…I have had three people observing and then it starts to feel a little weird." EP 2 confessed to doing this with her observations, saying she tends to "push everything until the end [of the semester]." Having multiple observations to complete in a single semester can also take up a significant amount of time.

Number of observations. In line with practicum requirements, first-semester TAs are required to observe five classes while TAs in their second or third semester are required to observe two. EP 1, EP 2, EP 3, and EP 4 agreed that two or three observations per semester would be a realistic number. Moreover, they took issue with the first-semester requirement of five, stating that it was too much. NP 1, NP 2, and NP 4 supported this, with NP 1 arguing that "if you do five then you don't do anything other than buzz in and look at what they are doing… no pre-, no post- [meeting], no write-up, just I went, I observed." NP 3 was the only participant

who was happy with the five observations for first semester, stating that it was valuable for her to watch five different teachers and get a "well-rounded picture" of the IEP classes. While the number of required observations may or may not represent an inconvenience for the TAs, they all emphasized the importance of respecting each other's classrooms as shown by the following concern.

   Poor etiquette. Etiquette refers to a set of rules for conducting oneself appropriately in a particular setting. In the case of observing their colleagues, TAs are expected to contact the teacher in advance to arrange the observation and clarify expectations such as whether to introduce themselves or interact with the students etc. Several TAs spoke about occasions when they have felt disappointed in the conduct of their peers, from showing up late to the classes they had arranged to observe or not showing up at all. NP 3 explained that she tries to have extra materials to give to the observer to help them follow the lesson, but sometimes this consideration is not reciprocated. She gave a recent example:

>   Actually I had an observer today who was supposed to come to my 9am class and showed up asking me to go to see my 10am class so I had prepared everything for her to come to my 9am with all the papers to give her and then she actually end up walking with me to my 10am and then kind of, I don't know…it's a little bothersome.

NP 4 also brought up a recent incident where a peer showed up unannounced to his class and asked to observe. As he remarked, "it wasn't an inconvenience just a…you know…I would rather know in advance." EP 3 asserted that she would feel very uneasy if an observer showed up unannounced to her class, comparing it to having her apartment door open and someone just walking in: "I'm going to be like 'what do you think you doing here, this is my house'…it's like

my own space with my students." The use of this metaphor suggests that EP 3 sees her classroom

as an intensely personal space and that an observation needs to proceed with the same courtesy

you would extend to someone inviting you into their home. NP 1 was less uneasy at the thought

of an unplanned observation, but spoke unfavorably of observers who interrupt her during class:

> I've had one person raise their hand and say 'how about you explain it this way' in the
>
> middle of my class…there [is] a necessity to train people in how to sit in a class and give
>
> observations after class instead of interrupting class.

NP 3 agreed that interrupting class was inappropriate, but insisted that their supervisor had made

it clear that an observer should be like "a shadow." Responding to NP 1 comment, she stated

"it's been unfortunate you've had the experience of having someone do that because we're not

supposed to." NP 3 comment suggests that some etiquette in observation had already been shared

by the institution, but that individual teachers were failing to follow it.   In any case, if TAs are to

participate in and learn from peer observation, then politeness and consideration should be the

primary concerns of the observing teacher.

Having discussed the practical obstacles to learning from peer observation, the seventh

emergent theme looks at observation itself as a reliable learning tool.

Shortcomings of observation. Classroom observation is an opportunity for a teacher to

see how a peer manages their class and responds to the events that occur within that classroom.

However, the reality is that a teacher can only observe what is visible, and may have to make

inferences about the observed teacher's overall approach to teaching and learning. EP 2

compared observing a class to "taking a picture of something, you don't know if the class will

always be the same or if that particular day was really good and the rest was really bad or the

other way round." Her remark implies that it is difficult for an observer to respond to the quality

of a peer's teaching because they are witnessing isolated behaviors. If an observer wants to share

feedback on how the lesson went, EP 4 states that they should avoid commenting on the

students' behaviors or reactions because they don't really know the students: "you might be

getting into something that you don't know about." EP 3 contested EP 4's remarks stating that a

teacher's responsibility is to engage the students and that this is something an observer should

watch for: "it's part of your job…making sure students are paying attention." EP 4 responded

that it is not a matter of the observer forgetting about the students' reactions, but that primary

focus should be on the instructor. He explained that in spite of unresponsiveness from the

students the teacher "might be doing something great" or that the teacher may have been

"actively trying to stop" certain behaviors, but in vain. However, EP 3 and EP 4 agreed on the

fact that any thoughts the observer choose to share with the observed teacher should be "as

objective as possible", that is, descriptive rather than critical. In terms of the observer learning

about best instructional practices, NP 4 explained that sometimes he is tempted to copy an

activity that the teacher has implemented successfully without thinking about why it was

effective, or the possibility that it may not work with his own students. He explained that this is

why writing a reflective report after an observation is helpful in that it encourages you to ask

those questions, instead of blindly imitating the instruction of a peer. Overall, the participants'

comments suggest that for peer observation to be effective, the actual act of observing a class

should only be considered part of the process, and that other factors such as the need for personal

reflection or communication with the observed teacher should also be considered. This leads

onto the next perceived obstacle in effective peer observation: lack of a clear purpose.

Lack of clear purpose. A purpose is one's reason for performing certain actions, and in the case of peer observation, its overarching purpose is for TAs to develop and grow as professional teachers. However, in conducting the focus groups, it became clear that the participants lacked a shared understanding of peer observation's purpose and goals. This related primarily to whether it was designed more for the benefit of the observer, the observed teacher, or both. On the topic of reciprocity, EP 1 described peer observation as "a two-way process in which you learn but at the same time you're helping the other person learn." EP 3 added that in addition to the observer learning by watching, an observed teacher should benefit by receiving feedback on the aspects of their teaching they could improve. However, NP 4 understood peer observation to be more for the benefit of the observer, stating "there may be other ways peer observation is done, but here it's geared more towards the person observing to learn." However, he later highlighted the expectation that the observer share their insights with the observed teacher: "we are supposed to meet with the person and debrief a little, and give them a little feedback." NP 3 understood such meetings to be voluntary, asserting "we just have to observe and leave." To NP 3's comment that meeting afterwards might be a valuable way for the observed teacher to get another perspective on their instruction, NP 1 responded by speculating on the purpose established by the institution: "maybe that's not their goal." EP 2 shared her own uncertainty about the purpose:

> What are we supposed to do? Are we just supposed to learn from the others, I mean, as an observer learn from the person who's there or help each other to be better, that would be the question like what is the objective of the review according to the people who are managing the program?

EP 3 also shared that she did not remember "seeing or even hearing" what the peer observation process was designed to do. Evidently, significant confusion exists among the TAs over the intended outcome of peer observation as a developmental tool.

However, it should be noted that the participants' understanding of the purpose of peer observation appeared to be somewhat influenced by their preferences for how the process should work, which varied according to their level of teaching experience. The experienced teachers were more receptive to the idea of getting feedback on their instructional practices. EP 1 stated that she "loves getting feedback from people" and that when she has had conversations with observers after class with the aim of hearing their perspective, it was "very successful." EP 3 and EP 2 spoke about their disappointment at the feedback they had received, which was largely superficial or innocuous. As EP 2 explained, "the feedback would just be 'oh it was great' or 'I had fun.'" From the participants' comments, it could be inferred that TAs were reluctant to provide substantive feedback to their peers out of fear of appearing judgmental, but this could also be attributed to teachers not having the same expectations or understanding of the observation's purpose. When asked if an observation could just be for the benefit of the observer, EP 2 responded "It's like 'yes come observe me I am awesome, I don't care what you say, just come and observe me.' I don't know but it takes away from the process." EP 3 stated that she would like more feedback from the teachers who observe her classes, asserting that: "as teachers we should be open to learning experiences and receiving constructive feedback." In contrast, the novice teachers displayed a greater reluctance to receiving feedback from their peers. NP 2 was concerned that it would create "a weird vibe" between the two teachers if the observer were to give feedback, and NP 4 mentioned how he feared getting a "shotgun spray" of critical

comments. NP 1 explained that as a new teacher, it would be "demoralizing" to be in a position of already questioning the things you're doing in the classroom, and to be on the receiving end of comments that were too critical. Overall, it appears that the novice teachers experienced greater anxiety at the thought of a peer sharing their perspective on their instruction, and potentially getting feedback that was overly negative.

From the above, it is clear that the participants see various flaws in the way peer observation is organized in their program, or at least show some concern over the roles of the participating teachers. When discussing these obstacles, TAs inevitably pointed out the changes they would make to the current peer observation process and, in general, how they thought the developmental potential of observing their peers could be enhanced. This leads onto the next group of themes related to best practices.

Best practices in peer observation

Although not directly involved with the organization of their professional development activities, both the novice and more experienced TAs shared their views on how their learning needs could be better addressed through the classroom observations they are required to complete. Their opinions are grouped into three themes: clear expectations, training, and alternative approaches to observation.

Clear expectations. When an individual engages in an activity that is designed to benefit them, it is important that they are aware of what they need to do in order for the benefit to be tangible and meaningful. In relation to peer observation as a developmental tool, the participants pointed out several factors that TAs should consider for their classroom observations to be

productive. Firstly, TAs need to have the right attitude. EP 1 explained that observed teachers should not see an observation as being evaluative but as a learning opportunity:

> Some teachers have the perception that 'OK this person is here to tell me if I'm doing things right or wrong'. And that's like off the point because really you can't observe someone's ways of doing things like you said, maybe it's not right or wrong, 'ok this worked for you but I want to learn why did it.'

EP 4 agreed that it is not an observer's place to judge the quality of someone else's teaching, but rather to foster conversations about what the best practices might be for that individual teacher and their classroom. As he asserted, "there's no right or wrong, there are just ways." On the need for reciprocity, EP 4 continued:

> If you have two people on the same wave of thinking or they share similar goals then it will be successful. I think it's important to avoid 'I know more than you or you know more than me'. If that happens, it won't be successful because people don't want to be judged, no one likes to be told what to do…somehow there's a thin line that cannot be crossed.

EP 4 evoking the image of a line not to be crossed hints at the strict boundaries that need to be drawn by both the observer and the observed teacher so that neither is left feeling disaffected by the observation process. This is particularly important if feedback is to be shared following an observation, in which case the teachers involved should agree on a specific focus for the observation. Expanding on what he means by a "thin line that cannot be crossed", EP 4 highlighted how having clear expectations is crucial for the person receiving the feedback:

[I]f you come and talk to me about my classroom management and I didn't ask you to observe that, then I don't want to hear about that, it sounds negative, but you don't want people telling you what to do when you think you know what to do. And if we think about it, we all think we know how to do something and that's why making an agreement is important. Then if you say 'ok please [come] and I want you to focus on my introduction with students' then somehow little by little, changes will take place.

EP 4's last comment about changes taking place suggest that if the observed teacher is to benefit from feedback and use it to improve their instructional practices, then they must be receptive to getting feedback, which will only happen if they have made clear to the observer which areas they would like feedback on. It is also necessary for observer to respect this constraint. EP 2, EP 1, and EP 3 supported this point, with EP 1 asserting that this underscores the importance of a pre-meeting where an observational goal can be established, and a post-observation debrief where the teachers can "discuss the events of the lesson with the specific focus in mind". EP 3 has the impression that currently very few teachers arrange to meet with the teacher before or after, admitting that she herself has never done it despite it being suggested in the directions they receive (see Appendix A). Returning to the participants' earlier comments regarding the uncertainty of purpose, it could be that TAs simply do not perceive these meetings as important as they do not understand the reason behind them. Moreover, when asked what changes they would make to the way peer observation is implemented, EP 4, EP 3, and EP 2 all used the word "guidelines" in their responses, with EP 4 affirming:

I think it's important that the person in charge of the institution comes and says ok this is how peer observation is going to work. If all the rules are explained and the process is

clearly staged, then it would be ok…I think that there are many benefits from peer

observations that we are not getting because of the lack of structure.

It is worth considering that the above comments were all made by the experienced teachers, who

appear to be more militant about the need for the institution to communicate clear expectations

and guidelines. It is not unreasonable to infer that their previous professional teaching

experiences have led to see the value in having robust guidance and support from their

supervisors. Nevertheless, both new and experienced teachers discussed the importance of

learning how to conduct classroom observation of their peers, which is the focus of the tenth

emergent theme.

Training. Individuals need to undergo some form of training to acquire specific

knowledge or skills. Participants perceived the skills needed to make peer observation a

productive learning experience as distinct from the skills they acquired or were acquiring as

classroom instructors. These skills related to two areas: observation and feedback.

Learning to observe. Observation is an ostensibly passive act as an observer simply sits

in a classroom, watching the teacher and students move through the stages of a single lesson.

However, TAs appreciated that observation is an exceedingly complex task, with many

instructional variables to be considered. Despite being uncertain as to how observational skills

could be taught, NP 3 speculated on the possibility of receiving more direction: "Am I looking at

the right thing? Could I take more out of this? Is there a way they could guide us what to look

at?" EP 1 and NP 3 both wondered if more detailed observational tools could be provided that

would clearly delineate the pedagogical aspects to be observed in a classroom. As EP 1

explained, "we could maybe get a checklist or a rubric with points we should focus on for

example if I knew I had to focus on like language use by the teachers, questions by the teachers."

She continued by suggesting that this would bring more specificity to the observation: "ok we're

going to have this observation based on teacher's questions, we're going to have this observation

based on classroom management, I think that would guide maybe a little bit the process." Such

materials also represent a useful record of the lesson if feedback is to be provided, another area

that participants wanted to learn about.

Giving feedback. A classroom observation gives the observed teacher an opportunity to

gain a new perspective on their instructional practices from the observer. However, as outlined

above, TAs acknowledge that little learning will occur if feedback is overly critical or poorly

delivered. Several participants emphasized the need for adequate training to be given if feedback

was to be a goal of the observation process. In terms of the type of feedback, NP 1 believes that

observers should avoid telling the teacher what not to do and instead provide practical

suggestions. She provided an example of this desired feedback:

> 'You could make your introduction into three vocabulary words, work on some
>
> collocations, do an exercise and then introduce three more words instead of introducing
>
> with a slide show all six words at one time'…. That would be super effective but not like
>
> 'you know they don't understand that word' or that 'culture doesn't do that', not like tiny
>
> things you already know you're doing wrong, total blind spots.

NP 1 reference to "blind spots" suggests feedback should ideally address the issues that the

observed teacher is unable to see for themselves. This emphasizes the need for an observation

debrief to take the form of a dialogue so the observed teacher has a chance to share their own

insights about the lesson, thus giving the observer an idea of the "blind spots" they can attend to

in their feedback. In addition, EP 4 asserts that teachers should be trained to give descriptive comments and ask questions, which encourage the observed teacher to reflect on their own teaching.

> [T]here are things you cannot say to people like 'I didn't like it', 'oh really you didn't like it, I don't care', what if you say 'oh you know I noticed you did this and this, what did you think about it', you don't go and accuse anybody. Nobody wants to be told they're doing something wrong.

EP 4 therefore calls attention to the type of language that is favorable when discussing an observed lesson with a peer. Indeed, EP 4 attributes the success of peer observation programs he has participated in other institutions to the fact that explicit training was given in how to give this type of feedback. Likewise, EP 2 and EP 3 pointed out that this approach was what they found useful about their experience with supervisor observation, because the questions and descriptive comments provided by their supervisors prompted them to "think back" and reflect on their own teaching practices. In a way, EP 3 and EP 2 perceive this non-critical feedback to be a model for the type of feedback teachers should be trained how to give when observing their peers.

In addition to training, participants made several suggestions as to how peer observation could be made more conducive to their professional development by varying its structure and organization. This leads onto the eleventh emergent theme: alternative approaches to observation.

Alternative approaches to observation. Alternative approaches stem from the need to provide individuals with other choices and possibilities of completing an action. In discussing peer observation, participants offered recommendations for how the observation protocol could

be modified to address current obstacles or concerns. Such ideas arose from the discussion with the novice teachers who, as mentioned previously, were much more hesitant about receiving (or giving) feedback to a peer. For instance, NP 1 speculated on a way that teachers could be identified for their particular strengths (classroom management, instructional techniques etc.), allowing other teachers to observe their classes with the aim of address their learning needs. As she explained:

> It would be kind of cool to be able to say 'I want to learn how to do a jigsaw [reading]', 'I want to see a jigsaw in action', 'I want to see someone putting you know students into groups for conservation at a low level' you know. Like things like that, like maybe coming with an idea what you wanted to witness or observe so you could figure a technique out.

In this scenario, NP 1 emphasizes the developmental aspect of observation for the observer without considering feedback to be component. This approach also falls in line with the novice teachers' desire to observe more experienced teachers, as expressed by NP 1, NP 4 and NP 3 who stated, "I have always looked for teachers at a higher level than me like they have more experience." Nonetheless, NP 1 clarifies that an approach enabling observers to select teachers based on pedagogical strengths should not preclude new teachers: "I think there are inexperienced teachers who go about it in a very intelligent and thoughtful way." On having feedback as a component of an observation, NP 1 suggested an approach in which two teachers discuss a prospective lesson plan, one teacher gives the lesson without being observed, and both meet afterwards to discuss how it went. NP 2 and NP 3 expressed approval of such an approach, with NP 3 stating:

I really like [NP 1's] idea of having the person going over the lesson before and after the class like you said like go over how it went and I feel like you would be more open to the constructive criticism of that person because they were part of the process of making it…. they understand your motive, they understand everything and then so you're eager to know what they think because they helped you make it.

NP 4, however, was less enthused at the prospect of collaborating on a lesson plan, seeing it as a greater demand on his time than a conventional peer observation. NP 1 insisted on the learning opportunities such an approach would provide:

There would be a lot more learning if you worked on the lesson plan together and then to be able to see like this was what I have on paper what I'm going to do and to see that in action in a classroom is like so rewarding slash an opportunity to learn because rarely does it every work out the way you have it on paper, 5 minutes for this, 7 minutes for that, 10 minutes for that, you know, I don't always do that but when I do do that, I laugh at how it turns out, so it would be such an enriching experience I think for the evaluator and the teacher you know, but yeah I mean that would take more time.

It appears that this approach is perceived as advantageous because it creates the space for collaborative dialogue while circumventing the possibility of unwelcome scrutiny or criticism. However, as the participants' previous comments on peer observation reveal, a modified observation protocol also risks being viewed as an imposition on the TAs' time if it is not perceived as productive or beneficial.

In brief, the TAs were not definitive or prescriptive in their recommendations for different observational practices. Rather, TAs were simply aware of inconsistencies between the

overarching goal of peer observation to help them develop as teachers, and the way it was practiced, and offered ideas as to how this gap could be bridged.

Returning to the purpose of this study, TAs perceive peer observation to be largely an effective tool for their professional development: it allows them to learn about and gain fresh perspectives on instructional practices, foster professional relationships, and indirectly promote student learning. However, TAs perceive its developmental potential to be somewhat undermined by concern over being scrutinized, practical obstacles, limitations of observation itself, and uncertainty over its intended purpose. They saw these issues as being potentially addressed by clarifying expectations, training TAs more thoroughly, and offering variations on current observation protocol. Although the novice and experienced teachers shared many of these insights, the less experienced TAs tended to perceive peer observation with greater anxiety and as primarily a way of learning about instructional practices and discovering their individual teaching styles with less emphasis on receiving feedback. The experienced teachers were more comfortable with receiving feedback on their instruction and more adamant about clearer guidelines being established by those overseeing the practicum course. In any event, the perceptions of the TAs affirmed peer observation to be an integral part of their professional development program. When asked if they felt the peer observation requirement should remain in place in future semesters, all participants responded positively, with EP 2 stating, "even without that much structure, it's still one of the most useful things we have."

Chapter V: Conclusion

The responses of the eight participants suggest that peer observation is perceived to be an effective tool for their professional development. The benefits of peer observation discussed by the TAs, including the opportunity to learn new instructional practices, develop rapport with colleagues, and reflect on their teaching, match up closely with the findings of previous studies (Bell, 2001; Blackmore, 2005; Bell and Mladenovic 2008). As pre-service teachers, the participants also saw peer observation as supporting their comprehension of theoretical and pedagogical principles covered in their M.A. TESL classes, such as the implementation of classroom routines. This supports Richards and Farrell's (2005) assertion that observation can help "narrow the gap between one's imagined view of teaching and what actually occurs in the classroom" (p. 94). From their comments, the participants also displayed an awareness of how expectations for classroom procedures and student learning can vary from one professional context to the other, with peer observation affording opportunities to understand the expectations and practices of a specific institution. NP 3 valued the number of observations she was required to complete because it gave her a better sense of how teaching works in her program, especially having taught in a different country. EP 2 also added that even as an experienced teacher, she felt peer observation was valuable in gaining insights into a new program. While previous studies have highlighted the role of peer observation in facilitating reflection and progress towards developmental goals, this study also affirms the value of peer observation in helping teachers make sense of new and immediate professional experiences.

Moreover, in line with Kohut, Burnap and Yon's (2007) findings, TAs' praise for the benefits of peer observation seemed to align more strongly with participation as an observer rather than being observed. While the researchers mentioned above did not provide reasons for

this difference, the participants' responses in this study suggest that uncertainty over the purpose of peer observation seemed to be a contributing factor: many TAs felt that an observer providing feedback to the observed teacher was not a necessary component of the observation process, and therefore considered the benefits of peer observation to be exclusive to the observer. Others considered feedback to be part of the professional dialogue associated with peer observation as a form of professional development. Indeed, researchers have long considered peer observation to be a reciprocal exercise (Wragg, 1994; Armitage et al., 2003), and previous studies have revealed the availability of feedback for the observed teacher to be considered an advantage (Blackmore 2005; Vacilotto and Cummings, 2007). However, only one out of the eight participants in this study felt they had received valuable suggestions or constructive feedback from a peer. This coincides with other participants' views that giving and receiving feedback can be highly sensitive, and require careful planning and training to be successful. The participants' responses therefore suggest that peer observation as a mutually developmental exercise involving the exchange of feedback may be more dependent on explicit outcomes and procedures while being the observer and simply reflecting on what is seen in the classroom may be a more accessible task. This supports Hendry and Oliver's (2012) argument that "the experience of observation strengthens [one's] self-efficacy to apply new strategies to their own teaching" (p.6) while the experience of being observed, with its associated "feelings of vulnerability" and risk of "damaging feedback" (p. 2), may weaken a teacher's sense of self-efficacy.

In terms of the limitations of peer observation, the participants' sentiments on the pressures of time and workload are similar to many of the studies mentioned in the literature review (Bell 2001; Adshead et al., 2006). As graduate students with many responsibilities, the

participants in this study were anxious about allotting time for classroom observations and any meetings related to them. However, in discussing their findings, Adshead et al. speculated that concerns over time and workload may be "shorthand for different concerns that are more difficult to acknowledge" such as a fear of scrutiny or uncertainty over the appropriate procedures (p. 72). In other words, if peer observation is perceived as a meaningful exercise with clear guidelines available to those who participate, then time pressures are likely to be less of an overriding concern.

Furthermore, a significant focus of this study was how the participants' level of teaching experience influenced their views of peer observation as a developmental tool. While there was considerable overlap in the views of the novice and experienced teachers, there were some notable differences. For example, the responses of the novice teachers suggested that they were more anxious than the experienced teachers at the prospect of a peer watching them in the classroom. They also displayed a greater reluctance to receiving feedback from their colleagues because of concerns that the feedback may be misguided or insensitive. Returning to Hendry and Oliver's (2012) observations, it could be that the experienced teachers have a stronger sense of self-efficacy because of previous successful experience in the classroom, which may make them feel less vulnerable to the possibility of scrutiny. By the same token, the novice teachers' feelings of vulnerability could be attributed to a lower level of self-efficacy. However, this finding contrasts with Blackmore's (2005) study in which experienced teachers tended to describe themselves as "enduring the process" of having their teaching observed, compared to the less experienced teachers who were more open to the practice (p. 225). A notable aspect of this study, however, was that the participants were in-service teachers while the current study

investigated the views of pre-service teachers. The fact that the experienced participants in the present study were more receptive to getting feedback from their peers may be related to their decision to return to a graduate pre-service program, which displays a considerable investment in their professional growth. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these participants were more open to constructive feedback because it is considered valuable for their professional development.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study and the wider literature, several suggestions can be made regarding the implementation of peer observation in a TESL practicum or pre-service teacher program. Firstly, considering the uncertainty expressed by participants over the purpose of peer observation, it is essential to clarify its goals and the procedures that will allow for these goals to be realized. If a model involving an exchange of feedback is desired, then it is important to recognize the participants' concerns about the subjective nature of teaching, and the fact that any feedback given may be either exceedingly harsh or overly safe so as not to give offense. To this end, Cosh (1999) recommends that "colleagues observe each other against a background of agreed peer observation criteria" (p. 24). This echoes EP 4's comments that without a specific focus or agreement about what is to be observed, the observed teacher is unlikely to respond positively to the observer's feedback.

On the other hand, many participants in this study, particularly those with less teaching experience, felt uncomfortable with feedback being a required component of the observation process, and did not feel ready to engage in such a close examination of their or others' teaching practices. Here, it is worth acknowledging Chism's (2007) view that the needs of the observed

teacher should be the most important consideration in setting up a peer observation program because of the feelings of vulnerability associated with this role. Therefore, if there are teachers in a practicum that do not want to receive feedback (or feel unqualified to offer feedback), it may be that such a model is not the most appropriate.

Nonetheless, a model that privileges the self-reflection and professional growth of the observer will still require careful monitoring and planning to be successful. For example, many of the participants in this study felt that they would benefit from further training in how to use classroom observation as a basis for their own learning. As Wajnryb (1992) states, "it takes a skilled and trained eye to perceive, understand and benefit from observing the proceedings of learning/teaching" (p. 5). Opportunities for practicum students to develop these observational skills should therefore be an important consideration.

Moreover, there are additional strategies that could be employed in peer observation to minimize the sense that one's teaching is being judged or evaluated. For instance, NP 1 suggested an approach in which two teachers discuss a prospective lesson plan, one teacher gives the lesson without being observed, and both meet afterwards to discuss how it went. This idea has many similarities to 'Ghost Observation', an approach outlined by the British Council (2011) that has the additional elements of the teacher identifying an area for development before the lesson and having this be discussed by both parties during the debrief. The British Council (2011) also recommended an approach called 'Stealing' in which a teacher observes a colleague's class looking for ideas and techniques to integrate into their own practice. Afterwards, the teacher meets with the observed colleague to discuss what they would 'steal' and why. A sense of scrutiny is minimized in this approach because the observer is explicitly

identified as the learner and the observed teacher is viewed as the expert. The advantage of both approaches is that the opportunity for collaborative dialogue, considered an essential part of effective development for teachers (Murray, 2010), is maintained.

Finally, embedding the peer observation process within a broader peer mentoring program may lead to increased benefits for practicum students. In peer mentoring, a novice teacher is paired with a more experienced colleague who can provide personalized support and encouragement (Murray, 2010). This may be an effective learning tool in a practicum considering the willingness displayed by the novice participants in this study to observe and learn from their more experienced colleagues. For the more experienced teachers looking for greater reciprocity and feedback, a peer coaching model in which both teachers see themselves as equals may provide further opportunities for professional growth.

Limitations

The number of participants represents a significant limitation to this study, with only eight TAs choosing to take part. Their experience may not reflect the experiences of all TAs who have participated in peer observation. The small size of the focus groups, while affording participants many opportunities to share ideas, may have also resulted in a smaller pool of ideas, failing to capture the "diversity of perceptions" possible with a larger group (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 6). On a larger scale, the participants were all teachers and graduate students in the same educational program, meaning that their insights into how peer observation is perceived in this particular program may not be relevant to other peer observation programs at other institutions. It is therefore difficult to identify the findings as generalizable.

Another limitation of this study relates to the classification of participants. A primary focus of this study was to examine differences in attitudes between novice and experienced

teachers. To isolate these two categories, the participants were designated into two separate focus groups according to their years of teaching experience. However, classifying the participants in this way resulted in the novice group being composed entirely of native speakers of English and the experienced group of non-native speakers. It should be noted that the study did find some divergence of opinion along the lines of first-language background in that two non-native participants confessed to feeling greater anxiety over their language use when being observed by a native-speaker. It is not implausible that other differences in perceptions between the two groups could be associated with first-language (or cultural) background rather than level of professional experience.

Moreover, the participants were all at different stages of their TESL practicum experience. For example, some had completed three semesters as TAs while others had only completed one semester. In addition to overall teaching experience, it is possible that the amount of time they spent as TAs participating in class observations may have influenced their views of the peer observation process.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is recommended that further studies on peer observation as a developmental tool include a larger number of participants and more focus groups to obtain a broader range of views. A greater diversity in the selected participants' professional or cultural backgrounds may lead to more enriched insights into how the practice is perceived.

Finally, if peer observation of teaching is modified within a TESL practicum or pre-service teacher program, perhaps considering the recommendations outlined above, it is important that teachers' views continue to be investigated to ensure the quality of their

professional development experience. This is supported by Nunan and Bailey's (2009) view that

action research represents "an iterative, cyclical process rather than a onetime event" (p. 229).

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Appendix A: Class Observation Directions

Observing other teachers is one of the best instructional tools for learning how to teach. For this reason, you are expected to conduct several teacher observations during your time as a graduate teaching assistant. For the observations, you should use the Class Observation Rubric found on D2L.

Observation Requirements

Semester	Requirements	Notes
Semester **1**	Minimum of **FIVE** observations	o Observe a different teacher each time. o Start with observing IEP and/or ESL Bridge classes. For observing teachers outside IEP/ESL Bridge, talk with your Practicum Supervisor
Semester **2**	Minimum of **TWO** observations	
Semester **3**	Minimum of **TWO** observations	

Class Observation Etiquette

When you observe another teacher's class, be a polite observer by remembering to do the following:

- o Contact the teacher and confirm the observation in advance.
- o Ask the teacher (in advance or on the day of) for his/her input: where you should sit; whether or not you should introduce yourself to class; whether or not you should interact with the students during class; etc.
- o Ask the teacher if s/he could give you any background information about the class.
- o Ask the teacher if s/he would like you to focus on certain aspects of the class.
- o Ask the teacher to meet with you after the class observation, even briefly, to exchange questions, comments, and thoughts related to the class you observed.

Appendix B: Demographic and Background Questionnaire

This survey is conducted by Mark Todd as part of his MA thesis and seeks to collect background information on participants in the focus group sessions. The results of this survey will be used only for research purposes so please give your answers sincerely. Thank you for your cooperation.

Please provide the following information by ticking the box (✓) or writing your response in the space.

1. Gender: ☐ Male   ☐ Female

2. What is your first and/or native language? _____

3. In which program do you currently teach?   ☐   IEP   ☐   ESL Bridge

4. How many **semesters** have you worked as a TA in the IEP/ ESL Bridge program?

   ☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4

5. Apart from teaching in the IEP or ESL Bridge program, how many **years** of teaching experience do you have?

   _____

6. Briefly explain your teaching experience outside of the IEP/ESL Bridge program.

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

7. Did you have experience with peer observation (either as observer or observee) before taking the MA TESL practicum?

   ☐   Yes   ☐   No

If yes, briefly explain.

_____
_____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What does the term 'peer observation' mean to you?
2. How do you usually select a fellow TA to observe?
3. What do you typically focus on when you observe a fellow TA? Do you have a specific goal about what you want to learn in mind?
4. What are you doing when you observe a class (just watching, taking notes etc…)?
5. Tell me about a class you observed that was particularly memorable.
6. How do you feel when a fellow TA is observing your class?
7. What do you consider to be the benefits of peer observation for (a) the observer (b) the observee?
8. Do you think both novice and experienced teachers can benefit from peer observation? Which group benefits more?
9. What do you consider to be the limitations of peer observation?
10. Do you think peer observation has helped you improve as a teacher? If so, in what ways?
11. What would you say are the main differences between peer observation and supervisor observation? Which do you prefer?
12. Why do you think peer observation is a compulsory part of the MA TESL practicum?
13. Is peer observation more or less useful than other aspects of the practicum (workshops, journals, self-observation, committee participation)?
14. Would you make any changes to the current peer observation process in the MA TESL practicum?
15. Is there anything else related to peer observation you would like to mention or discuss?