IRANIAN EFL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' DEVELOPMENT THROUGH OBSERVATION

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Abstract : This paper describes the processes used to examine on one hand the effect of less experienced teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes on their own skills and teaching methodologies. It also describes the role of teachers' training through observation in their students' achievements. This quasi-experimental design study was conducted In KISH Language School in Bojnurd, Iran. Twenty one EFL teachers were selected as experienced and less experienced ones and involved 169 male and female students (aged 15 - 45 years) as participants. In order to compare students' English proficiency before and after the treatment, a Key English Test (KET) and a Preliminary English Test (PET) were employed. Also, a Peer Observation of Teaching Questionnaire, a sample of TOEFL test and an interview were used to find out the results of teachers' development. This study also revealed that less-experienced teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes had a significant effect on EFL teachers' skills and strategies used in their classroom and almost all teachers were satisfied with their participation in experienced teachers' classes.
Keywords: *observation, professional development, less experienced teachers, learners' achievement*

INTRODUCTION

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

It is believed that teaching can be considered as the most rewarding profession there is and it can be. We can all give examples of the pleasure of helping a child grow in knowledge and understanding, and achieve their potential, but what about the teacher? They shouldn't be excluded from the benefits of lifelong learning because of their workload and desire to give. Growth and change are part of all our personal and professional lives, and teachers need to embrace them; not just to do a better job, but to enjoy doing it. Supporting teachers in their

development – trainees, newly or recently qualified, in their first three, ten or twenty years, and whether they're wonderful or struggling – is vital in improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools (Bubb 2005).

In recent times there has been call for change in teacher education in ways that will promote teachers being much more reflective in their practice (Jones 1998; Korthagen and Kessels 1999; Ball 2000; Wise and Leibbrand 2001). Korthagen and Kessels (1999: 4), argue teacher education programs need to link theory and practice and "to integrate the two in such a way that it leads to integration within the teacher". The best way for teachers to improve what they do is for them to reflect on their practice and work with other teachers to help them understand what is needed for high achievement." (Townsend, Raton & Bates 2007).

Pachier and Field (1997) suggest that being a successful foreign language teacher involves a commitment to stay beside the developments in the field and an enthusiasm to engage in constant professional development. It is believed that the poor quality of EFL teachers is partly attributable to a lack of teacher training and teacher professional development (Vo & Nguyen, 2011). As a result, observation has been introduced as one of the teachers' professional activities to help teachers to improve their teaching strategies through peer observation or observing experienced teachers classes. As Bubb (2005: 45) maintains: ''Observation is a powerful tool for assessing and monitoring a teacher's progress. Used well, it can also be a way to support teachers, because observation gives such a detailed picture and enables very specific objectives to be set. Observing someone teach gives a really detailed picture and is an opportunity to stimulate some really useful reflection on teaching and learning''.

Successful teachers make the most of any opportunities to observe others. They watch a range of teachers' classrooms. It is very encouraging to see that everyone has similar problems and it is interesting to study the different ways people manage them (Bubb 2005). Observation may also be helpful for teachers who are beginners in teaching and it can help them to monitor experienced teachers' classroom in order to improve their own skills and bring about changes in their own way of teaching and dealing with problems which they may face during their teaching. Researches show constantly that teacher quality is the crucial factor in student learning, the frequent problem is to identify the important characteristics of teacher quality and help teachers to develop these characteristics, though (Darling-Hammond 1999, Wenglinsky 2000).

Viewing the problem of improving student performance from this point of view makes the development of systematic and objective methods of classroom observation a critical component in improving teacher quality in every subject area. In order to move along the recent progress in teacher observation the researchers did investigations in this regard. The important point motivating a work in this area is the position of teachers observation in many countries like Iran where teachers' observation has not occupied the place it merits, whether in second language class, in school or in different EFL institutes (Akbari, Samar & Tajik 2007). Also, as far as observation during the period of teaching practice is concerned, it can be seen as a method for current training and learning (Wajnryb 1992).Therefore the purpose of this study is to investigate whether less experienced EFL teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes has any effect on students' learning.

Some studies suggest that learners will not achieve their learning goals successfully until they are given regular and systematic instruction. They also suggest that teachers can improve their teaching strategies by participating in more professional development activities in order to help students to reach their learning goals (Hayes 2011). Teacher education is presently facing a number of anxieties as pressures have come from many parts in the last decades, with perhaps the most powerful focus being on the issue of teacher quality (Tony & Richard 2001).

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

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

The increasing awareness of new approaches in teacher training has made the researchers interested in the notion of classroom observation as a tool which less-experienced teachers can use to develop as effective teachers. Therefore this study has examined how development of less-experienced teachers' skills through observing experienced teachers classes can affect their skills and strategies as well as their students' performances.

METHOD

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

To investigate the effect of classroom observation on students' outcomes and teachers' skills, three instruments were employed by the researchers. A sample of TOEFL test was used to assess the teachers' proficiency in English. It was selected from Longman Complete Course for the TOEFL test book published by Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc (2001). The number of questions were 60 multiple items, divided into grammar (30 items), vocabulary (20 items) and reading (10 items) sections. The TOEFL sample was piloted on (n=22) EFL teachers to determine the reliability of the test. Analyzing the result of the study

using SPSS (Ver.18), the reliability was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha as 0.732.

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

The third instrument was a PET questionnaire containing several sections. The questionnaire included focus on a particular issue, for example use of visual aids, question techniques, pace and timing, interaction patterns with / between students. Before observation the questionnaire was administered to participants to assess their initial knowledge, attitudes and skills in teaching. A similar questionnaire was given to participants to evaluate the impact of the treatment. Finally teachers were interviewed to find out more information on their responses about the process they were involved, which was not possible in observation questionnaire.

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

This study required at least 10 sessions with less-experienced teachers attendance in experienced teachers' classes. Teachers observed a class on an area particularly relevant to their own area of teaching. And they were supposed to fill the mentioned observation checklist at least twice during the observation sessions first before starting observation sessions and the second one after ending observation in order to choose the focused areas of observations according to teachers' needs and particular teaching situations. In order to test students' performance in English before the treatment, The KET and PET tests were employed for both control and experimental groups. They consist of a number of multiple questions and certain skills were measured: listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading and speaking which was measured through interview. At the end of experiment the same tests (KET & PET) were conducted as post-test to measure the effect of treatment on students' performance. First the students' performances in experimental groups were evaluated. Then students' performances in experimental group were compared to the students' performances in control group. In order to analyze the collected data of this study, the data were examined through the use of SPSS (Version.15), Excel (Version 2007). In this study the differences in achievement scores of students taught by teachers who participated in one of the professional development activities (class

observation) were used as the measure of effectiveness of classroom observation on students' outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 illustrates paired differences between two control groups in KET.

As the results in Table 1 show, there is a statistically increase in KET scores before (M=54.68, SD= 3.180) and after treatment (M=68.24, SD=3.053), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 12.060 to 15.046.This increase is not statistically significant.

Also paired differences between two experimental groups are shown in table 2.

According to table 2, there is a statistically significant increase in KET scores before (M=53.87, SD= 2.822) and after treatment (M=70.81, SD=3.113), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 15.81863 to 18.06599. This shows a positive result. Therefore, we concluded that the means between two groups are not equal and there is a significant difference between them.

Table 1
Comparison of two control groups in KET

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

Table 2
Comparison of two experimental groups in KET

	Mean	paired Differences				t	df	sig. (2-tailed)	
		Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
pair	exp group scores in ket test post test exp group scores in ket test pretest	16.94231	4.03618	.55972	15.81863	18.06599	30.269	51	.000

Table 3
The comparison of two control groups in PET

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

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Table 3 and 4 respectively show paired differences in PET control group and experimental group.

Table 3 shows, there is a statistically increase in PET scores before (M=45.11, SD= 2.423) and after treatment (M=57.43, SD=2.392), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 11.146 to 13.483.

Results in table 4 illustrate, there is a statistically significant increase in PET scores before (M=44.36, SD= 2.114), and after treatment (M=59.27, SD=1.835), p-value=.000 which is < .05. The mean increased with 95% confidence interval from 14.233 to 15767. We can conclude that the mean between the groups are not equal and there is a significant difference between them. *P-value=0.000< 0.05.* Accordingly we can say that teachers' observation had significant effect on students' scores as we had an increase in mean scores of experimental group.

In this study teachers were supposed to fill in a lesson observation criteria twice before and after treatment. The questionnaire includes different sections and each part includes various questions. The results estimated for lesson observation criteria 1 (before treatment) are observable in table 5.

According to this table sixteen teachers answered the questions that are related to different parts of questionnaire. According to this table Mean and Std Deviation for each part Preparation and planning, Start of the session, Explanation of the subject, Presentation of the session, During the session, Finishing the session and Evaluating Learners' behavior are (M: 1. 3500/1.2656/1.4167/1.2292/1.2969/ 1. 2000/1.3542/1.4000;SD:.06455/.06237 /.06804/.04781/.05337/.04830/.10305 /.0966) respectively which shows that teachers are not really satisfied with their performance during their classrooms.

Table 4
Comparison of two experimental groups in pet

	Mean	paired Differences				t	df	sig. (2-tailed)
		Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
pair	exp group scores in pet test post test exp group scores in pet test pretest	15.000	2.524	.381	14.233	15.767	39.416	43 .000

Table 5
Descriptive Statics before Treatment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation	variance
	statistic	Statistic	statistic	statistic	Std.Error	Statistic	statistic
Preparation and planning	16	1.00	1.80	1.3500	.06455	.25820	.067
Start of the session	16	1.00	1.75	1.2656	.06237	.24948	.062
Explanation of the subject	16	1.00	2.00	1.4167	.06804	.27217	.074
Presentation of the session	16	1.00	1.50	1.2292	.04781	.19124	.037
During the session	16	1.00	1.75	1.2969	.05337	.21348	.046
Finishing the session	16	1.00	1.60	1.2000	.04830	.19322	.037
Evaluating	16	1.00	2.33	1.3542	.10305	.41220	.170
Learners' behavior	16	1.00	2.40	1.4000	.09661	.38644	.149

Table 6 illustrates the results estimated for lesson observation criteria 2 (after treatment).

The evidence shows that overall, teachers reported high satisfaction with the processes in which they were involved since, Mean and Std Deviation for each part including: Preparation and planning, Start of the session, Explanation of the subject, Presentation of the session, During the session, Finishing the session, Evaluating, Learners' behavior are (M:3.0625/2.9687/2.9896/2.9479/2.8984/2.9000/3.0417, SD:.28018/.49896/.41486/.30257/.34827/.45019/.58214/.38966/3.0125) respectively. These findings indicate that less-experienced teachers who participated in experienced teachers classes reported greater satisfaction with the programs compared to their colleagues who didn't receive treatment.

The findings in table 7 show that Mean and Std Deviation of lesson observation criteria 2 (M: 2.9688, SD: .04521) is higher than Mean and Std Deviation of lesson observation criteria 1 (M: 1.3125, SD: .02161) which shows the great impact of class observation on Iranian EFL teachers' skills and strategies.

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

The findings of this study show that teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes had a significant

Table 6.
Descriptive statistics after Treatment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation	variance
	statistic	Statistic	statistic	statistic	Std.Error	statistic	statistic
Preparation and planning	16	2.60	3.80	3.0625	.07004	.28018	.079
Start of the session	16	2.00	3.75	2.9687	.12474	.49896	.249
Explanation of the subject	16	2.17	4.00	2.9896	.10371	.41486	.172
Presentation of the session	16	2.50	3.50	2.9479	.07564	.30257	.092
During the session	16	2.13	3.50	2.8984	.08707	.34827	.121
Finishing the session	16	2.20	3.60	2.9000	.11255	.45019	.203
Evaluating Learners' behavior	16	2.00	3.67	3.0417	.14554	.58214	.339
	16	2.00	3.40	3.0125	.09741	.38966	.152

Table 7
Descriptive Statics of all Questions

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean		Std. Deviation	variance
	statistic	statistic	statistic	statistic	Std.Error	statistic	statistic
LOcriteria1	16	1.17	1.43	1.3125	.02161	.08645	.007
LOcriteria2	16	2.62	3.31	2.9688	.04521	.18085	.033

LO: Lesson observation

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

Although learning outcomes are influenced by a complex interplay of factors particular to an institution, teaching context, and student disposition, when employed carefully and thoughtfully, student outcomes may contribute to judgments of teaching. Also data analysis through Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed that less-experienced teachers' participation in experienced teachers' classes had a significant effect on their skills and strategies and helped them to rethink their own teaching methods.

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

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the present study, teachers had a positive experience for class observation, the participants held the same belief that through observation and discussion, they had learnt about and adopted some of the others' instructional techniques. The evidence also showed that they adjusted their own techniques to improve the teaching of a particular class. Therefore, we can conclude experienced teachers' class observation is acceptable for EFL less experienced teachers and its introduction is beneficial for both teachers and students.

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