

Peer Observation of Teaching: A tool for Professional Development

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In this paper I discuss how the exercise of peer observation of teaching (POT) helped me as an observer and the observee (the teacher who was observed) in our professional development. I also present a peer observation report with my reflections. The paper has three parts. In the first part I discuss what makes POT an effective tool for professional development, in the second part I share my experience as an observer of a teaching session and present the report of a POT session and in the third part I give my reflections.

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1. Peer observation: What makes it an effective tool for professional development

Teachers who are committed to the teaching profession and interested in their professional development should be willing to allow their peers to observe their teaching and also be ready to observe their peers' teaching. This exercise of peer review or peer observation will yield positive results only if the observer and the observed have positive attitude towards each other. The sole objective of peer observation of teaching (POT) should be to help the observee (the teacher observed) know the positive aspects of the teaching session and suggest measures to enhance the quality of the observee's teaching and thus learners' learning. It should be a collaborative process and formative in nature.

Peer observation process has three stages: i) Pre-POT, ii) POT and iii) Post-POT. During the Pre-POT stage both the observer (A) and the observee (B) reach an agreement that A is going to observe B's teaching and share his/her observation with B and if desired/required B is going to observe A's teaching and his/her observation with A. There is mutual trust between the two parties. The common goal is to achieve professional development. They realize that POT is not the forum for the observer to assert his/her superiority or convey the "I-am-okay-but-you-are-not-okay" message or for the observee to be a passive listener and follow whatever the observer says. It is not an exercise to judge or assess the teacher. (Cosh, 1999) examines the merits and demerits of different models of peer observation and concludes that some models have been widely criticized because of their judgemental and threatening nature and proposes a reflective model. Both the observer and the observee are expected to be reflective teachers. During the observation stage, both the parties follow certain guidelines including arriving in time, recording what happened during different stages of the teaching session, observing the reactions and interactions of students, filling in the observation form, etc. During the post-POT, both the parties discuss what went well during the teaching session, whether objectives were achieved, why a particular strategy clicked or did not click, what improvements could be made to enhance the quality of teaching and thus learning, and it results in devising a concrete action plan.

Peer observation of teaching is mutually beneficial both to the teacher who observes and the teacher who is observed. It helps them to become reflective teachers. The whole exercise of

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peer observation should be carried out in a non-threatening environment. Constructive and quality criticism is essential to translate the objectives of peer observation into action (Fullerton, 1993).

2. My experience as an observer

I have had the experience of being observed by colleagues and senior teachers in the past. During my five-year teaching experience at an engineering institute in Rwanda, I used to invite my colleagues to observe my teaching and I have also observed many teachers' teaching sessions. These peer observation sessions were followed by interactive review sessions with observers. This experience has had a beneficial effect on me as well as the observers. As a teacher trainer, I have observed many teachers' teaching sessions and have written POR reports. Teacher observees and I have found such review exercises very useful. These have been learning experiences for both the groups.

Here, I share my experience of being an observer of a peer's teaching session and present a report of the peer observation. I took a 10-week online course on 'Methodology for TESOL' at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) during June-September 2012. The participants of the course were required to observe a peer's teaching session and write a report on the peer observation of teaching.

In July 2012, two new teachers of English joined our institute. One of the teachers showed much interest in improving her teaching skills. When I discussed with her the importance of peer observation of teaching, she asked me to observe a few of her teaching sessions and we reached a mutual agreement. I asked her to observe my teaching initially and she observed two of my teaching sessions. During the observation sessions she followed a checklist and prepared her own reports and shared the reports with me. Her feedback on my teaching was very useful in many ways. Later I observed one of her teaching sessions and shared my report with her. She was very receptive and agreed to take steps to improve her teaching. The report below explains in detail different stages of the teaching session and my comments.

2.1 Peer Observation Worksheet

This peer observation worksheet gives details about the students, their level of proficiency in English, the objectives of the lesson taught, skills focused, and the different stages of teaching with the observer's comments.

Background Information		Date: 01 August 2012
Course Name: Basic English Language Skills	Level: Intermediate Students who have just joined undergraduate	Number of students: 45

<p>(20 hours)</p> <p>Lesson: Active and Passive Voice</p> <p>Duration: 50 minutes</p>	<p>engineering program.</p>	
<p>Description of Students:</p> <p>There are 45 students in the group. After completing their higher secondary program the students have joined the undergraduate engineering program and now they are attending a one-month foundation program. During this period they are given training in Basic English Language Skills (BELS), Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Fundamentals of Computing. It is a mixed-ability group. About 10 students have higher level of proficiency in English than others. All students can understand instructions in English though some of them cannot express themselves in English.</p> <p>The students are sitting in five rows and three columns. Three students are seated in a bench. They are not allowed to change the layout of the classroom.</p>		
<p>Lesson: Active and Passive Voice</p> <p>Objectives: Upon successful completion of the lesson, the students are expected to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. know the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs 2. be familiar with the forms of active and passive voices 3. know how the two voices differ in meaning and form 4. know when to use active and passive voice <p><i>Remark: Objectives are very clear. Since the target group consists of students of engineering and technology, it is important to tell them why passive voice is important in technical documents.</i></p>		
<p>Skills focus / Grammar structure(s) / Vocabulary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grammar: Forms of active and passive voice - Grammar: Transitive and intransitive verbs - Writing: process description <p><i>Remark: Very clear.</i></p>		
<p>Lesson</p>		
<p>Time</p>	<p>Procedure</p>	<p>Notes</p>
<p>3 minutes</p>	<p>Warm – up: Greeting the students</p>	<p>The students responded positively to the teachers’ greetings. The teacher’s</p>

		pleasant smile made everyone feel comfortable.
	The teacher asked students whether everyone was present.	The response was good. Only one student was absent. The teacher enquired about the student.
30 minutes	Presentation	
5-7 minutes	Introducing transitive verbs and intransitive verbs by posing this question to students: Does anyone know the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs?	Many students were not familiar with the grammatical terms 'transitive verb' and 'intransitive verb'. When the teacher posed the first question most of the students were not able to answer the question. Some students tried their best to answer the question but the answers were not correct.
5 minutes	<p>Transitive Verbs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explaining the difference between the transitive and intransitive verbs with some examples. - Writing the following verbs on the board: send, attack, eat, drink, draw. - Asking students to give sentences using the verbs. - Explaining transitive verbs with appropriate examples. 	The explanation was clear. The examples were quite appropriate.
5 minutes	<p>Intransitive Verbs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing the following verbs on the board: sleep, go, walk. - Asking students to give sentences using the verbs. - Explaining intransitive verbs with appropriate examples. 	The explanation was clear. The examples were quite appropriate.

5 minutes	<p>Introducing Active Voice & Passive Voice</p> <p>Introducing Active Voice and Passive Voice by posing this question to students: Does the meaning change when a sentence in active voice is changed into passive voice?</p>	<p>Only a few students answered the question.</p> <p>The students would have understood the concepts better if the teacher had asked the following questions and explained the grammar points 'active voice' and 'passive voice'</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you want to be performers of actions or receivers of actions? 2. Can you give examples of performing an action and receiving an action?
10 minutes	<p>Explaining the forms and rules</p> <p>Giving example sentences and stating the rules for changing from active to passive or vice versa.</p>	<p>Too much time was spent on the rules.</p> <p>The example sentences were not appropriate.</p> <p>Too many linguistic terms such as subject, verb, object, auxiliary verbs, etc. were used by the teacher. As Brown (2001) says it is not good to overwhelm students with linguistic terms.</p>
10 minutes	Practice	
	<p>Asking the students to write 5 sentences in active voice. Then picking some students to read out the sentences. Asking some volunteers to</p>	<p>This worked very well. Many students were involved in these activities.</p>

	transform the sentences into passive voice. Repeating the same steps to transform passive voice into active voice.	The students worked on their own. It would have been better if the teacher had given them two or three pair-work or group-work activities.
5 minutes	Evaluation/Assessment	
	Inviting questions from students to check whether they have understood the grammar points.	The teacher didn't have time to assess whether the grammar points were understood by all the students.

2.2 Peer Observation Report

This peer observation report is written based on a set of seven questions related to the teacher's use of communicative language teaching, students' involvement in the lesson, talk time of the teacher and students, warm-up activity, presentation of material, practicing the newly learnt skills, and evaluation.

1. Did the teacher use Communicative Language Teaching? What did you observe which supports your answer?

The teacher used both structural and CLT methods to teach the lesson on active and passive voice.

The teacher tried to make the class interactive by posing questions to the students but the response of the students was not encouraging. Only a few students responded to the teacher. The reason for the students' passive behaviour could be their unfamiliarity with the grammatical terms 'transitive verbs' and 'intransitive verbs'. The teacher gave a few examples to explain the grammar points: transitive and intransitive verbs, and active and passive voice but the examples were not based on context. In communicative language teaching all examples are based on context, but it was lacking.

There were no pair-work or group work activities. Only whole class activities were given by the teacher. The students were not given opportunity to use the language productively.

No productive tasks were given. Tasks such as speaking about a process of preparing something (coffee or tea) or writing about it would help students have more practice in using passive voice and understanding the specific situation in which passive forms are used.

The teacher talked most of the time. Had the students been asked to discuss and describe a process of preparing something, the class would have been communicative and effective learning would have taken place. The layout of the classroom was not conducive for the teacher to pair the students or divide them into groups.

Throughout the class some mechanical exercises were given to students. They were asked to change sentences from active into passive and from passive into active.

2. How much were the students involved in and engaged with the lesson?

Many tasks were given to the students but all the exercises required them to work individually. Only some students who know English were involved in and engaged with the lesson. If the teacher had given them some pair-work and group-work activities the involvement of students would have been good.

3. What did you notice about teacher talk time vs. student talk time?

The teacher spent more time to explain the grammatical terms and gave students less time to interact with their peers or the teacher. The teacher posed a few questions to the students, but the questions did not attract many responses from the students.

4. What was the warm up of the lesson?

The teacher checked with the class whether all the students were present and enquired about the student who was absent. Some pleasantries were exchanged. The teacher successfully broke the ice.

5. How was the new material presented?

The teacher checked students' pre-knowledge on active and positive voice by posing these questions to the students: Does anyone know the difference between a transitive and an intransitive verb? What is the difference between active and passive voice?

Some students responded trying to answer the questions. Not a single student was able to explain the difference between a transitive and an intransitive verb. Then the teacher tried to explain the grammar points with some examples but the examples were not based on context.

The teacher gave more importance to grammar rules for changing sentences from active into passive and from passive into active. It

6. How did the learners practice the new material?

The teacher wrote five sentences in active voice and asked the students to change them into passive. She checked the answers with the class and explained. She expected some students to

ask her questions but the students did not ask her any question.

7. Was there an evaluation?

The teacher tried to assess the students' understanding of active and passive voice by posing these questions: Is it clear? Now do you know how to change the active into passive? Can you give an example of a passive voice? Some students responded positively and conveyed the message to the teacher that they understood the concepts.

There was no time for the teacher to get feedback from students whether it was an effective teaching and learning session.

Additional comments

It was not clear whether the objectives set for the lesson were achieved. Some students were not able to give correct answers when they were asked to change one form into the other.

The teacher mentioned the term "impersonal passive" and gave an explanation, but did not give any example. Had she given some examples, students would have understood the concept better.

Some examples were not appropriate. It showed that the teacher did not prepare well to present the grammar points.

The teacher was friendly with the students all along. Since she is a novice to the teaching profession she was a bit nervous.

3. Peer Observation: Reflection

The third part of the paper focuses on what I learned from the observation experience. This reflection is in response to the following questions.

- *How did the teacher address the following aspects of language teaching?*

Classroom environment, student participation, motivation and interest, teacher talk (directions, feedback, language level), sequencing of the lesson, transitions between activities, teaching language in context (content combined with language), assessment

- *What could be improved?*
- *What would you like to incorporate into your own classroom?*
- *What did you learn from this experience?*

What I learnt from this observation experience

Observing one of my peers' teaching was a wonderful learning experience for me. Never, in the past, did I think that I would learn something precious by observing a peer's teaching. The teacher, Ms X, is a novice to the teaching profession but has strong desire to learn from others. When I expressed my interest in observing her class she did not object to it but said that it was an opportunity for her to get my feedback and improve her teaching. She carries a broad smile in her face and moves with students freely. She exchanged a few pleasantries with the students and started the lesson very effectively. Within three minutes she broke ice and drew the attention of all the students. I could realize how important it is to exchange pleasantries when starting a new lesson.

After a 3-minute warm-up activity, Ms X started her lesson by asking this question: "Does anyone know the difference between a transitive verb and intransitive verb?" Only a few students answered the question. The rest of the class did not respond positively and it could be due to the students' unfamiliarity with the grammatical terms. Then the teacher explained the terms with some examples. Explanations were clear and the examples were appropriate. She made the students understand why it is essential to know the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs while learning the grammar points 'active voice' and 'passive voice'. According to (Brown, 2001), learners should not be overwhelmed with linguistic terminology but in this context knowing the grammatical terms helps learners understand the concepts of active and passive voice better.

At the next stage the teacher introduced 'active voice' and 'passive voice' with this question: Does the meaning change when a sentence in active voice is changed into passive voice? Again, only a few students tried to answer the question. If the teacher had paraphrased or simplified the question by giving an example, she might have made more students give their responses. Without giving her answer to this important question, the teacher moved to the next stage of explaining the form of active and passive voice and rules for changing from one form to another.

The students would have understood the concepts better if the teacher had asked the following questions and explained the grammar points 'active voice' and 'passive voice'

1. Do you want to be performers of actions or receivers of actions?
2. Can you give examples of performing an action and receiving an action?

These questions would have made students think and respond. The teacher would have got an opportunity to explain the grammar points with examples based on context. The students would also have got an opportunity to use the language in context.

The teacher gave more importance to the form rather than the meaning. She spent more time explaining the forms and rules regarding changing a sentence in active voice into passive voice.

During the process the students were bombarded with linguistic terms such as subject, verb, object, etc.

Inductive approach to grammar teaching is said to be more effective than the deductive approach. Ms X followed the deductive approach by presenting rules first and then giving examples. Based on my experience as a learner as well as a teacher I can say that if students acquire grammar rules through exposure to samples of speech they become better learners and their cognitive skills develop.

Some of the examples given by the teacher to explain the grammar points were not appropriate. Here are some mechanical or meaningless sentences that were given to students to change from active to passive:

- *I am singing a song.*
- *He drank a cup of coffee.*
- *I'll meet you at the railway station.*

In real life situations the passive forms of the above sentences will never be used. No one is going to say: "A song is being sung by me." or "A cup of coffee was drunk by him." Or "You will be met by me at the railway station." I learnt that only the sentences (in active voice) that can be changed into passive and if the transformed sentences (in passive voice) make sense to the reader or listener should be given as examples. The teacher is expected to give meaningful input in the class for learning to take place.

The teacher explained how active and passive voices differ in form but didn't explain how the voices differ in meaning. It would have been better if she had given two or three sentences in active and the same in passive and asked the students to find out whether they are different in meaning.

While explaining the form and rules for changing active into passive, the teacher gave this example:

- *We buy Chinese goods. (active)*
- *Chinese goods are bought by us. (passive)*

She explained that 'goods' is a plural noun and so it is followed by a plural verb. Then she wrote this sentence on the board: *We buy Korean good.* Then she asked the students to change the sentence into passive voice. All in chorus gave this answer: *Korean good is bought by us.* One of the students asked the teacher, "What is the meaning of the word 'good' in the sentence? Is it the singular of 'goods'? Can it be used as a singular?" The teacher replied, "The word 'good' is the singular form of 'goods' and it means an article of trade". The student, not convinced of the teacher's reply, said, "Mam, I think the singular form 'good' is not standard English". The

teacher said, "I'll check and let you know." The lesson I learnt from observing the teacher is that I should go to class well prepared and if I am not sure of the meaning of any word or the accuracy of something I must acknowledge it and assure the students that I will give them the correct answer soon.

The teacher mentioned the term 'impersonal passive' but did not give any example to make it clear to the students. If the teacher had given a few examples similar to these sentences

- *The building was constructed in 2008.*
- *The bridge connecting East Tambaram and West Tambaram will be constructed soon.*

the students would have understood the concept easily.

It is important to teach grammar communicatively. Though the teacher tried to be learner-centred at times, she did not engage the students with the lesson. There were no pair-work or group-work activities. If there had been one or two group activities, the student participation would have been better.

It is equally important to assess whether learning has taken place. The teacher, Ms X, did not have time to assess whether the students understood the grammar points and were in a position to use them correctly.

The purpose of teaching grammar is to help learners use the target language effectively in different situations and not to overwhelm them with linguistic terms and enable them to talk about the language. I learnt many useful things by observing the peer's class. Though the teacher was a novice she had courage to face the students and manage the class effectively. Her positive attitude did inspire me a lot.

Peer observation of teaching is an excellent tool for professional development. Not only novice teachers but also experienced teachers find this experience very useful. Openness on the part of the observee and concern on the part of the observer are required to make this exercise meaningful and useful.

References

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