Classroom Observation: Linking Teacher Evaluation and Professional Development in TESOL

Sayyed Rashid Shah[*] Rooh Ul Amin[†] Hussain Ahmad[‡]

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Abstract *This study examines the impact of increasingly challenging nature of classroom observation as part of teacher evaluation in English Language Teaching (ELT). This paper highlights the complex nature of evaluative classroom observation systems in various educational contexts. It also considers various issues that embody the challenging nature of classroom observation and teacher evaluation in connection to the professional development of teachers. In a small-scale study of Teaching of English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professionals in Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, it adopts an interpretive approach and utilizes semi-structured interviews to collect data. The results, presented in four major themes provide a detailed account of teachers' perceptions of the role of classroom observation in their professional learning and development. However, this development has not occurred due to the observation as a tool to elevate teaching and learning standards, alternatively, the managerial demands and the fear of being fired or transferred to remote campuses have stimulated teachers to develop professionally and offset this challenge. Despite their personal drive to professionalize themselves in a collaborative and professional culture, the challenge of observation still prevails owing to the teachers' lack of autonomy and some insufficiently trained observers' subjective approach.*

Key Words:

Teacher Professionalism, Professional Development, Classroom Observation, Teacher Evaluation

Introduction

There is an emerging consensus among the educators in the developed countries that to meet the challenges of 21st century, teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning outcomes have to be improved by taking a comprehensive approach to recruiting, preparing, supporting, and retaining talented teachers

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[*]Lecturer in English, English Language Institute, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
[†]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, KP, Pakistan.
[‡]Lecturer in English, English Language Institute, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Email: hgul@kau.edu.sa

(Jackson, 2013). Owing to these purposes, classroom observation as an integral part of teacher evaluation is widely applied as a means to ensure quality of teaching and improve learning outcomes (Zarro, 2005). While acknowledging the significance of teacher evaluation and classroom observation, authors have expressed concerns over its effectiveness and have noted that the accountability element often deteriorates this practice into a mechanical and meaningless exercise (Baily, 2001; Sawchuk, 2008; Stronge, 2006; Sinnema & Robinson, 2007). Though striking a balance between the goals of development and institutional accountability is not easy, proper training and planning can accomplish both. Otherwise, top-down or poorly structured evaluation system may involuntarily lead to an environment of threat, fear, suspicion and hostility among teachers and may prove detrimental to their professional selves (Jackson, 2013; Zhang & Ng, 2011).

Professionalism, often regarded as a technical expertise and moral principles and ideals, is equally desirable in ELT that demands institutions to evaluate teachers in order to determine their competence, knowledge and effectiveness as classroom teachers (Farmer, 2005; 2006). Teachers often face criticism and accountability for their leaners' underperformances and poor learning outcomes. This criticism usually comes from those individuals who are experts in teacher evaluation, classroom observation and clinical supervision. Although classroom observation is deemed to be a tool for teacher professional development, it mainly aims at quality assurance of performance management which causes lots of controversies (O' Leary, 2011). Teachers in various contexts associate the element of fear, threat and coercion to classroom observations which impact teachers' pedagogical practices. In the Gulf states, evaluative classroom observations are intimidating and in effective owing to the observers' judgmental and subjective approaches (Mercer, 2006).

In the context of TESOL, classroom observation is a frequently used method to enhance and develop instructional practices (Metcalfe, 2006). It is considered as a benchmark to appraise the teaching skills and competencies of rookie as well as experienced language instructors. O'Leary (2012) found that British schools adopt a box-ticking approach to classroom observation for collecting factual data about classroom practices. This mechanical and judgmental approach to teacher appraisal leads to teacher burn-out and makes it difficult for teachers to develop a collaborative culture where they can have critical discussions about their classroom practices. In the Saudi EFL context, there is a serious dearth of empirical research on how evaluative classroom observations contribute to the EFL teachers' professional learning and development. Hence, answers to the following research questions will fill that gap in the Saudi EFL context.

1. To what extent, do EFL teachers consider evaluative classroom observations a professional challenge in the Saudi EFL context?

2. What are those reasons which lead to the EFL teachers' belief that classroom observation is a challenging phenomenon in Saudi EFL setting?
3. How do the EFL teachers cope with the challenge of evaluative classroom observations in the Saudi EFL context?
4. What are the teachers' views about the role of evaluative classroom observations as a tool for their professional learning?

Theoretical Framework

Evaluation and its Impact on Teachers' Learning

Gaziel (2002) believes that teacher evaluation is a yardstick for ensuring educational achievements and teaching and learning outcomes. Sergiovanni (2007) stated three major goals of teacher evaluation:

a) *Quality Control*: supervision of pedagogical practices achieved by visiting classrooms, inspection rounds of schools, and interactions with students.

b) *Professional Development*: supporting teachers' development and growth with regard to their understanding of classroom practices, enhancing basic pedagogical skills and extending their expertise and improving their application of contemporary educational tools.

c) *Teacher Motivation*: instilling motivation and fostering commitment to teaching in a bid to attain general goals set by the institution and its intellectual vision.

In Stronge's (2006) view, there are two major objectives of teacher evaluation: Teacher accountability and teacher development. However, the fundamental aims of evaluation are to enable teachers examine and reflect on their practices, to raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in order to exhibit their skills in accordance with set standards (Arar & Oplatka, 2011). In recent times, educational institutions have given so much importance to teacher professional development (Guskey, 2000). Studies have demonstrated that teacher evaluation has the potential to promote teacher professional development (e.g. Beerens, 2000; Ovando, 2001; Tian & Zhang, 2004; Zarro, 2005). In American literature, the role of evaluation in teacher development and student achievement is widely cited and teacher evaluation through classroom observation is believed to have the potential to improve average teacher performance and promote students' achievement growth. Although, the estimated improvements during evaluation may not be conspicuous, high-quality classroom-observation-based evaluation enhances in-service teacher performance since, the evaluation of teachers on several skills and practices, such as classroom

management, instruction, content knowledge, and planning contribute to the teacher professional development (Taylor & Tyler, 2011).

Teacher evaluation is considered a controversial subject as Gitlin and Smythe (1989) point out that issues, such as evaluation of teachers often generates heated discussions. Nevertheless, systematic teacher evaluation schemes, complementing teachers' professional development and accountability may lead to improvements in pedagogical practices and lift student achievement, but they are still considered unsystematic due to the untrained evaluators, the use of ineffective methods or tools, and misalignment between teacher development needs and supposed targets, which thwarts the developmental goal of teacher evaluation procedures (Tuytens & Devos, 2011).

Looney (2011) believes that the effectiveness of teacher evaluation will depend on its alignment within the overall educational assessment and evaluation framework. With misaligned systems, there is no possibility to determine the success of pedagogical practices or set targets for improvement. However, systems focused on tight alignment may also undermine the effectiveness of innovative approaches to teaching and learning, thus balance is required, otherwise, the lack of balance will counteract teachers' professional development and overlook classroom practice and its underlying problems (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006). On similar grounds, Sinnema and Robinson (2007) share their concerns about the validity of teacher evaluation and notice major misalignment between the nature of effective teaching and the content of evaluation policies and procedures. Similarly, Al Ramirez, et al. (2011) found little relationship between teacher development and the policies and processes toward summative evaluations, therefore, authors doubt the developmental goals of teacher evaluation procedures (e.g. Davis, Ellett, & Annunziata, 2002; Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004).

Classroom Observation and its Goals

Classroom observations began in late 1960s in the form of formal, informal and peer observation when teachers started receiving observers, clinical supervisors and administrators in their classrooms (Bernstein 2008; Gosling 2002). These observations have various professional and administrative goals. For instance, classroom observation for the purpose of collective data and complete summative appraisal. In these kinds of observations, supervisors meticulously gather data and make informed decisions about the teachers' overall classroom performances (Cogan, 1973). These events are mainly used to assess teachers' classroom performances or identify and report their weaknesses, which could be worked on in a specific timeframe. In learning-oriented organizations, these recorded events and reports can help teachers to see their strengths and weaknesses and also guide teacher trainers to supplement and prepare training materials accordingly.

The most recent work by Murphy (2013) gives useful insights into the developmental side of observation. For example, it is an opportunity for observers to see teachers in action and assess their style of teaching, classroom management and other significant vistas of classroom instructions, which may not be gathered using other ways of appraisal. In addition, it is an opportunity for teachers to enhance their professional practice by receiving feedback on their lesson plans, pedagogical tools and instructional strategies. Moreover, teachers get a chance to reflect on and assess their classroom practices and teaching skills (Farrell, 2011). The whole reflective process leads to teacher professional learning and development.

Despite its undeniable impact on teacher professional learning, authors attribute various challenges with the process of evaluative observations. For instance, Williams (1989) expresses his concerns that observations with a traditional approach of appraisal often pose challenges to teacher and observer as the former adopts a judgmental approach and relies on his/her subjective knowledge and understanding. As a result, the observer fails to assist teachers with developing reflective skills and teaching abilities. Scholars associate various problems with these judgmental observations, for instance, lack of teacher education or training on part of the observer as teachers often become observers without receiving adequate training to observe classrooms and give teachers feedback (Sheal, 1989; Bailey, 2006). This lack of training influences their ability to give a unified and standardized feedback on classroom events. Murphy (2013) expresses the same concern that the observers' understanding of observation criteria and their implementation in different contexts have little or no harmony and the assessment is often inappropriate and incomparable.

This variation in the application of observation tool highlights the vital role of observer's training for an effective and reliable process (Murphy, 2013). For that reason, many teachers despise the whole practice (Aubusson et al., 2007; Borich, 2008), even panic being observed, since they consider it a stressful and intimidating process. In addition, teachers find it a tool of surveillance, control and accountability rather than a means of professional learning (Metcalfe, 2006). Similarly, observers in authoritative positions often exercise a top-down authority to see classroom interactions and events with a subjective lens, consequently leading to teacher anxiety and burnout (Li, 2009). Owing to these challenges, empirical papers have adopted titles i.e. *observations: a bane or a boon, survive teacher observations* (Sasson, 2008). Nevertheless, if teacher development is the ultimate goal of classroom observation, then an observee needs to be psychologically comfortable sharing a strong bond of trust with the observer to benefit from the process of observation (Aubusson, et al., 2007), which can only be achieved through establishing a congenial relationship between the observer and observe.

Observer-teacher relationship is a key to successful observation, which should never turn into a personal strife between the two parties (Bailey, 2006). It is important for teacher and observer to develop collegial, professional and trusting relationship that will lead to organizational effectiveness and teacher professional development (Cranston, 2009). In Williams' (1989, p. 85) opinion classroom observations should be "developmental rather than judgmental". Their goal should be to offer insights into teachers' pedagogical practices and enable teachers to reflect on and evaluate their instructional strategies in order to enhance their teaching repertoire (Malderez, 2003).

The humanistic evaluation model suggested by Sidhu and Fook (2010) has five developmental stages of classroom observations: 1) prior to the observation, when the teacher and observer discuss a formal observation plan; 2) while observation, when the supervisor collects data and records classroom events and interactions; 3) following the observation, when the data are analyzed and teacher's strengths and weaknesses are identified; 4) in post-observation conference, teacher and observer share their views, set goals and chalk out a developmental plan to rectify teacher's weaknesses and ensure their professional growth and 5) later, they decide on a period of time to accomplish the target goals.

Malderez's (2003) research further elaborates the objectives of classroom observations into four major categories; observation for training purposes, observation for teacher evaluation, observation for professional learning and observation for research. Similarly, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) consider observation as a tool for teacher development, a means for receiving rewards, and a way to get promotion. Although classroom observations serve various purposes in an educational setting, there is an agreement among the scholars that professional development of teachers can be the most effectively achieved target of classroom observation (Montgomery, 2013). In relation to teacher development, Hill and Grossman (2013) consider the use of scores in classroom observation a source of information that helps teachers improve instruction. They maintain that although classroom observations were initially perceived evaluative, such protocols are now taken "as key levers for the improvement of teaching" (Hill & Grossman, 2013, p. 372).

From a developmental perspective, classroom observation should have a pre-observation meeting, in which the nature of the lesson plan, scope of the teaching point and expected outcomes are discussed. This can be followed by a post-observation feedback session between the observer and the teacher to reflect on the lesson, discuss its various aspects for developmental goals of the teacher. In this stage, both the parties identify and agree on areas for improvement (Gall & Acheson, 2010). With respect to teacher development, during pre-observation conference, an observee and observer agree on certain developmental targets and other instructional issues which can be improved on as a result of observations.

On similar grounds, feedback session promotes collaboration between teachers and observers because "posing questions to teachers during these interactions allows them to engage in reflection, to think critically, and to approach teaching as a decision-making process" (Vasquez & Reppen, 2007, p. 164).

Metcalfe (2006) calls the post-observation discussion 'a professional dialogue', a key to the development of both observer and observee in which the future targets are set and the outcomes are shared with honesty. However, honesty may be compromised if developmental and evaluative observations are carried out together and thus both need to be done separately (Murphy, 2013).

In sum, to optimize the benefits of a classroom observation, the observer needs to be properly trained to understand various aspects of classroom teaching. To give constructive feedback and minimize the element of threat, fear and subjectivity are important skills that observer needs develop. Last, but not the least, the post-observation conference is the key part of the whole practice which should be a "non-judgmental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation" (Gebhard, 1999, p.35).

Clinical Supervision in TESOL

The application of evaluative classroom observation as a tool for measuring development and accountability has different forms in different educational settings. Therefore, it is significant to understand the perceptions of pre- and in-service teachers about their experience of being observed in a particular context (Wang & Day, 2002). In preservice training as a language teacher, observation plays a vital role in the professional learning of potential teachers who need to acquire instructional skills (Gebhard, 1999; Wajnryb, 1992). On the contrary, in mainstream education, classroom observations have undesirably turned into teacher evaluation, losing the essence of professional development (Sahakian & Stockton, 1996). Even though its significance as part of teacher evaluation and teacher development is undeniable, there is lack of empirical evidence on how classroom observations are carried out in various EFL/ESL contexts. Moreover, it needs more research to learn that how language teachers experience evaluative observations and how they impact their professional development. In this regard, Wang and Day (2002) explored the ELT teachers' concerns and challenges with evaluative classroom observations. They found both subjective and procedural problems with the practice of classroom observation which ensued tensions between observers and teachers, compromising teacher autonomy and voice.

A plethora of research studies in ELT on classroom observation have deemed appraisal observations ineffective due to the observer's failure to constantly visit classrooms and capture an essence of instructional practices for sustained professional development of teachers (e.g. Borg, 2006; Murdoch, 2000; Mallows, 2002; Hooton, 2008; Copland, 2008; Howard, 2010; Tennant, 2006).In EFL

contexts, particularly in the Middle East, Murdoch (2000) argues that teacher appraisal/evaluation needs to be conducted in a supportive environment. In the UAE context, he argues that classroom observation tools or rubrics are mostly under-developed and adhoc, which need to be modified and made more supportive for teacher learning.

Moreover, these observations are inconsistently held by supervisors who often have other administrative workload, thus making the whole process ineffective. With a lack of developmental focus, these top-down observation practices lead to teacher anxiety. Teachers lose faith in the validity of observation system, which undermines other institutional initiatives to support teachers' efforts to teach effectively (Murdoch, 2000). Similarly, Howard (2010) assayed to explore different features of teacher evaluation and the influence of classroom observation on teachers' and learners' demeanor; however, this study is unique in terms of context and goal as no research has been done on the burning issue of classroom observation in relation to teacher professional development in Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

This study has adopted an interpretive approach to uncover the perceptions and experiences of the English language teachers pertaining to classroom observation and their professional development in a Saudi university. Interpretive paradigm is naturalistic, constructivist, and qualitative (Robson, 2002), which suits the nature of this study. Smith (1987) considers interpretive approaches important when researchers aim to explore specific meanings of events or acts in the context of the research. As the focus of this study is on the individuals' lived experiences and how they attribute meaning to actions in their context, the interpretive design serves the purpose of the study. This small-scale exploratory study aims to understand the phenomenon of evaluative classroom observation from the EFL teachers' perspective. The exploratory design of the study helps recognize factors that impact the EFL teachers' instructional practices and identify challenges which they associate with evaluative classroom observations.

Method of Data Collection

To achieve fuller understanding of the target phenomenon, this small-scale study has adopted qualitative tools for the purpose of data collection (Jupp, 2006). To understand the phenomenon of classroom observation and its relation to teacher development, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with six EFL teachers. The rationale behind choosing qualitative interviews is that it is a unique and effective way of understanding the lived experiences of the participants and the meanings they ascribe to their actions in a social context

(Kvale, 2007). In qualitative research, one of the core issues to employ interviews is to achieve deep understanding of the individuals' or groups' experiences, perceptions or views (Scott & Usher, 2006).

For this study, ethical approval from the institute and the teachers' permission to partake in the study were sought prior to the interview stage. All six interviews were conducted in the institute using English as a medium of communication. Each interview took approximately 50 to 60 minutes. The participants were given a choice to choose their pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality.

Data analysis

The data analysis was an iterative process which involved open coding and thematic and content analysis of the qualitative data generated from semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Nvivo10 was utilized to help us arrange, examine and make the process of analysis process. The interview data and participants' responses were recurrently read and analyzed, which led to 53 open codes. This initial coding process was followed by merging the identical codes which reduced the total number of codes to 36. The codes were re-assessed and re-worded multiple times to ensure that the assigned codes/nodes were representative of the interview content. Moreover, the codes/nodes were checked in the light of the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Newby 2010). In the next stage of the data analysis, 36 codes were merged into 7broad categories. In the last stage, the merger of identical categories led to the emergence of4 overarching themes. The following sections presents findings and discusses description of the four major themes to answer the research questions.

Findings and Discussion

From the EFL teachers' recounted experiences of classroom observation as part of evaluation and its impact on their professional development, this segment gives a thorough interpretation of their perceptions and lived experiences in four major themes informing the research questions.

The Challenge of Observation and Teachers' Concerns

At the ELI, classroom observations have played a significant role in teachers' professional growth; however, various concerns communicated by the teachers substantiate the fact that they find it a challenging phenomenon which has influenced their teaching, particularly, in an observed lesson. Since, formal observation and feedback are integral to teacher improvement (Jonson, 2008),

EFL teachers in the Saudi context express their reservations about their lack of voice, especially in post-observation conference or feedback stage, in which observers give a verdict on teachers' classroom teaching, which teachers have to accept as found by Wallace (1991) as well. With regards to the role of observation as a professional development tool, Bailey (2006) states that effective classroom observations have pre- and post-observation dialogues between teachers and observers; however, such interactions rarely occur. This absence of communication is often due to unequal power relationship between teachers and supervisors (Wragg, 1999). As perceived to be an ultimate authority legitimized by the management (Cockburn, 2005), teachers possess no right to question the observers' verdict in case of any disagreement; rather they accept what is set forth. The teachers' lack of autonomy shows the negative influence of power imbalance on teacher-observer relationship. Consequently, the outcome and effectiveness of the feedback stage are compromised (Chamberlin, 2000). Devdas explains the points:

> *If I disagree with an observer, I have no choice but to sign the feedback forms and keep quiet. The power relationship affects the feedback stage. It's the pressure from the management. If you argue, it might backfire and you might lose your job.* (Devdas)

Teacher-observer relationship is often influenced by power imbalance and authoritative position of the observer which causes trust issues between the two parties. The participants' accounts suggest that observers have a top-down authority to make judgments on EFL teachers' once-a-year formal observation, which can affect their professional careers. Bailey (2006) deems it as a tug of war between the teachers and supervisors due to which the participants in this study consider it a hard choice to reflect on their practices and discuss their shortcomings in the feedback meeting. Heathcliff's explains:

> *In my observed lesson, if I think that there was something that did not go as well as I wanted to, then I usually keep it to myself. It's better not to discuss it with the observer because it will give him another questionable aspect of your teaching since the goal is not developmental.* (Heathcliff)

The observers' subjective approach to classroom observation is another reason that affect observer-teacher relationship and creates an environment of distrust and uncertainty. Subjectivity is a common concern of teachers in different educational settings (Borich, 2008). EFL teachers in this study perceive the observers' approach subjective. They believe that observers lack uniformity with regards to the implementation of observation rubric as their feedback on the same teaching point and their interpretation of an evaluative criteria often differ. They observe teaching events from their subjective lens which results in divergence in

opinions. The findings coincide with Wragg's (1999) views who questions the trustworthiness of classroom appraisal and states that observers often see what they look for. These remarks illustrate the subjective nature of evaluative observations, which are mostly done by those individuals who observe classroom interactions with a subjective lens (Foster, 1996). Similarly, Saudi EFL teachers in this study have voiced their concerns regarding the assessment criteria which are subjectively interpreted by observers in the Saudi EFL context.

> *6 to 7 observers have observed me so far. The change of observer often amazes me. For example, one observer might rate you high in one area, the other might consider it a point of improvement.* (Parson)

> *There is no resemblance in their preferences. One prioritizes one thing the other gives it no value.* (Simon)

The findings indicate that classroom observation is a challenge due to some of the observers' lack of proper qualification and training. This is exactly what Namaghi (2011) established. The findings also show that EFL teachers are often promoted to the positions of supervisors and observers with no sufficient experience and training of teacher training. These views are in line with Bailey's (2006) findings, which affirm the fact that visits by unqualified or untrained supervisors lead to teacher anxiety in the Saudi EFL context.

> *The observer's qualification does make a difference. If he got no solid ELT background and doesn't have proper training as an observer, he is going to make problems for the teacher. In the presence of a qualified and well-trained observer, you feel much better in your class as you know he is not going to harm you.* (Devdas)

> *The observer is a powerful man sitting at the back of your class, this is something which gives you some bad feelings, feeling of nervousness because you know that he is in power, he can make decision. But if he is qualified, professional, and experienced it reduces the element of stress and you feel comfortable.* (Parson)

EFL teachers in this study have performed to the best of their abilities. Their classroom performances and achieved scores are indicative of the fact that they have certainly improved their instructional practices; however, the element of threat and insecurity of job due to classroom observation prevail. In addition, teachers' lack of autonomy, observers' subjectivity, imbalance power relations between teachers and observers, supervisors' lack of professional training, and fear of losing job are those factors which impact pedagogical practices in the Saudi EFL context. These factors of evaluative classroom observation were common in 20th century as established by Williams (1989) and Quirke (1996) in non-EFL contexts. However, these traits are present in EFL settings, which make

classroom observation a difficult experience for the EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia.

> *With the current observation system, there is still an element of threat and it is related to how objective or subjective the approach of the observer is. This is always in my mind which makes me feel anxious.* (Devdas)

> *Classroom observation is still a threat to my job. Although, I'm pretty sure that I have the ability to give a lesson as per the established norms, but you never know what comes your way.* (Simon)

Findings of this section substantiate our untested assumptions about the threat element of classroom observation. For us, the observers' patronizing, threatening and unprofessional attitude has always been a nerving experience. Similar to the teachers' concerns, we find the observers' subjectivity and their lack of training factors that often cause frustration.

Collegial and Collaborative Interactions to Offset the Challenge

Collegiality emerged as a vital theme in the data. In a challenging context, the supportive role of peers and colleagues has been valued by the EFL teachers. Owing to their informal meetings, discussions and sustained interactions in a friendly environment, they have built professional networks and shown interdependence on one another, specifically in lesson planning and preparation. In line with Collinson's (2012) findings, teachers seek specific professional development with a desire to learn and create ways to assist colleagues by sharing their insights. Moreover, interdependence or reciprocal obligation, a key concept of Community of Practice (CoP) (Mercer, 2000; Vescio et al., 2008) has been shared by the teachers. The excerpts below are typical of how they helped each other with various tasks.

> *I discuss the whole lesson with my peers. It depends, which of my colleague has time or what he is good at. I bother them a lot. I give them few sittings and they always respond well. I send them the lesson again and again so they can check and make sure there is nothing missing* (Parson)

> *Whenever I am in trouble I go to my seniors and they treat me like their mentee.* (Faizi)

> *Peers are more helpful because you can confidently approach them at any time. Since they are not going to judge you or grade you, you can discuss the odd things too.* (Jim)

The above excerpts indicate that collegial support continues throughout the academic year and the learning opportunities are explored through participation in communities of practice (CoPs) and meeting with "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4). To Hargreaves (1997, p. 95), a collegial professional is "someone who relies on consultation, collaborative planning and other kinds of joint work with colleagues", thus their professional development becomes an ongoing process (Flint, et al., 2011). Data reveal that collegial interactions have raised their awareness of other professional challenges, i.e. cultural sensitivities, contextual demands and students' behavior.

> *It is very crucial to be in a circle of professionals who are always there to help you. They always share their experiences and the challenges of the context with a piece of advice how to cope with them, because teaching at the ELI is very demanding and different from other contexts.* (Heathcliff)

For Grossman et al. (2001), "learning from colleagues requires both a shift in perspective and the ability to listen hard to other adults" (p. 32). Since, learning is a situated practice (Lave &Wenger 1991) and often guided by more experienced people (Vygotsky, 1978), Shulman (2004) discourages pedagogical solitude and emphasizes a shift in teaching from private to public property, which will enable teachers' practices to become open to others, specifically to their peers. In this study, teachers have shown their tendency to arrange peer observations in order to improve their teaching practices.

> *I consider peer observation very crucial in teacher development and particularly in a successful show of an observed lesson. We often sit together to discuss our visits to each other's' classes. We learn from one another.* (Heathcliff)

This practice of peer observation often takes colleagues' critical feedback into consideration that prepares teachers for their formal observation, gives them insight into their pedagogical practices and offers them an opportunity to reflect on their teaching techniques. The excerpts below are in line with Guskey's (2000) understanding of peer observation as "one of the best ways to learn is by observing others, or by being observed and receiving specific feedback from that observation" (p. 23).

> *I often ask my colleagues to come to my class and see how things are going on. They give me an overview of the things in the class which helps me with my observed lesson.* (Parson)

> *I believe peer observation is more effective and there is more learning involved. I was observed by senior colleagues three times and I learned a lot from those people because the sharing was honest. There was no threat and the purpose was only developmental not punishment.* (Simon)

We are in complete accord with the EFL teachers' viewpoint that concerted efforts have promoted collegiality and played a part in their professional development. Their comments have further strengthened our beliefs in the concept of interdependence and collaborative ventures. Although, we have always sought a senior colleague's assistance with lesson planning and other professional issues, it would be a useful way of learning to work in teams and ameliorate our teaching skills.

The Impact of Contextual Factors on EFL Teachers' Professional Development

a) The Role of Professional Development Unit (PDU) in On-Site Learning

Studies have determined the impact of the situated and social nature of workplace on teachers' learning by increasing the use of internships, mentoring, workshops and other networks to support professional learning and development at work (Brockbank & McGill, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006). Similarly, at the ELI, the role of the PDU is predominantly characterized by transmitting new and updating the existing knowledge of the teachers.

Among contextual factors which have contributed to the teachers' professional growth, the PDU has played a phenomenal role. For instance, opportunities to attend workshops, seminars, and presentations based on the teachers' classroom needs have added to their existing knowledge. These initiatives are in line with the changing perspective about professional development, which suggests that professional learning activities should be context-specific and meaningful (Hargreaves, 1994; Meirink et al. 2007). Moreover, these activities can prove effective if they are based on teachers'questions and solutions, integrated in the practitioners' daily practice (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). Likewise, the teachers' exposure to different teaching techniques has incurred a great deal in context specific training and workshops that have enriched their pedagogical repertoire and have changed their attitude and perceptions of summative observations at the ELI.

> *At the ELI, some of the workshops are very useful because they are focused on the students and teachers' needs.* (Faizi)

> *Earlier PDU meant to be a threats factory- observing and giving us a list of our strengths and weaknesses and that's all. It would decide our*

> *future in this institute. But now I think they are giving us lots of opportunities to improve our teaching and work on our weaknesses.* (Devdas)

We have always suspected the role of the PDU in relation to teacher development, since it has been responsible for teacher annual evaluation and classroom observations. However, the participants have rendered its positive aspects and enlightened us on its sustained efforts to offer teachers opportunities for developing their classroom skills. In sum, the teachers' comments have convinced us to consider the crucial role of PDU in on-site learning.

b) The Bright Side of Evaluation and Accountability

In the words of Hargreaves (2000), contexts of rapid change and uncertainty as well as pressure and demands are forcing teachers to respond proactively to the standards set by the management to learn new skills and upgrade their knowledge. At the ELI, the pressure of annual evaluation has compelled teachers to acquire qualifications, such as CELTA, DELTA and MA TESOL.

The data indicate that teachers were not up to the task at the start of their teaching at the ELI; rather they adapted their practices, changed their pedagogical beliefs and thus developed professionally. Similar to the findings by Groves and Ronnerman (2012), teachers have identified the 'challenge' as a feature of the professional learning endeavor that is inextricably associated with growth, change and transformation. The below quotes highlight the role of external pressure which has driven teachers to update their knowledge in order to meet the standards of the workplace.

> *The pressure took me to do CELTA and that's the achievement. As a teacher, I have developed my instructional and management skills and earned a repute of a good teacher.* (Jim)

> *The evaluation system has certainly moved me to go for courses and workshops. Last year, I took four courses in the British council on motivation and classroom management. I took CELTA last summer and now I am looking forward to improve myself more by doing MA TESOL.* (Simon)

> *Improvement has come out of compulsion, otherwise I would have just relaxed and taught my own way.* (Heathcliff)

> *I came out of the GTM, traditional way of teaching and polished my classroom management skills. My teaching techniques revamped completely. I grade my language well now according to the students' level. I know different approaches that help me teaching different skills,*

> *i.e. reading listening, vocabulary, grammar and writing etc. so that all came from that pressure of observations.* (Faizi)

The above quotes also show a transition phase of the teachers from traditionalists to modern classroom teachers. This transition is not an abrupt or automatic process; rather the teachers had to unlearn certain skills to move to the top and gain a new professional identity. As professional identity is considered a "socially and culturally constructed self, formed through life's experiences" (McKeon & Harrison, 2010, p. 27) and is not a static phenomenon, teachers have gone through the experience of self-construction during their teaching at the ELI.

Teachers' Personal Efforts and Professional Development

The teachers' professional development has not initiated from a top-down management pressure alone, a lot of personal efforts are equally involved in the process that has helped them transform their practices. Their intrinsic motivation and the pressure of accountability together contributed to their professional learning and development. This motivation is seen in their effort to read articles and consult books in a bid to overcome their weaknesses. Like other participants, Devdas and Faizi explicate these points.

> *It was both the motivation and pressure of the management that I went for professional courses because I love teaching and I wanted to improve. At the same, it is important to prove your professional development progress for annual evaluation.* (Devdas)

> *To work on the proposed areas of growth by the observer, first I make a list of things that my observer points out. Secondly, I consult books and internet and read recent articles relevant to my areas of growth and learners' needs.* (Faizi)

To ensure good performance the observed lesson, teachers adopt various strategies which are discussed in the following section.

a) Positive Outcome of an Observed Lesson: Planning and Preparation

Before the classroom observation, the EFL teachers prefer to arrange brief meetings with their observers. From a developmental perspective, pre-observation meetings are meant to discuss set targets with observers; however, in present context such meetings have two key purposes: first, to understand the observers' priorities, second, to discuss any potential issues that may affect the observed lesson.

> *In pre-observation meeting, I discuss any logistic issues in my classroom, i.e. out of order projector, light, whiteboard, problem with chairs. Also, I would like to know the observer's perspective about my observation, what he wants to see in my lesson, so I can plan accordingly.* (Faizi)

Pre-observation conference is perceived a positive way to approach a formal observation. Also, informal observations and their feedback help teachers set priorities and make an outline of their lesson plans. Interview data have indicated that for an observed lesson, teachers spend approximately 6 to 8 hours and 2 to 3 days preparing and organizing material and activities. They believe that preparing for an observed lesson is different from that of a usual lesson in many aspects, however it helps them in long run.

> *The preparation time before the observation takes so much effort that the whole process becomes developmental.* (Simon)

> *The long hour's preparation has really helped me develop as a teacher.* (Heathcliff)

b) Reflection

Reflection is another dominant theme in the data that has led to the teachers' transformation. Teachers often reflect on their observed lessons and the observers' feedback, link that feedback to daily lessons and strive to overcome weaknesses highlighted by the observers. Furthermore, they refer to their teaching folders containing previous observation lesson plans and their feedback vis-à-vis materials used in workshops and teacher training courses. This reflective exercise helps them with their preparation and organization of ideas in a lesson to be observed. For Minott (2010) and Tigelaar et al. (2006) teaching is characterized by the consideration of existing knowledge, beliefs and experiences along with the assimilation of what is being learnt from different aspects of teaching. Thus, Minott (2010, p. 327) considers 'reflection' a crucial element of professional development and argues that reflecting on an "understanding of what works" in classroom informs effective teaching that promotes student learning. The excerpts below show how reflective practices contribute the teachers' learning.

> *I have a folder of old lesson plans, their feedbacks which I always revisit before I prepare my observed lesson. I look at the feedback and consider the areas of growth and make sure I don't repeat my mistakes in my new lesson. It is always a good idea to keep a clean and neat record of your lesson plans over the years to reflect and refer to on and off.* (Heathcliff)

> *I usually video tape my class and watch it with a critical eye. Sometimes, I share it with my colleagues for their feedback. There is learning in this no doubt.* (Faizi)

The above quotes reflect what Wilson et al. (2011) consider effective teacher professional development: "one that is sustained and long-term (allowing for teachers to repeatedly try out new strategies and to reflect on what worked and did not) and focuses on records of practice, including student work" (p. 385). The data also reveal an interesting fact about the teachers' endeavor to improve their skills and develop their teaching practices by video tapping their classes and critically analyzing their own performances.

Conclusion

The results of this study have provided a detailed account of teachers' understanding of the incontestable role of evaluative classroom observation in their professional development. However, this development has not stemmed from the use of observation as a tool to raise teaching and learning standards, rather the pressure from the top-down management system and the fear of being fired or demoted are reasons that have stimulated teachers to think out of the box and respond to the challenge more efficiently. Moreover, it is not merely due to the managerial demands and contextual factors that have led to the teachers' ability to offset this challenge, in fact, it is their personal drive to professionalize themselves in a strong collaborative culture through informal discussions, meetings and peer observations. Nevertheless, the challenge of observation persists due to the observers' lack of training, their subjective approach and the teachers' lack of autonomy.

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