The Affordances of Mobile-App Supported Teacher Observations for Peer Feedback

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ABSTRACT

Mobile technologies offer new affordances for teacher observation in teacher education programs, albeit under-examined in contrast to video technologies. The purpose of this article is to investigate the integration of mobile technologies into teacher observation. Using a case study method, the authors compare the traditional narrative paper-pen, mobile app-supported, and video observation methods. Participants included 2 experienced teachers of English as a Foreign Language who were selected as the observers and observees in a higher education institutional context. The data was collected in three different teaching sessions over 4 weeks. Data sources included lesson observation notes and semi structured interviews conducted with teachers after each session. Results suggest recommendations for the integration of mobile and video based observation tools into teacher professional development programs, pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, as well as teacher certificate programs.

KEYWORDS

EFL, In-Service Training, Mobile Apps, Peer-Feedback, Peer Observation, Self-Reflection

INTRODUCTION

Professional development activities, particularly for in-service teachers, serve as the primary means of learning from colleagues and others, disseminating their own knowledge and more importantly, reflecting on their own teaching in their micro-contexts (Bullough, 2009). Approaches to professional development include consultation, coaching, lesson study, mentoring, reflective supervision, and technical assistance (Alfaki, 2014). Although these have been in practice for a long time, recent research addresses the importance of authentic teacher learning in professional development programs (Park & Lee, 2015). Peer observation is one way to facilitate and enhance professional development activities in a collaborative manner (Carroll & O’Loughlin, 2014). The ultimate goal of such activities is to enable one’s development by engaging in meaningful activities with others. Mobile and video based technologies, when used with appropriate applications, can provide more collaborative learning opportunities by creating what would not be possible without having them (Valdivia & Nussbaum, 2007; Zurita & Nussbaum, 2004). Nevertheless, choosing the best technology and application combination for peer observations to facilitate more effective practices requires trying out different technologies and evaluate their usefulness.

Researchers have studied the impact of mobile technologies on both traditional and innovative ways of teaching and learning, revealing how mobile learning is practiced in numerous ways (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2007). Recently, teacher education research has had a growing interest
in exploring the potentials of mobile learning and devices for enhancing teacher learning in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs (Baran, 2014; Kearney & Maher, 2013). The key to an enriched teacher learning experience is having an effective, evidence-driven and innovative practice of mobile tool integration (Melhuish & Falloon, 2010). There is a need for an evidence based discussion on the affordances of mobile and video based technologies on teachers’ peer-feedback and peer-observation practices.

This case study aimed to reveal how mobile technologies as well as video observation and traditional paper-pen methods support teacher observation schemes for professional development. The study examined: a) the affordances of these methods, b) their challenges, and c) how they differ in terms of their effectiveness in post-observation feedback in an English as a Foreign Language context.

PEER OBSERVATIONS AND PEER REVIEW FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Observations are one of the most common methods used in teacher professional development programs to foster the spirit of collegiality, self-esteem, self-respect, self-awareness, mutual trust, respect and cooperation between teachers (Drew, Phelan, & Lindsay et al., 2017). As one of the ways to carry out observation in teacher education, peer observation is defined as a reflective process in which teachers find a way to critically approach and analyse their own teaching, which leads to development of teaching practices in terms of both methodology and pedagogy (Eri, 2014; Hendry, Bell, & Thomson, 2014).

There are different ways peer observation is implemented; although it is mostly preferred to be conducted face-to-face, alternatives include blended and online learning modes (McKenzie & Parker, 2011). However, for any peer observation system to be successful, initially set foci and clear goals, mutual understanding of breadth and depth of the process, and a rationale behind it are seen as the key (Cosh, 1999). Creating a professional community built upon learning together helps the development of teacher reflection (Butler & Schnellert, 2012). Research up to date do not provide a certain framework to select the best instruments or tools for peer observation (Carroll & O’Loughlin, 2014). Jones and Gallen (2015) stated that “any change that requires new pedagogical practices raises the question of how best to support staff through such a change” (p. 2). This is due to “different purposes and roles associated with different peer observation techniques” (Carroll & O’Loughlin, 2014, p. 447). Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to peer observation and its success relies on the quality of the process and the skills of the participants (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005).

Observations play a critical role for continuing professional development (Kurtoglu-Eken, 2001; McMahon, Barrett & O’Neil, 2007). Peer observations are found to be advantageous in many sense, but one of the crucial aspects of an effective peer observation lies at the feedback exchanged between the observer and the observer. While peer observation is a means for self-reflection, its effectiveness can be determined to the extent of the feedback provided by both parties. As Schön (1987) puts it, it is “a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled” (p. 31). Learning is likely to occur through the analysis stimulating reflection on one’s own practice because reflection is potentially a powerful learning mechanism (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The purpose of reflections is not to judge the observee’s teaching, yet to foster self-reflection and increase self-awareness concerning teaching performance (Cosh, 1999). That is, reflections are considered integral for self-development.

AFFORDANCES OF VIDEO AND MOBILE OBSERVATION TOOLS FOR FEEDBACK IN PEER OBSERVATIONS

Videos have been on demand recently due to an increasing interest for integrating information technologies into the use of cases in teacher education (Boling, 2007). One of the primary reasons of using video based reflections within in-service teacher education is that videotaping lessons allow encouraging and deepening reflective practice. To illustrate, Sherin and van Es (2005) documented