

PEER OBSERVATION AS A SUSTAINABLE COMPONENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALGERIAN UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching a language requires the teacher to have access to basic information about language, to get a deeper understanding of its systemic aspects and develops awareness that permits him to make a vision building on the pedagogical axes which sustain his/her teaching to make it that of satisfaction and improvement. These are the primary standards and objectives of the teaching principles that teachers wish to attain in the Algerian tertiary education. Yet it is truism that, in the area of pedagogy, teachers should be encouraged to observe value and understand their own experience, and to evaluate and integrate relevant external practice and knowledge into their own evolving model of effective teaching and learning. Unfortunately, in Algeria, this is not the case, because almost all university teachers whether prospective or experienced have never been agents to any training and have definitely tackled the job of teaching with no pedagogical preparation. Reversely then, if these teachers undertake reflection as a critical skill, they, most definitely, can refine the pedagogical practices which in the utmost sense meet the needs of their learners. All too often, if the concept of reflection is taken formally with peers attending meetings where they discuss what they do, how they do using feedback from peer review when undertaken as an exploratory task and as a purposeful platform towards change and betterment, it can then give rise to an undeniable improvement of teaching quality. Admittedly and beyond any doubt, most teachers learn to work on their professional development during the training and continue along their teaching careers. Therefore their teaching is generally evaluated by the professional development they have been subjected to. It is in fact the process that plays an essential role in successful education. Professional development is also considered as a bridge between would-be-teachers and experienced ones having the same objective which is guiding learners in achieving high standards of learning and development. It is then widely and increasingly recognised that the best way to build a systematic binding between these two teachers' categories, is by exploring the incentives that peer observation, as both a form of continuous professional development and as an investigative procedure can cause to offer. This paper, however, tries to underline the high values of peer observation, if accredited and made pervasive in the Algerian universities and sustained by the bases and principles of an approach of teaching, can foster, by raising teachers' awareness to its processes and byways, predictable comprehensive formulation and enactment of teaching practices, hence, to better quality teaching. The ultimate and sound call is; therefore, directed to both university teachers and decision makers to respectively look for new possibilities to change their teaching assumptions and put into action new academic regulations to promote what has proved to be successful worldwide in the domain of the teaching/learning process of higher education.

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KEYWORDS: Teacher Training, Novice, Experienced Teachers, Professional Development, Reflective Teaching, Peer Observation, Quality Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Teacher training and teacher development have, in the current state of the Algerian university, become a must to ensure better quality teaching in a globalised world which runs towards social and cultural progress at a pace reflecting innovations and inventions which occur here and there in a diversity of fields, and tertiary education is no exception. In order to cope with the unexpected, nowadays, for fear not to be caught in an on-going ritual behaviour of routinized and awkward practices, the profession of teaching requires from teachers to look at their teaching and classroom behaviour so as to transmit knowledge to students in a reliable and efficient way by undertaking training courses or by being involved

in a continuous professional development programme. Currently, in the Algerian context, however, there is no special evidence for professional training requirement for higher education teachers. Indeed teachers have never been subject of any provisional training course, nor have they been taking any professional development programmes which ensure them to acquire the necessary attitudes, beliefs and conceptions to enable themselves to become effective and competent teachers. On a further stand, and of considerable prominence, these teachers need an ideal professional development which provides them with the necessary skills and knowledge to design, deliver and evaluate tertiary educational programmes. In point of fact, what can make a

significant alternative is peer review as a key concept of teacher education development and as a major component of reflective teaching. If this concept is to be implemented and accredited within the department over a long period of time, the whole academic staff will benefit from it as if they embark in an on-going professional development and turn to be life-long teaching learners and would reach the apogee of quality teaching.

Characteristics of Good Teaching

Actually, the prerequisites a teacher should have before tackling the job of teaching are, most definitely, warmth, humour and the ability to care about people. Added to this is the planning of lectures, hard work and self-discipline. What has increasingly become important, on a worthier side, is that teachers should imperatively have a minimum professional knowledge of instruction and pedagogy in order to articulate the most important standards of the teaching job and substantively update and refine their own assumptions and beliefs about teaching. What is more, research has proved that teachers must have a thorough catch up in many areas of professional knowledge. Actually, they need to know about the curriculum materials and programmes appropriate for their subject so as to teach certain learners some particular concepts, the characteristics and cultural backgrounds of learners, and most of all, the goals and the purposes of teaching. In this regard Brown and McInryre (1989) reported that a good teacher should:

- Create a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere in the classroom
- Retain control in the classroom
- Present work in an interesting and motivating way
- Provide conditions so that learners understand the work
- Make clear what learners are to do and achieve
- Judge what can be expected of a learner
- Help learners with difficulties
- Encourage learners to raise their expectations of themselves
- Develop personal mature relationship with learners
- Demonstrate personal talent or knowledge

Development as a Result of Recent Events

Under this last definition, development is intimately associated with the impact of some recent events and incidents conducive to a change in modelling ways of teaching. These events and incidents do not happen deliberately; they are not chosen. They generally come from external sources; for instance, complaints coming from the institution about the students' little progress, or the introduction of a new technology in the classroom (interactive whiteboards).

To sum then, we have shed light on three possible definitions of the term development and applied them

in relation to ELT. We have come up with the conclusion that the teacher can change or develop in the following ways:

- Unconscious change (to change without noticing change)
- Deliberate change (to make things change)
- Change as a result of recent happenings.
- Teacher development: a Necessity in Education

By and large, professional development in any domain is crucial as it helps learn and apply newly acquired knowledge and skills which, in turn, will improve one's performance at work. What is more, development is seen as an on-going learning that is not only approved by the profession, but rather a requirement for keeping the job.

In the field of education, research has evidenced that quality teaching and school leadership are the most important factors in enhancing student achievement. For teachers to be as effective as possible they have to "continually" expand their knowledge and skills in order to put into practice the best pedagogical strategies. Also, teachers learn how to help students learn at the highest levels and how to better cope with their needs and weaknesses.

Regretfully, many teachers may not be well aware of most efficient methods for improving their own teaching on the one side and their students learning strategies on the other side. Besides, many misunderstandings do exist among teachers about the notion of development; its purpose and function. Teacher development seems to be one of the most needed strategy educational institutions have to strengthen and support at a time when quality education accounts too much. In a nutshell then, teacher professional development is undisputedly the gateway to attain better teaching and learning as well.

The Current Ranking of the Algerian University

Sometime ago, the Algerian Higher Education Ministry and Scientific Research spoke with great indignation about the deplorable situation of the Algerian university which was ranked among the world universities the very last globally. The classification made by the prestigious international institutions, put the ministry officials in an uncomfortable situation as it created thorny constraints that stand high as obstacles to prevent the Algerian students to further their studies in foreign universities. The problem is said to be of conformity with European and Asian universities. It is mentioned then that the Algerian universities/ University are far in the black back because of the very poor teaching quality and most definitely the total absence of developing processes. The three major institutions that made the classification standards did not include any Algerian university among the 500 best worldwide. Meanwhile, Times magazine ranked the

Saudi “Fahd” University at the 338th position and Cairo University at the 407th position. More subjectively, “Biometrix” index has ranked the University of Tlemcen, western Algeria, at the 23rd position at the African level and 4132 at the world level. A Spanish classification of the world best universities carried out over the year 2011 indicated that the Algerian universities are the worst in the Arab world. Algiers university comes at the 80th position in the Arab world and 6275 at the world level (Elchoroukonline.com, 2014). The perennial and deplorable situation of the Algerian universities has indeed bowled over many Algerian university teachers who really wish to probe their teaching, with their high creative abilities, so as to raise its quality to the unlimited. But alas most of them have gone to great length, albeit unsuccessfully. What in fact they need, with regard to this, is an on-going effective professional development.

Main Perspectives of CPD

Continuous professional development is regarded as a must for all teachers of whatever rank, since it is incessantly viewed as an enhancer to better teaching and therefore the concept that boost successful achievements of learning outcomes (Gusky 2002). It is, by the same token, conceived that these achievements can be of great prominence when approached by good observation and evaluation practice. Yet, it is essential for teachers to exchange their techniques, ideas and tips of teaching especially in the context of observation where various issues can be raised and congruently argued. Talking to students can intensively reveal a myriad of hidden areas of whether the process of learning is effective or defective and that might be obtained by the teacher beyond any external intervention. The fact that the teacher questions the strategies he adopts in his classroom and how much his students acquire knowledge by administering a questionnaire, or just taking notes during the lecture, can help him greatly gaining new insights which allow him better his teaching. Continuing professional development lets helps undeniably the teacher find new interests within his teaching and remains interested in his teaching. If a teacher is interested in what he does, he will continue to become better in it (Scrivener, 1998). Another corner, to which a teacher must set a high premium, is the regular meeting with the other academic staff to discuss the possibilities, the alternatives, the key notes of successful learning as well as the in-depth understanding of pedagogical practices which lead to positive learning outcomes. Within the group all teachers should grow and change with openness to self and to others. This grow should, definitely, be endeavoured by risk-taking, working, caring and sharing...the members of the group gather in and review the fruit of their learning. (Heron, 1989) Last but not least, as a major concern to continuous professional development is the close

binding between teacher and what happens inside the learner. It is believed that self-awareness on the part of the teacher is an essential complement to understanding what is happening inside the learner, and that developing awareness lies at the heart of our development as teachers (Adrian Underhill, 1994). With the raise of awareness both cognitively and affectively, the teacher can greatly contribute to the level up of the student learning outcomes. However, it is incessantly believed that special in-service courses can offer the teacher the possibilities to cover a myriad of pedagogical areas.

Principles of Effective Professional Development

Any teacher career encompasses a long process of professional development in which the teacher must learn serial of stratagems that help him to be in convenient position of applying appropriate methodologies of teaching. Professional development lays on the ground of setting objectives and principles that enhance teachers to match their teaching goals with their learners needs and to help them develop proficiency in the target language. In order to fulfil the purpose in view, the professional development must be up to date with the teacher’s career development. According to Huberman (1989), teacher’s careers are characterised by cycles of conflict/resolution that lead to growth and development. His research describes five stages in the professional lives of teachers: *exploration and stabilisation, commitment, diversification and crisis, serenity and distancing, and conservatism and regret*. While getting involved in teaching career, teachers need to identify their specific needs at each stage. Hereby, so as to level up and excel the potential of teachers, high-quality development should adequately incorporate the following principles which have the mission of supporting teachers to help all learners achieve the standards of learning and development. Professional Development:

- focuses on teachers as central to students learning;
- focuses on individual, collegial and organisational improvement;
- respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers;
- reflects best available research and practice in teaching/learning;
- enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, use of technologies, and other essential elements in teaching to high standards;
- promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools;
- requires substantial time and other resources;
- is driven by a coherent long-term plan;
- is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

What can be asserted to this extreme is that building an on-going professional development, is not an easy task for educators and teacher trainers who want to undertake a change in education, worthy to be raised is how to create a kind of compatibility between teacher training and teacher development and, accordingly, adopt feasible ways to ascertain how much change is needed by evaluating the current teaching situation in the university and that is set up mainly by a close study that would enlighten the university teachers' conceptions and beliefs of their own teaching. Hence, the change that drives the professional development may be liable to bring about the change in perceptions of classroom practices.

The Conceptions and Beliefs of University Teachers

In the field of teaching, many researches have noticed and asserted that university teaching and students' behaviour, in the process of learning, is mainly related to adapted theories of teaching which drive the beliefs and assumptions of these teachers about their own teaching (Marland, 1998). This is what really happens to Algerian university teachers who have never benefitted of any professional development and that is mainly due to an absence of an official status which requires from teachers to evolve in a continuous professional development by certification or contractual agreements, that serves to bridge the gap between prospective and experienced teachers, and also serves teachers to take on models and strategies that enhance efficiency in teaching and effectiveness in reaching the learning outcomes. To get back to the point, these beliefs are shaped to offer insights to teachers and to form their conceptions of teaching across the educational settings. What is worthy to note, also and in another context, is that these beliefs have an undeniable impact on the judgements of the teacher about the relevance of knowledge in particular situation (Pajares, 1992). To be brief, this necessarily means that there is a relationship between the teacher's beliefs and his conceptions of teaching. In a like manner, Schommer (1994) thinks that these beliefs vary from naïve to sophisticated. A teacher who holds naïve beliefs generally sees knowledge as simple, clear and specific, and then, the learning ability is innate and fixed and can be directly transmitted to the learners. Contrariwise, the teacher whose beliefs are sophisticated regards knowledge as being complex and uncertain, and can only be gradually fuelled to the learner. As a matter of fact, it is conceived that Algerian university teachers may be ranged among the naïve teachers according to Schommer (1994). Alternatively, Hashweh (1996) in his research on naïve and sophisticated beliefs, found that teachers who had sophisticated views were more likely to undertake the approach of facilitating lectures dispensing; whereas, those who held naïve beliefs

viewed utterly teaching as only transmitting knowledge. Both views are, therefore, distinguished in the sense that, the former stands for a learner-centred approach; whereas, the latter, tends to direct his teaching to a teacher-fronted approach. To this specific end, (Varnava-Marouchou, 2007) pointed out that the learner becomes dependant when the teacher thinks he is the only one who knows the subject and accurately transmits it, so this conception is referred to as 'lecturer-dependant'. A student-centred conception, on the other hand, is one where high quality learning which is viewed by (Watkins; 1998) as "*requiring active construction of meaning and the possibility of conceptual change on the part of the learners*". (Watkins, 1998:20) From this pedagogical alternative, the teacher runs implicitly the lecture by facilitating and encouraging the learner to become responsible of his/her knowledge acquisition. Being that, this conception is referred as 'student-dependant'. (Varnava-Marouchou, 2007).

The Current State of Professional Development

The needs of educationalists and academic officials throughout the world are to identify the learners' needs and to improve them, to enhance teaching efficiency, to increase the use of information and communications technologies and to raise awareness of the impact of globalisation on academic life (Nicoll and Harisson, 2003) These needs definitely represent the main objectives the Algerian university officials wish to reach in order to ensure with the academic staff the promotion of quality teaching and perfection in education. Nevertheless, quality teaching requires teachers to change their classroom practices and sometimes radically (James, 2005), but this cannot be achieved unless the teacher is in a position to seek a never-ending quest of training or development. In other words, it is imperative for university teachers to learn how to teach before and whilst teaching (pre-service and in-service training). Henceforth, teacher learning, as a process which has become increasingly important to ensure teachers to be successful in matching their teaching goals with their students' learning needs, is a necessary condition for student learning. Professional development is also needed for teachers to enable their students develop proficiency in the target language and understanding of the cultures associated with that language. Regarding this, it is currently believed, that it is no logic to speak about all these in the Algerian University, since teachers have never been subjects to/of special and official accredited training courses, nor have they been launched/initiated in an on-going bottom-up teacher education development, which allow them to improve teaching quality and student learning. Ample evidence; however, is provided by educationalists stating that training can indeed improve various aspects of teaching especially when this is evaluated by the learners themselves. Thus university teachers who

received training can by all means gain insights and effective strategies to improve their students learning. In this special context, (Trowler and Bamber, 2005) highlighted:

“Train higher education teachers to teach, they will do a better job than the untrained ones” (Trowler and Bamber, 2005:80)

This indubitably clears up the idea that on-going development is essential in the teaching field to such an extent that teachers who do not inquire about developing to become real teachers are to possess everything but the potential to teaching effectively. In our Department of English, no single teacher has been subject to/of any training and so are newbie as well as experienced teachers. It is claimed on another ground that all teachers, whether prospective, tenured, experienced, or even professionals are liable to make awkward practices but this awkwardness is hidden away from these teachers because it is involved in a ritual behaviour (Underhill, 1985). What goes well in a classroom goes unnoticed and what goes badly goes unnoticed, too. The point is that the perennial situation in which language teaching prevails in our universities due to the absence of training and development in our Department, has given rise to non-conformity of the teaching profession. Thereby the problem is that the Algerian officials tend, in their official speeches, to ignore the situation and focus on just one expressed will to ‘improve’. There is increasing evidence with this attendant view that university teachers need emphatically to attend special training courses for their professional growth, otherwise, their teaching will not bring satisfaction and success and this what really happens in the department of English of Tlemcen University. In this line of thought (Edge, 2002) posits that

Teachers teach at their best in different ways. For this reason and out of a sense of professional respect for colleagues whose development will take different paths than my own, and lead to different outcomes, I feel that I need to offer them the same sense of empowerment that I claim for myself: if you are making the kind of commitment to continuing professional growth that I have been talking about, I believe that you deserve respect for your teaching (Edge, 2002:51).

Edge’s quotation urges teachers to be engaged in a professional development since it is crucial and has the power to substantiate the whole process of teaching and learning. What is more important, teachers undertaking the path of development and peer observe one another, would change their beliefs which in turn would lead to an important expansion of their knowledge and skills, contribute to their growth and enhance their effectiveness with their

learners. Henceforth, they become more respected than any other teacher among academics could ever be, and so would grow their teaching

Peer Observation as Continuous Professional Development

As an explorative and investigative procedure, peer observation is regarded as the most powerful source of insight. It is also, on a broader sense, viewed as a collaborative non-evaluative process consisting of two or more peers who mutually take profit from the exchanges held in dialogues. It is within these dialogues that arise questions which intend to stimulate reflection and discussion meaning to provide each other with feedback. Yet, peer observation, in this view, tends to bring teachers together and provides them the chance to interact and share their ideas and expertise of teaching. Observation gives to teachers a new outlook built on the way the other teachers teach and much more it creates collegiality in any educational setting. Within this perspective (Gosling 2000) sets out the most important objectives that peer observation must stand on in whichever department.

- To assist departments in providing a high quality educational experience for its students
- To enhance the importance attached to quality of teaching
- To encourage all staff to reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching and identify their development needs
- To foster discussion and dissemination of best practice
- To increase staff awareness of the whole student experience
- To identify any weaknesses and put in place an action plan to remedy them

Peer observation is often, on a worthier side, used as part of a training course for prospective teachers, or as part of professional development process of individual, tenured to experienced teachers or the whole Department. More importantly, it does the clearing of the site of teaching from awkwardness and clumsy practices by guiding the teacher to new possibilities of refining and reformulating his teaching practices using his colleague’s feedback as a tool to conduct a new vision building. When it happens that the teacher being observed accepts the comments of the observer, this can be an effective source of learning experience (Gosling 2005). In its full sense, while organized in the whole Department, the impact of POT is undeniable and extends to the whole staff and compel teachers of different status and ranks to share understanding, standards of pedagogy and mutual willingness to use peer observation so that their learning on teaching would grow steadily and more importantly would get rid of those feelings of jadedness that accumulated over

static years of work. Within this thought, it is of high importance for a successful peer observation, that staff must be regarded as authentic peers, in which there need to be mutuality and respect for each of the teachers who take part in the observation scheme proposed to be implemented in their department. Afar from this context, it is increasingly recognized that many a teacher are sensitive to criticism, that they show a kind of aversion and disobedience and stand against the consensus of observation. As a matter of facts it is primordial to set it out with great care, respect and sympathy. When it comes to be undertaken with these requirements, the benefits grow many and diverse. They are mainly numbered as: increased teacher confidence, greater collegiality, encouragement of debate, dissemination of best practice and, most of all, outstanding improvement of teacher interactions with students (Marshall 2004, Bell and Mladenovic, 2008).

It has grown pervasive, on another hand, that peer observation offers novice teachers the opportunity to benefit from the good performance of teaching of experienced teachers and help them to decode, with effective strategies, what has been for them for so long a complexity to overcome. In a like manner, these teachers include in their practices and strategies what they have never tried before. Thereby for the observed teacher, the observer can set into sight an objective, a vision building of the lesson and, on a worthier side, can collect data about the lesson that the teacher who performs the lesson might not be able to gather, or even had never thought of before in his earlier teaching. But what tends to be negative when speaking about peer observation, is that not all teachers see it as being rather substantial and necessary to better one's teaching, but the majority implicitly articulate a kind of aversion in their behaviour and feel apprehension especially when they are told that their teaching which has been always private will suddenly be made public. Such an anxiety was described as a hurdle to overcome when implementing peer observation:

... it appears that fear is the most compelling reasons to forestall the implementation of peer review. How ironic that disciplines that pride themselves on the peer review of their research...can let peer review of teaching be so immobilizing! (Atwood et al., 2000)

In fact, it is a total rejection of the concept of peer observation since when it comes to their minds that they are to be evaluated they consider it as a threat. Observation is therefore seen as being closely related to supervisory and evaluation; consequently, it is often regarded as a threatening experience. Williams (1989) summed some of the negatives of the traditional classroom observations:

- The teachers did not. Like it. It was threatening, frightening, and regarded as an ordeal.
- It was prescriptive.
- The checklist focused on too much at once.
- The teachers had no responsibility for the assessment. It was teacher-centred.

Nowadays in higher education, it is increasingly recognised that peer observation receives far more importance and interest than any other form of professional development courses. It is, in fact, the method which offers the academic staff the possibility to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching of all teachers of the department by enhancing them to undertake reflective practice which in turn can be used as a method that offers formative feedback and therefore provides the evidence to substantiate student evaluation (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004). The evaluative form of observation is not thereby the only model with which is sought teaching effectiveness, but there exists other models which underpin change and betterment in the teaching profession (Gosling 2002).

Limitations of the Study

The present study can in no way be one-off since there have been many limitations whilst the overall description we provided. In fact, our choice fell upon and was limited only to peer observation as an investigative procedure in order to fulfil the purpose in view. This is to say that teachers as reflective practitioners can undertake other exploratory tasks such as: lesson report, keeping diary or teacher portfolio. The next concern was about the setting of the study which was carried out and limited only to the department of English in Tlemcen University, but since it is widely known that educational institutions meant for the pedagogical preparation of university teachers have never existed in Algeria, we avoid going to other universities. This clears up the fact that the obtained results were limited to the above-mentioned setting, but in our mind most definitely and utterly they reflect what happens all over the country.

Concerning teachers who analyse their own practices and consider alternative means for achieving their ends, it can be asserted that many a teacher has no knowledge of what reflective teaching is, may be because the byways of reflection still remain ignored at the level of higher education. This fact is indubitably the one which makes teachers still bewildered in applying the right techniques that can help them to extricate from practices which are no longer in current use. Furthermore, the subtle influence of the instructions that fall from above, have remarkably turned out teachers to blind followers the suggested programmes. Conversely, this must not prevent us to claim that there exist a great number of well- prepared, effective and caring

teachers who are concerned about their work and have always examined their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices and use the resulting insights to improve their teaching. Most of these skilled teachers have attained a high degree of expertise and an advanced level in the on going process of conveying knowledge. ... it appears that fear is the most compelling reasons to forestall the implementation of peer review. How ironic that disciplines that pride themselves on the peer review of their research...can let peer review of teaching be so immobilizing! (Atwood et al., 2000)

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CONCLUSION

Roughly speaking, language teaching education in Algeria has proved to be hollow and not adequate in terms of the preparation of teachers' practical courses to tackle their work with determination and commitment. Concerning teachers who analyse their own practices and consider alternative means for achieving their ends, it can be asserted that many a teacher has no knowledge of what reflective teaching is, may be because the byways of reflection still remain ignored at the level of higher education. This fact is indubitably the one which makes teachers still bewildered in applying the right techniques that can help them to extricate from practices which are no longer in current use. Furthermore, the subtle influence of the instructions that fall from above, have remarkably turned out teachers to blind followers the suggested programmes. Conversely, this must not prevent us to claim that there exist a

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be promulgated on the account of teachers' continuous professional development bring about the change; the radical change with which the Algerian University will hopefully gain an honourable position among the outstanding nations.

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