

Enhancing the Quality of EFL Pre-Service Teacher Training Through Peer Observation

Irina PUȘNEI

*Cahul State University “Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu”
Dunărea de Jos University of Galați*

Alina PINTILII

Cahul State University “Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu”

Abstract

Teachers' regard for peer observation is often ambivalent and defensive due to the stereotypical views which associate it with stress, anxiety and the fear of being criticised during the feedback sessions. Peer observation is often linked with negative emotions, which often overshadow its initial goal—teaching quality improvement. An attempt to change this perspective was made by bringing forward and cascading a revised concept of peer observation, which is unbiased and constructively oriented, through an observation competence-building project aimed at training pre-service and in-service teachers. This research aims to analyse the integration of peer observation during the English Didactics course, in accordance with the principles of the REFLECT project, where pre-service teachers were trained to conduct peer observations of micro-teaching sessions and practicum classes objectively. The upsides and limitations of piloting peer observations will be revealed and discussed throughout the research, aiming to offer an objective view of the project implementation experience.

Keywords: peer observation, pre-service teachers, reflection, unbiased, observation sheet.

INTRODUCTION

Peer observation has always been integral to the teacher training process, the teacher practicum, and teaching experience. Even though the value of peer observation for both the observant and the observed is universally recognised (Willerman et al., 1991; Sharmin, T., Mohi Uddin, M., 2024), there are risks that old observation patterns, which are often associated with assessment (Anderson, 2005: 125) may cause feelings of anxiety and nervousness. Other problems often result from subjective observations that do not accurately reflect classroom reality but take the form of critical or subjective compliments. Misinterpreting the concept of peer observation results in a process that is prone to failing its original purpose: to reflect the observed reality and benefit both sides, the observer and the observed pre-service teachers. Due to the duality of the concept and the blurred line between observing facts and interpretations, this study seeks to highlight the benefits and challenges of peer observation in pre-service teacher training. To confirm the hypothesis that peer observation is beneficial when it is objective, the data of observations conducted during the English Didactics course and practicum will be analysed and discussed, focusing on objectivity, detail, clarity, and the ways of offering and receiving post-observation feedback.

PEER OBSERVATION

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Peer observation is a complex process that involves the unbiased recording of factual classroom actions and requires specific tools and etiquette for giving and receiving feedback. It takes preparation, time for classroom input, and a non-evaluative approach to the process.

Much existing scientific literature on peer observation highlights its benefits in the classroom, with various scholars shedding light on different aspects of this approach. Benedetti (1997), Anderson (2005: 273), Dos Santos (2016: 39/40), Shakil (2024:76), and Gerges (2025) advocate for the concept of peer observation in terms of opportunities for professional development through formative experience and collaborative learning directed towards teaching quality improvement.

Peel (2005), Bell and Mladenovic (2008), and Yiend et al. (2014) adopt a broader approach to the observation process, discussing the rationales behind it and presenting three teaching observation models. Peel builds on the structural perspective of the observation process by emphasising the teachers' informative role in building and sharing observation experiences, engaging in collaborative visits, and engaging in reflective discussions. Bell and Mladenovic expand on the idea of a non-critical collaboration in peer observation, leading to constructive dialogue and experience exchange. This idea gained support in the studies of Yiend et al. (2014), Fletcher (2018), and Jia et al. (2024), who find the collaborative model more successful than evaluation and developmental models, as it is non-judgmental and benefits both parties (the observer and the observed). They also strengthen the role of process-based research and critical reflection in peer observation. These points of view underline the importance of objectively recording factual classroom events and constructive feedback. Similarly, Otero Saborido et al. (2024: 85) highlight the importance of the moral and ethical peer observation process based on professionalism and mutual respect. In this sense, developing a culture of peer observation would increase the trust between the observer and the observed. Thus, the observer's discrete presence and unbiased and constructive feedback will reduce the pressure on the observed and encourage collaborative reflectivity between the parties.

Yet, according to scholars like Corcelles Seuba (2023:224), Al Abri et al. (2024: 103), and Shakil (2024:75), peer observation is used in many educational institutions as a tool for measuring and assessing the efficacy and quality of instruction. This approach to peer observation may pose challenges for the observed ones, making them feel threatened and judged by the observers. Therefore, negative emotions and experiences may increase the anxiety and mistrust between both parties. The observers find it difficult to offer constructive feedback, whereas the observed learners may fail to receive feedback professionally. This may also undermine the constructive aspect of observation and cause resistance to receiving feedback.

Given the discrepant views of the peer observation process between the observers and the observed and the tendency to associate the observation process with evaluation, it became clear that the concept, as well as the process itself, must be revisited and brought forward as a process of recording facts, details, time, and actions without making any assumptions, building judgements and subjective opinions. A strong initiative emerged from the University of Zurich with the implementation of the REFLECT project, which aims to rethink the traditional and stereotypical concept of peer observation. In their handbooks, Golob and Weidinger (2022: 7) claim that both the observers and the observed can "undergo personal and professional development when they are observed, and their teaching is described and reported back by mirroring the reality through detailed and objective facts". Their approach to peer observation involves a gradual process of reshaping mindsets and building awareness and attitudes that support the original intention of peer observation: teaching quality improvement.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Overall, peer observation should be perceived as a constructive tool helping the pre-service teachers grow through coaching and scaffolding. In their first attempts at teaching, pre-service teachers often experience insecurities and struggle to overcome emotional and communicative barriers, which emphasise their need for collaboration and support from their observers, ranging from their Didactics course teachers to practicum mentors and coordinators. Proper guidance, which entails step-by-step observation, constructive analysis of micro-teaching and practicum teaching realities, and a supportive environment, should work towards opening the mindsets of both the observer and the pre-service teachers. They would, therefore, engage in a productive collaboration directed towards gradual improvement and enhanced teaching quality.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study builds upon observations conducted during the practicum and the English Didactics course, which trains pre-service teachers for pedagogical practicum and their role in teaching. Additionally, it is based on examining over 150 observation sheets that pre-service teachers completed during micro-teaching sessions and the practicum. Furthermore, this study analyses the ways of offering and receiving post-observation feedback.

Traditionally, peer observation has been an integral part of the assessment process during the micro-teaching sessions within the Didactics course and during practicum. Peer observation was aimed at measuring the pre-service teacher's skills based on criteria presented by the observer, which were included on observation sheets that could also be found in the Practicum Guide. These were presented as a list of indicators that the observer would tick in case they were observed, along with some remarks and recommendations written on the observation sheet that would be delivered during the feedback session.

Implementing the REFLECT project entails piloting REFLECT principles during the English Didactics course, redesigning observation sheets, and reshaping the way feedback is delivered and received. This builds observation competence, enabling pre-service teachers to approach observation as an unbiased process aimed at helping them improve their teaching skills. Piloting was also intended to develop practical skills in giving and receiving feedback, based on mutual respect, objectivity, and a constructive approach.

Given the complexity of rethinking the observation process through the REFLECT approach, it began with training the Didactics teachers who gained expertise through observation sheet design, preliminary discussions, practical peer observations of their colleagues, and offering and receiving feedback. Having gained experience, Didactics teachers varied and updated the observation sheets, providing updated guidelines on the observation process in the Practicum Guides. Piloting REFLECT principles on peer observations during the English Didactics course began with updating the course syllabus, embedding a module devoted to observation and feedback and rethinking the micro-teaching sessions as observation-competence building and scaffolding-oriented. During the course piloting, 10 second-year students and 4 third-year students were trained on how to conduct peer observations and participated in micro-teaching sessions, which were observed by their peers and the Didactics teacher. The observations were preliminarily planned so that every student involved would have the opportunity to observe the instructor and the peers and be observed during micro-teaching sessions. After the training, the pre-service teachers were enrolled in 4 weeks of practicum stages in secondary schools. During the first week of practicum training, the pre-service teachers observed their school mentors, and in the weeks that followed, they conducted five peer observations, following the stages of the REFLECT approach. The observation sheets were further submitted after micro-teaching sessions, as part of

Upon examining the observation sheets, it became clear that pre-service teachers were not bound to a particular observation template; they could edit their notes to make them readable afterwards. One could also easily note that some indicators (such as non-verbal communication, handouts, the board, and classroom equipment) were described in more detail than others. Some observers focused only on one or two indicators and omitted the others, as can be noted in the observation sheets illustrated below:

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License To address this issue, the students were given the task of watching a video lesson sequence and observing one or two indicators of a particular characteristic. First, this assignment allowed them to rewatch the moments they found difficult to observe and focus on facts rather than making judgements. Second, watching the same video multiple times helps improve the observation of details.

Another considerable challenge pre-service teachers faced during observation was refraining from interpretation and judgement during the observation process. Despite being trained to detach from personal impressions and avoid opinion words when observing their peers, most observers struggled to separate facts from opinions, especially in the early course piloting phase. Among the opinion phrases that pre-service teachers used most often are presented below:

Fig.3. Observation sheet 3. Characteristic: Teacher Talking Time and Students' Talking Time

1. Teacher talking time and student talking time
How did the teacher manage to reduce their talking time to provide more opportunities for students to speak?

The teacher gave students many opportunities to speak with each other and express their opinions, such as when they were paired up and asked about the conversation regarding the found wallet. The teacher provided clear instructions and then allowed the students to frequently discuss to correct or add information, which suggests that they could have allowed even more space for students to speak independently.

2. Instructions
How did the teacher organize the tasks and activities? Did the teacher use other means besides speech to give instructions (gestures, materials, etc.)?

The teacher explained the activities quite thoroughly using visual examples and real objects (such as the example of the wallet), which helped clarify the context. The teacher also asked students to repeat certain words and phrases, providing a clear structure to the lesson. They used questions to check understanding (e.g., "What kind of organization is the Red Cross?"), but there wasn't much mention of gestures or additional materials that could have complemented the instructions.

3. Classroom management
Did you observe effective examples of classroom management?

The teacher demonstrated good classroom management by dividing the students into pairs and small groups to discuss with each other, which allowed everyone to participate. This method was effective in keeping students engaged. However, the teacher frequently intervened in their discussions, which suggests that they could have given the students more autonomy.

4. Rapport
Did you observe moments where the teacher created good rapport with the students?

The teacher showed good rapport with the students, using a friendly tone and encouraging them to actively participate in discussions. The teacher also made personal connections, such as when talking about their sister and her driving habits. However, the teacher could have encouraged more spontaneous feedback from the students to increase natural interaction and comfort in discussions.

Fig.4. Observation sheet 4. Characteristic: Students

Follow-up - Filipe, John (Shames)

- Involvement - The students are fully engaged in the activities, following the teacher's calm instructions during the meditation. They are actively involved in creating a mind map and then interacting with their peers.

- Strengths and Weakness:

Students follow instructions well and appear engaged in both the individual and group tasks. They have a good understanding of the teacher's directions. - Strengths:

- Classroom management: the teacher manages the class effectively, giving clear instructions step by step. The use of a calm voice help maintain a focused and peaceful environment.

- Groups: There are 6 students in total. The teacher organizes the students first into individual activities and then facilitates peer-to-peer interactions. Groups are well-structured and students work within the time limits set by the teacher (6 minutes for mind mapping, 2 minutes for interaction).

- Instructions: are given clearly, step by step. The teacher explains each task thoroughly and ensures students understand what is expected of them before moving on to the next activity.

- Rapport: the teacher fosters rapport through a calm, supportive tone and attentive interactions, creating a comfortable and trusting classroom environment.

As highlighted in the observation sheets, opinion words such as “good”, “effective”, “supportive”, as well as overgeneralised phrases such as “many opportunities”, “quite thoroughly”, and assumptions like “appear engaged”, “which suggests that they could be more comfortable” adhere to evaluation rather than to observation. In response to this challenge, the instructor observed the observers offering feedback and asked guiding questions, prompting them to reflect and elicit unbiased alternatives. Constant exercising, focus on description, and the use of tools like a timer, camera, pen, and paper helped make peer observation more evidence-based, clearer, and more objective.

During the first feedback sessions, the pre-service teachers were hesitant to offer and receive it despite being previously trained and aware of its benefits. They were still in the process of building peer trust, which allowed them to take a constructive approach. Another reason for hesitation resulted from the inexperience of linguistically formulating observations and questions in a manner that sounded objective and encouraged pre-service teachers to reflect on their teaching. The instructor's presence during the feedback sessions, which followed the micro-teaching sessions, was very important, as the instructor moderated the feedback session, helped with asking questions, and provided feedback that could serve as an example for the rest of the observers.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Overall, pre-service teachers were familiarised with the ethics of offering and receiving feedback, which they trained during the piloted Didactics course and could further apply during practicum.

Pre-service teachers had more autonomy in conducting peer observations during the pedagogical practicum. They were allowed to invite observers, schedule preliminary discussion meetings, and agree on the observed characteristics without the presence of the practicum supervisor or school mentor. Each practicum student (pre-service teacher) had to observe at least five peers and include the observation sheets in their practicum portfolio. The analysis of the observation sheets included in the practicum portfolio showed that most pre-service teachers chose to invite different observers to their classes. Some of them invited the same observer to observe different characteristics more than once. Others were observed more than once on the same characteristic by different observers. Among the most frequently observed characteristics during practicum were as noted in the table below:

Table 1. Observed Characteristics during Practicum

Characteristic	Number of visited students
Students' involvement	4
Explanation and feedback	2
Verbal and non-verbal communication	10
Teacher talking time	6
Instructions	5
Classroom management	4
The students	3
classroom dynamics and teacher-student interaction	2
Lesson stages	6
Resources	3
Promoting concentration and attention	3
The teacher guides independent learning	6
Speaking practice	1
Interaction	2
Types of activities	8
multiple characteristics	4
Time management	4
Teaching Grammar	1

The analysis of the peer observation sheets during practicum reveals that pre-service teachers were actively observed on various characteristics. However, 50% of students chose to be observed at least twice on the same characteristics. When asked about the reason why they chose to be observed twice on the same characteristics 53,7% answered that they wanted to be observed by two different observers and see if the observations differ, 19,5% acknowledged that the characteristics they chose were problematic areas in their teaching and they wanted a constructive feedback that would further help them improve, 14,3% of the respondents stated that they wanted to be observed on the same characteristic twice as they wanted to track their progress after the second observation. Finally, 12,5% of the pre-service teachers stated that they chose the characteristics randomly, with no particular reason behind their choice. Despite different reasons, pre-service teachers agreed that peer observation revealed facts that they were not aware of but were worth considering for teaching

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License quality improvement. These insights reflect a change in the students' perspectives regarding the importance of experience exchange and peer learning through peer observation, as well as fostering trust among peers. Another finding was that one student observed the Teaching Grammar characteristic. This supports the assumption that most students feel insecure about inviting peers to observe the Grammar teaching area, which they acknowledged as being the most challenging part of their practicum. This is indicative of another challenge that needs to be addressed –building reflective skills and inviting trustworthy peers to observe problematic areas and offer constructive feedback.

The analysis of the practicum observation sheets also shows that pre-service teachers still need support and guidance in terms of recording observations properly, formulating them constructively, and stimulating reflections through questions during feedback sessions. The analysis shed light on some aspects which needed improvement. It revealed that some observations were not grounded in factual recordings, such as timing when observing the teacher's talking time characteristic or recording the number of students involved in certain activities during class, quoting specific phrases and questions. To address the issue of repetitive and lacking detailed observations, instructors should discuss the problem of feedback efficiency with both the observers and the observed pre-service teachers during the practicum assessment sessions. This discussion should clarify that feedback lacking factual information cannot foster reflection and, therefore, cannot be constructive.

Other limitations resulted from the discrepancy between the school mentors' mode of conducting peer observations, who were not trained in this manner according to REFLECT principles and offering feedback and the pre-service teachers' expectations of receiving feedback, as they had been trained to observe and be observed according to REFLECT principles. This discrepancy highlighted the differences between the old-patterned attitude towards peer observation and the constructively oriented perspective towards it, as well as the need to align the regard for peer observation in the education institutions' training, hosting pre-service teachers during practicum and employing them.

To strengthen the impact, school practicum mentors, other practicum supervisors, and regional inspectorate members will receive further training to conduct peer observations and offer feedback in accordance with the REFLECT principles. Reconsidering their views and revisiting the practicum observation requirements in the practicum guides and other institutional documents are consistent steps to support the shift towards pre-service teaching training focused on quality and improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to investigate the concept of peer observation as a revisited tool for teaching quality improvement. The research has shown that reshaping the concept of peer observation is an important step that all actors involved in pre-service teacher training should take. The data collected through observation and peer observation sheet analysis demonstrate that changing the old-patterned perspective of the peer observation process requires time, effort, and consistent exercising. Time is required for eradicating the stereotyped association of peer observation with evaluation and opening the minds of pre-service teachers, instructors, and mentors. Effort is required to rebuild peer observation skills through monitoring, scaffolding, and constant practice. Peer observation skills can be effectively exercised in various activities, ranging from presentations to simulations and micro-teaching sessions, when conducted under the instructor's guidance and feedback, considering the principles of objective and reflective observation. Instructors' guidance must be combined with practicum supervisors' and mentors' support and

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License feedback, and this synergy will make the peer observation process a trustworthy and growing experience.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, N.A. (2005) *Pre-Service Teachers observation of Cooperating Teachers and Peers while participating in an early field experience*. Teacher Education Quarterly, 32 (4), 97-117.
2. Bayındır Özkan, F. Y., and Dikilitaş, K. (2023) 'EFL instructors' values systems, reflections, and emotions on paired peer observation process'. Pedagogical Perspectives TSTT Special Issue p. 139- 160
3. Dos Santos, L.M. (2016) Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Development through Peer Observation Programme. English Language Teaching 9 (10) 39-46
4. Dos Santos, L.M. (2017) How do Teachers Make Sense of Peer Observation Professional Development in an Urban School? International Education Studies 10 (1) 255-265
5. Gerges, E. (2025) Peer Observation: 'Ensuring Teachers' Excellence through Higher Education' in *Higher Education and Quality Assurance Practices*. UAE: IGI Global Scientific Publishing
6. Gollob, R. & Weidinge, W. (2022) *Observation Handbook for Teachers. Professional development through classroom visits*. Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Zurich University of Teacher Education
7. Jia, Y., Spagnolo, Barrett, A., Murphy, A., Basto, P.M., Rothpletz-Puglia, P., Luther, O. (2024) 'Validation of a peer observation and evaluation tool for online teaching in the U.S. ' Education Tech Research Dev. Springer 2-25
8. Otero Saborido, Domínguez-Montes, F.M., Cenizo-Benjumea, J.M., & González-Calvo, G. (2024). 'Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: Systematic Review of Observation Tools'. Educational Process: International Journal, 13(1), p. 84-101
9. Schreiner, Ch. (2009) *Handbook of Research on Assessment Technologies, Methods, and Applications in Higher Education*. Hershey. New York: Information Science Reference
10. Skott Monkhouse, A.R. and Vannucci, A. (2024) 'Interdisciplinary Peer Observation: Can it Work?' The Future of Language Education in an Increasingly Digital World: Embracing Change – Selected Papers of Cerele 2022, 56-72
11. Shakil, A.S. (2024) Teaching Skills Development of Bachelor of Education Students through Peer Observation and Feedback. Bangladesh Teacher Education Journal (BTEJ), Vol. 4, 75-86
12. Tosriadi, Asib, A., Sri Marmanto; Umu Arifatul Azizah (2018) 'Peer Observation as a Means to Develop Teachers' Professionalism. International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding [online] Available from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326002158_Peer_Observation_as_a_Means_to_Develop_Teachers'_Professionalism
13. Willerman, M., MacNelly, S.L. Copper Koffman (1991) Teachers Helping Teachers. *Peer Observation and Assistance*. Praeger, Greenwood Press, Inc.