Peer Observation of Teaching in an Indonesian Higher Education Contexts: Observers' and Observed Teachers' Perception

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Abstract

Teaching in higher education in the Indonesian context has received more attention in the past two decades. Actions have been taken to improve teaching quality. One of the attempts conducted by a department in an Indonesian university is peer observation of teaching. The objectives of this study are twofold. The first objective is to investigate the observers' and the observed teachers' perspectives of their participation in a POT. The second objective is to discover the perceived benefits toward their teachers' professionalism. Two observers and two observed teachers participated in this study. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews. The findings uncovered that the observers and the observed teachers claimed to have improved their pedagogical competence and believed that the institution required further action. The data also revealed the benefits that the observers gained because they could see a teaching model and that the observed teachers received feedback from more experienced teachers. Participants also considered skills in giving and accepting criticism were necessary for their growth and that the POT served them as a moment of self-reflection. The limitation of the study is that it lacks information on the teaching performance upon the POT and peer relationship. The study implies that the institution should follow through the results of the POT.

Keywords: *peer observation of teaching, pedagogical competence, observed teachers, observers, teaching performance*

Introduction

Higher education is becoming more complex and challenging as teaching and learning in higher education levels are considered significantly different from school. Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker (2006) maintain that teaching in higher education is not more important than students' learning; thus, students must be more independent and responsible for their learning. However, it does not mean that teaching quality in higher education is neglected.

In Indonesian higher education contexts, teaching quality has received greater attention in the past two decades. The curriculum of the Indonesian Framework mandates teachers to reflect and evaluate their way of teaching. In turn, many higher education institutions in Indonesia have made several attempts to accommodate their teachers' needs for reflection and evaluation. These attempts come as teacher professional development programs aiming to help students achieve their learning goals. One of the less popular programs conducted to help teachers reflect and evaluate their teaching way is peer observation of teaching (POT). Bell & Mladenovic (2015) assert that POT is a powerful activity that provides teachers with feedback from others about their pedagogical competence. The activity often gets to the point where teachers gain inspiration to alter their classroom instructions. Although POT often happens in pairs, Torres, Lopez, Valente, &

Mouraz (2017) argue that POT, which involves multiple teachers from multidisciplinary courses, also successfully enhances teachers' pedagogical competence. In a POT, one teacher usually attends the other teacher's class to observe the teaching-learning process for a particular meeting.

Literature Review

Many scholars agree that POT has benefits for both institutions, such as the controlling quality of teaching (Peel, 2005; Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Jones & Gallen, 2016) and individual teachers, e.g., improving relationship with colleagues (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014), enhancing self-efficacy (Mousavi, 2013; Bell & Cooper, 2013), and enhancing teaching strategies (Hendry, Bell & Thomson, 2013). POT can also result in more than what has been expected, e.g., building collegial relation (Bell & Cooper, 2013; Atkinson & Bolt, 2010), improving student engagement (Pounder, Huan-Lam, & Groves, 2016), facilitating effective leadership (Bell & Thomson, 2018), and supporting novice teachers (Vacilotto, 2007; Bell & Cooper, 2013). On the other hand, they also acknowledge the challenges of conducting POT experienced both by institutions, e.g., costly (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005; Kumrow & Dahlen, 2002) lack of knowledge on the process and context to conduct a POT (Mento & Giampetro-Meyer, 2000) and individual teachers, e.g., teachers' insecurity (Mento & Giampetro-Meyer, 2000; Ahmed, Nordin, Shah, & Channa, 2018) and anxiety (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008).

One way to improve students' learning is by improving teachers' teaching quality, and POT is believed to be able to do that. POT is defined as the process in which teachers come and sit in other teachers' classes to improve their pedagogical practices (Hendry & Oliver, 2012), although POT can also be conducted online (Jones & Gallen, 2016). Hendry, Bell & Thomson (2013) and Tosriadi, Marmanto, & Azizah (2018) provide a more elaborative POT definition by adding that the teacher observer will provide feedback for the betterment of the observed teacher's pedagogical practice. Motallebzadeh, Hosseinnia, & Domskey (2017) mention that POT is a well-structured structured system that allows teachers to be involved in decision making, such as selecting partners and deciding which areas to be observed. In addition, Donnelly (2007: 117) asserts that the process should be "identified, disseminated, and developed." To put it lightly, the POT process needs to be looked at and sustained.

Bell & Mladenovic (2008) assert that POT can be an effective way to improve teachers' pedagogical practices, refine their academic perspectives, and develop their peer relationships. It is in line with Carroll & O'Loughlin (2014), stating that POT can also improve teachers' academic engagement. Lomas & Nicholls (2005), who call POT as peer review of teaching, strongly argue that a POT is often used as a quality enhancement technique, meaning that the program tends to be more judgmental and evaluative, which can be intimidating for some teachers. Lomas & Nicholls (2005) assert that a POT should be more of quality assur-

ance. Quality assurance refers to the program used by teachers to gain more confidence in their teaching practices.

Problem Statement

While many scholars agree that POT gives many benefits to those involved, very few education institutions conduct this particular type of teacher professional development due to some reasons. Previous literature recorded that the reasons for not conducted POT are tedious work in organizing and record-keeping (Jones & Gallen, 2016), teachers' insecurity (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005), cost (Kohut, Burnap, & Yon, 2007), and teachers' participation (Ivarsson, 2019). If there is, the POT programs are very rarely sustained.

A large number of studies also present the perspectives of either the observer or the observed only. Very rarely were the perspectives of both observer and the observed investigated to understand the meaningful experiences they obtain from being involved in the POT conducted by the institution they work for. Also, in many Indonesian contexts, POTs are rarely conducted in structured and sustainable ways. The uniqueness of the study is that both the observers' and the observed teachers' perspectives are equally investigated to gain a deeper and more thorough understanding to bridge the gap between the existing and the current research.

Therefore, the current study's aims are twofold. First, it aims to capture teachers' perspectives on being involved in the institution's POT set up. Second, the study is an attempt to investigate the perceived benefits of POT toward teachers' professionalism.

Methodology

The study aims to explore the perspectives of teachers working in the site in which the 'routinization of an innovation was known to have occurred' (Yin, 2012: 30). At the time the data was collected, the POT was a sustainable program conducted in the department – perhaps, it was the only sustained POT in the university. Thus, the sustained POT can be a routinization, as suggested by Yin (2012).

In the POT, full-time instructors were assigned to be the observers, and the freelance teachers were the observed. The program was put to a halt due to the pandemic, causing all classes to either be canceled or moved online, making it impossible to carry out. One observer was assigned to attend classes of more than one freelancer. The observed teachers, unfortunately, were not assigned to sit in the observers' classes and watch their teaching performance. While the department offered training in various foreign languages, the research data were taken from the observers and observed teachers who taught English as a foreign language.

This study investigated the observers and the observed teachers' perspectives about participating in a sustained POT program and the perceived benefits they obtained from their participation. Two observers and two observed teachers agreed to participate in this research. For confidentiality reasons, all participants were

pseudonymized. Consent was obtained verbally prior to the interviews. One of the researchers interviewed the participants twice. When the data from the first interviews were transcribed and analyzed, the researchers believed that some inquiries must be more elaborated. All interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in the first language to avoid misunderstanding and for clarity reasons. After all interviews were transcribed, member-checking was carried out to maintain internal validity (Merriam, 1998). In member-checking, the transcriptions were returned to the participants to see if they would like to change the information. No information was altered by any of the participants. The data were analyzed by finding similar themes. The excerpts used in the report were translated into standard English. Another data source was the observation document used in pre- and post-observation discussions.

The two observers – full-time instructors – were both females (Linda and Dwi - both pseudonyms) who had been teaching for 9 and 6 years at the data collection time. As full-time instructors, the observers had to meet a certain number of teaching hours weekly and fulfill administrative responsibility. The two observed teachers were male (Nano) and female (Rini) – both were also pseudonyms, who had been teaching for four years. Unlike full-time instructors, freelancers were only responsible for teaching several classes in which the students could be from different disciplines. It was unknown if the observers attended the classes taught by the observed teachers.

The university where the POT was conducted was located in the outskirts of a college town in Indonesia. The university mandated several strategies to monitor the teaching quality, such as surveys and focus group discussions. The university did not specifically designate POT as a way to maintain and improve the teaching quality. Realizing that each department had its uniqueness, the university gave each department freedom to carry out its programs to monitor the teaching quality. One of the departments applying the POT program was the Language Training Center (LTC). The particular department housed several permanent instructors and several freelancers.

Findings

The data obtained from the interviews were organized to discover the observers' and the observed teachers' perspectives for participating in a POT and the benefits they perceived they obtained from their participation.

The Observers' and the Observed Teachers' Perspectives toward POT

The observers: learning from observing. The two observers considered their participation in the POT as positive experiences that are fun, exciting, useful, and helpful. Both regarded their roles as observers as new learners who could learn new things from others, such as teaching strategies, teacher and student characteris-

tics. Linda asserted, "When observing, I do not merely evaluate the observed. I focus more on what I can learn, what I can apply in my own class." Moreover, Linda also stated that she learned new teaching strategies. When she observed a class, the teacher used the materials considered 'difficult' to teach. The data showed that being an observer in the POT helped her understand teachers' characteristics, e.g., teachers who can use humor in their teaching or teachers who always stick to the textbook.

Similarly, Dwi also regarded her experience observing other teachers as useful because observing allowed her to see how other teachers interact with their students and how the interaction helps students' learning. On the other hand, Dwi also felt uncomfortable sitting in other teachers' classes due to personal relations with the observed teachers. She stated that in one way or another, observing meant evaluating, which she found it difficult to evaluate her colleague(s). She added that being an observer must be more knowledgeable than the observed. The example she provided was that her understanding of the theories underlying specific teaching strategies was essential to validate the feedback she gave to the observed.

The observers: More on the process. Both observers stated that they enjoyed the whole POT process where they participated. According to the observers and the observed teachers, the POT process consisted of three general steps: pre-observation, observation, and post-observation.

Concerning the pre-observation, besides discussing the schedule and procedure, Linda stated that she studied the checklist provided by the institution she would use during the observation. She added that the process helped her get the idea to focus on what she had to observe. She remarked,

"As an observer, I have to focus on the aspects [of teaching] I need to observe. So, I do not just come in empty-headed, no planning. No, it's not like that. There's a form that helps me to do that." (Linda – interview excerpt)

During pre-observation, Dwi had a meaningful dialogue with the observed – apart from studying the checklist. She stated,

"[During the pre-observation] I met the observed and had a brainstorming session. We talked about the class that I was about to observe: the number of the students, the characteristics, the materials to be used [by the observed]. I also let the observed know my role when I observe her or his teaching a class." (Dwi – interview excerpt)

After the observation, Linda and Dwi held a post-observation dialogue with the observed freelance teachers. In the dialogue, Dwi provided feedback to the observed teacher based on the checklist she discussed earlier. She stated,

"[During the post-observation] I usually state my personal opinion about [the teaching of] the observed. Which parts are okay, which parts need improvement. Basically, our discussion is about the observation checklist." (Dwi - interview excerpt). Linda also discussed similar issues with the observed in the post-observation.

Linda proposed that the process did not stop in the post-observation dialogue to make the POT process better so both the observer and observed could benefit more. To be more powerful, the POT should require both the observer and the observed to write a self-reflection on their roles and expectations on what they would receive from their peer observer or the peer observed.

"[A POT] needs to be well-structured in terms of scheduling and data filing. Most importantly, a follow-up program needs to be carried out. The process for the observer does not only stop when she submits the form, but she should write a reflection about what she has learned [from observing] and how she can incorporate those in her own class. She has, like, a portfolio [of the reflection] or interesting findings that she presents in structured sharing sessions with other peers." (Linda – interview excerpt)

For Dwi, being an observer was challenging, especially when she had to provide constructive feedback. In addition, she asserted that understanding the observation checklist leads to improvement because the observer needs to have a high level of pedagogical knowledge and skills. Therefore, she proposed that the institution should provide training or workshops for the observers to ensure the effectiveness of the process, e.g., skills on how to make and deliver constructive feedback or how to observe effectively.

The observed teachers: different or not different. Nano and Rini revealed different perceptions concerning their participation in the POT. Prior to being observed, Rini stated that she diligently studied the rubric and prepared her class based on the observation rubric – a preparation that she rarely did before joining the POT.

"Before participating in the POT, I did not do a lot of things regarding my teaching practice. For example, I was supposed to plan to review materials I taught in the previous meeting [before starting today's lesson]. I even sometimes forgot [last meeting's materials], so I had to ask my students. After the POT, I am forced to pay more attention to the sequence in teaching – even when I am not observed." (Rini – interview excerpt)

Unlike Rini, Nano was more apathetic in looking at his participation in the POT. He asserted that he made no significant changes before being observed. He remarked,

"In terms of teaching the class, I do what I always do. So, the observer sees the real me [when teaching]. Just because I'm being observed, I change the way I teach. No. The lesson plan and teaching strategies are all things that I always do in class." (Nano – interview excerpt)

Rini revealed that she was quite nervous when she was being observed because the observer was her colleague. She was anxious about not being able to control her students while being observed. It would have been better for her if she was not acquainted with the observer because she would not meet the observer after the observation. She was less nervous in the second and third observations because she realized the POT was not merely for evaluation. Different from Rini, knowing the observer personally did not make Nano feel uncomfortable. He stated,

"To me, I do not feel nervous. Well, maybe a little. The observer is my colleague. It's like another observation." (Nano – interview excerpt)

The observed teachers: more POT. Although Nano and Rini acknowledged scheduling problems with the observers, both intended to be more actively involved in the program. Rini, who had been observed 3-4 times, stated her idea to be observed 3-4 times per semester. Similar to Rini, Nano asserted that the POT should be held more frequently. In addition to the observation frequency, Rini expressed that the post-observation should not be just the dialogue between the observer and the observed, and it would have been better if further action was taken by the institution based on the findings from the observations. Workshops or training could be used to address common issues emerging from the observed.

The Observers' and the Observed Teachers' Perceived Benefits of POT
The observers: Self-reflection on the process. When asked about how being an observer contributed to their betterment, both Linda and Dwi mentioned that the roles somehow affected their pedagogical competence and skills. Linda highlighted that sometimes she applied the strategies she observed in her class when teaching the same materials, especially when some teachers considered the materials 'challenging to deliver.' Concerning this, she remarked,

"I can improve my teaching strategies [from watching the observed] and solve the same problems emerging in my class." (Linda – interview excerpt)

For Dwi, she sometimes felt the burden of being an observer because her pedagogical knowledge and skills should have been higher. However, her role allowed her to compare well-prepared and less-prepared teachers and compare the results to students' learning. It led to her being well-planned with her class. She added that the preparation helped her to see the mental picture of what her class would be like.

The observed teachers: getting feedback. While the findings may not be surprising, the data showed that the observed found the POT useful for improving pedagogical skills. Rini stated that before participating in the POT, she rarely reflected on her teaching. She believed that she had done what considered necessary to do by a good teacher and applied her knowledge and skilled she studied in college. However, after joining the POT and having someone observing her, she missed several essential things that should have been done by a good English teacher. She stated,

"When someone came in and observed my teaching practice, it felt like someone showed me what I should have done. For example, the observer told me that I used too much teacher talk time in a Free Conversation Class. That was the point when I thought to myself, [the observer is] right. I should give more opportunities to students to talk. The feedback is useful for me to apply it in my class and improve my practice." (Rini – interview excerpt).

Nano also expressed the same perceived benefit he obtained from the POT. He stated that after participating in the POT, he found out about his teaching practice based on the rubric he received from the institution. He also received feedback from the observer, which might not necessarily be in the rubric.

Discussion

All participants in the current research were not first-timers in the POT process, and they had a positive attitude toward the activities, even though the observed teachers appeared to be aware that they were evaluated in some ways. Literature also shows that the observer's attitude and the observed play an essential role in the program's success. Many studies show this particular issue in POT. Research conducted by Bell & Mladenovic (2008) found that both the observer and the observed showed the willingness to change their teaching practice after following a POT. While they were anxious about being observed, they also stated that such a program was inadequate to enhance their classroom instructions. A POT only works effectively when the observer and the observed understand the whole process of POT (Yiend, Weller & Kinchin, 2014;

Kenny, Mitchell, Chroinin, Vaughn, & Murtagh, 2014) and its ultimate goals. Chamberlain, D'Artrey & Rowe's (2011) participants displayed an apathetic attitude toward a POT by stating that a POT was undeniably useful for developing their professional and personal competence; however, it could also be an activity to which they could act in a surface level.

The changes in their pedagogical competence, as reported by both the observers and observed teachers, are in line with multiple studies (Donnelly, 2007; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Bell & Mladenovic, 2015). For the observers, looking at others' teaching strategies could be one way to improve their pedagogical competence when facing a similar situation. This particular finding is in line with Hendry & Oliver (2012), who assert that modeling will work better to the observer when the observed is considered more experienced and has a higher status; it is not necessarily the case in the current study. The observers in this study had higher status and bigger power than the observed teachers; however, they also found it useful to see a teaching model. In addition, looking at the observed teaching improved the observers' academic engagement because it made them reflect on their practices. The observers' position in this study was interesting because they could observe but not be observed, similar to Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond's (2004) study. The observers in this study were considered more experienced and more powerful, and the observed teachers did not receive any opportunities to sit in the observers' classes and use the observers' teaching skills as a model, apart from the feedback they received. The observer in Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond's (2004) study received training from an external advisor, unlike the observer participants in this study. This issue was raised during the interview but was not considered a problem by the observed teachers.

A wide array of studies show that POT is beneficial for the observer and observed, although no clear line has been drawn on whether who receives more benefits than the other. For example, Bell & Mladenovic (2015) assert that POT can benefit the observer and the observed in a way that they can shift their focus away from being teachers; thus, their concepts of teaching and learning expand. This process would require the observer and the observed to have meaningful discussions on the POT. The current study also showed that pre- and post-observation discussion also existed, similar to what Garry, Qian & Hall (2011) have reported, about a series of steps to conduct a POT. The steps include the observers and the observed teachers meeting to discuss the POT aims, the courses, and the pedagogical practice area to be observed. After the observation was conducted, the observers and the observed teachers had another dialogue. The objectives and the process must be clearly articulated and fully understood by the observers and the observed teachers to achieve what it intends to achieve (Peel, 2005). In addition, determining specific areas to be observed can help both the observer and the observed focus on which area they want to develop. (Colucci, 2014) maintains that observing someone teaching can be overwhelming if there are too many areas to focus on. The post-observation dialogue is the step in which both the observer and the observed discuss the constructive feedback and areas to improve in the next meeting (Ivarsson, 2019). In many POT programs, the observer

and the observed are teachers with similar or same disciplines. Torres et al. (2017) argue that the POT of multidisciplinary courses is also effective in engaging academics through a series of meaningful activities by removing class contents and focusing on pedagogical concerns.

In addition, Hendry & Oliver (2012) and Tenenberg (2014) assert that the observer's benefits include learning a new teaching strategy, which was also found in this study. In turn, implementing the new strategy in their classes boosts their self-efficacy. In a POT, the observer and the observed would have an academic discussion on the new teaching strategy. The discussion can also boost the observed confidence by convincing him that his teaching strategy is considered effective that others will be willing to adopt it. This case is especially true when the observer is a more experienced teacher than the observed.

The finding also revealed that skills in giving and accepting criticism were considered necessary by the participants. It is in line with Ivarsson (2019), arguing that POT can be a means to create an academic atmosphere that consistently encourages teachers to self-reflect and puts down barriers to share ideas. While sharing ideas might look simple, the observer and the observed must be involved in structured, non-judgmental activities that allow them to provide constructive feedback and receive it without feeling judged. Thus, an observer must possess skills to provide constructive criticism, while the observed should accept others' criticisms (Karagiorgi, 2012). Besides, Kohut et al. (2007) contend that a high level of objectivity is required to conduct a proper observation and provide constructive, meaningful feedback; therefore, training on observational and analytical skills is highly required. The environment created from the POT will, in turn, develop collegial trust and respect (Atkinson & Bolt, 2010). It is considered another benefit obtained by both the observer and the observed, providing and accepting feedback that both get prior to the POT.

Although several studies showed that POT could build better relationships with their peers (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Donnelly, 2007; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014), this particular study did not reveal similar findings. It could be because the participants considered that the POT process was all completely professional rather than personal. Another possibility was that the observers and the observed teachers already had a high collegiality level, developed through their daily interaction in the institution for a long period. Thus, the formality between the observer and the observed was already low, making the POT process more effective (Torres et al., 2017).

While the observers and the observed teachers acknowledged the usefulness of the POT to their pedagogical competence and skills in general, the concern that POT was considered routine was also demonstrated in this study. The data revealed that the POT was considered as a regular review process that did not yield any consequences on the POT participants' professional life, either punishment or rewards, especially to the observed. Similar findings were also shown in Chamberlain et al. (2011: 196) study in which the observer and the observed "went through the process of ticking boxes on a form but paid superficial attention to what

they were doing and why they were doing it." Karagiorgi (2012) also found that his participants considered POT as superficial. If left untreated, the feeling can influence the level of teachers' engagement in POT, which can become one of the challenges to conduct POT.

Lomas and Nicholls (2005) assert that teacher engagement is one of the program's biggest challenges. They add that POT is often seen as opposing academic freedom. Letting an observer – who is sometimes a stranger – come into their class and gives feedback – even if it is constructive – can increase insecurity. This feeling may influence the engagement level of the observer and the observed, as Carroll & O'Loughlin (2014) maintain that one of the keys to a successful POT is the relationship between the observer and the observed. Both need to have a high level of trust in one another. Providing a supportive context by matching the observer and the observed who have known each other may lead to a high level of engagement in the program (Mento & Giampetro-Meyer, 2000).

The other challenge in conducting a POT is the cost, as it is more expensive than a regular administrative way of monitoring or evaluating teaching quality. Kumrow & Dahlen (2002) argue that the cost may include expenditure on tangible things, e.g., computers, software and intangible things, e.g., incentives, benefits. Kohut et al. (2007) suggest that POT needs to be linked to teachers' rewards, which will increase the cost of POT.

In addition, many teachers find it difficult to allocate their time to be fully involved in POT (Ivarsson, 2019). If the observer and the observed must exchange roles, they must attend other classes apart from teaching their classes. It may mean that the observer and the observed have to work twice harder when they are committed to participate in a POT. The long and winding process will eventually need some organization and document filing (Jones & Gallen, 2016). Last but not least, although several studies revealed that the observer and the observed were willing to change as a result of POT (Bell & Mladenovic 2008), evidence on these said changes were rarely – if not, never observed (Bell & Mladenovic 2015).

POT is an intricate process that can be challenging but rewarding at the same time. To have an effective POT, institutions must clearly articulate the purpose and the whole POT process to the observer and the observed to ensure everybody participating understands their roles in the process. POT, as sustainable as it may seem – but if not managed well, may only become an end of professional development rather than "a means to achieving more meaningful developmental goals" (Jones & Gallen, 2016: 623). POT can be a mere routinization that loses its meaning to achieve the ultimate goals because the observation is at the superficial level (Karagiorgi, 2012) with no significant follow-up programs. Moreover, institutions have to manage the process skillfully to obtain the best results from the process. On a side note, POT alone is inadequate to improve teachers' pedagogical competence and skills. Most importantly, suggestions and concerns from the observer and the observed need to be taken seriously so that academic engagement becomes more meaningful.

The present study lacks information on the changes in the observers' and observed teachers' pedagogical competence and skills upon their POT participation. While both of them claimed that the POT somehow had changed their teaching practices, the study did not follow up on how far it influenced their teaching practices – especially when the observed teachers have been observed more than three times. Future research can investigate the POT effects on the observer's and the observed's practices in improving students' engagement.

Another limitation of the study is that it is unknown whether the peer relationship between the observers and the observed teachers influenced the POT process in any way or how it changed during the POT process. Future research might look into the issue more closely on the peer relationship prior to, during, and upon the POT process. The influence of the peer relationship and gender difference on the POT outcomes can also be interesting to be investigated.

Further actions taken by the institution were not investigated in this study. Research on actions taken by the institutions upon the POT process based on the observers and the observed teachers has been surprisingly scant. All suggestions may need longitudinal studies to carry out.

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