

Original Paper

Teacher-Centred Classroom Observation in Benin: A New Approach to Teacher Professional Self-Development English

Department

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Abstract

Teacher observation is deemed as an essential procedure in teacher training and education. This article presents a framework for implementing a new approach to class observation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Benin. In order to move along with the recent advancement in teacher education, this paper has tried to explore the current system of class observation, supervision and the various contextual issues related to this practice so as to propose a new scheme centered on teachers that may stand a long way to make a more valuable contribution to their overall professional growth and improvement.

The current research has used a semi-structured interview survey and a questionnaire to elicit qualitative and quantitative data from some purposively chosen classroom trained and untrained teachers, and some supervisory staff (teaching adviser, head teacher and inspector). The findings have elicited meaningful implications for the issue at stake. They have showed that despite the gloomy data collected in the field about classroom observation, the majority of the teachers still believe that if well-organized it can serve as an effective tool for professional growth. This has led to propose a new teacher-centered model of teacher observation totally based on teachers' priorities which stands the chance of allowing teachers to take much of the responsibility for their own professional development.

Keywords

Class observation, teacher-centered, self-assessment, peer observation, peer coaching and mentoring

1. Introduction

Education plays a vital role in the development of any country for its end-products are human beings or citizens endowed with the capability of making effective change. In Benin, the opportunity to address urgent problems is greater now than in any other time. Therefore, ensuring the provision of quality education which is more relevant to the needs of the country, by attracting state-of-the-art pedagogy of qualified individuals into the profession is more than ever compulsory. Training them by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, values, awareness, and motivating them to opt for professional development has become a priority. All this has become arguably one of the key educational challenges to cope with and one of its significant components is class observation, for it provides the possibility to observe the reality of daily teaching practice. Class observation has, however, always presented problems for both teachers and supervisory staff. It has traditionally caused dissatisfaction, stress, anxiety and challenges to all the stakeholders of the school. Most teachers feel intimidated, threatened, frightened and consider it a real ordeal because the whole process is rather nerve wracking. In fact, this inherited top-down model not only is authoritarian, prescriptive, judgmental and impressionistic in nature (Mercer, 2006) but the whole process is most of the time totally decided upon by the observer, making it observer-centered. Meanwhile, the Competency-Based Approach (CBA), being implemented in the country for some years now, has been promoting learner-centered approach.

However, since observation plays a key role in teacher development, action research has developed many models. The literature has highlighted three distinct foci related to teacher evaluation: a) rating teachers on their professional traits, b) rating teachers on instructional practices, and c) rating teachers based on their professional growth and specific classroom traits (Ovando & Ramirez, 2007). More recent research has developed more bottom-up procedures, whereby the teacher's perspectives are considered as of paramount importance as teaching is becoming more democratic and teachers must be given voice to experience their wishes and concerns (Aubusson et al., 2007). In other words, psychological comfort and mutual confidence being a basic component of observation for teacher professional growth to take place, the affective dimension needs to be delved into so as to make observation more teacher-centered. This is why the objective of this article is to gather data which will help propose a new model of classroom observation that takes account of teachers' attitudes, perceptions, feelings and that stands the chance to remove their negative reactions to teacher observation for self-development. Specifically, the study aims at addressing the following questions:

1. what are the Beninese teachers' attitudes, perceptions and feelings towards the current classroom observation practices?
2. what are their opinions about a new model of classroom observation that can minimize concerns and resistance to observation and foster professional development?

1.1 Background to the Study

1.1.1 The Teaching and Training Situation in Benin

The massification of education of the last decades has led to a glaring scarcity of professionally trained teachers. Schools were obliged to recruit undergraduates, freshers from the university without any pre-service training. In some best cases, they were given a few “*recipes*” about how to conduct a class in a practical way, a kind of “*See me and do it yourself*” training, without any theoretical background to back up the practice. This situation has negatively been impacting on learners’ achievement. As it can be expected, over the past years, students’ examination results have dropped drastically. This low level of the teaching force composed of more than 70 percent of unqualified staff has led to less orthodox pedagogical practices seen here and there as far as professional ethics are concerned. This bleak situation is compounded with the implementation of a major curriculum reform called “Competency-Based Approach”. The main objective is to link the learners’ socio-cultural environment to the classroom experience so as to motivate them to become true agents of change and development in their respective communities. This program has been putting an extra burden on teachers for it requires an acute imagination and creativity difficult to provide by an untrained teacher. These multiple demands imposed on trained and untrained teachers require appropriate training in many areas, for no program change can help teachers be effective if capacities are not built in them to promote new ways of performing their professional roles.

Fortunately, the educational authorities launched from 2011 a vast training program for this category of teachers. As far as trained teachers are concerned, no in-service training has been organized for them of late. In fact, the aim of in-service training is to fight against complacency and satisfaction with “safe” routine ways of teaching which slowly creep into any teacher after some years of “ruggedness”. Therefore, the strategy of school-based weekly meetings called “Animations Pédagogiques” came to the fore. The aim of these meetings is to discuss the problems related to the subject-matter, to share experience and to give one another advice for better performance. Most of the time they are held under the supervision of a senior teacher called “Animateur d’établissement” (AE). These meetings are then supposed to bridge the gap between initial training and professional development of teachers. In many cases, they simply concentrate on bringing forward some procedures and ideas applicable within the classroom and in the confines of the prescribed textbooks.

As a whole, some attempts are made to promote in-service training for EFL teachers in classroom situation, but the provision is discontinuous in terms of its content to yield effective dividends in the teaching field. The supervisory staff supposed to take care of the whole scheme is composed of inspectors, teaching advisers and head teachers called “AE”. The supervisory work consists in attending once in a while a teacher’s lesson followed by an exchange of views and the supervisor gives the teacher advice about ways of improving his/her performance. But in fact, the whole exchange tends to be empirical and based on recipe implementation, different from one supervisor to another. Besides, the advisory role is rarely given a warm welcome by teachers because of the evaluative part of it. This

also creates ill-feeling, resentment, and deemed as an ordeal, making the whole experience psychologically stressful and nerve wracking for both teachers and supervisors.

Let's now shed light on the current research works about the issue.

2. Literature Review

Teacher observation is one of the most challenging issues in teacher education. It is “*the bridge between the worlds of theory and practice*” (Reed & Bergemann, 2001, p. 6). According to Farell (2008) cited in Merç (2015), classroom observation in a reflective practice agenda can provide language teachers with an opportunity to gather information about their own teaching and classroom practices in order to push them to scrutinize classroom actions more carefully.

Malderez (2003) mentions four main purposes of classroom observation: for professional development, for training, for evaluation, and for research. Likewise, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) quote three main forms of observation: for professional development, for rewards and for promotion. Nevertheless, most researchers and practitioners agreed that the main goal of classroom observation is professional development.

Depending on the contexts, the role and objectives of classroom observation may differ from pre-service to in-service program. Most pre-service training uses it as a learning tool for potential teachers to learn the basics of teaching (Gebhard, 1999). In EFL/ESL contexts, on the other hand, class observation has become synonymous with teacher evaluation and teacher supervision (Sahakian & Stockoton, 1996).

❖ Types of Observation

In many educational contexts observation is differently termed.

We have “*appraisal observation*” which is seen as “*supervision*”. The term “*general supervision*” (Wallace, 1991, p. 108) refers to outside the classroom, whereas clinical supervision entails then idea of practices within the classroom. The latter is considered as a special occasion when an observer sits at the back of the classroom observing and recording the teachers' and the learners' actions (William, 1989, p. 85). The underlying assumption is that observation is a powerful tool that enables participants to gather data and gain insights into the classroom teaching and learning (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Although observers are required to ensure impartiality, the actual fact is that their presence more often causes frustration, dissatisfaction and stress.

William (1989, p. 85) asserts that “*developmental observation*” should be “*developmental rather than judgmental*” and should provide teachers with opportunities to raise their awareness of class dynamics, improve their ability to assess their own teaching approaches, develop, reflect and enhance their pedagogical skills (Malderez, 2003).

Sidhu and Fock (2010) have advocated a humanistic evaluation model that consists of five stages which lead to developmental observations: i) in “pre-observation stage”, the observer and the observee collaboratively plan a formal observation session; ii) in “while observation stage”, the observer gathers

low-inferences and verifiable data; iii) in “post-observation scenario”, the observer analyses data to discover strengths and weaknesses; iv) in “post-observation meeting”, the observer and the observed collaboratively focus on both the strengths and weaknesses to help teachers develop a future plan of actions that will help them grow professionally; v) afterwards, both parties set a time-frame to achieve set targets.

Shad and Harthi (2014) contend that to make the observation scheme successful and beneficial for the teachers, the observers need to be qualified trainers who know what to look for, how to provide effective feedback and how to minimize subjectivity. In a similar way, Gebhard (1999, p. 35) asserts that observation needs to be a “*non-judgmental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation*” in feedback discussions which are integral to teacher professional development.

Today, it is commonly agreed that the traditional supervisor-supervisee relationship with its subjective, authoritarian, prescriptive, supervisor-centered and judgmental classroom visits can no longer achieve the sacred goal assigned to them to foster teacher professional growth.

However, most of the different models with their different frameworks, though striving to propose bottom-up approaches seem to fail to put the teacher at the center of their professional development. The Competency-based Approach (CBA) being implemented in Benin for some years now promotes learner-centered teaching. As a result, teachers should be equipped with the ability to judge honestly their own teaching and see clearly how much learning and the quality of the learning that has taken place. In other words, it means ensuring in teachers the ability to assess their own knowledge and professional performance so as to become autonomous learners. Therefore, various benefits of teacher self-assessment have been identified worldwide.

In fact, one of the most important factors of good teaching is self-awareness which is the ability to reflect on one’s own teaching and so gradually develop and improve one’s skills as a mature teacher. Borgmeier et al. (2016) contend that one of the benefits of self-assessment is that it involves teachers more directly in teacher evaluation, giving them a greater sense of ownership in the evaluation process and in subsequent decisions about the areas of the work they need to improve. As for Pennington and Young (1989), they have argued that allocating some responsibility to teachers for the evaluation of their work is an appropriate way to recognize their status as professionals. Additionally, Marzano and Toth (2013) suggest that self-assessment can provide a better picture of teacher competence than a small number of classroom observations conducted by an external evaluator. Obviously, these frameworks are underpinned by the views that, by reflecting in a systematic manner on what they know and can do, teachers can become more aware of the range of competences they need and identify appropriate directions for further development.

However, alongside self-assessment stands peer observation which seems to gain ground today. Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 85) define peer observation as “*a teacher or other observer closely watching and monitoring a language lesson or part of a lesson in order to gain an understanding of*

some aspect of teaching, learning or classroom interaction". In his own way Zacharias (2012, p. 134) contended that peer observation can be effective for three main reasons: (i) it provides the observer an opportunity to see how others deal with problems teachers face on a daily basis; (ii) observers can learn effective (or new) strategies they themselves have not seen or tried; (iii) peer observations can cause the observers to reflect on their own teaching practices. He further added that to be relevant for professional development, peer observation can be made "*useful for both the observer and the observed teacher*" (Zacharias, 2012, p. 134). So, for peer observation to be beneficial for both the observed and the observer, information has to be shared between the participants. Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 86) argued about the issue that:

Observing another teacher may also trigger reflections about one's own teaching. For the teacher being observed, the observer can provide an 'objective' point of view of the lesson and can collect information about the lesson that the teacher who is teaching the lesson might not otherwise be able to gather.

Therefore, the theoretical framework on which this study is based on, is drawn from Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2011) work on classroom observation. According to this framework, there are three components of the attitudes towards classroom observation: cognitive, affective and conative. The cognitive component deals with the beliefs and opinions of teachers about classroom observation. The affective component on the other hand, is about the likes and dislikes of the teachers. The conative component finally, is related to an individual's readiness for action and likeness to participate in an action.

Nevertheless, the validity of self-assessment seems to raise a serious problem. As early as the eighties, studies by Mabe and West (1982) compared self-assessment with performance and found a low correlation between the two measures. They also highlighted factors which improved the validity of self-assessment. Among these were the rater's previous experience with self-assessment and the anonymity of the self-assessor. Likewise, educationalists such as William (1989), Mercer and Ryan (2015, p. 45) found gaps between self-assessment and actual performance and mentioned that "*our sense of self may not necessarily be an accurate reflection of our actual abilities or performance*". So, care should be taken to maximize the strength of this instrument while minimizing its shortcomings.

Hence, empirical studies focusing on approaches to professional development which encourage teachers such as self and peer observation need to be carried out. This is the challenge this study is supposed to take up.

3. Method

The current study is exploratory in nature, considering the experience, perceptions and attitudes of EFL teachers in Benin. To identify the challenges of the current class observation practices in order to develop an observation model that can best suit the preferences of classroom teachers, the current study presents two phases. The first phase has used a qualitative method that consists in conducting interviews to highlight teachers' and supervisory staff's views, attitudes and perceptions about current practices and about a new proposed more teacher-centered observation model. The second phase has used a quantitative method that is questionnaire administration that intends to serve the same purpose. This section is split into three subsections dealing with the study sample, the instruments used to collect the data and the procedure followed by the discussion of the results.

3.1 The Sample

The purposive sampling design in this study is chosen to have valid results. Two types of participants were identified: i) twelve trained classroom teachers who were observed at least once; ii) twelve untrained teachers [they represent more than 70 percent of the teaching force] who have experienced class observation as well.

Two teachers of each type were randomly chosen to pass through an interview and twenty of them were given questionnaire to fill in. Three respondents from the supervisory staff (an inspector, a teaching advisor and a head teacher) were randomly chosen for an interview. All the participants except from the inspector teach English in State or private schools throughout the seven proficiency levels.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Interview

The aim of the qualitative data analysis is to achieve a thorough understanding of the target phenomenon. The choice of qualitative interviews was made since it is "*a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the lived experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world*" (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). Similarly, Scott and Usher (2006, p. 147) had this to offer about the issue: "*to seek in-depth understanding about the experiences of individuals and groups, commonly drawn from a sample of people, selected purposively. Such types of interviews are called semi-structured*".

The current study has also used qualitative techniques for data collection. Three semi-structured interview questions were asked to the four teachers and the three supervisory staff to explore their perceptions, opinions and attitudes in a face-to-face individual audio-taped interview with the researcher. Each of them voiced his/her perceptions and attitudes about the current situation of class observation and his/her opinions and suggestions about the proposed teacher-centered model. Some questions, probes, prompts and intuitive questions were framed, based on the researcher's own experience as a trainer and an observer. Each interview lasts twenty to thirty minutes. This open-ended interview method was designed to minimize the limitations of the self-completion questionnaire method.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

Based on the purpose of the study and the research questions, the investigator developed a self-made questionnaire so that respondents can easily give the information asked for.

The participants were asked to fill a questionnaire containing twenty items. The first section (item 1 to 11) deals with the language teachers' background characteristics followed by their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding classroom observation. The second section (item 12 to 20) takes care of their perceptions about the proposed model of observation. No previous information was provided before the distribution of the questionnaire in an attempt to preserve the participants' original views about class observation.

3.2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Participation was voluntary and respondents were given additional information about how their answers would be used together with guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. The collection of data lasted two weeks to allow teachers time to reflect carefully before responding to the questionnaire. The close items were analyzed using the descriptive statistics including mean scores, frequencies and percentages according to the nature of the items. The final open-ended item (where respondents were asked to offer suggestions about the new model of class observation) was analyzed thematically and categorized. All the data have highlighted the two main research questions.

3.2.4 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the content validity and the reliability of the instruments used, the investigator discussed the issue at stake with some experienced E.F.L instructors, supervisory staff and some colleagues, lecturers in the English Department who have had some experience in this field. They were asked to judge the appropriateness and relevance of each instrument item bearing in mind the overall purpose of the study. This exercise led to the reformulation or cancellation of some questions in the questionnaires for clarity and conciseness sake.

4. Presentation of Results

As participants recalled experiences of how the phenomenon of classroom observation has challenged their professional life and their opinions about a new proposed model that may stand the chance of minimizing resistance, this section has the objective of informing the two research questions alongside the study framework. Therefore, the results of the study hinges around the two main aforementioned points to be highlighted.

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions and Opinions about Class Observation

The first results which are about the background characteristics of the respondents show that their teaching service lies between four to twenty years with a mean scores of 12.5. Only four out of twenty of the sample that is 20% are trained, while 50% are untrained and 30% are being trained. So, though the majority of these teachers are untrained, they have spent a reasonable time in the teaching force. Additionally, these instructors were poor about finding ways to improve themselves through seminars,

workshops, conferences, travels, etc. Only 30% are on-the job training for the past three years.

In response to the question to know how many times they have been observed, “one time” scored high (84%), while “two time” scored (12%) and “three times and plus” only (4%). The observer, for 11 respondents (73%) out of 20 was an inspector/administrator followed by a teacher trainer (15%) and a teacher adviser (12%). Obviously, the supervisory staff is made up of inspectors, teacher trainers, teaching advisors and head-teachers who may or may not inform teachers before the day of the observation. In the sample 80% asserted they were informed.

Furthermore, classroom observation was considered by 90% of the survey as being an effective tool for teacher development but only 40% found it very useful. The different reasons for this is shown in Figure 1.

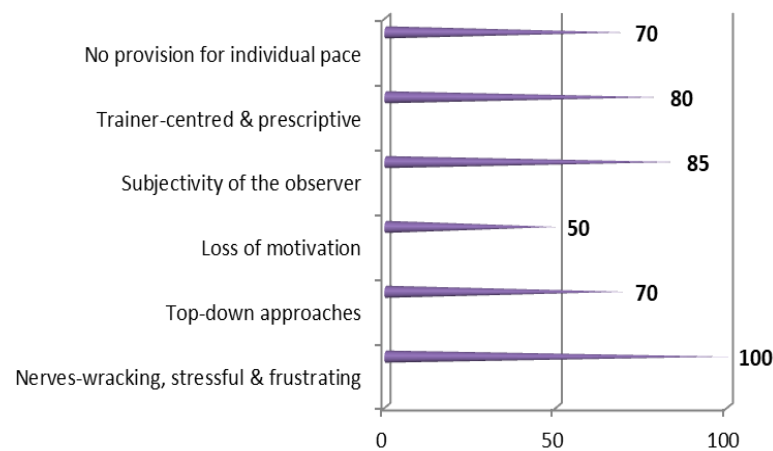


Figure 1. Disadvantages of Class Observation

One of the four interviewees had this to say about the reasons why he considered class observation not very useful.

Teacher observation is really needed and important but in this our country we have had bad experience. In fact, a control is needed over our teaching mainly the great majority of ‘vacataires’. As for my experience I haven’t benefited much from it because the inspector and this is the case with many of them was very critical, condescending, proud and everything in a climate of threat and insecurity. I was so nervous that my performance was badly affected. (Frederick)

These reflections confirm what the questionnaire reveals in Figure 1.

Far more respondents considered the benefits of observation important, and listed the following as advantages: “it requires more careful planning and preparation” (70%); “it provides feedback” (90%);

“it creates awareness” (55%); “it improves teaching skills, methods and techniques” (62.75%); “it helps self-reflection and self-evaluation” (40%). These positive sides of class observation pave the way to the affective components.

The affective components are closely related to teachers’ feelings. Therefore, when asked about their feelings when being observed, the majority of the sample, 100% mentioned “uneasiness”, “distrust”, “threat”, “insecurity”; while (70%) “Embarrassment” “anxiety” and “stress”, and 70% ticked “I cannot teach naturally”. For 60% their students are “distracted”.

As for the three supervisory staff interviewed, they unanimously confessed that their job is to contribute formatively to the teachers’ professional development. They further complained about interpersonal conflicts and the lack of a sustained observation program due to financial constraints that make difficult the changing of teachers’ classroom practices and their development.

The next group of questions gathered information about the new proposed model of teacher-centered observation.

4.2 The Proposed Teacher-Centered Model of Class Observation

To know if they are ready to participate in a teacher-centered class observation project, 17 out of 20 (85%) agreed to participate against 3 (15%) who responded negatively. This shows against all odds their commitment to take into their own hands the responsibility for their professional development. This is corroborated by the fact that 60% of them found this project “very useful”, while for 30% of them it is “somewhat useful” and 10% declared it “not useful”. Different reasons account for this belief and this is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for the Usefulness of Peer-Observation and Self-Evaluation

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
i) it can be positive and rewarding	18	90
ii) You can benefit from other colleagues’ experience	17	85
iii) You can provide and receive constructive feedback from peers	14	70
iv) It can provide you feedback on shortcomings and strength	16	80
v) It can create more empathy, trust and mutual respect	15	75
vi) It can correct shortcomings and keep you up-to-date	15	75
vii) It can provide a more friendly and supportive environment conducive to professional growth	18	90
viii) You can gain experience about observation practices	14	70
ix) It can create emulative comparisons and competition	14	70
x) It can raise teaching standards	12	60
xi) It can help to learn about innovations	11	55
xii) It can help to present different perspectives of teaching methods	8	40
xiii) Other reasons? Specify...		

Obviously, the majority of respondents scored a high proportion about the reasons for the usefulness of peer-evaluation and self-evaluation, pillar of teacher-centered observation. The implication is that the sample is quite aware of the different advantages they may have in trying a new model that stands the chance to minimize concerns and resistance and as a result, promotes professional development.

On being asked if they would like to be observed by peers and to observe them as well, 85% responded positively against 15% who rejected the idea. They went further to give the reasons for their preference, displayed in Figure 2.

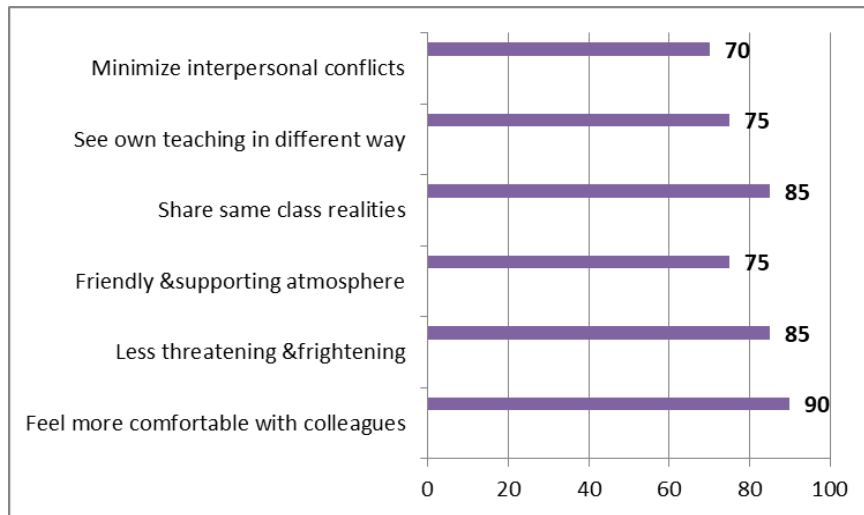


Figure 2. Reasons for Peer Observation Preference

These high proportions show that most of the respondents support this new approach of class observation. Nevertheless, they revealed some constraints shown in Figure 3.

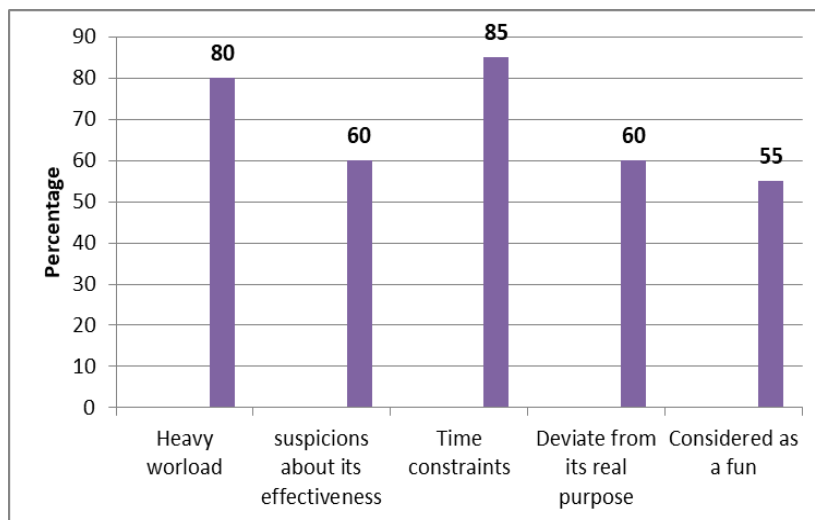


Figure 3. Constraints about Teacher-Centered Observation

One of the interviewees even voiced his reflections by arguing the following:

A teacher-centered class observation, nice! But don't forget Inspectorate is very powerful in our country. They will feel their authority truncated and may not cooperate to make the project a success. I personally wish it could work so that we teacher take into our hands the responsibility for our professional growth. Let's colleagues be sensitized about the real objective of the project.

Reaffirming the positive aspects of peer-observation and self-evaluation, respondents went further to choose the aspects of their teaching they would like to focus on in such a new model of observation (Figure 4).

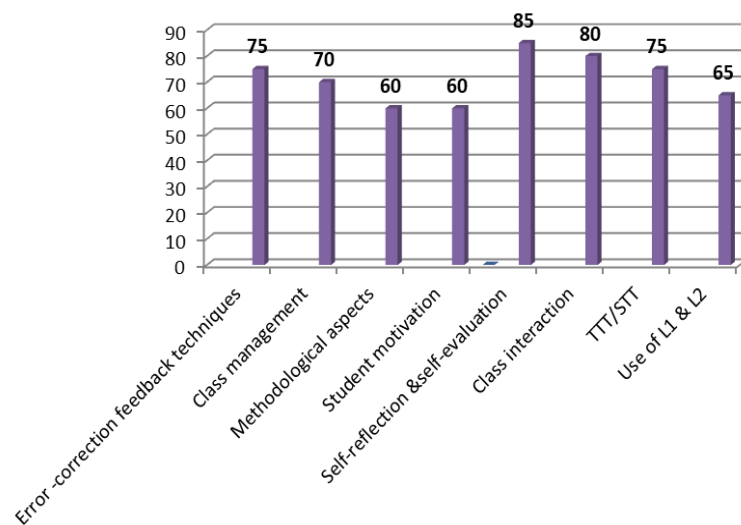


Figure 4. Aspects of Teaching to Focus

For such a new approach to observation in Benin to thrive, respondents were asked to choose among the prerequisites that can help fulfill the objective which is to make class observation an effective tool for teacher development.

This is how they rated each item in Figure 5.

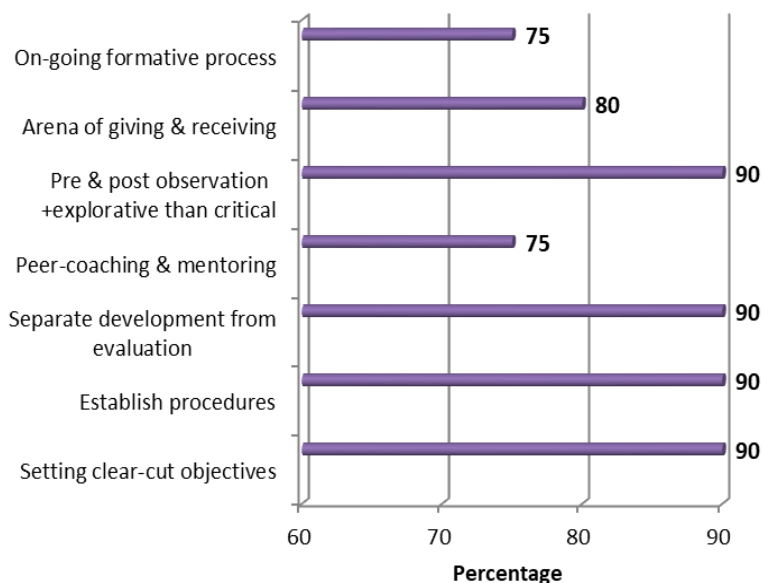


Figure 5. Prerequisites for the Model to Fulfill Objectives

The three supervisory staff interviewed were optimistic about the proposed new scheme of classroom observation but pointed out possible constraints that should be coped with: inaccuracy and lack of information about self-assessment, inflated self-assessment, limited self-awareness and competence, financial constraints. Additionally, they advised a period of sensitization for teachers to willingly take into their hands the responsibility for their professional development, and by creating in each school a trusting learning environment that can enhance self-assessment and as a result, yield positive formative benefits.

After analysis and categorization of the survey's only one open-question which is about teachers' contributions as far as the proposed teacher-centered class observation is concerned, the following main points are put forward: the use of social media group on the internet, keeping diaries, records and portfolios; the use of informal talks in the whole process, and an effective co-ordination from the bottom to the top. These suggestions are what the teachers believe necessary for this type of observation to yield professional growth.

5. Discussion

Analysis of the results of this study has helped to give a clear picture of Beninese teachers' perceptions, thoughts, beliefs and feelings as regard the way class observation is carried out and their opinions about the new proposed model.

5.1 Teachers' Perceptions, Thoughts and Beliefs

The first block of the results that is the background characteristics of the sampled teachers reveals that the teaching force in Benin is made of relatively young teachers the majority of which is unqualified. So, though academically fit, they are professionally crippled and need on-the-job-training that may help

them feel confident in classroom, develop their skills, techniques, methods and awareness that can enhance their ability to evaluate their own practices. A good professional grounding would have made them familiar with professional development opportunities including classroom observation.

The scarcity of the supervisory staff in Benin is another constraint that makes observation far more evaluative than developmental. Most teachers were observed only one time so far in their professional life. But despite the gloomy data, the vast majority of the teachers shares positive attitudes regarding observation despite their limited knowledge about it and believes it can be an effective tool for professional growth. So, its advantages outweigh its disadvantages. Obviously, personal experiences not very rewarding for most of them due to distrust, insecurity, embarrassment, anxiety etc., have not luckily made them lose sight of their real professional needs. As a result, 85% of them were enthusiastic to participate in such a project.

Considerably fewer teachers (15%) were willing to be part of the team of peer observation activities. The unwillingness of these teachers is probably due to the disturbing effect of observation, viewed as a tool for evaluation commonly practiced in the country. This reluctance to take part in this type of activity was researched by Wallace (1998) and he argued that even professional and competent teachers feel anxious about their teaching capabilities and may not be able to make use of their full potentialities. As a support to this idea, Bettinelli (1998) found out that teachers with experience less than five years are more enthusiastic about being observed than more experienced and older ones.

One of the interviewees voiced the following opinion: *“I believe our inspectors most of the time underestimate teachers’ performance. Their feedback is a formality and they have conflicting views that make the whole experience not beneficial. Their bossy attitude is what de-motivates me”* (Joseph).

The above quote shows that there is a lack of congenial relationship between the teachers and the academic coordinators who are given inordinate powers to use observation to keep a close check on them. It can also be inferred that because of the current atmosphere of distrust, helplessness and hopelessness, something must be tried out to restore teachers’ willingness and enthusiasm to take into their own hands the responsibility for their professional growth.

5.2 Teachers’ Opinions about the New Proposed Model of Classroom Observation

In a discussion to the second research question, the feelings of the teachers show that most of them (85%) are enthusiastic about participating in a project of classroom observation as an observed and an observer as well. It must be emphasized that the peer-peer roles are to be made clear right from the beginning to avoid tensions as regard the goals of observation. In fact, collaborative peers are capable of mutually sharing ideas, knowledge, challenges, etc., on common ground. Research carried out regarding teaching methods including team-teaching and co-teaching (Smith, 1994; Cranmer, 1999; Johnston & Madejski, 2004; Creese, 2005) cited in Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) can contribute towards creating a friendly climate of trust needed for observation to be rewarding and yield expected fruits. This is confirmed by the high scores of respondents about the issue (Table 1) and their preference to be observed by peers rather than the so-called “expert”, most often disconnected from

classroom realities.

For both participants to benefit equally from this new approach of classroom observation, the pre and post observation meetings prove very important. The respondents in this survey suggested some areas of common challenges they would be happy to focus on (Figure 4). These aspects deal with their teaching in terms of their relationship with learners, language skills and areas, student motivation, error-correction feedback techniques, use of L1 & L2 and others. Coping with these will eventually result in self-awareness and improved teaching skills. Furthermore, the results seem to suggest that Beninese teachers need more opportunities for observation in which they can participate, setting up working groups and support networks right from the school level.

The expected goal starts from what happens at the pre and post observation stages when the results from observation schemes or discussions about the lesson are engaged. No unannounced or unexpected visit, no improvisation, for the observed and the observer or the team agree on what exactly to focus on. As for the post-observation discussions, and as a response to the respondents' criticisms about these feedback sessions, the recent literature on the issue suggests using a negotiative approach for meaningful interactions to take place between the observer and the observed in a friendly and collaborative atmosphere. As Brown (1995) rightly points it out, such a negotiation leads to teachers' commitment to autonomy and self-directed professional development. Besides, this active involvement stands the chance of yielding far more benefits rather than teachers being passive receivers of any *expert's advice* for improvement.

Minaflinou (2013) suggested some questions that might be adapted at this crucial stage. Possible questions might include: "*What are the data made available after this lesson?*"; "*What have I learned from the person I have observed?*"; "*What have we discovered about class activities we were not aware of before?*"; "*What can we learn from them?*"; "*How far can this experiment/trial improve our daily routine practice?*" etc.

At this level it is important to point out that the observed teacher should take time to self-reflect on the lesson, receive positive encouragement from the peer, evaluate collaboratively the quality of the lesson and see how shortcomings can be minimized and strengths be built upon for improvement. This relates strongly to what Johnson (2009, p. 21) advocates, stating that teacher education is no longer a process of translating theory into practice but "*a dialogic process of co-constructing knowledge that is situated in and emerges out of participation in particular socio-cultural practices and contexts*". This constructed knowledge is what the CBA (Competency-based Approach) recommends teachers to build in students in order to make them autonomous learners. For this to be possible, they have to practice the same thing as learners. Many studies have highlighted the beneficial effects of peer observation and the setting of team work organizations in schools as far as EFL teachers' professional development is concerned (Alwan, 2000; Arsene, 2010; Cosh, 1999; Donnelly, 2007).

However, though the advantages of peer-observation outweigh the disadvantages according to Beninese EFL teachers, some of them comment on its downsides among which "time constraints" which scored

very high, 85% (Figure 3). In fact, teachers' busy schedules can make it difficult for them to put in the time and effort needed to design and implement a program like the one in study. But as the saying goes, "*where there's a will there's a way*". A competent teacher today is the one who can create a positive pedagogical environment and is able to fight against any odds and make good professional choices. He is committed to development and more importantly to self-development and is engaged in the process of reflection in his/her own professional activity in order to improve daily practice. As Salas and Mercado (2010) contend, reflective practices such as team observation stand the chance to result in fruitful experiences and professional development.

In Benin, for many reasons among which lack of adequate training, very few teachers can reflect on their teaching experiences in a systematic way. Rather, most of them expect an 'outsider' to observe them and tell them what is good or bad in their teaching performance. This probably prevents them from enjoying friendly observation opportunities that will eventually help them improve as reflective practitioners.

However, peer relationships do not always guarantee success and therefore many researchers advocate that the bad connotations of peer observation have to be overcome. Moreover, self-reflection may be a limited and highly subjective action (Ghebard & Oprandy, 1999; Richard & Nunan, 1990; Mann, 2005). It may provide insights that may be quite painful to hear but which can improve teaching. The participants in this survey scored high some prerequisites for peer-observation in Benin to meet the expected goals. These are: setting clear-cut objectives right from the beginning of the program; establishing effective procedure to follow; separating observation for development from observation for evaluation purposes; making peer-coaching and mentoring part and parcel of the whole process; making pre and post observation an arena of giving and receiving and finally making the teacher-centered approach to observation an on-going formative practice (Figure 4). Wallace (1998), Ghebard and Oprando (1999), Oprando (2002) among others have similar opinions as the concerns expressed by the participants.

Another objection may be having two novice teachers observing each other, just like two blind men walking, holding hands. However, "*two heads are better than one*" and a sustained and well-coordinated observation program with a careful planning and preparation should be able to provide solution to this seeming handicap.

5.3 Strategies for Implementation

The fact that the teaching force in Benin is composed of up to 70% of unqualified teachers makes it a priority to provide opportunities for learning and sharing ideas with colleagues through peer observation, peer coaching and mentoring process. It is fortunate that the weekly school-based training programs in each school aims at empowering teacher professional development. It should be reorganized into peer mentoring teams. The head teacher in each school called "*animateur d' établissement*" will coordinate the program in his/her school as a mentor. This will require a training that takes care of the skills needed to be an effective mentor.

Teachers will work in pairs or in teams to observe each other's class every week. Finding items to observe can be discussed during the pre-observation phase collaboratively with the observed and the observer. So, novice or young teachers can observe skilled and experienced teachers to learn from them for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding about how to become a teaching professional. Obviously, the primary goal of the peer observation project is to rethink the way teachers do things and adapt it to changing times, students, and circumstances. It means balancing our teaching styles with that of today's learners' styles, a technologically savvy generation who prefers kinesthetic and visual learning activities over the traditional text-based tasks. This will probably help us identify teaching strategies that work with them and respond to their needs. Only a self-development-oriented EFL teacher, conscious of the current challenges can keep abreast of the new trend.

Therefore, the weekly mandatory meetings or the debriefing sessions should be an arena of giving and receiving, carried out in an atmosphere of mutual trust where a positive critical analysis is foremost, and the whole process informative and empowering. With time, both the observed and the observer colleagues will benefit from gaining self-confidence and motivation for teaching, learning about innovations, identifying learning problems and gaining experience about the concept of observation, peer observation, peer coaching and mentoring processes. All this needs time, commitment, and motivation. As Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 88) rightly put it "*If observation is to be a positive experience [...] it needs to be carefully planned and implemented*".

To sum up, the overall picture of the proposed new model is to make classroom observation a pleasant, informative and empowering experience. It refers more importantly to collaborative support and negotiation between the observer and the observed which is an integral part in teacher autonomy, resulting in teacher self-directed professional development and improvement which lead to improved student learning.

Therefore, the practical implications of this new approach to teacher professional self-development are at least threefold. First, class observation which used to be a traditionally, highly stressful and nerve wracking process for teachers in Benin can now become a positive learning experience and a tool for nurturing competent teachers. Second, by adopting this model, more responsibility is bestowed on teachers and this is a kind of revolution in Beninese teacher observation practices that stands the chance of providing friendly observation opportunities that will eventually improve teachers as reflective practitioners. Third, this model intends to help involve Beninese teachers in a process of action research that is shared inquiry, reflection and decision-making. In other words, it will make the classroom become a kind of laboratory where the teacher can bridge between the worlds of theory and practice in order to scrutinize classroom actions more carefully and critically.

However, far from the researcher the pretention of having covered the issue of teacher self-development through peer observation, peer coaching and mentoring processes. One point that can be noticed is that the phenomenon under study is complex and cannot be grasped in a single study as Dewaele (2010, p. 222) rightly emphasized: "*it is thus inevitable that only a glimpse of a multifaceted*

reality can be provided". A deeper approach could be later provided to have an accurate and detailed picture of self-assessment tools, the coordination of the whole program at school, district, regional and national levels.

6. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to explore the perceptions of Beninese EFL teachers about classroom observation practices in order to propose a new observational model centered on teachers' priorities. The findings have revealed that though they believe that classroom observation can be used as an effective tool for professional development, the enormous challenges related the current practices, have made it not very beneficial for the classroom teacher. Therefore, to fight the prevailing elements of threat, insecurity, top-down approaches, and allow teachers to take much of the responsibility for their own professional growth, another class observational model more interactive than directive, more teacher-centered than supervisor-centered has been proposed. Opportunity is provided to the respondent teachers to give their viewpoints about the new program as we are still at the initial stages, at a short step forward to develop a kind of reflective teaching in teacher observation practices based on self-assessment, peer observation, peer coaching and mentoring processes.

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