

4 Senior English Teachers' Views of The Benefits of Post-Lesson Discussions

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Oman embarked on a programme of educational reform called Basic Education. One element in this reform was the creation of Senior English teachers (SETs). Individuals appointed to this new position were given the role of supporting and providing advice to the teachers of English in their school. SETs also observe these teachers, conduct post-lesson discussions with them and write reports about their performance. All new SETs attend a training course lasting 20 hours, after which they assume their new role under the guidance of regional supervisors. The focus of this study is on post-lesson discussions (PLDs). It is part of the role of all SETs and is increasingly becoming a focus of research in ELT in Oman. My particular focus here is on how SETs conduct PLDs and on the views which SETs themselves have about PLDs.

2 THE POST-LESSON DISCUSSION

The PLD is a time where, following an observed lesson, the teacher and observer meet to discuss this lesson. PLDs can have different characteristics in terms of how they are organized and the processes which they involve, and I discuss these below. Generally, though, the literature recommends that the PLD provide the teacher with opportunities to reflect on their teaching by considering data from their own lessons (see, for example, Stoller, 1996).

2.1 Phases of Post-Lesson Discussion

Within the broader observation cycle, the PLD is seen to be the third of three stages, with the first being a pre-observation meeting and the second being the actual observation itself. While the first is arguably not essential, it is not really possible to have a PLD without a prior observation. The PLD itself can be broken down into different stages. Glavaski (2001), for example, talks about three different

elements: 1) climate setting, where the supervisor creates a relaxing atmosphere for the ensuing dialogue; 2) reflecting, where the teacher talks about and analyzes the lesson and 3) planning, where the supervisor and teacher devise an action plan for the teacher to follow. In Oman, the Ministry of Education's guidelines for PLDs recommend that teachers first be given opportunities to reflect on the lesson, then that the lesson be discussed with comments from both the Senior Teacher and the teacher, ending with a summary by the teacher of the key points raised.

2.2 Field Notes

SETs need to have some record of the lesson observed to refer to during the PLD. A common strategy for making such a record is the use of field notes – written observations about what occurs in the lesson and about the observer's reaction to the observed events. Bailey et al. (2005, cited in Bailey, 2006) refer to three types of information that may be included in field notes: 1) Observed facts and events; 2) Inferences based on facts and events; and 3) Opinions based on what seems true. One of my interests in this study relates to the kind of notes SETs take while observing teachers.

2.3 Scheduling Post-Lesson Discussions

In scheduling PLDs, SETs need to decide whether to hold these immediately after an observation or some time later. Glavaski (2001) suggests a number of reasons for a delayed PLD. Firstly, teachers often have another lesson immediately after the observation – they will not be free to sit and discuss the observed lesson straight away. Additionally, even when the teacher is free, allowing some time between the observation and the PLD gives the teacher more time to think about their teaching (this assumes of course that teachers will in fact reflect in this way). In their study of the reflective talk of student teachers on a TESOL course, Williams & Watson (2004) found some evidence that delayed debriefing was characterized by a higher level of reflective talk than was found in PLDs which took place immediately after the observation.

On the other hand, Stoller, (1996:16) suggests that the PLD should take place soon after the observation, so that "both the teacher and supervisor can decipher data and recall the class as a whole". Randall & Thornton (2001) also feel that it is better to hold the PLD right after the lesson as this better allows the teacher to remember the events. Fletcher (2000) is also supportive of immediate PLDs.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

This study examined the views held by Senior English Teachers (SETs) about post-lesson discussions (PLDs). The following questions were investigated:

1. What kinds of plans do SETs follow in PLDs?
2. When do SETs normally hold PLDs?
3. What are their views of the benefits and disadvantages of immediate and delayed discussion?

4. What difficulties do SETs face in PLDs?
5. Do SETs set an action plan in PLDs and, if so, how do they follow it up?

3.2 Context & Participants

The participants in this investigation were a non-probability sample of seven SETs in Basic Education schools, five from Cycle one (Grades 1-4) and two from Cycle two (Grades 5-10). All were female with at least four years experience as SETs. All held a BA degree. Apart from the SETs' willingness to participate in the study, practicality was a factor in the choice of these participants – they worked at schools in Muscat which were reasonably close to my own.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Two kinds of qualitative data were collected in this study because I wanted to examine in depth SETs' views about the PLD. I conducted interviews with the SETs and analyzed recordings of PLDs they conducted.

3.4 Interviews

As Burton & Bartlett (2005) note, interviews constitute a fundamental research tool in the researcher's toolkit. In this study the interviews aimed to elicit SETs' views about PLDs and about specific issues such as the problems they faced in implementing this part of their role as SETs. I piloted an interview to check that it would be a suitable way of collecting data relevant to my research questions and I found that it was. Through my analysis of the pilot interview I also became aware of the kinds of questions to ask to encourage respondents to speak more at length (in the pilot I asked several yes/no questions which resulted in very short answers).

Following the pilot I interviewed the seven SETs individually. The interview questions (see Appendix) reflected the issues highlighted above in my research questions and were also informed by my reading. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and, with respondents' permission, audio recorded. The SETs were reassured that their responses would be treated confidentially and that their identity would also be protected.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on how much each individual SET had to say in response to my questions. Campbell, Gilroy & McNamara (2004:99) state that "open ended questions facilitate the giving of opinion" and thus I used open ended questions as much as possible to encourage the SETs to speak freely and at length. The interviews were fully transcribed for the analysis. As Campbell, Gilroy & McNamara say (2004:102), "there are many advantages in transcribing taped interviews, such as access to a complete account of the interview and the facility to scrutinise detail". In analyzing the interviews I concentrated on those responses which related directly to my research questions; I also compared what the SETs said to what I found in their recorded PLDs, which I now discuss.

3.5 Recorded PLDs

In addition to the interviews, one PLD involving each SET in the study and one of their teachers was audio recorded. These seven recordings allowed me to examine both the content and the structure of the PLD. I recorded the PLD because I needed to listen carefully to the SETs' questions and, as McDonough & McDonough (1997) note, an audio recording allows conversations and discussions to be captured accurately. The PLD data were fully transcribed. In analyzing the PLD, I identified the processes that SETs go through in conducting PLDs. In particular, I focused on the issues that were discussed earlier in literature review – the stages of the PLD, the scheduling of the PLD, and the SETs' use of field notes.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Planning the PLD

All SETs said that they inform teachers in advance that they will be observing them. Three said that they inform the teachers a day before. In explaining this decision, one SET said that "sometimes I'll forget and I'll visit the same class, so it is better to inform her". Another SET said "maybe the teacher wants me to observe her in such [i.e. particular] points in the lesson so it is better to inform her before". Four SETs said that they inform teachers on the same day they will be observing them.

4.2 Pre-Lesson Discussion

The full observation cycle is meant to start with a pre-observation discussion. Three SETs said that they never do this because they feel there is no need and because they will discuss everything in the PLD. The other four SETs said they have pre-lesson discussions. One SET explained that a pre-lesson meeting is useful so that "if the teacher will teach something different from the book I am not going to get surprised, because she told me about it before". Another SET said "some teachers have problems in some points, so we discuss this in pre-lesson discussion and when I observe her I can check what we discussed".

4.3 Stages in Post-lesson Discussions

I identified stages in the PLDs through an analysis of the recordings. From these I found that two SETs open the conference by praising their teachers; this reflects what Glavaski (2001) calls climate setting. For example, one SET started the PLD in this way: "thank you for having me in your class, I like your lesson, your group chart, competition and your voice, is clear and your relationship with the pupils". In the other five PLDs, the SETs started by asking about the aims of the lesson, without any climate setting.

The recorded PLDs also showed that all seven SETs gave the teachers the opportunity to reflect on and analyze their lessons. This tended to be the longest stage of the PLD, during which the teachers were asked to comment on various aspects of the lesson or to identify parts which they felt were more or less effective. One SET, for example, said to the teacher "tell me three things you like in the

lesson”, while another asked the teacher “how was everything and how do you feel about your lesson?” Teachers did not always respond to these prompts with detailed reflections; in the second example just given the teacher’s response was “fine” and the SET had to ask her more specifically to comment on the aims of the lesson.

In terms of how the PLDs came to an end, six SETs agreed on an action plan with their teachers, while only one ended the discussion by asking the teacher “Do you want to add or ask about anything?”. Additionally, the recordings showed that in closing the PLD four SETs asked their teachers to summarize the points they discussed. Teachers’ responses to these requests varied; one started talking about something else and the SET had to bring her back to the summary; in another case the teacher provided a detailed summary, as follows:

Next lesson I’ll do more practise with items of the rooms and the TPR with each group in the class and practise more in naming items of the rooms and describing the location by asking where is? And I’ll play a game with them.

4.4 SETs’ Field Notes

In the interviews, all SETs said that they make open-ended field notes during observations. Four SETs said that in each observation they have a particular focus and make notes about that issue. One SET said that she discussed this focus in advance with the teacher: as she explained. “before observing the teacher we discuss if she wants me to focus in one thing in particular”. Two SETs said they make notes about things which go wrong in each lesson. One SET said she made notes about various issues that she noticed while observing.

In terms of the actual sheet on which they made notes, no forms were used, just generally blank sheets of paper. However one said that she divided her notes into two sections: 1) classroom management and 2) lesson delivery. Another SET suggested that it would be better if they did have a form divided into specific sections as this would give the SETs a clearer focus on important issues. She felt that “The way we are using now in writing notes make us lazy to do a lot of observation”. She was referring to the open-ended nature of the notes they need to take and the challenges involved in trying to make notes about the whole lesson – a form would simplify this task.

4.5 Immediate and Delayed PLDs

The data from this study show that all seven SETs believed that the PLD should be immediately after the lesson (or in one case, if not immediately, at least on the same day). In justifying this position, the SETs explained that having the PLD straight away allowed the lesson to be fresh in the teacher’s mind and thus they could remember the details more accurately. An interesting point made by one SET was that the PLD should be immediately after the lesson because if there was a serious problem the teacher would need to be made aware of it at once rather than repeating it in the lessons which take place before the PLD. I asked the SETs about whether they had tried both immediate and delayed PLDs; only one said she had tried both and she felt that delayed discussion was not valuable because the teacher will forget some points from the lesson.

4.6 Difficulties in PLDs

The kinds of problems SETs face in their schools reflected the character of the teachers in their schools. The first SET said her problem was with new teachers because they have no experience, so they need more time in the discussion to reflect upon their lessons. Two SETs said they have problems with experienced teachers because they do not want to learn new methods of teaching. One of them explained that she tries encourage experienced teachers to “try this time my idea if it did not work you can go with your own technique, but at least give it a try”. Another problem identified by one SET was that some teachers do not have strong oral skills in English and this makes communication difficult both in their teaching and during the PLD. In some cases, an SET explained, teachers are concerned about the quality of their spoken English and say as little as possible during the PLD. Another challenge raised by one SET is when a teacher makes several language mistakes; she does not feel she can discuss these during the PLD because it is a sensitive issue which may hurt teachers’ feelings. One final difficulty mentioned by one SET was that “sometimes the teacher is busy and has other classes, so I cannot conduct the PLD immediately after the lesson”.

4.7 Action Plans

Four of the SETs said they set an action plan, which means both the teacher and the SET make suggestions about what to continue or change for future lessons, and then SETs follow it up by observing the teachers more than once to see the improvement. Three SETs said that they sometimes set an action plan when it is needed. Two of them said they follow it up by observing the teacher. The third SET said she uses absent observation: she sits with the teacher and discusses solutions to her problems, then the teacher goes to her class to try these solutions out and later discusses the issue again with the SET. If the SET finds this is not helping the teacher she plans a mini workshop for all the teachers in which they discuss particular problems and exchange ideas about solutions.

5 DISCUSSION

The pre-observation conference is considered an important part of the observation cycle (Randall & Thornton, 1999), yet only four of the seven SETs in this study said that they meet teachers before observing them. Those SETs who did not conduct pre-observation meetings said that they discuss all the issues they want to after the lesson, but they are clearly missing out on the benefits which a prior discussion of the lesson can bring to them and to the teacher. Additionally, given that teachers are also expected to engage in peer observation, and that pre-lesson discussion should form part of that cycle too, the example of SETs is likely to influence how peer observation is conducted; where SETs skip pre-lesson discussions it is likely that teachers in their schools will also do so when conducting peer observation.

In terms of how the PLDs are structured, there is evidence of climate setting, reflection and planning (Glavaski, 2001) in some of the PLDs studied here, though

not all covered the first and third of these; in all cases, though, there was evidence that the SETs were giving teachers opportunities to reflect on their teaching. Judging by the teachers' responses, though, questions arise about the depth of reflection that actually takes place during PLDs; if the PLD becomes a routine administrative activity then one would not expect deep engagement; also, it is unclear to what extent teachers are ready (and/or willing) to reflect on their teaching in the way that the PLD assumes they can. These are issues that merit further analysis.

In terms of the nature of their field notes, while the SETs agree, as Freeman (1998) and Ur (1996) advise, that that field notes are a good method for collecting data about what happened in the classroom, each SET had a particular approach to deciding what to focus on and whether to involve the teacher in decisions about the focus. On the training course SETs attend it seems that they are encouraged to make notes about all aspects of the lesson; there was some evidence here that SETs found this challenging and would welcome the development of a more structured observation sheet to guide their observations.

Another issue of interest here was the timing of the PLD. It is perhaps not surprising to find that in this study all the SETs said they prefer to do PLDs immediately. This is, after all, what they are advised to do on the SET training course, and they may not be fully aware of the alternative of delayed debriefing. As noted above, there can be value in allowing some space between an observation and a discussion of it, though of course, as the SETs noted here, this may mean that teachers forget some details of their lesson. Al-Sinani (2007) also found that SETs preferred immediate PLDs.

Finally, the study has highlighted a range of challenges which SETs say they face in conducting PLDs. These range from teachers who resist any advice or new ideas to those who do not say much during the PLD. The latter may be particularly true with novice teachers; as Copeland (1982) cited in Gebhard (1990) states, new teachers may often not speak much during post-lesson conferences because they believe they lack appropriate skills and thus feel the need to be told what to do.

5.1 Limitations

The study has highlighted a range of issues which I feel are of general interest to the work of SETs in Oman. However, as with any study, there are some limitations to bear in mind when considering these findings. The participants were all female and worked in a particular region of Muscat; male SETs and SETs in other regions may have different practices and beliefs in relation to the PLD. Additionally, SETs' comments about the teachers they work with reflect their (the SETs') perspectives. Studying PLDs from the teachers' perspective too would complement the kind of analysis I have presented here.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has been valuable to me as a Senior English Teacher. It has also helped me identify aspects of their work where SETs would benefit from further training; the need for such training was identified in an earlier study by Al-Kharbushi, (2005) and my work provides evidence of issues that SETs can usefully focus on in in-

service training. For example, collective discussion of some of the difficulties SETs face might be a useful way of identifying ways of addressing these. Also, SETs might benefit from a greater awareness of both immediate and delayed ways of conducting PLDs and of the value of the pre-observation discussion. The role of the SET is an important one and on-going professional development for staff in this role is important if they are to do their jobs effectively.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been working as a senior teacher?
2. You did the senior teacher course. To what extent has this course enabled you to conduct post-lesson discussions?
3. Have you ever read a book other resource to help you in conducting PLD?
4. What is the purpose of PLD?
5. During the observation what do you record?
6. What does the form you use for feedback look like?
7. Where do you conduct the PLD?
8. How do you handle the PLD?
9. Do you think pre-discussion could help the teacher in PLD?
10. Do you discuss all steps of the observed lesson or do you focus on main events?
11. From your experience do you think PLD should be used straight away after the observation or later?
12. What do you understand about the word Action Plan?
13. Do you set an action plan after the PLD? If so, how do you follow it up?
14. How could you ensure that the teacher gets appropriate feedback?
15. Does the teacher usually take notes during the discussion?
16. Do you sometimes face any difficulties in PLD?
17. Who usually do you turn to when you face difficulties in your role as a senior teacher?
18. What further work do you think you still need to learn in PLD?
19. What kind of support do you think would help you for professional development?
20. How would you describe a successful PLD?
21. Finally, in relation to the issues we have discussed, is there anything else you want to add or you think is important?