

China EFL Primary School Teachers' Practical Understanding of Peer Coaching

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to document Chinese EFL primary school teachers' practical understanding of peer coaching. The population of the study was 19 Chinese EFL teachers of five primary schools in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China. The teachers were selected by purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used as research tools to collect data. Data were analyzed by opening coding and axial coding techniques. The results of this study indicated that EFL teachers regarded peer coaching as a process in which teacher works together to share teaching resources and prepare teaching plan; observe teaching and provide feedback; find flaw in teaching with the help of their peers. Peer coaching benefits their teaching in improving teaching skills; sharing teaching experience and workload; saving time and energy in teaching.

Key Word: China, Teachers' Practical Understanding, Peer Coaching

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Introduction

Traditional way of teacher professional development is to select some teachers from different schools and train them together by outside experienced experts for several days. After being trained about new teaching strategies and skills, most of teachers could apply the new knowledge for the first few weeks and then resume their teaching habit (Brandt, 1987; Showers, Joyce & Bennett, 1987; Showers & Joyce, 1996). As a result, a given attempt to introduce alternative teaching approaches would most likely fail. According to Hargreaves and Dawe (1990), the failure of traditional teacher training is caused by teacher professional isolation, which is called “occupational disease”.

As a means of teacher professional development, peer coaching provides an opportunity and context for teachers to communicate with their colleagues. The process of peer coaching provides a good opportunity for teachers to reduce their professional isolation (Slater & Simmons, 2001). In peer coaching program, teachers learn from one another, observe teaching and provide feedback. Showers (1985) concluded that peer coaching has five major contributions. First, it helps teachers develop the skill in using new strategies. Second, it allows the teachers to apply new strategies as appropriate their instructional objectives, theories, and teaching models. Third, it helps teachers instill long-term retention of the knowledge, skills, and strategies. Fourth, it increases likelihood of new teaching strategies adaption. Finally, teachers would be more likely to exhibit clearer cognitions about the purposes and uses of the new strategies.

While scholars have praised the contributions of peer coaching to teachers’ professional development, empirical studies of peer coaching

programs have plagued with the discussions of implementation issues that undermined the success of these programs. As an educator of Yunnan Educational Research Academy who was responsible for evaluating peer coaching programs, the researcher found that peer coaching programs in some schools often digressed from their original goal during the process of implementation (Wu, 2009). After several months into the programs, participants practically stopped their activities. They got together to prepare teaching or correct students' homework instead what they did before. An awareness of teacher practical understanding of peer coaching would help to find out the cause of digression and pave the way for realizing the promised potentials of a peer coaching effort.

This present study tries to understand how Chinese primary English teachers conceptualize peer coaching. The investigation was completed by semi-structured interview.

Methodology

This study investigated teachers' concept about peer coaching in five primary schools in Kunming, China. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data of primary English teachers' understanding of peer coaching. Topics for semi-structured interview were conducted according to the research question "How Chinese primary English teachers conceptualize peer coaching?". Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts of the interviews were translated into English and anonyms were used for every participant.

Participants

Nineteen primary English teachers from five primary schools of Kunming, Yunnan province, China participated the interview. Among nineteen participants, three are male and sixteen are female. Fifteen of seventeen participants who got undergraduate degree major in English. Two participants got graduated degree and vocational degree respectively. Nine of the nineteen participants are between 21 and 30 years old; four participants are between ages of 31 and 40 years old; five participants are in age of 41 to 50 years old; only one participant is over 50. As the teaching experience, four participants have been teacher less than two years; three participants have 3 to 5 years teaching experience; four participants experienced 6 to 10 years teaching; another four participants got 11 to 15 years of teaching experience; three participants have already been teaching for 16 to 20 years; only one participant have more than 20 years teaching experience.

Results

Teachers' idea about peer coaching

Participants considered peer coaching as a way of teacher collaboration in which teachers 1) observe peers' classroom and provide feedback; 2) prepare teaching together; 3) share teaching resources; 4) solve teaching problem together and find out flaw in teaching that oneself could not find alone; 5) reduce workload by sharing jobs with other teachers; and 6) help each other and learn from each other.

Schedule of peer coaching

Ten of the participants reported that they got together and coached each other once a week regularly. Six of the participants met once a month. Three participants reported that they worked together when needed, such as preparing teaching plan for one who would represent their school to take part in teaching skill competitions.

Teachers' motivation to take part in peer coaching program

The reason participants reported to join in peer coaching program is because that they were required to do. When the participants found that coaching together could reduce their workload, save time and make their teaching efficient, they became voluntary to take part in peer coaching program.

Participants of peer coaching program

All English teachers in the school were members of peer coaching program.

What participants did in the process of peer coaching

Process of peer coaching included preparing teaching plan; observing classroom; and providing feedback. Participants in peer coaching program also shared their teaching experiences, problem and puzzle in teaching. Simultaneously, they discussed ways to help less advanced students and the skill of communicating with students' parents. Sometimes they talked about events they met in teaching and life. They also discussed teaching relative issues, uploaded useful teaching resources and courseware, tried to find teaching and research information in a QQ (Chinese social communication tool) chat group.

Teachers' perspectives towards their peers

Participants' regarded their peers as being positive in peer coaching process, especially to those aspects they were familiar with. Peers would like to provide suggestion to others with open-minded and support each other without reservation.

Benefits of peer coaching

All most all participants claimed that peer coaching benefited them in solving problem of teaching which couldn't be solved by themselves alone; sharing ideas, resources and working together made their teaching half the work and double results; teaching experience shared among peers improved their teaching skills; resources sharing saved peers' time and energy; novice could adapt their teaching more quickly with the help of veteran. Participants became more confident in peer coaching program.

Few participants worried about that some peers might become lazy and rely more on their peers' support and feedback; possible misunderstanding in communication would led to repeated work and time consuming.

Conclusion and Discussion

From the participants' view, peer coaching is a process in which teacher works together to prepare teaching plan; observe teaching; provide feedback; share teaching resource; solve problems in teaching; find flaw in teaching with help of their peers. This confirmed Showers' (1985) theory of contributions to peer coaching. The participants believed that support from their peers could improve their teaching and reduce their workload.

Peer coaching program implementation in participants' schools lacked time assurance and regular coaching process. Peer coaching program had no regular schedule, some schools worked together only when there were group tasks. The process focused more on participants' daily teaching activities but not on certain new language approach study or teacher professional development. Participants shared individual experiences, problem and puzzle of teaching in order to find effective ways to make teaching more active and high efficient. Simultaneously, they tried to find ways of helping backward students and ways to communicate with students' parents reasonable. They practiced basic teaching skill, such as standard Mandarin, simplified drawing, and wrote with chalks on the blackboard. Sometimes they even did some campus cultural activities together after class.

Participants took part in peer coaching program not necessarily voluntarily but for the reason of pressure from their principal. However, when they were in the program, they shared teaching resources and experience and helped each other improve their teaching. They agreed that besides reducing work load by sharing jobs, working together could not only save time and energy but also make their teaching more efficiency.

Participants claimed that almost all of their colleagues were positive in collaboration, especially when they were familiar with the collaborative content. They tried to stand on peers' angle when solving problems. They provided feedback and suggestion to each other without reservation, and accepted suggestions from others in an open-minded way. They extended peer coaching program from face-to-face coach but to social network, discussed and communicated teaching relative issues with one another in QQ chat group. They

upload and download useful teaching resources, courseware, and education information through the plat of QQ chat group.

Peer coaching benefits teaching and professional development in many ways. It helps them solve teaching problems that they could not solve by themselves alone, help them save time and energy in teaching. Participants could share workload and teaching experience together, learn from each other, help each other and improve themselves together. Veteran's help enable novice to adapt their teaching more quickly.

Some participants worried that collaboration in peer coaching might lead some teachers rely much on others help. Time consuming and repeated work emerged when misunderstanding in communication is seen as another drawback of peer coaching. Anyhow, participants thought even if there were drawback in it, the advantage of peer coaching is still obvious

Primary English teachers are far insufficient in Kunming, Yunnan, China. Generally, there are not more than 4 English teachers in each primary school in urban. Many primary schools in the suburbs have only one or two English teachers. Each primary school is far from one another. So it's not easy for all English teachers to get together. QQ chat group provides the opportunity for participants of peer coaching coach each other in internet. In this situation, peer coaching program could be formed by English teachers from different schools in the district but not only in the same school.

Future study might focus on process of peer coaching to find out details of it so as to guide teachers to avoid pitfalls in coaching implementation.

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Appendix

Interview Topic of China EFL Primary School Teacher Practical Understanding of Peer Coaching

This is just for investigation. It's anonymity

Gender: Male Female

Education background:

Vocational degree Major: English Other
 Undergraduate degree Major: English Other
 Graduate degree Major: English Other
 Doctor degree Major: English Other

Age: Under 20 20-30 31-40
 41-50 Over 50

Years of teaching:

Under 2 years 3-5 years 6-10 years
 11-15 years 16-20 years Over 20 years

1. What's your idea about working together?
2. Normally how often do you work with your colleagues?
3. Why do you choose to work together with your colleagues?
4. Who do you coach with?
5. What do you do together with your peers?
6. How do you feel toward your peers?
7. How do you feel toward peer coaching? In what way does it benefit you ? How does it help you improve your teaching?