Peer observation is considered to be an important part of teacher development. This study attempts to gain an insight into the nature of peer observation as a learning experience in pre-service teaching practice. It addresses the following questions: 1.) What were the focuses of observation in student teachers’ peer observations? 2.) What aspects of teaching were discussed between the observed and the observer in post-observation sessions? 3.) What did observers report to have learned from observing peers?

The participants in this study were sixty-one student teachers of English language and literature at a Croatian university. The study was made during the students’ school-based teaching practice. Each participant was both the observer and the observed. The observer observed and recorded the focus of observation agreed on in pre-observation session. The observer and the observed met after the lesson to discuss what was observed. Both parties wrote a peer observation report. The observer's report contained the focus of observation, data collected by observation, questions that were discussed in a post-observation session and the description of what the observer had learned from the observed lesson. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the observers' reports were made to answer the research questions.

The results of the analyses show that the most frequent focuses of peer observations were organisation of the lesson and learners' engagement. The discussion points in post-observation sessions were most often in the area of classroom management and teacher behaviour. The majority of learning outcomes reported by the observers are in the area of lesson organisation and teacher behaviour.

Keywords: pre-service teaching; student teachers of English; peer observation; learning from peer observation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Peer observation refers to a teacher watching and listening to another teacher in his or her teaching with an aim “to gain an understanding of some aspect of teaching, learning, or classroom interaction” [1, p. 85]. This type of observation is intended to lead to professional development [2, p. 179] and it is considered to be beneficial to both the observer and the observed teacher [3], [4].

Peer observation is organised as a reciprocal activity; first a participant observes his or her partner’s class and then he or she is being observed by the same partner. Different models of peer observation have been proposed (e.g., [6], [7], [5]). They all have in common the organisation of the activity into three stages: pre-observation meeting, observation and post-observation conversation. The aim of the pre-observation meeting is to decide on the focus of observation and the procedures for recording observations. In the second stage the observer visits the peer’s class and collects data following the procedures that were agreed upon in the pre-observation meeting. After the observation the participants meet and discuss the recorded data.

Peer observation is intended to be supportive [6]. The observer helps the observed teacher to collect information about his or her teaching and to focus on an aspect of his or her behaviour [6]. Peer observation enables the participants to share ideas but also to discuss problems and concerns [1]. The possibility to discuss lessons with peers contributes to becoming a reflective practitioner [8]. Peer observation can "help to build an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding" [3, p. 163] and it can promote the culture of professional cooperation [7].

The main purpose of peer observation is to learn [6], [7], [1] rather than to evaluate a peer's teaching. The observers may discover new teaching strategies [1], and identify techniques and practices they can use in their own teaching [9, p. 43]. Peer observation provides an opportunity to reflect on one's
own teaching [10, p. 19], [1], [4] i.e. to see “one's own teaching differently” [11, p. 183]. It enables teachers to become more self-aware and “to learn more about [their] teaching attitudes, beliefs and classroom practices” [12, p. 38]. Peer observation is “an opportunity to explore own constructs and make them explicit” [7, p. 131]. It enables us “to generate our own alternatives based on what we see others do” [11, p. 184].

This study examines peer observation as a learning tool in initial teaching practice of student teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). It describes the results of the analysis of student teachers’ peer observation reports and investigates the value of peer observation as a learning activity in initial teacher education.

2 AIM OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to gain an insight into the nature of peer observation as a learning experience in pre-service teaching practice. It addresses the following questions:

1 What were the focuses of observation in student teachers' peer observations?
2 What aspects of teaching were discussed between the observed and the observer in post-observation sessions?
3 What did the observers report to have learned from observing peers?

3 METHOD

3.1 Participants

Sixty-one student teachers of English language and literature at a Croatian university participated in this study. The study was carried out during the course Practicum and Teaching Practice, a mandatory course that is offered in the last semester of the graduate study programme of teacher education.

Student teachers started peer observation activity after each student had observed 20 mentor lessons (10 in an elementary school and 10 in a secondary school or a school of foreign languages) and taught one or two individual lessons. During the teaching practice each student teacher taught ten lessons, both in an elementary and a secondary school (or a school of foreign languages).

3.2 Procedures

Before the peer observation activity student teachers gained observation skills in global and more focused observations of their school-based mentors. Each student teacher participated in 14 global observations of their school based mentors, seven in an elementary school and seven in a secondary school or a school of foreign languages, and in six more focused observations, three in an elementary school and three in a secondary school or a school of foreign languages. In global observations student teachers would write down what happened in the classroom, what the teacher did and what the learners did, as well as their comments and questions for post-observation sessions with their mentors. More focused observations were task-based observations from Wajnryb [13], such as “Lesson planning”, “The learner as doer”, “Attending to the learner”, “Lexis and learning”, “Giving instructions”, and “Managing error”. The collected data were analysed and interpreted in post-observation sessions with the school-based mentors and a university teacher educator.

Before peer observation the student teachers attended a session on peer observation that was organised by a university teacher educator. At the beginning of the session the reflective approach to teaching was explained by Richards and Lockhart's definition of reflective teaching [14, p. 1] “Teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching”. The concept of reflective practitioner was introduced by Wajnryb's [13, p. 9] definition “A teacher who is discovering more about their own teaching by seeking to understand the processes of teaching and learning in their own and others' classrooms”. The nature of peer observation was explained by Bailey et al.'s [3, p. 157] definition of peer observation: peer observation refers to “the act of being openly and attentively present in another teacher's classroom, watching and listening to the classroom interaction primarily for reasons of professional growth (rather than supervision or evaluation)” and by Fanselow’s [11, p. 184] description of peer observation. Then, student teachers were given general guidelines for peer observation, and specific guidelines for the observer [3] [7]. Examples of the ways of collecting
data on peers’ teaching were given as well as the suggestions for giving feedback in post-observation sessions.

Each participant was both the observer and the observed. The observer observed and recorded the focus of observation agreed on in the pre-observation session. The observer and the observed met after the lesson to discuss what was observed. Both parties wrote a peer observation report. The observer’s report contained the focus of observation, data collected by observation, questions that were discussed in the post-observation session and the description of what the observer had learnt from the observed lesson. The observed student teacher wrote about how he or she had felt being observed. They gave a copy of the report to each other and to the university teacher educator.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data on the focus(es) of observation, discussion points in post-observation sessions, and the learning outcomes from lesson observations were analysed by a qualitative and quantitative analysis. To answer the first research question the reported focuses of observation were grouped into categories sharing common characteristics. For example, focusus "giving instructions", "error treatment", "presenting new vocabulary" were grouped into the category "Teaching strategies". Then the frequency of each category was calculated. To answer the second and third research question both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis of the data on discussion points and learning outcomes were made. First, segmenting into meaningful units was made. For the purpose of this study, a unit of meaning was defined as a statement or part of a statement that carries a new piece of information. For example, the statement “Although it is advised to use flashcards in an elementary school, we both agreed that they can be very useful when presenting new vocabulary or introducing new grammar items even in a secondary school.” was considered as a single unit of meaning, and the statement "I have learnt that it is important to prepare interesting tasks in order to make students participate, and that it is also necessary to keep the balance between seriousness and fun." was considered to consist of two units of meaning. Next, the units were grouped into subcategories. For example, the units "Instructions should be short and clear.", "Instructions should be given in a clear voice.", and “Students should know how much time they have to accomplish the task.” were grouped into a subcategory “Giving instructions”. Then the subcategories were grouped into categories sharing common characteristics. The analysis resulted with five categories. They were organisation of the lesson, learner engagement, classroom management, teaching strategies, and teacher behaviour. Finally, the frequency distribution of these categories was calculated.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that eighteen observers were required by their peers to observe the whole lesson i.e. to note as much as possible about the lesson they taught (e.g., “she asked me to observe everything”) whereas 43 observers observed one or more specific aspects of teaching (e.g., “alterations in the lesson plan”; “giving instructions”; “error treatment”; “lesson stage (discussion)”). Sixteen observers reported to have focused on one specific aspect of a peer's teaching while 15 student teachers focused on two aspects (e.g., “student teacher's attitude towards the learners and their reaction to him”; “introductory activity, learner response”). Six observation reports contained three aspects of teaching to be observed (e.g., “lesson stage, techniques and learner response”).

The results of the analysis of the specific focuses of observation, presented in table 1 below, show that the observed student teachers most often asked their peers to observe some aspect of the organisation of their lessons. Organisation of a particular activity (for example, “discussion on a topic”; “grammar practice”; “vocabulary building exercise”) was the most frequent focus of observation within this category (13 mentions). Other observed aspects in this category were lesson planning (five mentions), alterations in lesson planning (two mentions), organisation of a particular lesson stage (five mentions), and the use of teaching materials and media (three mentions). Second in frequency was the focus on learner involvement. This refers to learner response in general (nine mentions) and learner response to particular activities (seven mentions). This focus was reported either as the only focus of observation or together with other focuses (e.g., “lesson stage, learner response”, “activity, techniques, learner response”). Fourth in frequency were the aspects of classroom management, such as teacher-students interaction (five mentions), student groupings (two mentions), and attending to the learner (two mentions). Teaching strategies were not often reported as the targeted aspect of observation. The strategies that were observed were giving instructions (three mentions), feedback provision (two mentions), and introducing new language (one mention). The least frequent focus of
observation (two mentions) referred to teacher behaviour (approach to the students and teacher voice).

Table 1. Frequency distribution of the focuses of peer observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of peer observation</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole lesson</td>
<td>18 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the lesson</td>
<td>31 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner engagement</td>
<td>16 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>9 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>6 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher behaviour</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>82 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One hundred discussion points were mentioned in the student teachers’ reports on peer observation activity. Coding and categorisation of these points resulted with the findings presented in table 2 below. More than one-half of the reported discussion points were in the area of teacher verbal and non-verbal behaviour and classroom management (28% and 26% respectively). More than one-half of the discussion points in the area of classroom management (54%) referred to discipline (14 mentions). Other discussion points in this category referred to attending to the learners (five mentions), managing interaction (four mentions), and student groupings (three mentions).

As for teacher verbal and non-verbal behaviour, the tone of the teacher’s voice (nine mentions) and the teacher’s attitude (eight mentions) were most often discussed. Other aspects of teacher verbal behaviour that were mentioned in the discussions were teacher language, such as accuracy and the use of the first (L1) or the second language (L2), and the use of humour (three and two mentions respectively). Other reported non-verbal aspects of teacher behaviour were teacher confidence (three mentions), the use of smile (two mentions), and rapport with the learners (1 mention).

The issues that deal with the organisation of a lesson and teaching strategies were equally discussed and are the third in frequency of the reported discussion points. Organisation of activities and the use of media and materials were most often discussed (eight and four mentions respectively) whereas timing, ideas for teaching, and alterations in lesson plans were discussed once or twice each. Most often discussed teaching strategies were giving instructions (seven mentions). Second in frequency were presenting and explaining new language (vocabulary items) and feedback and error treatment (5 mentions each). Board use was mentioned twice as a discussion point.

The findings show that learner engagement was least frequently discussed in post-observation sessions; elicitation techniques for encouraging learners to participate were mentioned as discussion points in eight observation reports.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of the discussion points in post-observation meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points of discussion</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Presentation of the lesson</td>
<td>19 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Learner engagement</td>
<td>8 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Classroom management</td>
<td>26 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Teaching strategies</td>
<td>19 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Teacher behaviour</td>
<td>28 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The observers reported most learning outcomes from peer observation in the area of the organisation of the lesson (see table 3 below). Many student teachers (15 mentions) reported to have learned about the importance of good lesson planning (e.g., “I have learnt that the teacher has to be well prepared and organised before stepping in front of the class”; “I have learned that good planning is a
source of presenting interesting activities which arouse learners' attention"; “She has taught me good preparation always leads to a successful lesson."). Other learning outcomes related to lesson planning referred to the importance of flexibility in the delivery of the lesson (three mentions) (e.g., "It is not always possible to stick to the plan."); "I have learned that a teacher should be well prepared for the lesson, yet ready to adapt the plan to the learners,"; "I noticed that many things can influence the change of our lesson plan ... "). and the importance of planning additional activities (two mentions) (e.g., “Sometimes students will be not so eager to participate in some activities or discussions, so we can end up with extra time at the ending of the lesson. So, I think that we should always plan additional activities just in case this happens."). Many student teachers (15 mentions) reported to have learnt about the importance of the organisation of activities in terms of their characteristics (e.g., “I realised that it is better to have a lot of short and interesting activities that will keep the students occupied than to have one or two long and boring activities.”), selection (e.g., “Through observing this lesson I have learned how to make a lesson interesting to the learners through appropriate activities.”), and versatility (“I have also learnt that versatile activities help keep the lesson interesting.”). Other learning outcomes in this category referred to the organisation of lesson stages (e.g., “The thing that I learned from this observation is that it is very important to have a good beginning, that sets off the general mood and atmosphere in the classroom.”), use of materials and media (e.g., “I have learnt that, depending on the type of the lesson, it is good to use as much multimedia materials as possible, because I notice that the students react extremely well to such materials.”), and pacing (e.g., “The colleague held a very interesting and instructive lesson showing me the importance of varying the dynamic of the lesson and maintaining the pupils' motivation at all time.”).

Teacher approach was the second in frequency (28 mentions). The majority of learning outcomes in this category referred to teacher attitude (14 mentions) (e.g., “It is important to find a balance in our behaviour so to be strict and relaxed at the same time.”; “It is necessary to keep the balance between seriousness and fun.”) and teacher behaviour (14 mentions) (e.g., “I learnt that it is very important to feel confident.”, “One has to be confident when stepping in front of a class.”). Other characteristics, such as firm”, “relaxed”, “warm”, “having a sense of humour”, were also mentioned.

Nineteen learning outcomes were reported in the area of classroom strategies. The majority of them (nine mentions) referred to giving instructions (e.g., “Forming instructions in a bad manner changes a lesson plan because the teacher has to spend much more time to explain the instruction again and it affects the timing.”; “We should always give instructions using clear voice and higher volume.”). Other learning outcomes in this category were in the area of feedback provision (six mentions) (e.g., “I have learnt that learners like their contribution to be acknowledged.”). Four student teachers reported to have learned new strategies by observing peers (e.g., “From observing the lesson I have learnt some new strategies for vocabulary teaching.”).

Next in frequency were learning outcomes in the area of classroom management. One-half of these outcomes referred to managing interaction (e.g., “It is important to keep the class focused by maintaining eye-contact and use the learners' names.”; “It is important to involve as many students as possible when asking referential questions.”), and one-half of the learning outcomes were related to discipline (e.g., “What I learned from this observation, concerning the behaviour towards the learners, is that the two most important things are establishing clear discipline rules and expectations from the mere beginning of the class and treating students with respect because, in most of the cases, they will return the favour to the teacher in the same way.”).

Fewest learning outcomes were reported in the area of learner engagement (five mentions). They included student teachers' observations about students' willingness to participate (e.g., “The students' participation does not reflect their skills.”; “Young students can be eager to participate and solve problems even if they are not fully capable.”) and the impact of teacher behaviour upon learner participation. (e.g., “I have learnt how the attitude of the teacher affects the behaviour of the students. Since she entered the class relaxed and smiling, students also became relaxed, they were happy to participate and she didn't have to discipline them.”).
Table 3. Frequency distribution of the learning outcomes of observing peers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Occurrence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the lesson</td>
<td>40 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner engagement</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>12 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>19 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher approach</td>
<td>28 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>104 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 CONCLUSION

In this study an attempt was made to shed more light on peer observation as a learning experience in EFL pre-service teacher education. By answering research questions the student teachers’ experiences with peer observation, with respect to the focuses of observation, discussions in post-observation meetings and the observers’ learning outcomes, were investigated. Based on the findings the following conclusions have been drawn:

At the beginning of their teaching practice student teachers seem to be more interested to gain information about their delivery of the lesson in terms of its organisation and learner response to the activities they organise than to collect information about a particular aspect of their teaching behaviour. About one-half of the focuses of observation in this study were in the area of lesson organisation and learner engagement.

Post-observation sessions seem to be an opportunity for student teachers to reflect on and engage in a constructive dialogue about different aspects of managing interaction, such as discipline problems, and teacher verbal and non-verbal behaviour. More than one-half of discussion points in this study were in the area of classroom management and teacher behaviour.

Peer observation seems to be a very useful learning experience for the student teacher who observes another student teacher teach. Based on the findings it may be concluded that peer observation leads the observer to raising awareness about effective teaching and the factors that contribute to better organisation and delivery of the lesson. More than two-thirds of the observers' learning outcomes are in the area of lesson organisation and teacher behaviour.

A more in-depth insight into the nature of learning in peer observation activity could be gained by investigating conversations in post-observation sessions. A content analysis of post-observation discussions might provide better understanding of the ways in which participants construct meaning and make decisions for further actions.

REFERENCES


