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Supervision and appraisal of foreign language teachers' performance

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Abstract

Teaching is not only a systemic and learning-oriented action but also the core of teachers' professional assessment. Thus, the problem statement of our study was to analyse the relations Foreign Language Teachers established between teaching, supervision and appraisal of professional performance through classroom observation.

Through qualitative research, the prevailing supervisory perspective of teaching Foreign Languages, based on continuing professional development, reflective practices and peer relationship, proved the importance of both innovative teaching practices and a continuing assessment of performance over the two legally-imposed formal moments of classroom observation per evaluation cycle, at the time this research was conducted.

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1. Introduction

As a systemic exercise with distinctive features (PME, 2010a), the action of teaching comes close to the perspective of the teacher looked upon as someone “who teaches not only because he/she knows, but because he/she knows how to teach” (Roldão, 2007a, p.101, translation by the authors), whilst making use of complex processes such as the transformation of curricular knowledge and syllabus adaptation. The internalization of knowledge by the students occurs when the teacher masters subject areas, both theoretical and scientific knowledge as well as technical, pedagogical and didactic areas, filled with continued questioning of the teaching action (Roldão, 2007a).

From a broader perspective, the internalization of knowledge by students should also take into account a

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thorough and permanent training aimed at suitably qualified individuals, who will be ideally fully prepared to act and react not only in the most diverse contexts of a multilingual and multicultural Europe but also worldwide. As a result, the knowledge passed on to students by their teachers should be of a continuous, multidimensional, modular and lifelong nature (CEFR, 2001).

2. Teaching specifics

In terms of theoretical framework, we analysed diverse perspectives of the teaching concept in the scope of the teaching performance and this fact led us to its dual transitivity. Given that the transitivity of the action of teaching lies in “the intentional construction of the passage or the promotion of internalization of something by the other” (Roldão, 2004, p. 97, translation by the authors), two different perspectives are assigned to the action of teaching: on one hand, the teacher teaches the learner contents, which the latter, depending on his/her capabilities and effort, will have to absorb. In this situation, the teacher is a “professional of knowledge more than of a function” (Roldão, 2004, p. 98, translation by the authors), whose action “is widely intransitive regarding the student” (Roldão, 2004, p. 98, translation by the authors), however, it is transitive as far as knowledge is concerned. On the other hand, the teacher is also a mediator between knowledge and the learner. Consequently, his/her role is characterized by a “double transitivity – the teacher is the one who teaches not only something, but something to someone” (Roldão, 2004, p. 98, translation by the authors).

In order to meet the demands of the teaching role and taking into account the centrality of the action of teaching within the development of the teaching and learning areas, teaching is necessarily associated with both specific knowledge and a growing assertion of the teacher as a “professional of education with the specific task of teaching, by making use of professional knowledge, supported by research and shared reflection upon educational practice” (PME, 2001, p.5570, translation by the authors). Therefore, we conclude that the action of teaching is at the centre of teacher’s performance and defines the core of the teaching profession. From this approach emerges the need for evaluation and systematic observation with the purpose of assessing performance.

In the scope of the teaching and learning areas, the appraisal of the teaching performance by peers should enhance scientific and pedagogical components significantly, whilst focusing on the pedagogical work in the classroom. As a consequence, this turns the reconciliation of the formative and summative dimensions in a single professional of education, who is both a supervisor and a peer evaluator (Vieira, Moreira, Barbosa, Paiva & Fernandes, 2010), and the evaluation between peers into the most difficult tasks for a teacher to perform (Alarcão & Tavares, 2003).

According to Oliveira-Formosinho (2002a), 2002b) and Alarcão & Tavares (2003) quoted by Formosinho, Machado & Oliveira-Formosinho (2010), the scenario of supervision which emphasizes “the supporting roles, listening, active collaboration on agreed goals through contracts, involvement in daily educational activities and reflected experimentation through action that seeks to respond to the identified problem” (p.107, translation by the authors), should be the one in which the appraisal of teachers’ performance, regulated by self-and one-on-one peer supervision, overcomes individual interests and aims at collective change, based on the monitoring of teaching practices and teacher support (Vieira *et al.*, 2010).

3. Methodological framework

A research was conducted in a public secondary school in the northern region of Portugal. The participants were fifteen *Foreign Language Teachers* whose teaching subjects were namely French, English and Spanish and were subjected to classroom observations by their peers in the 2010-2011 school year. Through the survey technique, we aimed at:

- Identifying foreign language teachers’ conceptions about the action of teaching;
- Knowing the curricular teaching practices in terms of planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching activities that Foreign Language teachers claim to develop;
- Understanding foreign language teachers’ perspectives on *appraisal of teachers’ performance*;
- Identifying possible indicators (enablers/ constraints) that these teachers associate with supervision in the context of classroom observation.

The adopted research methodology was the *case study*, whose nature is essentially qualitative and necessarily subjective. In this case, individuals experience reality in different ways. Thus, if the teacher’s way of teaching is a reflex of the subjective reality, beliefs, thoughts and professional perspectives, the action of teaching will be based precisely on such subjective thoughts, beliefs and perspectives. In this sense, the knowledge of both

educational and educative contexts of the participating teachers of this study is consistent with a qualitative approach, insofar it aims at the understanding of “individuals, personal constructs, negotiated meaning” (Opie & Sikes, 2004, p. 08), since what is considered important in both an interpretive and qualitative paradigm is self-interpretation and representation of the individuals’ experiences (Opie & Sikes, 2004).

Following our methodological options, the survey was the technique chosen for data collection. This both internal and external instrument was validated previously and passed to fifteen Foreign Language Teachers that had been teaching at a public secondary and third cycle school in the school year 2010/2011. These teachers underwent classroom observation and / or played the role of supervisors / peer evaluators in the scope of the appraisal of teachers’ performance. The data obtained from the questionnaire were statistically analysed using SPSS - 17.0 version.

The questionnaire, in which the participants were asked to express their degree of agreement and disagreement, the frequency of the stated actions and answer a multiple-choice exercise, required us to “build a set of alternative answers to this question specifically” (Hill, 2009, p.121, translation by the authors). Furthermore, the Likert scale was chosen to help teachers express their levels of agreement or disagreement in each statement. Finally, we also used the technique of observation and document analysis to complement and enhance our research.

4. Findings

The survey was divided into three main parts, in an attempt to ease the reading and interpretation of the different results. These parts were: personal and professional characterization of the participant teachers; Teaching action and Supervision in the context of teachers’ appraisal of performance.

4.1. Participants’ personal and professional characterization

Regarding the personal and professional characteristics of the participating teachers, whose average ages were 44 years, the data from the questionnaire enabled us to conclude that the female sex was predominant (93%), all teachers were bachelors, three of them had post-graduated studies and six teachers were holders of an academic Master's degree. The majority of teachers (87%) are the so-called *career teachers* and 73% of teachers have been teaching for at least nineteen years, which reveals some professional stability.

As far as the variable *Role in the appraisal of teacher performance* is concerned, four teachers were peer evaluators (27%), whilst all the other participants were only evaluated teachers (73%). The teachers, who were observed in classroom for the appraisal of their performance, were: a teacher of Spanish; seven teachers of French and seven teachers of English.

4.2. The teaching action

Concerning the teaching action and the teachers’ professional experience, the participant teachers were asked to express their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Teachers’ perceptions towards the teaching action.

Teaching...	Strongly disagree	Partially disagree	Undecided	Partially agree	Strongly agree
...is to profess knowledge.	1	0	1	6	7
...assumes the intention to produce learning by the student.	0	0	1	7	7
...is to pass on knowledge.	0	1	1	6	7
...aims at facilitating the construction and appropriation of knowledge by the student.	0	0	0	5	10
...implies mastery of subject area knowledge.	0	0	0	5	10
...involves the reconstruction of the curriculum taking into account the students’ contexts.	0	1	1	6	7
...implies necessarily the effectiveness of learning by the student.	0	0	0	4	11

The given answers express mostly the partial and strong agreement with the provided statements, which confirms the complexity of the teaching action. This complexity is present in the passing on of “knowledge that one possesses” (Roldão *et al.*, 2009, p.142, translation by the authors) and that the teacher openly declares. It is also directly linked to an intention of “promoting learning and appropriation of knowledge by others” (Roldão *et al.*,

2009, p.142, translation by the authors). However, corroborating Vieira *et al.* (2010), teaching is not only about knowledge, but also “to think, to encourage students to identify and solve problems, helping them create habits of thought and action” (p.59, translation by the authors).

From the participants’ point of view, the teaching action still aims at facilitating the construction and appropriation of knowledge by the students and, according to Roldão (2007b), this happens whenever the teacher “organizes and structures a set of actions that lead others to learn. This is (...) what defines teaching” (p.36, translation by the authors). However, *Teaching* also requires the mastery of subject knowledge based on both theoretical and scientific basis, which is inherent to the teaching function (Roldão *et al.*, 2009), i.e. the possession of specific knowledge that derives from the breath of professional skills considered necessary to good teaching performance (Roldão, 2007b; Roldão *et al.*, 2009).

The majority of the participant teachers agreed strongly that *Teaching* necessarily implies the internalization of knowledge by the students. However, and once more in corroboration with Roldão’s theoretical perspective (2004), the teacher intentionally teaches topics to the learner, which the latter, according to his/her abilities and effort, will have to learn. As a result, the intention to teach does not necessarily imply an effective outcome as the teacher’s action “towards the student is largely intransitive” (Roldão, 2004, p.98, translation by the authors), despite being transitive towards the subject knowledge. In addition, we aimed at characterizing the everyday curriculum practices that participants have claimed to implement in their classrooms. Therefore, teachers were asked to estimate the frequency with which, in the planning, realisation and regulation of school activities, they put into practice each of the listed activities, bearing in mind that “[t]he individual or collaborative setting (...) includes metacognitive tasks such as planning, monitoring and evaluation, central to the development of self-determination and social responsibility” (Vieira *et al.*, 2010, p.24, translation by the authors).

As a result of this research and as far as the flexible and open activities at the planning stage are concerned, we concluded that teachers generally take into consideration the purposes of the contents they teach and their performance. They also do regular collaborative work with their peers; adapt the planning of indoor activities to the students’ contexts and characteristics as well as the monitoring and redirection of educational activities as a way of contributing to the improvement of educational results, as required by legal regulations.

Regarding the analysis of the realisation of the school activities, it can be inferred that the participant teachers contextualize learning very frequently in an environment of mutual respect and interaction through “effective management of communication processes and interactions in the classroom” (PME, 2010a, p.52301, translation by the authors).

The participant teachers also affirmed to foster learner autonomy and pair work using the Information and Communication Technologies, which are technically adapted to students, and value the processes of teaching and learning. However, it is also worth mentioning that, when carrying out school activities, the teachers seldom articulate curricular subjects, perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the curriculum of other subjects, which can owe itself to the lack of a collaborative culture. Finally, this non-promotion of inter - relationships among the different areas of knowledge affects, in Goodson’s perspective (1997), not only the processes of teaching and student learning but also contributes to a fragmented view of knowledge .

As far as the evaluation of the teaching activities is concerned, the participant teachers stated that they regulate student learning through self-assessment practices, which implies according to legislation, “the analysis of educational activities and its reorientation towards improvement on teaching and its outcomes” (PME, 2010a, p.52301, translation by the authors) , i.e. the monitoring of teaching and learning (Vieira, 1993;Vieira *et al.*, 2010) .The lower frequency in the use of diagnostic evaluation each time a new unit is started, means that teachers perform diagnostic activities less frequently when compared to other practices of assessing learning.

Figari (1996) agrees that the diagnostic activities should precede action and be predictive, as long as they identify the needs to be met and diagnose problems. According to Stufflebeam (1980), those activities constitute an assessment of contextual nature.

4.3. Supervision in the context of the Appraisal of Teachers’ Performance

In the following stage, we intended to understand the perspectives of the participant Foreign Language Teachers about the Appraisal of Teachers’ Performance, with reference to supervision as shown in Table no 2.

Table 2. Perspectives about the Appraisal of Teachers' Performance.

In my opinion, the appraisal of teachers' performance...	Strongly disagree	Partially disagree	Undecided	Partially agree	Strongly agree
...is the only way to progress in my career.	4	2	3	3	3
...provides teacher growth beyond the current level of performance.	2	3	2	8	0
...is a formality without consequences in the improvement of teacher practice.	1	5	1	7	1
...is an instrument of control of teaching at school.	1	2	1	9	2
...causes the relationship between the evaluated teacher and the peer evaluator to be hierarchical.	1	5	1	6	2
...rewards merit and dignifies the teaching profession.	5	3	3	4	0
...fosters the reflection upon practices as a way of improving teacher performance.	0	3	0	8	4
...makes value judgments about the overall quality of teacher competences.	1	1	2	8	3
...contributes to teachers' professional development.	1	3	2	8	1
...is an opportunity to take risks and experiment with new methods of teaching.	1	4	3	5	2
...increases the competitiveness among peers.	0	1	2	6	6
...makes use of data collection based on individual criteria.	2	3	3	6	1
...is merely a bureaucratic ritual.	1	2	3	3	6
...promotes collaborative work.	3	1	1	8	2
...contributes to the identification and resolution of problems.	1	1	4	7	2
...aims at school development.	1	4	4	6	0
...enables identification of professional needs.	1	2	3	8	1
...recognizes the complex and multidimensional nature of the teaching action.	0	5	4	4	2
...makes use of data collection based on standardized criteria.	0	1	4	10	0
...causes the relationship between the evaluated teacher and the peer evaluator to be non-hierarchical and reciprocal.	0	1	4	9	1

Thus, the participants' perspectives about the appraisal of their performance were somehow divided: on one hand, the appraisal of teachers' performance was perceived as the only way of career progression, i.e., six participants agreed partial and strongly with this view, whilst, on the other hand, six participants disagreed proportionally. This reveals that for six participants, professional development aimed at progression doesn't owe itself solely to the appraisal of teachers' performance. On the other hand, eight teachers partially agreed with the fact that the appraisal of teachers' performance fosters professional development, while seven teachers agreed partially with the fact that the appraisal of teachers' performance does not improve pedagogical practices. This means that as far as innovation and change in practices are concerned, the majority of participants does not recognize any impact of the appraisal of teachers' performance on their teaching practices.

It is also worth mentioning that the majority of participants partially agreed with the idea that the appraisal of teachers' performance seems to act as an instrument of control of teaching at school, leading the teachers to "an administrative role of control where efficiency and productivity are the watchword" (Formosinho, Machado &

Oliveira - Formosinho 2010, p.140, translation by the authors), as far as accountability and professional as well as bureaucratic control of the appraisal of teachers' performance are concerned (Formosinho, Machado & Oliveira - Formosinho, 2010).

Furthermore, eight teachers partially and strongly agreed with the fact that the relationship between the evaluated teacher and the peer evaluator is hierarchical from an evaluative perspective. On the other hand, ten teachers agreed that this relationship was nonhierarchical from a supervisory point of view. This discrepancy between two opposite positions might have to do with the experiences teachers went through during their formal appraisal. However and according to Vieira (1993), this kind of non-hierarchical relationship may lead to professional development with the objective of improving teaching practices.

Eleven teachers out of fifteen considered that the appraisal of teachers' performance allows the making of value judgments over *Teacher Performance* and, according to nine teachers, the appraisal of teachers' performance contributes to their professional development. Additionally, seven teachers saw it as an opportunity to try out new practices. In a consistent manner, twelve teachers considered that the appraisal of teachers' performance increases the competitiveness among peers, which is reinforced by the idea that, despite the effective collaboration among peers to provide equality in the situation in which supervisor and evaluator are the same person, "one cannot help pointing out the difficulty to put fully into practice this ethical imperative between peers" (Vieira *et al.*, 2010, p.130, translation by the authors).

Another reason for this might be the fact that the percentages to access the highest marks in the Portuguese grading system allow career progression to only 20 % and 5 % of the evaluated teachers respectively (PME, 2010a; 2010b). On the other hand, most teachers agreed with the fact that the appraisal of teachers' performance is merely a bureaucratic ritual. This fact seems to be in accordance with a summative perspective of the appraisal that Formosinho, Machado & Oliveira-Formosinho (2010) consider to "involve a tension between development and professional accountability, professional supervision and bureaucratic control" (p.110, translation by the authors).

From the obtained results, it was possible to infer that the participants' perspectives are supervisory in some aspects, but tend to an evaluative perspective of supervision in others. For instance, the supervisory perspective of appraisal of teachers' performance seems to prevail upon the evaluative one, as far as the teacher's professional development and experimentation of new practices are concerned.

Consequently, the moments of reflection upon pedagogical practices between the evaluated teacher and the peer evaluator are predominantly on a one-on-one basis in the appraisal of teachers' performance process and aim at promoting the teachers' professional development. Besides, they also foster the making of value judgments on the teaching performance, despite the use of mostly standardized data collection criteria. These criteria were set up by the Portuguese Ministry of Education and Science and based on four dimensions of the teaching performance, being the dimension of *development of teaching and learning* the one we based this study on. The data collection criteria may also affect the appraisal of teacher's performance in the classroom, from the moment the teaching action is subjected to value judgments by the peer evaluator. Finally, the competitiveness factor between peers from an outcome perspective and in opposition to collaborative work in a supervisory perspective, may owe itself to the individual experiences teachers had undergone during their formal assessment. To sum up, the appraisal of teachers' performance does not seem to dignify these participants' teaching work.

At last, it was our purpose to identify possible indicators, both positive and negative, that teachers of Foreign Languages and Cultures associated with supervision in the context of classroom observation. The positive and negative aspects reported by the participant teachers were as follows:

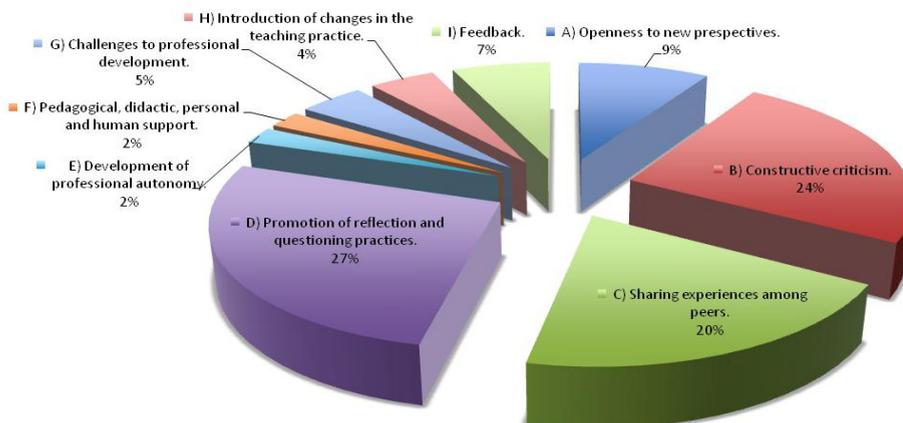


Fig.1. Positive aspects of supervision.

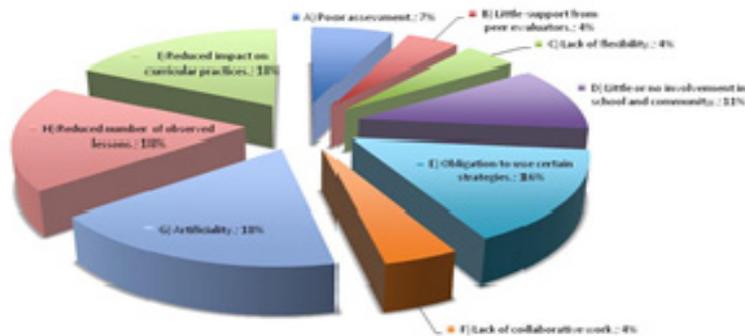


Fig. 2. Negative aspects of supervision.

The three positive qualities of supervision most referred to by the participant teachers were: *Promotion of reflection and questioning practices* (27 %), which can be justified by the teachers' perceptions of supervision of the teaching practices, seen as a monitoring process of the practice "through reflection and experimentation procedures" (Vieira, 1993, p.11, translation by the authors); supervision based on *constructive criticism* (24%), which can be characterized as dialogic, democratic, bi-directional, of shared responsibility and metacognitive in order to enhance learning. Besides, it can also improve the appraisal of teachers' performance as, from Stenhouse's point of view (2003), "only the critical function serves the transformation of practice" (p.20, translation by the authors) and finally, the participants pointed out the *sharing of practices and experiences* (20%) which leads to "shared reflection upon educational practice" (PME, 2001, p.5570, translation by the authors) within the group that teaches the same subject. As a result, the majority of our sample revealed a high level of agreement on these three options, completing 71 % of the given answers.

As far as the negative aspects of supervision are concerned, pie chart no 2. presents the following results: *reduced impact* [of supervision] *on curricular practices*; *reduced number of observed lessons* and *artificiality* were pointed out by 18% of the participant teachers each. Teachers recognized that supervision had little visible impact on their practices during the formal appraisal of their performance. Furthermore, they also admitted that the number of lessons observed by their peers had been clearly insufficient and endowed with artificiality, since only a higher number of continuous classroom observations of the teaching practices would be able to provide a self-, more rigorous and thorough analysis of the teaching performances, as well as of the appropriateness of continuing or replacing the observed aspect in the classroom (Reis, 2011). As a result, the artificiality of the appraisal process seems to derive from the fact that the participant teachers were legally forced to go through it. In the end, our sample reveals the same degree of agreement on the three most mentioned options, completing 54% of the given answers.

5. Conclusions

In accordance with our findings, we believe in the importance of fostering innovation and change in curricular practices by knowing those practices systematically and in depth as well as their facts and constraints, so that the appraisal of teachers' performance can take place naturally, continuously and less bureaucratically. We also suggest that teachers promote students' active participation and involvement in curricular activities, so that the

teaching action can fulfill its function and achieve its ultimate goal— Learning.

Finally, teachers' career progression should take place beyond the two formal moments of appraisal of performance, so that the teachers wouldn't see it as a bureaucratic and standardized ritual. From the moment it is neither perceived as sufficient for innovation and improvement of teaching practices nor blended with moments of reflection, the appraisal of teachers' performance has to involve necessarily more formal and informal moments of observation of teaching practices, as a means to help enhance the participant teachers' perceptions about their own appraisal, generally perceived as an artificial process of regulation.

Finally and despite not being compulsory for all teachers, the two formal and legally-imposed moments of classroom observation that occur every two school years, have proved to be clearly insufficient to reverse the idea that the appraisal of teachers' performance does not dignify the teaching profession.

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