Peer observation in ELT at higher education: the implementation in synchronous online teaching

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Abstract
Purpose – Our paper examines how ELT lecturers perceive the feasibility of implementing Peer Observation (PO) in synchronous online settings, drawing on their prior experiences with offline PO. We also aim to identify potential areas for synchronous online PO.
Design/methodology/approach – We employed semi-structured interviews with eight lecturers as participants. Data analysis included identifying keywords, transcribing and labeling responses, and sorting and categorizing the themes.
Findings – Firstly, our findings indicate that lecturers reported several benefits from conducting offline PO, such as identifying teaching weaknesses, learning new techniques of teaching, gaining motivation, and receiving peer feedback. Participants also agreed that synchronous online PO is feasible and may offer greater benefits, especially with the shift to online teaching. Finally, the interview data highlighted potential areas for observation in synchronous online settings, including both pedagogical and technological aspects.
Research limitations/implications – Firstly, our study did not explore the potential and focus areas of synchronous online PO based on lecturers’ actual experiences. Instead, we derived these potential and focuses from their experiences with offline PO. Secondly, the potential observation areas have not been validated.
Practical implications – This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the potential of synchronous online PO and identifying key aspects for observation. Furthermore, in terms of practical implications, our findings may serve as a basis for developing validated guidelines for synchronous online PO, involving more practitioners. Additionally, lecturers and higher education institutions can consider implementing synchronous online PO to enhance teaching quality.
Originality/value – Previous literature has discussed ELT teachers’ perceptions of offline PO, but limited research exists on its implementation in synchronous online contexts. Additionally, identifying potential areas for observation in synchronous online PO remains a concern.
Keywords Peer observation, Synchronous online teaching, English language teaching, Higher education
Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction
Peer observation (PO) is where one teacher observes another teaching method (Bell and Cooper, 2013; Blackwell, 1996; Engin and Priest, 2014; Whipp and Pengelley, 2017). PO is described as “the power of having another pair of eyes to help teachers ‘see’ better in their classroom” (Richard and Farrel, 2005). Successful PO enhances educators’ awareness of classroom challenges and their strategies to address the issues (Richard and Farrel, 2005). PO is widely accepted for professional development in various educational fields (Fletcher, 2017), including English Language Teaching (ELT) in higher education. Previous studies found that PO benefit ELT educators in universities in face-to-face by improving pedagogic content (Agustina et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2018; Batlle and Seedhouse, 2022; Day, 2015; Engin and Priest, 2014; Nhun and Nguyen, 2023; Richards and Lockhart, 1991; Sanif, 2015; Santos, 2016), boosting teachers’ motivation and confidence (Agustina et al., 2020; Day, 2015; Engin and Priest, 2014), and providing feedback on teaching specific
language skills (Ahmad, 2020; Chien, 2019; Richards and Lockhart, 1991). However, these studies primarily focused on offline teaching situations. With the increasing demand for online teaching and learning at the university level, the need for online PO is becoming crucial (Jones and Gallen, 2016).

For over a decade, studies have explored online PO in various higher educational contexts, e.g. (Jones and Gallen, 2016; Kille et al., 2015; O’Keeffe et al., 2021; West and Clauhs, 2019). In contrast, research on its application in ELT within university settings is still under practiced (see (Inceçay and Dikilitaş, 2022; Taghizadeh and Zafarpour, 2022). However, these studies were conducted in asynchronous settings using video recordings. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to address these gaps by exploring ELT lecturers’ perceptions of implementing synchronous online PO. Furthermore, another concern with PO is adapting observation rubrics for both traditional and virtual classes (Inceçay and Dikilitaş, 2022). Observation dimensions may include teaching practices, classroom atmosphere (Coady et al., 2020), teacher knowledge, lesson delivery, and planning and preparation (Ahmad, 2020; Richard and Farrel, 2005). The case is that some aspects of offline PO like nonverbal communication are absent in online settings (Bennett and Barp, 2008) while in online class, teachers must find effective teaching strategies to ensure and maintain a student-centered learning environment. This situation implies that rubrics designed for offline PO may not work online, as each aspect should relate to specific teaching practices (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore, the second aim of our study is to investigate potential areas of focus for online synchronous PO in ELT environment in higher education.

This study contributes to ELT in higher education theoretically and practically. Firstly, it expands existing literature by exploring synchronous online PO’s potential, drawing from offline PO experiences. While existing studies focus on on-site PO, we extend this to the online context. Secondly, we advocate for key aspects in synchronous online PO, addressing a gap in rubric discussions for traditional settings. In practical terms, our results can serve as a foundation for further research aimed at developing validated guidelines for synchronous online PO. Additionally, institutions can use our study to support decisions to implement such practices in ELT classrooms.

2. Literature review
2.1 Positioning peer observation in teachers’ professional development (TPD)
Popova et al. (2022) define Teachers Professional Development (TPD) as “the principal tool” for improving teachers’ knowledge and skills and emphasizing continuous learning (Fletcher et al., 2018). TPD benefits teachers and impacts student growth by transforming knowledge into classroom practice (Avalos, 2013). TPD also aligns with institutional goals (Richard and Farrel, 2005), serving as a means for program leaders to enhance pedagogy skills through interconnected processes (Fletcher, 2017). TPD types can be formal, informal, collaborative, or individualistic (Gosling, 2002), and the activities can be individual, peer-based, team-based, or organizational (Richard and Farrel, 2005). Examples include workshops, conferences, degree programs, institutional visits, research, teacher networks, and coaching/PO. PO offers colleagues a chance to observe and gain insights from each other’s teaching practices (Richard and Farrel, 2005; Bell and Cooper, 2013; Harper and Nicolson (2013) assert that PO allows academics to place themselves in the position of novices again, benefiting from exposure to various approaches. Blackwell (1996) highlights PO benefits such as reassurance, feedback on innovations, uncovering hidden behaviors, addressing discomfort, tackling known problems, learning as observers, and sharing teaching publicly.

2.2 Models and benefits of peer observation
Webb (2020) categorized PO into summative or formative models Summative PO assesses performance for appraisal, often causing observed teachers to feel judged and threatened
In contrast, formative PO provides constructive feedback aimed at improving teaching practices, leading to positive outcomes (Blackmore, 2005). Gosling (2002) identifies three PO models: Evaluation, Developmental, and Peer Review. The Evaluation model involves senior staff observing to identify underperformance, providing summative feedback. The Developmental model, conducted by expert teachers, assesses and enhances teaching competencies. Both models result in judgmental reports which can discourage active learning (Blackwell, 1996). The Peer Review model, however, fosters collegial discussions about teaching, emphasizing non-judgmental, formative feedback and mutual reflection, promoting active learning and broadening teaching experiences (Blackwell, 1996; Gosling, 2002).

In this study, PO follows the Peer Review model to enhance teaching quality. The literature highlights that PO benefits various stakeholders. For observed teachers, it fosters collegiality, self-awareness, and constructive feedback (Richard and Farrel, 2005). Observers gain insights and self-reflection opportunities. Institutions benefit from aligning PO with goals, promoting personal growth, and maintaining overall performance and quality. From the department or institution’s perspective, Richard and Farrel (2005) also state that PO can align with institutional goals. Through successful implementation of PO, most academics can achieve personal growth, subsequently contributing to departmental or institutional objectives of maintaining overall performance and quality (Fletcher, 2017).

2.3 Focus and procedure of peer observation
Careful planning of observation focus areas is crucial for successful PO. For example, Richard and Farrel (2005) suggest areas like time management, activities, interaction patterns, and instructional media. Coady et al. (2020), suggest some classroom environment domains for observation. The instructional practices domain includes creating respect and rapport, establishing learning culture, managing procedures and behavior, and organizing space. Classroom environment areas involve communication, questioning, student engagement, assessment methods, and flexibility. In ELT, observation focus also includes teachers’ attention to student language production and the activities used for other specific skills (Richard and Farrel, 2005), such as critical thinking skills in reading lesson (Ahmad, 2020) and questioning and discussion techniques based on students’ proficiency levels (Coady et al., 2020).

PO involves three main steps: pre-observation, observation, and post-observation (Fletcher, 2017). Pre-observation involves a consultation with the peer to understand the teacher’s goals and strategies. Observation involves careful watching, often with a checklist, and note-taking. Post-observation entails providing feedback through a supportive and non-judgmental discussion (Gosling, 2002). The shift to online teaching introduces new dynamics to PO focus areas. Some aspects applicable offline, like observing motivation levels and behavior management, become challenging online (Richard and Farrel, 2005). İnceçay and Dikilitaş (2022) suggest that online PO may prioritize observable activities like facilitating dialogues or utilizing technology effectively.

2.4 Previous research: peer observation synchronous online teaching
Previous research has extensively explored various facets of PO in ELT within higher education, focusing on teachers’ perceptions and its potential benefits. Studies by Agustina et al. (2020), Ahmed et al. (2018), Engin and Priest (2014), Nhung and Nguyen (2023), Sanif (2015) and Santos (2016) have shown that PO can enhance cognitive areas like lesson planning, teaching ideas and techniques. Furthermore, PO has been found to increase EFL teachers’ motivation and confidence (Day, 2015). Research has also focused on specific language skills. For instance, Richards and Lockhart (1991) found that PO helps teachers
ensure students get sufficient language practice, and Ahmad (2020) used PO to improve reading lessons. Additionally, Batlle and Seedhouse (2022) focused on developing positive feedback stances in PO, while Chien (2019) explored integrating technical vocabulary into PO phases. However, there is limited research on online PO, especially in synchronous environments. Ersin and Mede (2020) developed an e-practicum which include PO phases for pre-service teachers. İnceçay and Dikilitaş (2022) examined ELT teachers’ experiences with online PO using recorded materials, focusing on reflection part. Taghizadeh and Zafarpour (2022) compared PO, reflection, and expert feedback for online teaching performance. However, these studies occurred in asynchronous settings using recordings and their emphasis was on the reflection process, which is part of the final phase of PO.

Since this study focuses on PO in synchronous online classrooms, we need to define what synchronous means first. As stated by Martin et al. (2021), synchronous online teaching allows instructors to connect with their students in real-time, regardless of geographical distance, using tools like Skype and Zoom for smooth interactions (Lu, 2022). Khan et al. (2021) distinguish synchronous online teaching from asynchronous formats by highlighting the integration of technology into teaching methods to ensure collaboration among students and with teachers (McArthur, 2022; Wang et al., 2010).

2.5 Theoretical framework
This study uses Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (SCT) to explore how lecturers perceive the impact of PO on teaching quality in synchronous online settings. According to Walqui (2006), SCT emphasizes that knowledge construction occurs through social interaction, where individuals engage in activities with clear purposes, such as problem-solving (Shabani, 2016). PO aligns with SCT as it involves observers and teachers in practical teaching activities designed to improve performance systematically.

The second principle of SCT is mediation, where cognitive development is mediated through various means: object-regulated, self-regulated, and other-regulated (Shi, 2017). Object-regulated mediation involves teachers seeking help from cultural artifacts, such as English videos or teaching equipment, while self-regulated takes control of both their cognition and activities. Other-regulated mediation involves seeking help from colleagues and institutions to enhance skills. “Mediation,” especially other-regulated mediation, connects SCT and PO. In PO, interactions and feedback between observers and teachers help improve teaching by sharing strengths and challenges. Vygotsky’s SCT, with its emphasis on other-regulated mediation, supports the effectiveness of PO in enhancing professional development.

3. Methodology
Eight English lecturers from an Indonesian university shared their perspectives on synchronous online PO. Their insights were drawn from prior experiences with traditional offline PO and discussed potential observation areas in the online context. When selecting participants, we followed two key factors, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), Guest et al. (2006) and Sargeant (2012). First, qualitative research does not require a large sample size (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Guest et al. (2006) suggests that six to twelve interviews should be sufficient to uncover themes. Second, participant selection in qualitative research is purposeful and based on their roles, perspectives, experience levels, or career backgrounds (Sargeant, 2012). Four senior lecturers with extensive teaching experience, in which they also participated in offline PO as both observers and observed teachers, provided insights into PO. Two other lecturers with six years of teaching experience, who have also been observed several times, offered diverse perspectives. Additionally, two younger participants, though less experienced and not yet having had the
opportunity to be observed, provided valuable insights into technology use in online teaching situations since they are more adept at utilizing technology and media.

We began the interview process by obtaining informed consent from all participants. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and started with basic questions about participants’ names, teaching experience, and academic qualifications. They were then asked open-ended questions about their experiences with offline PO and their views on the potential of online PO. We used a mix of direct, indirect, and follow-up questions to encourage detailed responses. To ensure honesty, all responses were anonymized.

The interview questions included the following:

1. Are you familiar with the concept of Peer Observation? How do you define it?
2. Can you share your experience of being observer/observed teacher in offline Peer Observation?
3. In general, do you find the Peer Observation to be a positive experience? Or have you found it negatively impacts a lecturer’s teaching performance?
4. With the current shift to more online teaching, is it feasible to conduct Peer Observation in synchronous online meetings (e.g. using Zoom)?
5. Do you think that Peer Observation in synchronous online meeting to be useful? Why?
6. If we talk about observation rubrics of offline Peer Observation, are they still applicable in online mode?
7. According to you, what aspects should be the area of focus on synchronous online Peer Observation?

The profiles of the participants are presented in the following Table 1:

For data analysis, we transcribed the interview recordings and thoroughly reviewed the dataset before starting the coding process. We labeled each participant’s responses and categorized the codes into themes. Following Braun and Clarke (2008), themes were aligned with the research questions to capture essential keywords. Participant quotations were included as evidence for each theme, considering their frequency of occurrence.

4. Results

The study was guided by two research questions: (1) What are lecturers’ perceptions of synchronous PO based on their experience in offline PO? and (2) What are the observation focuses of online PO? Themes for the first question included the benefits of offline PO and the potential of PO. The second question was addressed through the theme of observation focus in online PO.

4.1 Theme 1: the benefits of offline peer observation

The first theme explored lecturers’ perceptions of the potential of synchronous online PO based on their experience with offline PO. Participants discussed the benefits they had experienced from offline PO, acknowledging familiarity with PO terms and practices. In the coding descriptors, lecturers frequently mentioned the advantages of offline PO, including: gaining awareness of weaknesses in teaching, obtaining ideas about teaching techniques and strategies, finding motivation, and having a colleague to observe them. Another specific benefit of PO in ELT classroom is that observers can also provide feedback on linguistic aspects such as pronunciation. Some quotes from lecturers’ responses can be seen in the following Table 2.
4.2 Theme 2: the potential of doing synchronous online peer observation
The second theme revealed respondents’ beliefs about engaging in PO in synchronous online classes through teleconferencing access. While perceptions varied, common codes among respondents indicated that synchronous online PO would be beneficial for several reasons. These included the need for feedback from online PO, the potential to assess the success of online teaching, insights into materials used, teaching procedures, organization of discussions in virtual classes, and management of student activities and interactions. Few quotes from participants can be seen in the following Table 3.

4.3 Theme 3: observation focus of synchronous online peer observation
The last theme we uncovered was the focus areas for synchronous online PO. Based on the interview data, we identified two main areas: pedagogical and technological. The pedagogical focus includes lesson delivery, organizing discussions, variety of assignments, intonation and voice, and providing feedback to students. The technological focus involves the use of media or applications to effectively deliver materials, conduct exams, and engage with students. Participant quotes illustrating these points are provided below in Table 4.

5. Discussion
PO has proven to be an effective tool for enhancing TPD, particularly in ELT context in higher education. Given the increasing demand for online classes in higher education, implementing PO in synchronous online formats is essential. This study aims to explore
lecturers’ perceptions of the potential for implementing PO practices in synchronous online settings, drawing from their experiences with offline PO. Specifically, it focuses on English language educators in universities and seeks to identify potential observation focuses for synchronous online PO rubrics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme’s name</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Participants whose comments pertained to the theme</th>
<th>Comments pertained to the theme (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of offline PO</td>
<td>Getting observer’s suggestion, there is somebody’s eyes to observe, receiving more ideas about teaching strategies, having notes about linguistic aspects of, motivation was boosted, being aware of weakness, etc</td>
<td>R1, R2, R3, R6, R7, R8</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential of doing synchronous online PO</td>
<td>As a tool to see successfulness of teaching online, still beneficial to see lesson plan and material, online PO is undeniable, online PO can provide feedback, etc</td>
<td>R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exemplar quotes**

“Sometimes we focus on delivering the lesson, but then there are some other aspects that we inadvertently skip but the observer knows that, such as the clarity of the media we use or as simply as our voice that is not loud enough” (R1)

“Peer observation mostly focuses on the pedagogical aspect, on how teachers deliver the materials to the students, but sometimes, we [observer] can make a note about the language competence of observed lecturers, such as if they mispronounced something really crucial” (R2)

“I didn’t even remember what I missed during my lectures until my peer took some notes and shared them with me after class” (R6)

“Once, they [observer] told me that the way I correct their [students] pronunciation is smooth and less judging. I was so happy and my motivation increased. I know that I will keep that approach” (R8)

Another benefit that I got is, I just realized that I talk that much in my class and give less time for them to discuss. I became aware of my weakness and in the next meeting, I will remember it (R8)

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

Table 2. Theme 1

Table 3. Theme 2
Firstly, most lecturers reported positive experiences with face-to-face PO, highlighting benefits such as enhanced teaching strategies, improved classroom activities and management, and increased motivation. They appreciated the additional perspective provided by observers, which helped ensure effective teaching practices. According to the Sociocultural Theory (Shabani, 2016; Shi, 2017; Walqui, 2006), teacher development occurs through social interaction and mediation. The presence of an observer, even in a synchronous online setting, can significantly impact teaching by stimulating mediation through discussions and feedback, ultimately enhancing teaching quality. These findings align with previous studies. For instance, a participant who had been in an observer position commented that feedback could also address the observed lecturer’s language aspects. This issue also appeared in Motallebzadeh et al. (2017)’s study, where one of the benefits of PO was making the observed teacher aware of their pronunciation and word stress before teaching. Another finding showed that PO increased lecturers’ confidence, as similarly noted by Bell and Cooper (2013) and Whipp and Pengelley (2017).

Secondly, lecturers highlighted the potential of synchronous online PO, emphasizing its necessity as teaching shifts online. Despite being accustomed to offline teaching, they agreed that PO remains beneficial in the online context, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. As online and hybrid learning modes continue, lecturers require feedback on aspects such as lesson delivery, student interaction, and technology use. We propose that synchronous online PO offers valuable real-time feedback during online classes, enhancing teaching skills and introducing new strategies. These findings support the implementation of online PO in higher education. Additionally, we also suggest that observation rubrics for synchronous online PO should encompass both pedagogical and technological aspects. These insights can help ELT educators and researchers develop more comprehensive rubrics.
Thirdly, participants noted that most focus areas in face-to-face PO, such as planning, preparation, and lesson delivery, could still apply to synchronous online teaching. This includes content alignment with lesson plans, introduction of objectives, class initiation and conclusion, time management, and teacher language. However, aspects like physical space organization are not applicable. Participants suggested additional focus areas in both pedagogical and technological aspects. See Table 5 for specific ideas from participants.

All participants recognized the necessity of using technology in online meetings. Wang et al. (2010), emphasize that online teaching involves not only the relationship between teachers and students but also the interaction with technology-mediated environments. Khan et al. (2021) argue that successful synchronous online learning requires technology integration and various communication channels to ensure real-time interactions and collaboration among participants. However, our study has a limitation: we could not investigate the potential and observation focus of synchronous online PO based on actual experiences, as no synchronous online PO practices had been implemented yet. Therefore, future research can expand on this preliminary study, especially for ELT researchers in higher education. Firstly, conducting case studies involving groups of lecturers in synchronous online PO can help develop specific observation rubrics for online settings. Secondly, validating these rubrics using data triangulation can ensure their validity and reliability. Lastly, longitudinal research can explore lecturers’ perceptions following the implementation of synchronous online PO. By integrating various methods, future studies can significantly advance knowledge and practice in online teaching.

6. Conclusions
PO has significantly enhanced teaching quality in various educational settings. However, its potential in synchronous online environments, particularly in ELT in higher education, remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by emphasizing several key points. Firstly, PO is highlighted as a powerful tool for refreshing teaching strategies, enhancing classroom activities and management, and boosting confidence and motivation. Secondly, based on participants’ experiences with on-site PO, the study suggests that PO can also be effectively implemented in synchronous online classrooms. Participants recognized that the shift to online teaching impacts their competencies, necessitating feedback from observers. However, it is important to note that participants had not yet implemented synchronous online PO; thus, the focus areas for rubrics in this study were based on their perceptions. Future research could develop this study through case studies of synchronous online PO and validation of observation rubrics. The implementation of synchronous online PO is expected to continue as a professional development trend for ELT in higher education.

<table>
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<th>Pedagogical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting the number of assignments given</td>
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<tr>
<td>Starting discussion and grouping students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking and responding questions to and from students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Checking silence students and engaging with all students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximizing “voice and intonation” to emphasize</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Technological</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anticipating technical problems in online meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using applications for delivering lessons and assignments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating materials with interactive digital media</td>
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<tr>
<td>Switching from one screen to another</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arranging discussion rooms/groups for exercising specific ELT skills such as speaking and writing</td>
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</tbody>
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**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

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**Table 5.** Focus area in synchronous online peer observation
References


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