

Supervising English Teachers: Saudi Principals and the English Language Barrier

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ABSTRACT

Principals' supervision has been an important aspect of school leadership, which has aimed to improve the overall quality of teaching in schools by improving the work of individual teachers. This study has identified a need to fill an existing gap in the teaching supervision literature, as researchers have overlooked the possibility that principals' mastery of the English language may affect the supervision of English language teachers. It therefore examines whether Saudi female principals who did not major in English language face difficulties supervising English language teaching in secondary schools. This study was carried out over a week. The data was collected from five female principals working in secondary schools by means of semi-structured interviews. The results showed that the main obstacle faced by principals supervising English language classes was understanding the English language itself. Data collected by the study show the need for Saudi Arabian principals to be aware of their limitations in understanding English when supervising English language teachers; having this information can be crucial for improving supervision and planning successful supervisory practices. Moreover, it can help principals evaluate themselves and review the way they supervise English language teachers.

Key words: Supervision, English teachers, Principals, Schools, Students

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, teacher supervision has been identified as a way to improve both teaching and learning and a key factor in the success of a school (Minnear-Peplinski, 2009). Supervision can be part of the administration of the school. It is therefore important for school principals (who are not just administrators but also supervisors) to pay attention to teachers' teaching. In Saudi Arabia, a principal supervises all the teachers in her school regardless of their areas of expertise. Consequently, a potential obstacle to principals' ability to pay attention to and understand teachers' teaching could be a language barrier.

This study aims to address the following question:

a. Do Saudi female principals who do not understand English face difficulties in supervising English language teachers' teaching in schools?

Addressing this question is crucial because if principals find it difficult to supervise English language teachers, they need to review and revise the way they carry out their supervision duties. Section 2 below provides a brief overview of supervision and its purposes, followed by a discussion of principals, their supervisory duties and the obstacles they may face when supervising English language teachers. The methodology and discussion are in sections 3. and 4.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Supervision

Before discussing principals and their duties as supervisors, it is important to provide a general overview of supervision and its purpose. A supervisor's role is to watch over the performance of some task or other. Indeed, the literal meaning of the word 'supervise', which has its roots in the phrase 'super video', is 'to oversee' (Adepoju, 1998). In practice supervision means guiding teachers in order to improve their classroom instruction, with the objective of improving student learning (Allida et al., 2018). Moreover, its goals are to ensure that teachers are able to follow the curriculum and to strengthen teachers' classroom management practices (Kutsyuruba, 2003). Supervision can help teachers realise the real goal of education, provide them with particular teaching skills, and develop a positive attitude towards professional development (Mpopfu, 2007). Furthermore, it can support teachers to use best practice in their classroom teaching and provision of knowledge to students (Mwaniki & Guantai, 2018).

The question that arises here is 'who is the school supervisor?' A school supervisor could be a principal, assistant principal or specialist consultant (Sidhu & Chan, 2010). Oliva and Pawlas (2001) suggest that supervision is crucial

and plays an important role for all kinds of teachers: new, inexperienced, experienced, effective, and ineffective. Supervision may improve teachers' reliability and students' confidence in their teachers (Yunus et al., 2011).

From time to time, teachers transfer between schools, and there may be a need to supervise teachers when they come into a new school (Mpofu, 2007). Newly qualified teachers may also need help from a supervisor (ibid). Supervisors must be flexible and respectful; moreover, they must be fair in their dealings, as well as honest, friendly, and ready to help teachers solve their problems while keeping a peaceful atmosphere that encourages teachers to work well together (Bessong & Ojong, 2009). Moreover, supervisors must make sure they have knowledge about how to supervise in order to enhance teachers' competence (Darishah et al., 2017). Since one of the aims of this paper is to address principals' supervision, this is discussed below.

Principals' Supervision

The subject of educational leadership has received a great deal of attention in both oral and written histories (Reed, 2005). In the last three decades, almost all studies exploring school success and reform have shown the effective leadership of principals to be a key aspect of school improvement (Leech et al., 2003). In fact, the principal focuses on setting the direction and inspiring others to make the change to a new and improved environment for the school (Davies, 2005). A successful principal is the cornerstone of a school (Alsharari, 2010); this implies keeping up-to-date with the latest information in educational pedagogy and being enthusiastic to learn in general. In this way, the principal can set a good example for the rest of the school by being both energetic and hard-working (ibid).

When acting as a supervisor, a principal should establish regular meeting times for teachers to plan instruction and reflect on their practices (Spillane et al., 2004). They are also responsible for the successful implementation of the curriculum in their schools (Yunus et al., 2011). This cannot be achieved unless principals make supervision their highest priority (ibid). Their supervision role within their own school has several benefits. For instance, principals are likely to have more time for supervision if they are dealing with teachers in their own schools rather than visiting different schools as external supervisors (Sergiovanni, 2001).

However, effective supervision that improves the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom is not without obstacles. According to Yunus et al. (2011), these confront not only teachers, but also the principals themselves. Supervisors may experience several obstacles when supervising, as highlighted in the next section.

Supervision Obstacles

Several factors may affect supervision. For example, even where principals understand their responsibility to supervise teachers, they seldom have time to supervise due to their busy schedules (Yunus et al., 2011). Consequently, supervision is not usually their main concern (Minnear-Peplinski,

2009). Another potential factor may be teachers' attitudes towards principals. Some may perceive that principals are not qualified to supervise, especially if they are from a different discipline; i.e., when a principal with an art degree is trying to supervise a science teacher (Yunus et al., 2011).

A 2018 study by Allida et al. explored administrators' perceptions of supervision and the obstacles they face when undertaking supervision. A total of five principals were interviewed and the findings revealed that they did indeed face several obstacles. First, there was not enough time to conduct thorough supervision. Second, teachers' mistrust the supervisor. Third, when they knew that they were to be supervised teachers attempted to prepare intensively, thus giving principals the wrong impression. Some teachers liked to feel independent, but felt that they were controlled during supervision.

Kipngeno (2014) carried out a study to investigate factors influencing principals' supervision practices in primary schools. With a sample of 105 participants consisting of 35 headteachers, 35 deputies and 35 senior teachers, the study found: a) that principals' administrative experience influences instructional supervision and; b) that large class sizes affect not only principals' instructional supervision practices but also teachers as it increases their workload in public primary schools, which in turn contributes to a decline in academic performance. This brief survey of existing research highlights a gap; it can be seen that supervision researchers overlooked the possible impact of a principal's major and more specifically of their command of English on their efficacy when supervising English language classes. This study attempts to fill that gap.

As noted above, the principal's role is crucial in improving the school atmosphere and the quality of education. This is linked to their position as administrators and supervisors. Nevertheless, when conducting their roles, they often encounter obstacles due to the large number of demands they face.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample of this study was meant to be homogeneous in that the researcher chose participants according to certain variables. The sample involved 5 Saudi female principals (aged 40-49) who had worked as principals of secondary schools for an average of 8 years and whose majors were not English. The reasons for these choices lay first in the fact that the researcher is female (and thus cannot access male schools in Saudi Arabia). Moreover, the secondary level is the final stage of general education in Saudi Arabia, which requires principals put more effort into supervising students and teachers. Additionally, the English language taught at this level is difficult for someone who does not speak English; it is therefore important to investigate how principals who do not speak English can supervise English teachers.

Instruments

The instrument used to collect data for this study was a semi-structured interview, which is a conversation between

an interviewer and a respondent with the purpose of obtaining certain information from the respondent (Bell, 2010). It is effective in situations where the researcher has a good overview of the circumstances and is able to develop questions about the topic in advance (Dornyei, 2007). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer asks the same questions to all participants although not necessarily in the same order or with identical wording (Dornyei, 2007). The advantages of using semi-structured interviews include allowing specific questions to be repeated and enabling anything that is vague to be explained, as well as allowing the researcher to pursue follow-up questions to gain additional information where responses are incomplete (Ary et al., 2014). The researcher developed the interview schedule after reviewing the literature and looking at the supervision list used by principals in Saudi schools. Using semi-structured interviews in this study allowed principals greater opportunities to say what they feel and think about supervising English language teachers and the associated obstacles. Since all the participants in the study were first-language Arabic speakers, the interview was conducted in Arabic to ensure that the participants could understand the questions, and their responses were later translated into English.

Procedure

The researcher paid close attention to ethical issues during the study. After receiving permission from the schools to conduct the study, participants were informed about the purpose of this particular topic of research. Consent forms were collected from the principals, who were then interviewed. The study was conducted over a week.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the Saudi Ministry of Education, principals should perform the following supervisory duties: (a) conducting classroom observations of teachers; and b) checking students' notebooks. The results showed that the participants expressed negative attitudes towards their supervisory roles when they related to the supervision of English teachers. A number of obstacles were identified and these are discussed below, supported by relevant quotations from the participants. The findings are presented under two key areas based on the interview data: a) classroom observation and; b) checking students' notebooks.

Regarding the first category, principals face several obstacles in a classroom observation situation. It is worth mentioning that principals in Saudi schools only conduct classroom observations once or twice a semester. All the participants in this study had difficulties in understanding the English language; as the quotes below indicate:

'One of the obstacles when doing a classroom visit is the English language itself. I do not understand the instructions sometimes'.

'When an English teacher plays a tape for students in the listening class, I cannot understand it'.

'I like to ask the teacher about the lesson before I attend to avoid embarrassment of not understanding the

English language lesson, so at least I know what the topic is about'.

'Most of the time I feel that I cannot criticize very well after conducting a classroom observation because I do not understand the English language lessons'.

Regarding the second category, the principals in this study encountered difficulties not only in understanding English language teachers' instruction but also in understanding the English language when checking students' notebooks during their classroom visit. One principal said: 'I do not understand the English words', and another said, 'I just look at the title and date written in their notebooks because I cannot understand what is written in English'. A third principal stated 'Since I do not understand the English language, I ask the English teacher to give me an excellent student's notebook and book and I compare them with those of others by looking at whether they write the same letters'.

The quotes above indicate that some of the principals in this study had devised strategies to help them supervise English language teachers as they do not have a good grasp of English, such as asking the teacher about the topic of the lesson beforehand. Only some of the principals had developed some strategies to help them but the others still struggled.

These obstacles indicate that when observing English language teachers, the principal needs to have mastery of the English language. This was confirmed by the principals' complaints about their failure to understand English. All the principals interviewed commented that all the training programmes they had attended were general, and that there was nothing specific about supervising English teachers which would enhance their capabilities and capacities when they had to take on that role. As one principal said, 'There are no workshops for the English language teaching supervision'. Another one said, 'they conduct workshops for other subjects but not for the English language teaching supervision'.

The fact that the principals found that being not able to understand English affected the quality of their supervision may mean that possession or lack of specialist knowledge of other subjects might also affect supervision. Further research is needed to find out whether this is the case, but these findings do show that the studies of Allida et al. (2018) and Kipngeno (2014), discussed above, overlooked the potential importance for principals of being able to understand a teacher's specialist field in order to be able to offer effective supervision.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that principals should be enrolled in English language courses in order to improve their grasp of English, which in turn may help them supervise English language teachers. Another recommendation is that the Ministry of Education could help principals by assigning assistants who understand English who could then help principals to evaluate English teachers. However, the second recommendation would entail that principals would not have the final say with regard to their supervision and evaluation.

The study was limited by the small number of participants and by the fact that it was only able to address obstacles faced by principals supervising English language

teachers. It is recommended that future research should look at whether principals also face difficulties when supervising teachers who teach other subjects, such as maths, physics or geography.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of teaching supervision is to help to improve teaching practices, leading to more effective learning. Arguably therefore, we should attempt to remove obstacles that can hinder a principal's ability to supervise well. This study addressed a gap in the teaching supervision literature, which relates to the fact that researchers have not previously asked whether principals' mastery of the English language can affect their supervision of English language teachers.

The study asked whether Saudi female principals who did not major in English face difficulties supervising English language teaching at secondary schools. The study found that principals do face difficulties, and that these are specifically related to their limited grasp of English, both when conducting classroom observation and when checking students' English notebooks and that this affected the quality of their supervision.

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