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Classroom Observations – Moving from Evaluation to Development

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Introduction

"Observations are usually infrequent, stress-packed rituals. The purpose of observation should not be to judge the quality of teachers, but to find the most effective ways to coach them to improve student learning."

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012
https://pragmaticreform.wordpress.com/page/9/

My primary work is as a management trainer for LTOs (language teaching organisations), working with academic and other managers in schools and other educational institutions to offer ideas and support for their work, and such that they can best help teachers who work under them to successfully encourage student learning. In this work, I have been privileged to work all over the world, and with many different people in a multitude of contexts. It is also in this role that I have realised that many of the problems that academic managers, and in fact teachers, grapple with are the same the world over. One of these issues is that of classroom observation.

The observation of teachers is one which apparently causes many problems in language schools (and indeed in any other type of school). Observations are often only performed by managers, and the experience for teachers can be stressful. But observations in themselves are not necessarily a bad idea. As a SPELT member said, in response to an online survey: "Very formal observation leads to stress and artificiality, whereas informal observations are more helpful and simple to carry out".

In the article that follows, I will lay out the reasons why I believe that judgmental evaluative observations, of the type that most people experience, are not helpful or useful. I will contrast these with developmental observations which are designed to help both observer and teacher to grow and progress as teachers, and which are, sadly, a much less common form of observation – to illustrate this fact, in a recent survey of SPELT members, 50% said that the function of observation in their institution was "for control/evaluation", while a further 50% said that it was for a "mixture of evaluation and development". None said that observation was used purely for development.

To follow up, I will talk about peer observation, in which teachers observe each other, and how to effectively set up a peer observation system. In closing I will share the strategy of one academic manager I recently worked with, who launched a peer observation system in a fairly challenging context.

What is the function of observation?

Broadly speaking teacher observation fulfils two functions.

It is an evaluative tool, used as a form of quality control and also a method of evaluating teachers. It is often used as part of the annual appraisal system of a school, and is frequently relied upon in the case when a teacher is perceived to be "failing".

It is also a developmental tool, as practiced in teacher training courses and in various other professional development systems – in which the teacher being observed and, indeed, the observer, learn and develop. We shall return to this form later on.

Evaluative observation

We evaluate to punish and almost never to improve teachers' practice. In other words, we evaluate to punish and not to educate. (Freire, 1998, p. 7)

One of the big issues in the annual work cycle of academic managers is teacher observation. This is usually part of the annual performance review/appraisal system, and probably also involves a meeting where the Academic Manager gets together with the teacher to discuss their performance and possibly set goals for the year ahead. Most people have probably been through this process from at least one end – as teacher and/or as manager.

The teacher observation as a part of this process, usually involves teacher and manager agreeing on a class to be observed, the teacher providing a lesson plan, and, after the class, a discussion, which may involve some form of documentary process, whereby the manager writes down her comments and the teacher signs off on his agreement/understanding of those comments.

Is this an effective way of managing performance? Following are some reasons why I believe it's a bad idea:

1. Even if the observation is presented as a developmental tool, by making it part of the annual (or whatever regular interval) performance review cycle, it will inevitably take on at least some judgmental aspects (both from the teacher's and the manager's perspective)

2. It is not useful to review a teacher's performance based on one (almost inevitably unrepresentative) hour out of their annual workload of possibly 1000 hours.

3. It's a time consuming process. For the teacher – who has to produce more formalised lesson plans, and has to go through the pre and post lesson meeting; and for the manager – who will be facing at least 2 hours' time commitment (for a one hour lesson) for each teacher under her management. Even with as few as ten teachers under an academic manager's supervision, the time commitment is high.

4. In some cases the manager has not come to her role through teaching – in this case it clearly makes very little sense to observe teachers and be able to make any meaningful suggestions or analysis.

5. Very often the teacher observation as part of the performance management process just exists because it always has been done this way, and nobody has thought to question it.

6. Observers are rarely clear on what they are observing. What it is that they can see that will tell them whether a lesson is a "good one", that is to say, whether learning is taking place.

Professor Robert Coe of Durham University, says that observers in the English state school system tend to use the following proxies to assess a lesson:

- Students are busy: lots of work is done (especially written work)
- Students are engaged, interested, motivated
- Students are getting attention: feedback, explanations
- Classroom is ordered, calm, under control
- Curriculum has been 'covered' (i.e., presented to students in some form)
- (At least some) students have supplied correct answers (whether or not they really understood them or could reproduce them independently)

(Coe2013 p xii)

In general then, judgmental observations are not effective – they neither support teachers nor do they tell us anything particularly useful about the quality of learning and teaching.

Before moving on to developmental observations, however, if I'm proposing that we drop the teacher observation from the performance review, I would also like to propose a replacement. As the manager of a very large project to help a major Brazilian language school "reculture" itself, this was something we looked at, and what came out of the process was, I think, an excellent alternative solution to the standard review. A working committee of teachers from all of the school's branches was formed, and they worked together to propose something which they felt would be a better performance management system – and one that would be acceptable to both teachers and managers. What they eventually settled on (and which became the new system) was something akin to the portfolio system of student assessment.

Teachers, over the year, were required to keep a portfolio. This was designed to reflect their successes, problems, development, reflections – crucially whatever *they* wanted to take from the year. Lessons that had been a great success, workshops attended, activities that had worked, activities that had not worked (and reflections as to why not), student work that had touched them in some way, whatever they wanted to remember and take from the year. As part of the performance review meeting with their line manager, teachers presented these portfolios, sharing things that they wanted to share with their boss that came out of the year. As it was an ongoing process and not just an annual event, the portfolio further encouraged teachers to think and reflect on their work constantly. And the manager got to hear stories and anecdotes from the classroom that she would otherwise not have heard. Both teachers and managers felt that the new system made a lot more sense and was of much greater value.

That's not to say that this is all the meeting should involve – the idea of setting professional development goals for the year and reflecting on last year's goals in a formalised way, is also very important, as are many other areas of performance management systems. But as a replacement for the teacher observation section of that process, I think it is worth considering.

One other option to replace the observation I have seen used by a university language centre in Turkey, is as follows. The teacher sets up a video camera in the classroom and records herself teaching. After the lesson, she reviews the video and selects a 15 minute segment for presentation. She reflects upon that segment in writing – what happened, what the students did, what learning took place, what she did, etc as well as any reflections and applications for her future teaching. As part of the performance management system

she submits this clip, along with the reflections to the academic manager. Crucially the teacher is allowed to video herself as many times as she likes until she finds a clip that she deems suitable for submission. In practice, I was told, the first year this system was in place, teachers spent a long time choosing a clip that they felt was an example of excellent teaching, that they felt proud to offer up. Whereas the second and subsequent years, they were much more likely to choose a clip which they felt they could talk about at length (often, therefore, a clip in which they were able to offer up numerous critiques of their own performance and teaching).

Developmental observation

It is not observation which is the problem though, merely the use to which it is traditionally put. As Sheikh (2004) puts it *"Observation is the means by which a shared experience can be used profitably to illuminate professional activity"*.

In any observation there are two main actors, aside from the students. The observer and the teacher. Both can gain an awful lot from the experience and involvement of observing. We are perhaps most familiar with the value of observation for the teacher, since that is the dynamic we most often encounter in teacher training programmes or indeed in the kind of evaluative observations we looked at above.

Development for the teacher

It is important to consider the observation here as referring to the entirety of the process – from any form of pre-class meeting between teacher and observer, to the actual class under observation itself, to the post class discussion and interaction between teacher and observer. For the teacher, much of the learning that goes on from being observed happens in these pre- and particularly the post- class meetings.

Before the class, the teacher has the opportunity to explore his/her own lesson plan, with a critical friend to ask probing questions which might help to adjust what the teacher does in the class itself. "Why do you plan to do this exercise here?"; "What is the function of this particular activity?" and so on. The observer here should not be telling the teacher what to do, merely questioning and giving the teacher space to reflect on the choices he/she has made. The teacher might also take this opportunity to experiment with a novel approach, an unfamiliar activity, or even a new technology. It also allows the teacher to highlight some area of their practice that they would particularly like feedback on.

After the class, the feedback from the observer can serve to highlight many things for the teacher:

- What the observer noticed the students doing, which the teacher may not have detected, which can obviously help feed reflection on the class and what learning was taking place.
- Specific feedback on the mechanics of teaching, possibly on areas that the teacher herself identified as being something she wanted to get a second opinion on from the observer.
- More general ideas about lesson flow or planning or even syllabus design, for example.
- Suggestions on how best to help this particular group of learners.
- A general professional conversation between two professionals using the lesson as a starting point and taking in ideas, philosophies, thoughts, approaches, methods and all points in between.

- A guided reflection, with the observer asking questions to bring the teacher around the reflective cycle in analysing her own lesson.

In general, it can be a rich source of professional development which is grounded in the realities of the teaching context. All of us who have been lucky enough to have been observed by a sensitive and thoughtful colleague/trainer/manager with a talent for giving feedback and a keen eye, will recognise the value that such an experience can have.

Development for the observer

Perhaps this side of the professional development coin is the one that we think less about. Because the observer has often tended to be the "expert" - the trainer or the manager, the experienced teacher offering advice and wisdom to the younger teacher being observed-this view of the process has been less a part of our experience of observation. But, the observer can also learn a lot from the experience of observing. As Gore (2013) writes:

> *To improve their teaching, often the best thing for teachers to do is to look outside their own classrooms. Observing other teachers is a key part of development; it improves teachers' own self-awareness of their skills and also makes managers more effective at identifying areas for further growth.*
>
> *It is ironic that opportunities to observe teachers and classes are presented more often to those who already train teachers, rather than teachers themselves. In many ways these trainers need to observe less to aid their own development than those who are just starting out as teachers.*
>
> (Gore, 2013)

Unlike the teacher being observed, the learning moments for the observer tend to come during the lesson itself, and subsequently in conversation with the teacher after the class is over. Put in an observing position, rather than being an integral part of the events unfolding (as when teaching), the observer can gain the following:

- A better sense of what the students do in certain situations, or a chance to pick up on ways that the students interact with each other and the material, in a way that they may not get when focussing on the lesson
- An expanded "toolkit" of activities and approaches to teaching gleaned from observing other teachers in action
- The opportunity to watch how an activity or a method works in practice, perhaps getting the courage to try it oneself, having seen how it works, and pondering how it might work in ones own class
- Increased self-awareness of ones own teaching
- New tricks for use in the classroom
- Different ways of working with familiar material and/or teaching points

Just as the post-lesson reflection and feedback session can be of great value to the teacher being observed, so it can be here also, allowing both parties the chance to ask questions, reflect on what happened and, as mentioned above, engage in a genuine professional dialogue in support of both teachers' practice.

Peer Observation

As we have seen, peer observations can be, if properly organised, an extremely useful tool for professional development. The benefits of

observation for both observer and observed are listed above, and, from a management perspective, it is an excellent source of professional development which is sitting right there in your school. As such it is not only useful, but it is also an inexpensive form of professional development (though its low cost should not be taken to suggest it is of little value). And last, but by no means least, a successful peer observation system opens up the channels of communication in the staffroom and can be a step along the road to creating a culture of feedback.

So, why not?

Despite the fairly clear advantages, relatively few language teaching organisations (LTOs) actually run successful peer observation systems. In late 2012 I carried out an online survey on peer observation systems, in which more than 60 teachers and managers answered questions about their own organisations. Only 12.5% of these respondents said that their LTO has a system in which teachers participated enthusiastically and from which they gained a lot.

There are two main reasons for this gap between the obvious benefits in theory and the lack of them in practice: attitudinal and practical.

Attitudinal

- A fear of observations in general, brought about by people having had bad experiences, or because observations are the way we are judged/evaluated in most training courses (and often in LTO performance management schemes).
- Because observations, even peer observations, are seen as imposed from above
- Because they are seen as not important. A curious side effect of the importance attached to judgmental observations, is that developmental ones can, if not sufficiently promoted, feel unimportant.

Practical

- Teachers don't have the time to organise and actually do the observations
- Teachers don't have the time to do them well. Perhaps they do the observation, but don't meet before and don't have a worthwhile feedback session afterwards
- Teachers don't know how to observe
- Teachers (and others) don't know how to give (and receive) feedback

So, there are a fair number of reasons why peer observation may not be as successful as we might hope.

What does the research reveal?

Through the survey, the following data emerged: Of the LTOs surveyed, 27% had obligatory peer observation, 38% encouraged it, and the remaining 35% had no system. In response to the question 'Do teachers participate enthusiastically and gain a lot from the process?', 13% responded "yes, very much so", 50% "some yes, some no", 9% "it's just an obligation" while the remaining 34% that it "never happened".

As for the details of the systems that were in place, the vast majority were perceived as imposed by the academic director/ management. Before the observations, in some cases teachers would meet, or in others there were forms to be completed, but often there was no formal contact between observer and observed before the lesson itself. During the observation, sometimes there were tasks or observation sheets to be filled in; in other situations the role of the observer

(and what they were observing for) was negotiated by the two teachers, and in some cases there was no clear idea of what should be done. Post observation tended to be described as a discussion, with, in some cases, a form to be completed (and subsequently put on file).

Developing a successful peer observation system

So, given the reasons for the above gap between theory and practice, I wondered how a system could be developed that worked more effectively. Could a system be developed which would genuinely be a successful way to enhance professional development, and in so doing, open up channels of communication and feedback within our LTOs? I concluded that there are a few ways which can, at the very least, create the conditions for a more successful system.

As a manager, the starting point must be to let the teachers themselves decide how it is to work. It may be that the virtues and value of peer observation are not entirely obvious to everyone, so the manager may have to sell the idea to the teaching staff, but once this has been achieved, it can then be left to those teachers to design the system – how it will work, what the structure of the system will be, and what the details are. If the manager feels it necessary, she can make some suggestions, or at the very least, provide some articles and reading materials to help the teachers choose among some options. Ruth Wajnryb's book "Classroom Observation Tasks: 1992" is perhaps a good starting point.

Secondly, ensure that training is given in the skills needed to observe one another productively. Run a training session in how to observe – it's a skill that many people need to acquire. Maybe someone on your staff is an experienced observer and can offer such a session. Put together a training session on giving and receiving feedback.Not only is observing someone a skill, but giving and receiving feedback is very definitely a skill – and one which will not only be useful in the after-observation discussion, but will benefit the LTO anyway. Peer observation, and by association professional development is important, and it needs to be seen as such. It's no good telling everyone you believe wholeheartedly in peer observation, but don't support them in doing it. So,thirdly demonstrate its importance through concrete actions. Give teachers the time to do it by making it part of their contractual professional development time, as well as making it an integral part of the annual performance management systems.

Finally, one more aspect that tends to tie people in knots when thinking some of this through is the question of proof. If you make peer observation a contractual requirement, then what kind of evidence will you be looking for to confirm that the observations have taken place? If you require observation notes or lesson plans, then immediately the "between peers" aspect of it becomes subverted, and whatever resistance you might have managed to overcome could reoccur. But, many academic managers argue that if there is no paper trail then they can't be sure that the observations are taking place. My suggestion would be to put this point to the teachers too. Perhaps one compromise option is to ask teachers, in their annual review meeting, to discuss how it went, what they got from it and how the peer observation system itself could be improved.

Peer Observation in Practice

I'd like to close with an approach devised by Pip Linney-Barber, an academic manager in Australia, as part of his work on the IDLTM. Called the 'peer-support model', it is based partly on the work of Jill Cosh (reference below). Pip was working in a situation in

which he felt teachers were extremely resistant to being observed both for historical reasons and because of the perceived power dynamic. The peer support model flips the power relationship of the observed lesson. As Pip puts it, "In this model, a teacher with a particular concern or interest *e.g.* pacing or a specific grammar point, will request to observe a colleague who they feel might give them some insight, or new ideas, about how to address the particular area of interest or concern. In this model the observed teacher is assuming the mantle of teacher trainer. The emphasis shifts from the observer *judging* the lesson to the observer *learning* from the lesson."

His proposal was to introduce this idea to the teachers. Prior to the meeting they were given a handout on peer observation and peer reflection (from Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching: 2011*) to spark discussion and thinking about peer observation. At the meeting, the peer support model was proposed, and discussion began about how to make it work and what would be helpful. The final version was as follows:

1. All teachers identified an aspect of their teaching practice that they were interested in developing

2. Teachers were then invited to the lesson of a teacher who felt they had something to offer in this area.

3. Prior to the observation, the teachers sat together to discuss the upcoming observation and to determine whether the observer could contribute to the lesson in a co-teaching capacity.

4. The observer attended the lesson for an hour and filled in the 'peer support activity' form (a form which was developed by the teachers as part of this process)

5. After the lesson, either on the same day or the following day, the teachers met for a follow up feedback session which was guided by their completed 'peer activity support' forms. (Before this, training had been conducted in giving and receiving feedback) [Linney-Barber, 2012]

Having recently been in touch with Pip, I gather that the feeling from him and the teachers is that the new system is working. However, there is a remaining difficulty: finding the time for teachers to do the observations (especially in a situation whereby the teacher needs to be substituted from their own class in order to observe). He is currently trying to come up with a solution. But in general, he feels that in a difficult environment, the peer support model has stimulated discussion in the staffroom, has got people thinking about their teaching in a more open way, and has been done in such a way that the teachers feel they have made it their own, with the result that enthusiasm for the system is high.

Obviously, this is just one possible solution of many, and which one works best will depend very much on context and situation. A highly motivated teaching team who already share a lot of ideas will probably aim for something slightly different from a group of suspicious teachers who jealously guard their teaching "secrets". I'd argue, however, that an effective, well run peer observation scheme is something which is very much worth striving for, as part of your organisation's professional development plan for teachers, and as part of the quality assurance programme that your LTO may be involved in.

Conclusion

To sum up, the classroom observation can be an extremely effective tool in supporting the development of both teacher and observer. It is context specific, practical and reflective.

One way of promoting effective classroom observation is to organise a system of peer observation in which teachers share and learn from one another. This can remove the evaluative power dynamic from the traditional classroom observation model and create something which is truly valuable and supportive of good teaching.

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