

Implementation of a Peer Observation Programme for Teacher Development

By James Richard Lee

It is common for TESOL institutions to have an observation system in place whereby managers observe teachers in the classroom and provide feedback on their performance. The benefits of such a system with regard to teacher development are, however, dubious. Here I would like to propose the introduction of a peer observation programme which incorporates a shift from top-down to bottom-up observation procedures according to guiding principles from literature. It is contended that collaboration among colleagues, which would incorporate the sharing of expertise and exploration of teaching beliefs, leads to the building of mutual trust. Although concerns about collaboration and reflection processes may need to be addressed, it is hoped that such a programme will eventually result in increased trust, collegiality and professionalism among its participants.

A New Approach

Bottom-up vs. Top-down

This proposal for a peer observation programme is an attempt to move away from observations carried out by those in supervisory roles for assessment or appraisal, and to move towards observations carried out

by colleagues in a supportive environment. It wishes to avoid the trainer-centred observation identified by Williams (1989) among others, in which there is a focus on what is considered good or bad practice. In traditional forms of observation the teacher's role is to remain the passive recipient of advice or criticism (Cosh, 1999). Many teachers' view of observation remains thus, often as a hangover from their pre-service training. Kumaravadivelu (2012) advocates moving towards an era of post-method in which teachers assume greater responsibility for their own development. He suggests that the traditional top-down approach to teacher education fails to address teachers' specific requirements, and instead leads teachers to perform classes which are geared towards the ideals of the institution rather than the aims of the teacher (or indeed, the needs of the students). His proposal is for a more interactive and multidimensional paradigm which incorporates development of a knowledge base, analytical skills, recognition of beliefs and reflective practices. It is hoped that a bottom-up peer observation system would be closer to this ideal than many current observation systems. As Freeman and Johnson (1998) state, teacher development should focus on the teaching itself; more specifically, the teacher, the context and the pedagogy. It is acknowledged that although this is a long-term

and complex process, the desire to reflect on and understand one's own teaching is at the core of teacher development.

Guiding Principles

Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) identify a number of suggestions for successful peer observations put forward by teachers themselves. They highlight the need for a friendly, supportive environment and acceptance by all parties that successful observation needs sufficient time allocated to it. Richards (n.d.) proposes guidelines (including for each participant both observing and being observed, and holding pre- and post-observation meetings) in his account of a successful peer observation programme in Hong Kong, which gave teachers a number of insights into their teaching practice and inspired some to make positive changes. Similar ideas are suggested by Richards and

Farrell (2005), who go on to identify practical ways in which administrators and supervisors can provide support for those teachers involved in the process. Their advice includes consulting with teachers prior to the implementation of the programme to discover what resources, administrative support or time might be required. Another idea is to hold workshops which allow teachers to reflect on the programme. The above advice has all been incorporated into the programme plans (see 'Key Changes' and Table 1, below); however it should be made clear that any involvement on the part of administration is purely to provide such support as is requested, and not to take part in, nor choose the focus of, the observations themselves. It is crucial that teachers have a free rein to decide what is to be observed – the teacher, the students or the learning context (Cosh, 1999). Malderez and Wedell (2007) emphasize that it is important to consider carefully the process needs of the

Table 1. Key Changes

Criteria	Typical programme	New programme
Number of observations	1 x observed by line manager 1 x observed by peer (Annual)	2 x observed by peer (All completed within one semester)
Obligation to participate	Obligatory	Voluntary
Collaborative workshops	None	2 per semester
Observation schedule	No fixed schedule	Structured schedule over 1 semester
Pre- and post-observation meetings	No	Yes
Suggested follow-up activities	None	Workshop and conference Presentations Journal articles Action Research projects
Used for teacher evaluation?	Yes	No

participants on the course; in other words, teachers need time to try out (and reflect on) new ideas, and to feel comfortable doing so, and this should be fundamental to the design of the programme. For this reason, the course described below has been designed to include regular observations within a time frame which allows for teachers to meet regularly; however it also gives them sufficient time to reflect on the observations.

The Programme

Key Changes

The principal aim of this programme proposal is to introduce a peer observation system within a TESOL institution. It takes as its starting point a typical top-down observation programme and proposes a number of key changes (see Table 1).

The most significant changes are:

- That observations should be conducted by peers only. Teachers should, as far as possible, choose their own partner with whom they wish to collaborate.
- Participation in the course should be entirely voluntary.
- The programme would take place over the course of one semester. Participants would be free to take part in both semesters if they wish.
- A workshop would be held at the start and end of each semester. The first would explain the process, suggest observation and feedback activities and focusses, and identify any administrative support which may be needed. The second would be a chance for participants to report back on how successful they found the programme, and to make any suggestions for further improvements.
- Teachers would observe their partner twice, and be observed by the same partner twice. This equates to four observations per semester, or one every three weeks (excluding exam weeks).
- Teachers should meet pre-observation to discuss the planned class and agree on a focus for the observation, and should also meet post-observation to discuss any issues which arose.
- Teachers would be encouraged to use the

peer observation system as a tool for small (or larger-) scale action research and to write up their experiences for their own professional development review, for publication, as a mini-presentation for colleagues within workshops, or for presentation at conferences.

- Observations would not be used for evaluative purposes; however, participation in the scheme could be considered to be evidence of a commitment to Personal Professional Development.

Observation Activities

In order to facilitate collaboration and encourage reflective practice, or indeed to collect data for research, participants will need to select suitable observation activities. Naturally, they should reflect the focus of the observation. There are a wide range of activities available for teachers - Wajnryb (1992) and Wallace (1998) are excellent sources of observation ideas. In addition, Bailey (2006) provides a detailed study of manual data collection procedures, such as field notes.

Before the observation (in the initial workshops and/or in pre-observation discussions) it is important to establish teacher beliefs. Appendix 1 is based on an activity proposed by Johnson (1999) which encourages teachers to reflect on some commonly-held beliefs about teaching. It has been adapted to encourage teachers to work together and discuss these beliefs collaboratively. Appendix 2 (Wajnryb, 1992) is a similarly effective activity as it uses a rating scale for provoking discussion about classroom practice. Courneya et al. (2008) showed their research participants two different classes on DVD and asked them to rate how effective the teaching was in each example. A similar approach could be used on this programme in order to generate discussion about teaching beliefs.

Richards (1998) provides a list of ideas for the focus of observations, such as teacher time -management, teacher questions and student responses, student performance during pair/group work or investigating classroom interaction patterns. Appendix 3 is an example of a data collection sheet for recording interaction patterns¹. This kind of observation task does not involve any evaluation of the

teacher; the observer is simply acting as an assistant to the teacher by recording data which the teacher would like to critically reflect upon. The focus is on bottom-up collaboration, as opposed to traditional top-down checklists of 'good practice'. Video can also be used to record certain kinds of activity, and may be useful for teachers' self-reflection; nevertheless having an observer in the class allows the participants to share inferences and opinions (Bailey, 2006) particularly in post-class feedback.

Collaboration Leading to Greater Trust and Increased Professionalism

Collaboration and Sharing of Expertise

A major benefit of the programme would be to foster increased collegiality through collaboration between teaching staff. As TESOL departments expand, it could be argued that the sense of community (Richards, 2010) among staff becomes fragmented, and isolation increases. Re-establishing the teaching community would have a number of benefits. Johnston (2009) promotes co-operation among teachers as a fundamentally social process which leads to professional development. Cosh (1999) suggests that mutual support among teaching colleagues can lead to increased confidence, enthusiasm and a willingness to experiment. Bailey (1996) notes that collaborative dialogues with colleagues enabled course participants on a teacher development programme to consider their own teaching practices in a new light. This peer observation programme enables the establishment and/or development of relationships between teachers of varying backgrounds and beliefs, with varying degrees of expertise and experience. Central to this is the understanding of expertise – Tsui (2003) has identified characteristics such as automaticity of response and efficiency in planning. If, as Freeman (2002) states, teacher learning remains a life-long quest to improve and find meaning in one's work, then the sharing of effective practices among colleagues is invaluable. He points out that for teachers to fully explore this, they need to be able to both reflect critically and articulate their experience. The programme, by placing teachers in the position of both observer and observee, aims

to provide teachers with the skills to do both. Furthermore, teachers have the opportunity to learn from observing their colleagues in the classroom and applying that to their own practice.

Exploring Beliefs and Building Trust

Pre-observation discussions are important for teachers to clarify how exactly they would like the observation to proceed and what they would like the observer to focus on. These discussions also enable teachers to explore each other's teaching beliefs. This concurs with the ideas of Borg (2009) who has pointed out that in constructivist theory there is an explicit link between teachers' prior experience and their current learning. Johnson (1999) also contends that teachers' beliefs rarely alter, even when they take part in professional development courses. As Borg (2009) states, teaching beliefs are unobservable and may require detailed examination in order to be identified. Discussion before and after observation can help teachers to uncover their own beliefs, while peer observation itself can be used to investigate whether their practice matches their beliefs. It would seem to be crucial to the success of the peer observation programme that observation pairs are able to trust each other, and that exploration of each other's teaching beliefs is a chance to build that key element of trust.

Collaboration and Reflection Issues

On the other hand, Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) have identified a number of valid concerns which lead to what they claim is a lack of focus when it comes to peer observation. These include time constraints, limited scope, ideological fuzziness and teacher resistance (particularly when participation is compulsory). They make the valid point that we must be careful to ensure that any culture of collaboration is genuine. They state that what they term *contrived collegiality* is counter-productive as it simply involves teachers working together because they are forced to do so by their institutions. Cosh (1999) provides examples of peer observation schemes linked to appraisal and pay rises in the UK and USA which were unsuccessful because of a perception that they were introduced from

above, and the teachers did not exert any control over the process. Clearly this is a situation to be avoided. Nevertheless, the voluntary nature of the programme, in addition to the opportunities for undertaking intrinsically motivating action research, will hopefully lead to an increased sense of ownership among staff. Research has shown that most teachers have a clear preference for bottom-up, rather than top-down, observation procedures in any case, which should also serve to mitigate these concerns (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011).

There is also the danger that some teachers may not be ready for the reflective aspect of the observation procedure. Roberts (1998) notes that while novice teachers are likely to respond to reflective activities with varying degrees of success, experienced teachers also have difficulty discussing their own teaching. However, a willingness to participate in the scheme would demonstrate openness to new ideas. The programme would hope to introduce such teachers to these reflective processes and through the contact they have with other experienced educators, help them to develop those skills. The collaborative workshops are an important part of this process. Richards (2010) also acknowledges that a change in mindset may be needed among some teachers, but emphasizes that for those who are willing to embrace collaborative teaching, the benefits are both personal and professional and an important step towards becoming a more integrated part of the teaching community within the institution and beyond.

Increased professionalism

Despite the above concerns, the fact remains that a peer observation programme is potentially a step towards increased professionalism. Leung (2009) differentiates between sponsored (or institutionally-endorsed) professionalism and independent professionalism. While assessor-based observations are an example of sponsored professionalism, peer observation is an opportunity for more reflective practice, a key component of independent professionalism. In the former the teacher's creativity may be stifled by the scrutiny of the institution, thereby reducing professional autonomy.

Conversely, reflective examination is crucial to raising professional consciousness as it allows teachers the freedom to develop according to their own goals. Richards (2010) suggests that teacher support groups, discussion groups and action research can all be an integral part of critical review and reflection. Peer observation can incorporate all three of those elements.

Conclusion

Institutions strive to be learning communities. Brandt (2003), in support of his claim that student achievement is linked to professional development of teachers, states a number of ways of identifying 'learning organizations'. In particular, such institutions should exhibit supportive organizational cultures, be respondent to change, and collect and use information to help achieve their goals. Although a peer observation programme would require a significant investment of time and commitment on the part of both an institution and the participants, there are many potential benefits. The programme can encourage teachers to work together, taking responsibility for their own and their colleagues' professional development. It can build trust and collegiality among staff, and provide important reflective skills. It can transform the observation procedure from a process in which staff feel nervous and uncomfortable into a real chance to demonstrate and develop professionalism. In short, it is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to what extent the institution represents a modern learning organization.

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Appendix 1

Pre-observation activity A

Read the following statements:

Teachers teach the way they were taught.

There is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way to teach.

Teachers learn to teach by teaching.

More experienced teachers are better teachers.

Teachers are born, not made.

Make brief notes on each of these statements and state why you agree or disagree with each. With a partner/In a group, discuss why you agree or disagree with each statement.

Reflect in writing on your discussion. Try to identify one new insight from your discussion. How does what you discussed relate to what you do in the classroom?

Adapted from: Johnson, K. (1999, p.41) Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action, Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle

Appendix 2

Pre-observation activity B

By way of preparation, consider your own beliefs about learning tasks. Consider the following six statements relating to the features of good learning tasks and circle the appropriate number on this scale.

0 - not a characteristic of a good task

1 - this characteristic is optional

2 - this characteristic is reasonably important

3 - this characteristic is extremely important

4 - this characteristic is essential

Good learning tasks should:

Enable learners to manipulate and practice specific features of the language.

0 1 2 3 4

Provide an opportunity for learners to rehearse communicative skills they will need in the real world.

0 1 2 3 4

Involve learners in risk taking.

0 1 2 3 4

Involve learners in problem-solving or resolution.

0 1 2 3 4

Be process- as well as product-orientated.

0 1 2 3 4

Offer learners choice.

0 1 2 3 4

Are there any other characteristics that you would consider essential to a good learning task?

Taken from Wajnryb, R. (1993 p.133) Classroom Observation Tasks: A Resource Book for Language Teachers and Trainers, Cambridge: CUP

Appendix 3

In-class observation task

Use lines and arrows to show the interaction and communication patterns which occur during the class.

