6 *Peer observation*

The nature of peer observation

Peer observation refers to a teacher or other observer closely watching and monitoring a language lesson or part of a lesson in order to gain an understanding of some aspect of teaching, learning, or classroom interaction. In Chapter 3 we examined how teachers can observe their own classrooms. In this chapter the focus is on observing another teacher's classroom and what two teachers can gain through observing each other's teaching. In our experience, many teachers have a negative reaction to the idea of someone observing their classes. For many, "observation" calls to mind a coordinator or visitor coming to a classroom to carry out a supervisory or evaluative observation as part of the process of performance appraisal. Observation tends to be identified with evaluation, and consequently it is often regarded as a threatening or negative experience. Williams (1989, p. 86) has summed up some of the problems of traditional classroom observations:

- The teachers did not like it. It was threatening, frightening, and regarded as an ordeal.
- It was prescriptive.
- The checklist focused on too much at once.
- The teachers had no responsibility for the assessment. It was trainer-centered.

In this chapter we wish to separate evaluation from observation and explore how observation can be a part of the process of teacher development rather than focus on it as a component of appraisal.

Purpose and benefits of peer observation

Observation is a basic part ofthe learning of many occupations, particularly in vocational and technical fields, but learning through the observation of

practitioners at work also plays a role in other fields, such as business, law, and medicine. **In** teaching, observation provides an opportunity for novice teachers to see what more experienced teachers do when they teach a lesson and how they do it. But experienced teachers can also benefit from peer observation. It provides an opportunity for the teacher to see how someone else deals with many of the same problems teachers face on a daily basis. A teacher might discover that a colleague has effective teaching strategies that the observer has never tried. Observing another teacher may also trigger reflections about one's own teaching. For the teacher being observed, the observer can provide an "objective" view of the lesson and can collect information about the lesson that the teacher who is teaching the lesson might not otherwise be able to gather. For both teachers, observation also has social benefits. **It** brings teachers together who might not normally have a chance to interact and provides an opportunity for the sharing of ideas and expertise, as well as a chance to discuss problems and concerns. Observation provides a chance to see how other teachers teach, it is a means ofbuilding collegiality in a school, it can be a way of collecting information about teaching and classroom processes, it provides an opportunity to get feedback on one's teaching, and it is a way of developing self-awareness of one's own teaching. The following vignette from a teacher in Korea illustrates how feedback from peer observation helped him develop as a teacher.

Vignette

I did not realize that I was asking and answering all my own questions until the observer showed me his narrative account of what he had seen in my class. I wanted to get on with the lesson and get them writing. Now I think my students just waited each time I asked questions because they realized that I would eventually answer these same questions for them. I was in fact spoon-feeding them too much. Now, thinking about this I realize that I frequently do this in my ESL classes. I think this is not helping my students. After this class and the discussion I had with the observer, I realized the power of having another pair of eyes in the room to help me "see" better. I should also say that the observer was a trusted friend and this helped me a lot too.

Eric Harmsen

Reflection

- Have you ever had an observer in your class? If so, what did you learn from the observer about your teaching?
- What are possible problems with having an observer in your class?

At the same time, the limitations of observation need to be understood. Obviously, an observer can only observe things that are visible. This includes such things as the following:

- *Timing*. How much time the teacher spends on different activities
- *Activities*. The types of activities the teacher employs during the lesson
- *Questioning techniques*. The types of questions the teachers asks
- *Participation*. Which learners actively participate in the lesson
- *Classroom language*. The kind oflanguage learners produce

Other important aspects of the lesson, however, are not observable. They either have to be inferred or can only be identified as a result of talking to the teacher. These include the following:

- *Decision making*. The kinds of decisions the teacher considers during the lesson
- *Engagement*. The extent to which learners find aspects of the lesson interesting and engaging
- *Problems*. Difficulties the teacher experiences during the lesson but that might not have been visible to an observer
- *Teachingprinciples*. The principles that inform the teacher's approach to the lesson

Observation as a component of teacher development, therefore, involves discussion and reflection in order to arrive at a valid understanding of the meaning of the events observed.

Nonevaluative observation within the context of professional development is often welcomed by teachers, as the following teacher's comments reveal (from Richards, 1998).

- It revealed more detailed information on student performance during specific aspects of the lesson than I could have generated on my own.
- **It** revealed unexpected information about interaction between students during a lesson.
- It helped me develop a better working relationship with a colleague.

- It has taught me how much I can learn from my colleagues.
- It made me more aware of the limited range of teaching strategies that I have been using.
- I realized that I need to develop better time-management strategies.
- J have learned the value of evaluating myself. I know more about my strengths as a teacher as well.

If observation is to be a positive experience, however, it needs to be carefully planned for and implemented. The nature of observation might seem to be self-evident, yet the process of observation is more complex than it might appear. Lessons are dynamic and, to some extent, unpredictable events. They involve many different participants and often several different things are happening simultaneously. Classroom events sometimes unfold very quickly, so taking note of multiple events in real time is often impossible. Specific procedures are therefore needed.

Procedures used for peer observation

The purpose of observation is to learn from the observation experience. In order to do this, the observer cannot simply depend on memory. Procedures are needed that can be used to record information about the observation. We have made use of the following procedures, depending on the purpose of the observation.

Written narrative

This technique was described in Chapter 3 and involves a narrative account of the lesson as a whole. In the present context, however, the narrative is written by the observer rather than the teacher. The observer tries to provide an account of the main structure and development of the lesson, the kinds of activities the teacher employed, and the significant time periods within the lesson. In carrying out a written narrative, it is important not to try to describe everything that happens during the lesson. The language used should be objective and precise, and any form of evaluation should be avoided.

- *Advantages*. A written narrative provides a broad picture of a lesson and can be useful in helping to see what the structure of the lesson was like and how the teacher implemented or departed from his or her lesson plan.

- *Disadvantages*. Many aspects ofthe lesson are difficult to describe accurately in real time, such as the actual language that was used during a teacher-student exchange.

Field notes

Field notes consist of brief descriptions in note form of key events that occurred throughout the lesson, including interpretations of incidents where relevant. Taking notes is an informal way of jotting down observations of events as they occur. Notes are sometimes time-based (e.g., notes are made at regular intervals, such as every 5 minutes, using an observation form that identifies the time intervals that are being described), or they may be linked to the key activities that occurred during the lesson (e.g., the teacher's setting up and explanation of an activity, the teacher's comments on an activity after it has been completed).

- *Advantages*. Taking notes is a flexible way of observing a lesson. When significant things are happening, the observer notes down relevant information. When relatively little is happening (e.g., when students are silently reading a text), the observer can focus on something else (e.g., noting down how often students used their dictionary during a reading activity).
- *Disadvantages*. The information collected may be insufficient to capture what is really going on in the lesson.

Checklists

A checklist is a structured inventory listing features of a lesson that the observer completes as he or she observes the lesson (see Appendix for examples).

- *Advantages*. A checklist is highly focused and relatively easy to complete. It provides a systematic way of collecting information on specific aspects ofa lesson.
- *Disadvantages*. Some aspects of a lesson are difficult to identify using a checklist. Checklists sometimes focus on trivial aspects of the lesson and fail to account for much of what happens.

In the following vignette, a teacher in Pakistan who wanted to observe the teaching practices used by the teachers while teaching reading and writing designed her own checklists. She discusses the process of designing her own checklists.

Vignette

For me, a classroom observation checklist must not contain too many items. This is a lesson I learned from a few observations I conducted. Sometime back, in order to appear very professional and show off my newly acquired knowledge, I developed wonderfully detailed checklists divided and sub-divided into many topics. The checklists looked very well done and highly useful, but in practice that was not the case. I ended up with too much to look for in too little time. So now, when I design checklists I restrict myself to looking at one or two aspects of my teaching and I do not devise too many questions, nor do I have too many categories. If you keep your checklist concise and stick to the most important points, your observation will be "good."

Aamna Khalid

Reflection

- What (and how many) items do you think are essential to include in a checklist for looking at a teacher's questioning behavior?
- What aspects of a lesson do you think can successfully be documented using a checklist?

The focus of an observation

Many aspects of a lesson can be the focus of an observation. Typical "how-to" dimensions of teaching include the following:

- How the teacher starts and ends a lesson
- How the teacher allots time within a lesson
- How the teacher assigns tasks to students
- How the teacher deals with a reticent student
- How the teacher organizes learning groups
- How the teacher supervises students while they are learning
- How the teacher asks questions

In focusing on the teacher's use of questions, observation can examine the following aspects of questions (from Gebhard, 1996).

- What kinds of questions does the teacher ask most often? Yes/no? Either/or?
- Wh-? Tag?

- What is the content of the teacher's questions?
- How long does the teacher wait after asking a question to get a response?
- How does the teacher give instructions? How much time does it take? Do students know what to do after being given the instructions?

Other topics that are suitable for classroom observations include the following:

- *Teacher S time management*. Allotment of time to different activities during the lesson
- *Students' performance of tasks*. Students' language use, procedures, and interaction patterns
- *Time on task*. The extent to which the students were actively engaged during a task
- *Teachers action zone*. The extent to which the teacher interacted with some students more frequently than others during a lesson
- *Use of the textbook*. The extent to which a teacher used the textbook during a lesson and the types of departures made from it
- *Pair and group work*. The way students completed a task, the responses they made during the task, the type oflanguage they used, students' time on task during pair and group work, and the dynamics of group activities

The following vignette is an example of how a recently qualified (nonnative English speaker) teacher of EFL, who was teaching English conversation classes in Korea for the first time, asked one of his peers (also a newly qualified native speaker of English) to observe him teach a series of lessons. However, he wanted her to focus specifically on interactions (teacher-to-student and student-to-student) in his classroom as he was unsure of what was happening. After the first two classroom observations, the observer noted that not all the students participated equally during group (student-to-student) work and that only certain students were involved when volunteering answers in whole-class discussions. After the discussions with the observer, the teacher came up with the following change, explained in his own words.

Vignette

Maybe I should ask students to form groups of four and ask them to tally their group's responses and ask each group to present their analysis. I will give each member a task such as group leader, group timekeeper, reporter, and secretary. I read this somewhere, and I think this could involve more participation from the students, rather than me doing the tallying, which

became monotonous after a short while, and there wasn't any analysis of any kind of the results.

The teacher decided that he would like to learn from this discovery, so he asked the observer to observe him again to see if he was successful in implementing his new approach to group work. The beginning teacher commented on the outcome:

I saw a big difference in my classroom interactions when I asked them to form groups of four and gave each member a role in the group. They really got involved in the discussions as did the whole class. No one member of each group dominated the conversation and no one member was silent - all seemed happy with their assigned roles and duties. The peer-observation process really worked well for me, and I am happy I was able to ask another teacher whom I trust, because she is relatively new to teaching as well.

Park Sang Kang

Reflection

- Why do you think Sang Kang had difficulties realizing what type of interactions were common in his classes?
- How do you think peer observers can be helpful to beginning teachers? Experienced teachers?

When observation is a component of professional development, the focus may be on general teaching issues such as those noted here, or it could be directed toward concerns a teacher has about some aspect of his or her teaching. For example, it might be directed to issues such as the following:

- I have a feeling that the brighter students are not challenged by my teaching.
- I suspect that I spend too much time explaining things.
- Some students are too talkative, and some are too quiet, in my classes.

Observation by a peer could help the teacher further understand these problems by collecting information related to each problem.

Peer coaching

Peer coaching is a particular form of peer observation and involves an experienced teacher working with a less experienced teacher in a mentoring role. Peer coaching is the focus of Chapter 10.

Implementing peer observation

The following guidelines have proved useful for implementing peer observation:

- *Select a colleague to work with.* This may be a teacher who is teaching the same course or using the same textbook as you, or you could observe a teacher teaching a different kind of class, depending on mutual interest.
- *Each teacher takes turns at teaching and observing, asfollows:*
  1. Arrange for a pre-observation orientation session. Before each observation, meet to discuss the nature of the class to be observed, the kind of material being taught, the teacher's approach to teaching, the kinds of students in the class, typical patterns of interaction and class participation, and any problems expected. The aim of these discussions is for the observer to understand the kinds of issues the teacher is facing and to learn more about the class and what its particular circumstances or problems are. The teacher who is teaching the lesson should also identify a focus for the observation at this stage and set a task for the observer to carry out. The observer's role is to collect information for the teacher that he or she would not normally be able to collect alone. It is important to stress that this task should not involve any form of evaluation.
  2. Decide on observation procedures to be used and arrange a schedule for the observations.
  3. Complete the observation using the procedures that were agreed on.
  4. Arrange a post-observation session. Meet as soon as possible after the lesson. The observer reports on the information collected and discusses it with the teacher.

Supporting teachers in implementing peer observation

Supervisors and administrators have an important role to play when implementing and encouraging peer observation. They can support teachers throughout the process in the following ways:

- Survey teachers in order to find out what kinds of support they might need for classroom observations (e.g., in terms of resources, administrative support, knowledge, and time).
- Gather resources on classroom observations such as articles or videotapes of classroom observations, and, if possible, invite outside experts or consultants to give a workshop on how to do observations.

- Ask teachers who have taken part in peer observation to explain what makes for a successful classroom observation.
- Where possible, free up time for teachers who want to engage in classroom observations.
- When teachers have successfully completed a series of classroom observations, encourage them to report to the other teachers about their experiences.

Summary

Peer observation can help teachers become more aware of the issues they confront in the classroom and how these can be resolved. Observation can also help narrow the gap between one's imagined view of teaching and what actually occurs in the classroom. By engaging in nonevaluative classroom observations, the responsibility of professional development can also shift from others (supervisors, peers, etc.) to the individual teacher. Because observation involves an intrusion into a colleague's classroom, procedures for carrying out observations need to be carefully negotiated between the participating parties. Having an observer in one's class is always something of a threatening experience because the teacher is now "on show." Assigning the observer a nonevaluative task goes some way toward minimizing the sense ofthreat, as does pairing teachers by choice and letting them negotiate the goals and procedures for observations.

Example of peer observation

Getting started

A group of beginning teachers in a language department requested assistance in professional development from their more experienced peers (Richards, 1998). They wanted evaluative feedback on their teaching but also wanted to combine this with feedback from their students. Therefore, a strategy of three-way observation was developed.

The process

The following strategy was implemented:

1. Pairs of new and experienced teachers decided to work together. The novice teacher invited a colleague to collaborate.

2. Each pair of teachers arranged to carry out several observations of each other's classes.
3. Data were collected at the end of each lesson on students', the teacher's, and the observer's perceptions of the lesson (different from usual peer observations). At the end of the lesson, the teacher allotted 5 to 7 minutes to the following activities:

The students were asked the following questions about the lesson:

Think back on the lesson that you just had and answer these questions.
1. What were the main goals of the lesson?
2. What is the most important thing you learned in the lesson?
3. What do you think was the most useful part of the lesson?
4. Was there anything about the lesson that was not very useful to you?

The observer was asked the follOWIngquestions about the lesson:

As you observe the lesson, try to answer these questions.
1. What were the main goals of the lesson?
2. What is the most important thing the students learned in the lesson?
3. What do you think was the most useful part of the lesson?
4. Was there anything about the lesson that was not very successful?
5. How did you feel about the lesson as a whole?

The teacher was asked the following questions about the lesson:

At the end of the lesson you taught, answer these questions.
1. What were the main goals ofthe lesson?
2. What is the most important thing the students learned in the lesson?
3. What do you think was the most useful part of the lesson?
4. Was there anything about the lesson that was not very successful?
5. How do you feel about the lesson as a whole?

The outcome

The participants in this study found that:

- There was often closer agreement between the three sources of information on the goals of the lesson when it was taught by experienced teachers than when it was taught by inexperienced teachers.
- The experienced and inexperienced teachers differed on what they perceived as being the most successful part of a lesson. The experienced teachers judged a lesson successful in terms of what the learners were

likely to learn; the inexperienced teachers felt that a successful lesson was one that worked best from their point of view as a teacher.

Some insights

The most successful aspect of these classroom observations was that they allowed experienced teachers to serve as valued mentors to their less experienced colleagues. The fact that the experienced teachers were willing to go through the same process of critical reflection as the novice teachers gave them great credibility in the eyes of the novice teachers. Additionally, the experienced teachers became more thoughtful about their own teaching.

References and further reading

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Appendix

Checklist for monitoring a *teacher's questioning strategies*

Note (checkmark) how often the teacher asks the following questions at various intervals (for example, every 5 minutes) during the class.

Type of question asked	*Frequency*
1. *Factual/literal*. Teacher asks a question that the students can answer by reading or listening to the teacher.	_____
2. *Opinion/interpretative*. Teacher asks a question that the students can answer by "reading between the lines" from a text or from what the teacher says. Students can use own prior knowledge to answer.	_____

Type of response required	*Frequency*
1. *Display/fact*. Student must display his or her knowledge of a topic by providing facts from memory.	____
2. *Referential/thought*. Student must provide an answer that involves thought and reasoning in order to reach a logical conclusion.	____
3. *Choice*. Student must only provide a yes/no, true/false answer - no explanation required.	____

Selection of student	*Frequency*
1. Calls student's name directly before asking question.	____
2. Calls student's name directly after asking question.	____
3. Calls for student volunteers after asking question.	____
4. Allows students to self-select when to answer.	____