

Peer Observation and Feedback in Teacher Training and Teacher Development

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Peer observation and feedback in teacher training and teacher development has a natural appeal. It seems professional, non-threatening and non-prescriptive. However, as teachers are usually untrained and often inexperienced in observing and particularly in the delicate matter of giving feedback, the experience may be less productive and less constructive than hoped. This article describes a pre-service teacher training course (WICE TEFL Certificate Program) where, over the years, we have developed a peer observation and feedback scheme which is task-based. This orientation helps to avoid some of the pitfalls which may be encountered when implementing peer observation and feedback in either teacher training or teacher development. Specimens of different types of observation tasks are included.

Observation

Observation in the classroom exists for a variety of purposes, one of which is research. By this we mean pure research which is carried out by researchers and indeed may be read only by other researchers because it is often seemingly far removed from the day-to-day concerns of practitioners. Though observation for this purpose is not the topic of this paper, it is worth mentioning because researchers have given us some of the techniques and tools that are sometimes employed in observation for teacher training and development. Globally, they have taught us the principle of observing the observable. As teachers, our fundamental question may be: "What constitutes effective teaching?" But, the answer, if it does exist, is surely so complex that we probably cannot come close to answering it unless we begin by breaking it down into manageable, observable components such as, "What different techniques does the teacher employ to indicate that an error has been made?" and "What is the resulting student behavior?"

A second type of observation is for purposes of supervision. The term is very

broad and refers to a wide variety of approaches and situations (Gebhard, 1984). By definition, a supervisor is not a peer, but is a person in a position of responsibility (pedagogical and/or administrative) in regard to the teacher observed.

At one end of the spectrum is prescriptive or directive supervision. The basic premise is that the supervisor-observer knows the "right" way to teach and can judge how closely the teacher matches the given criteria. Once again this is not the topic of our paper. However, we mention it because the negative connotations associated with this type of observation (passing an exam, getting a job, etc.) have been found to be responsible for the reluctance on the part of experienced teachers to enter into a peer observation project. (Richards and Lockhart, forthcoming) This must be taken into consideration when implementing peer observation and feedback in teacher development.

Collaborative supervision is a very different approach in which the observer and the teacher work together posing problems, stating hypotheses, seeking solutions. The observer does not prescribe, but collaborates with the teacher in a sharing relationship. The obvious advantage to this approach in both teacher training and teacher development is that teachers do not become dependent on the dictates of a tutor or supervisor, but develop an inquiry-based approach to teaching. Thus they gain confidence in their ability to effectively deal with a variety of situations.

Training and Development

For the purposes of this paper, and in our whole approach to teacher training, training and development are more similar than they are different. They are part of a continuum. Teacher training, pre-service, is the initial stage of a teaching career and teacher development, in-service, is on-going. Training does imply the presence of an informant/consultant (teacher trainer) whereas development may be carried out independently by teachers or teams of teachers. But they are similar in that both involve discovering or upgrading one's knowledge of learning theory and of options in the classroom, selecting from among those options and experimenting with them, and subsequently reflecting on their effectiveness. In the collaborative approach observers and teachers do this as a team.

Peer Observation and Feedback

In the final analysis, trainees *know* their trainers will take part in the all-important decision whether or not to award that certificate or diploma. Teachers *know* that program directors and supervisors, however collaborative their approach may be,

are in a position to influence a teacher's career advancement within the institution. A *truly* collaborative approach is perhaps only possible when peers observe one another. (Parrish & Poumellec, 1990). Even then, possible pitfalls are numerous.

We propose to present the WICE TEFL Certificate Program as a case study. Our observation and feedback scheme has come about through a certain amount of experimentation (as we continually explore *our* options), much reflection and discussion, and extensive reading. Everything we have read is emphatic that the most difficult element in training teachers to train teachers is the development of perceptions of classroom events and especially the delicate art of sensitive and constructive debriefing, in other words observation and feedback. We can certainly confirm this. It has been and remains the most preoccupying part of our role as teacher trainers.

By extension, this would suggest that in teacher development one's peers, whereas they may be highly effective as classroom teachers, might be ineffective or even counterproductive as observers due to lack of training and experience in observation and feedback. They may be overwhelmed by the complexity of classroom events and be unable to focus on anything specific. Feedback could be a vague and not very useful "That was great!". More experienced teachers may, on the other hand, actually become prescriptive and try to help their less experienced colleagues "see the light". Observers may tend to concentrate on elements of personal interest and be insensitive to others, thus not taking full advantage of the opportunity and perhaps not providing feedback in areas of concern to the teacher observed. Some peers may feel uncomfortable mentioning what they perceive to be a colleague's weaknesses. Others may feel that this is just how they can be the most helpful and overemphasize the negative.

WICE TEFL Certificate Program

It is our experience that observation tasks provide the focus and framework which help to avoid some of the above-mentioned problems and contribute to a positive and constructive outcome. Below you will find examples of tasks that are used at WICE as the basis for our peer observation and feedback scheme. They would not be operational in all circumstances and may not be in accordance with the goals and objectives of other programs. In order to understand the reasons for the adoption of our particular task type and feedback procedure, it is important to know something about the aims of our course and the internal as well as external parameters.

Aims

The basic aims of the WICE TEFL Certificate Program are two-fold: to prepare teachers for their first employment in teaching English as a foreign language and to instill in them an exploratory and reflective approach to teaching, so that they may continue to develop throughout their careers. Our objectives are as follows:

1. to provide trainees with insight into classroom options within the context of current theories of second language acquisition and of language itself,
2. to give trainees the opportunity to put a variety of options into practice through extended clinical experience,
3. to encourage trainees to develop perceptions of classroom events, including student behavior and teacher behavior,
4. to reflect on their teaching experience as well as on their observations of colleagues' lessons.

Organization

The organization is the same for both the 100-hour intensive courses and the 150-hour academic year courses. There are 14 trainees who meet together for input sessions and are divided into teams of seven for practice teaching, which is concurrent with the input component (clinical-based model). They teach groups of up to ten adults, who are informed upon enrollment that they will be taught by trainee-teachers. Trainees team-teach consecutive segments of a lesson in progressively smaller groups for progressively longer periods of time. Each trainee is observed by the other six members of the team, plus one teacher trainer. The lesson lasts one hour and a half. After the students leave, one hour is devoted to feedback.

Observation Tasks

As each trainee teaches a segment of the lesson, his or her colleagues complete an observation task. Tasks serve many purposes.

1. Tasks help focus on one or a few elements of classroom activity at a time. This is essential for those trainee-observers who might otherwise be insensitive to these elements in the face of the overwhelming complexity of a foreign language lesson.

Fig. 1: This task is used very early in the course, soon after the input session on classroom management. It guides trainees to focus on the teacher's position and

movement, teacher/student talking time and various interactions. There are always widely varying estimates of the ratio of teacher talking time and student talking time. (Question 2) Of course, it is impossible to answer this question accurately without using a complex time lapse coding system, but this question does serve its purpose. It leads trainees to consider the appropriate ratio in different types of lessons and segments of lessons and to explore ways of attaining that ratio. Questions 1 and 3 operate on the same principle. They invite trainees to consider the effect of teacher position and movement and of different types of interaction.

1. Before the lesson begins, draw a plan of the room indicating white board, students' chairs, etc. Plot the teacher's movement throughout the lesson.

2. What is the approximate ratio of teacher talking time and student talking time?

T	%
S(SSS)	%

3. What different interactions do you observe? (T-S, etc.)

Figure 1

2. Tasks are designed to be gatherers of data. They do not require reflection at the time of completion. The data gathered subsequently serve as a starting point for feedback which involves analysis of options taken, discussion of their effectiveness and possible effectiveness of alternatives.

Fig 2: This task focuses attention on the students. It permits trainees to see which students participate spontaneously, which tend to dominate, and which may participate very little or not at all. It can lead to consideration of nomination procedures and wait-time, among other elements. It would clearly be more revealing if it somehow recorded the amount of time each student speaks and/or who the student addresses. But, it is perhaps counterproductive if the task becomes so unwieldy that the trainee-observer cannot be receptive to other elements of the lesson. Note that individual trainees are asked to complete the task for only a portion of the time.

STUDENT PARTICIPATION	
Write the names of the students and indicate the number of times each student participates over a 10-15 minute period. Mark with a ✓ if the utterance is spontaneous and with a X if the student is called on by the teacher.	
Time: From	to
<u>Names</u>	<u>Utterances</u>

Figure 2

3. Tasks are non judgmental in nature. This helps ensure, but by no means guarantees, that feedback will remain objective and constructive.

Fig. 3: In this task, trainees are asked to make note of elements of phonology included and techniques employed in the lesson. They are *not* asked to attach labels such as “good” or even “sufficient” or “appropriate”.

PRONUNCIATION	
What elements of stress and intonation are incorporated into the lesson?	What techniques does the teacher use to help make stress and intonation patterns clear to students?
What sounds does the teacher encourage the students to practice?	What techniques does the teacher use to help students recognize and produce sounds?

Figure 3

4. Observation tasks are effective awareness activities. The results of the task in Figure 4 speak for themselves. A majority of teachers would suggest that, though a lesson may be student centered in its conception, it is teacher-dominated in its exploitation. Used early in the course, such a task can serve as an introduction to some of the techniques of student-centered teaching. It is purposely left untitled. Trainees are asked to determine what the aim of the task is.

<i>OBSERVATION TASK</i>	
Mark T each time the answer is "the teacher". Mark S each time the answer is "a student".	
1.	Who do the students speak to?
2.	Who do the students listen to?
3.	Who explains the target language item(s)?
4.	Who explains vocabulary?
5.	Who corrects students' errors?
6.	Who answers students' questions?
7.	Who repeats what one student says if other students do not hear or understand?
Now compare the number of T's and the S's for each question	

Figure 4

WICE observation tasks are simple and brief. We felt we had to reject complex systems which would require training in how to use them and/or would occupy all of the trainees' attention. WICE tasks are more qualitative than quantitative but always objective. Trainees in our program are preparing to teach English in a wide variety of situations. It is important for them to become aware of different options, with the clear understanding that there are no "best" options.

Feedback

The second stage of the procedure is reflection and discussion based primarily, but not exclusively, on the observation task. The format of the feedback sessions evolves throughout the course.

Phase 1: The trainer selects or creates a task for use at the appropriate time, often after the relevant input session. Feedback is carried out by the trainees and the trainer. The role of the trainer is *conductor*, ensuring that all segments of the lesson are discussed, encouraging all trainees to participate; *controller*, in case of negative comments or suggestions not consistent with current theory and practice; *initiator*, "How would you describe the presentation technique used today?", "How did students demonstrate understanding?"; *informant*, reminding trainees of theory behind options, providing alternative options, etc.; and *counselor*, making comments or suggestions when appropriate.

Phase 2: Feedback is conducted by trainees. The teacher trainer observes, participating less and less.

Phase 3: This phase is similar to the preceding phase, but the trainees select observation tasks themselves for the lesson as a whole or for their individual segments.

Phase 4: By this stage trainees are responsible for syllabus design. They are teaching longer segments (45 minutes) and they create tasks appropriate to their segments and in accordance with their perceived needs.

Trainees receive written feedback from the trainer-observer after each teaching practice. This also evolves as the course proceeds, going from a sort of checklist to a selective but objective account of teacher and student behavior.

Program evaluation

Throughout the course teacher trainers remain sensitive to trainees' needs and sentiments. As a result, feedback may take a completely different direction from that which would have been implied by the task completed. We also have found that trainees sometimes need a break in routine. Thus, on occasion, no task is used, allowing observation and subsequent feedback to be unstructured. At the end of

each course trainees are asked to complete evaluation questionnaires on the course as a whole and on the peer observation and feedback component in particular. Trainee evaluations are frequently the impetus behind decisions to modify procedures.

Alternative Observation Task Types

Alternative types of tasks, variously called by their creators observation instruments, systems, or schedules may be more suited to other observation and feedback programs in other contexts.

There exists a large body of observation systems which are more quantitative in their approach than the above examples of WICE tasks. Some were initially created for purposes of scientific research in the classroom. They are often highly complex, either in the number of different types of events they attempt to observe during a given time span, and/or their method of recording data. To complete the observation instrument the observer must, in some cases, be trained in its use. Often the observer is so preoccupied with the completion of the task that, whereas it may provide useful information for the teacher observed, the experience may be less beneficial for the person observing. The analysis of data gathered by certain instruments is time-consuming and is based, in some cases, on video or audio recordings or written transcription of a lesson. On the other hand, data are more complete and more reliable.

Other observation instruments make no attempt whatsoever to be quantitative or even objective and nonjudgmental. Indeed, one of the purposes of the observation schedule in Figure 5 (Nunan, 1987) is "to demonstrate to participants that observations are not value neutral, that what we see when we observe a classroom will reflect our own beliefs and attitudes as teachers about the nature of language and the nature of learning.

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE 2 (make observations after 20 and 40 minutes)

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 1. All instructions were clear. | yes/not sure/no |
| 2. The class understood what was wanted at all times. | yes/not sure/no |
| 3. Every student was involved at some point. | yes/not sure/no |
| 4. Students were interested in the lesson. | yes/not sure/no |

(Table continued overleaf)

5. The teacher made sure all the students understood.	yes/not sure/no
6. Materials and learning activities were appropriate.	yes/not sure/no
7. Class atmosphere was positive.	yes/not sure/no
8. The pacing of the lesson was appropriate.	yes/not sure/no
9. There was enough variety in the lesson.	yes/not sure/no
10. There was the right amount of teacher talk.	yes/not sure/no
11. Error correction and feedback were appropriate.	yes/not sure/no
12. There was genuine communication.	yes/not sure/no
13. Teacher was skilled at organising group work.	yes/not sure/no
14. Explanations of points of language were clear.	yes/not sure/no

Figure 5

In addition, *the way we choose to document classroom behavior will have an important bearing on what we see.*" (our italics) Clearly, a task type must be adopted only after thoughtful analysis of the goals and objectives of a peer observation and feedback program. For more examples and further information concerning alternative task types see the works indicated in the Bibliography.

In many cases the most satisfactory solution will be what Michael Wallace refers to as the *ad hoc* approach which is flexible and eclectic. (Wallace, 1991) Within the framework of an observation program, the observation system employed varies depending on the aims of the particular participants and the specific, immediate area(s) of concern.

Conclusions

1. Observation tasks play an indispensable role in providing a focus for observation and in setting the tone for feedback. The nature of the tasks may be qualitative or quantitative, fixed or flexible, but must correspond to the aims of the program.
2. Feedback is the essential follow-up to observation. Feedback time must be scheduled. If feedback is left to chance, it may not occur at all, thus losing one of the major advantages to both observer and observed.
3. Participants benefit from an initial sensitization to the collaborative approach to observation and feedback. In teacher training this can be accomplished through the guidance of the teacher trainer in the early stages of the course. In teacher development, an orientation meeting of

all participants prior to implementation of the program can serve the same purpose.

In closing, we hope to have opened a dialogue with teachers and teacher trainers who have experience with peer observation and feedback or who are considering implementation of such a program.

Questions to be asked prior to implementing a Peer Observation Program

1. Whose initiative is it? teachers'? administrators'?
2. If teachers', what can administrators do to support a peer observation and feedback program? How will they be persuaded to do so?
3. If administrators' how will teachers respond to a topdown initiative? Will they need to be persuaded of the potential benefits to them in their professional development
4. Who will participate? Will participation be voluntary?
5. How will students feel about a teacher-observer in the classroom? How will these feelings be taken into consideration?
6. What are the goals and objectives of your peer observation and feedback program?
7. Which type or types of observation tasks suit your goals and objectives?
8. Who will select or create specific tasks? team of participants? observer? teacher observed?
9. Will tasks be used systematically or will observation and feedback sometimes be unstructured?
10. Will participants have the possibility of being observed by and observing a number of other participants or just one colleague?
11. Will one or more observers sit in on a lesson?
12. In the case of more than one observer, will they complete the same task or different tasks?
13. What rules of etiquette will be observed? Who will determine them?
14. Will feedback be scheduled immediately after observation of the lesson or at a later time?
15. How will the program be evaluated? Will evaluation be on going and/ or upon completion? How will possible modifications be determined and implemented?

16. In teacher training, what are the respective and relative roles of peer observation and feedback and teacher trainer observation and feedback?
17. In teacher development, what is the appropriate role of administrators in order to ensure that peer observation and feedback remain a truly collaborative effort?

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WICE is a cultural and educational institute serving the English speaking community in Paris. The WICE TEFL Certificate is awarded in conjunction with Rutgers State University of New Jersey, Continuing Education Division, Newark, New Jersey USA.