

ELERI Classroom Observations: An Evolution

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Introduction

Part of my duties as the Freshman English Coordinator at the English Language Education Research Institute (ELERI) has been conducting classroom observations for over twenty Visiting Faculty Members (VFM's). Perhaps nothing makes a teacher feel more ill at ease than having his or her class observed by a colleague, and especially a supervisor. However, this uneasiness should be understood by both the observer and the teacher being observed as a natural response. This is especially true in a foreign environment, and the EFL administrator should make every effort to make the observation beneficial for the teacher's professional growth rather than simply a tool for quantitative evaluation.

Classroom Observation Theory

In an effort to improve the observation process at ELERI, I utilized the following guiding principles for classroom observations taken from Ruth Wajnryb in *Classroom Observation Tasks* (1993, p. 19):

1. **ESTABLISH TRUST:** Observers need to maintain a sensitive awareness of the potential for vulnerability that inevitably accompanies any observation of teaching. When a teacher opens the classroom door and extends a welcome to a visitor, a basic trust in motive and professional ethic accompanies that welcome. This must be respected.
2. **BE AWARE OF CLASSROOM DYNAMICS:** The presence of a visitor inevitably affects the classroom dynamics. Observers should take care to minimize the intrusion and allow for this factor in drawing conclusions from the data.
3. **AVOID GENERALIZATIONS:** Observers need to realize that the samples of data brought from the classroom are inevitably limited, and that sweeping generalizations should be avoided. We need to talk about *what happened in*

the lesson (a particular observed lesson), and refrain from making the unwarranted leap to *what happens in lessons* (generally).

4. DECIDE ON PURPOSE OF THE OBSERVATION: Sometimes the task will entail some preliminary collaboration and co-operation with the teacher who is going to be observed. At other times, it will be necessary not to alert the teacher to the central point of the observation for fear of 'contaminating' the data.

5. PROVIDE FOLLOW-UP TO THE EVALUATION: While the above precautions are necessary for methodological validity, it is as important on the human and professional side, to be sure to share with the observed teacher any follow-up discussions about the lesson. The question of 'ownership of the experience' is an important one and requires sensitive awareness. We need to remember that the experience has to be meaningful, rewarding and non-threatening to all involved.

I have utilized an observation system based on fixed observation categories because there are several advantages to using such a system. According to Michael J. Wallace in *Training Foreign Language Teachers* (1991, p. 75), these include:

1. Objectify the teaching process; providing data which a teacher and a supervisor can agree on as to what 'really happened,' within the particular categories that are utilized by the system.
2. Provide a reliable record; some studies show that trained observers using a particular system can demonstrate a very high level of agreement among themselves.
3. Promote self-awareness in the teacher, by the very act of using them.
4. Provide a meta-language, which enables teachers to talk about their profession in a more appropriate way because they have shared technical language.
5. May make teacher training more effective by improving the quality of teaching.

However, such systems are not perfect. During my first year as the FE Coordinator, the classroom observation form placed too much emphasis on quantification (See Appendix A). According to Wallace, Dunkin and Biddle have pointed out that

"...perhaps the greatest single flaw in much of the research we have received is the persistent assumption that appears to underlie much of it--that teaching can be reduced to a scalar value" (Wallace, 75). As an observer, I found the task of circling numbers to be distracting to the observation process and providing teachers with an "average score" does not give the teacher meaningful feedback.

Revision of the Classroom Observation Process

I set out to revise the entire evaluation process by first revising the form (See Appendix B) while maintaining the general categories: "Lesson and Teaching Style," and switching to a more general evaluative criteria: "Needs Improvement," "Good," and "Excellent." However, realizing that these too are scalar in nature, I made detailed written comments on each point listed on the form. Thus, if I checked "Needs Improvement" for number 2, "The lesson was well organized," I explained, in detail, why the lesson was not well organized.

In addition to a post-conference where, I go over each step of the classroom observation point-by-point with the instructor, each teacher is required to complete a pre-observation form on which they list the lesson's goals and objectives, possible activities in the lesson, any previous instruction related to the lesson, general class comments, and finally, specific points they would like observed (See Appendix C). Such a form is valuable in three ways: first, it saves time. While a person-to-person pre-observation conference would be ideal, administrators rarely have the time to meet with each teacher individually prior to the observation. Second, it gives the teacher some empowerment over the observation process and helps

them to focus both their lesson plan and specific teaching techniques they would like evaluated. Third, it prepares the observer ahead of time for the observation and he or she knows what to expect and look for.

The teacher's response to the above process and forms was favorable since it was a departure from the scalar evaluation of Appendix A. However, in its second year of use I found teachers feeling deeply wounded if they received *any* marks in the "Needs Improvement" column. In fact, some instructors confided during the post-observation conference that they felt like failures as a teacher, even though I explained to the entire staff that "Needs Improvement" does not mean that the particular point of the lesson was a failure, but rather it could use some revision to make it more effective. Furthermore, I found the task of explaining each point of the Class Observation Form to be very time consuming as well as giving the teacher a disjointed account of their class.

Therefore, I decided to retain the main headings: "Lesson" and "Teaching Style," as well as the specific points (1-6) under each heading as guidelines for teachers to plan their lesson and for me to observe their class. However, rather than marking the columns "Needs Improvement," "Good," and "Excellent," I eliminated these columns and use a chronological report that comments on the instructor's class and lesson plan as it actually happens in the classroom (See Appendix D). The response to this observation style has been overwhelmingly positive. The instructors no longer feel threatened by having their teaching reduced to evaluative categories, and they

greatly appreciate the chronological account of their class as it was observed and the suggestions given for improvement.

Conclusion

Like curriculum, the observation process should be dynamic in nature. That is, it should be flexible enough to adapt to the differences in student levels, student and teacher personalities, etc. It should also provide both written and oral feedback to the teacher being observed, thus promoting an open, honest dialog between the teacher and the observer. No observation system is perfect, but the changes I have made at Asia University have proven to be successful.

APPENDIX A: CLASS OBSERVATION FORM

Observer: _____ Class: _____
Instructor: _____ Date: _____

Criteria:	1	Unsatisfactory	4	Good
	2	Poor	5	Excellent
	3	Fair	N/A	Not Applicable

I. Lesson

- | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| 1. | The lesson was well organized. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 2. | There were a variety of activities in the lesson. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 3. | Student groupings seemed conducive to the lesson. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 4. | The lesson was appropriately paced. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 5. | Materials were used effectively. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |

II. Teaching Style

- | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| 1. | The instructor encouraged student participation in the lesson. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 2. | The instructor encouraged students to use English. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 3. | The instructor made efforts to make the instructions clear. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 4. | General classroom management was maintained (time usage, discipline, classroom continuity). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 5. | The instructor showed sensitivity in correcting student errors. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 6. | The instructor demonstrated the ability to adapt the lesson where necessary. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
| 7. | The instructor demonstrated adequate rapport with the students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |

Average score: _____

I have met with the Freshman English Coordinator/ELERI Director and reviewed this form and written comments together.

Instructor: _____ Date: _____

Observer: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: CLASS OBSERVATION FORM (REVISED)

Instructor: _____ Class: _____
Observer: _____ Date: _____

*N/A: Not Applicable

I. Lesson	Needs Improvement	Good	Excellent
1. The lesson had clear goals/ objectives.	_____	_____	_____
2. The lesson was well organized.	_____	_____	_____
3. The activities were appropriate for the class goals/objectives.	_____	_____	_____
4. Student groupings seemed conducive to the lesson.	_____	_____	_____
5. The lesson was appropriately paced.	_____	_____	_____
6. Materials were used effectively.	_____	_____	_____

II. Teaching Style

1. The instructor encouraged students to participate in the lesson and stay on task.	_____	_____	_____
2. The instructor made efforts to make the instructions clear.	_____	_____	_____
3. General classroom management was maintained (time usage, discipline, classroom continuity).	_____	_____	_____
4. The instructor showed sensitivity in correcting student errors.	_____	_____	_____
5. The instructor demonstrated the ability to adapt the lesson where necessary.	_____	_____	_____
6. The instructor demonstrated adequate rapport with the students.	_____	_____	_____

I have met with the Freshman English Coordinator/ELERI Director and reviewed this form and written comments together.

Instructor: _____ Date: _____
Observer: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C: PRE-OBSERVATION FORM

Instructor: _____ Class: _____

Reviewed by: _____ Date: _____

I. LESSON GOALS/OBJECTIVES

II. POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

III. PREVIOUS INSTRUCTION RELATED TO THE LESSON (If Applicable)

IV. GENERAL CLASS COMMENTS

V. SPECIFIC POINTS YOU WOULD LIKE OBSERVED

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE CLASSROOM OBSERVATION REPORT

Date

TO: *Instructor's name*

FROM: Douglas E. Forster

RE: Classroom Observation, 6/16/95

I. LESSON/TEACHING STYLE

1. The instructor began by asking how many students were ready to speak and how many were still doing the writing part of the assignment. The class was divided into two halves: one for speaking and one for writing. *Note: The majority of the class sat on the "writing" side of the room--only four students were ready for the speaking part of the assignment.
2. The instructor explained the directions for both the writing and the speaking. These instructions were written clearly on the board:
 - a) Please sit on the left if writing. 1) finish writing your rough draft (shitagaki) paragraphs (use good paragraph form). 2) start writing your opinion statements. *if finished 1 & 2--rewrite (make it better) your paragraphs (for final presentation) --start practicing speaking.
 - b) People who are ready to speak: 1) Sit at desks grouped into 4 (on your right). 2) Take out your final paper. Let me look at it to see if you are really ready. 3) If ready, have one person start by introducing his/her topic & then sharing his/her summary (and give opinions). 4) Write your participation points on the sheet (paper) I give you.
3. Next, the instructor explained the "Current Events Homework" handout and instructed the students to "write your best summary paragraph." The instructor asked if there were any questions but got no response from the students. However, when she asked, "Get it?" the students responded, "Got it." *Suggestion: Give a little more wait time after asking students a question. Ask students content-specific questions regarding the instructions. For example: "Tomoaki, what will you be working on today?"
4. The instructor gave individual attention to the small group of students in the speaking group. During this time, I noticed that the writing side of the class was very "chatty" and speaking in Japanese. For the most part, they seemed to be remaining on task. However, some just sat and stared at the front of the room. Two female students in particular sat in the back of the room and chatted in Japanese. They did absolutely no writing. *Suggestion: Keep reminding the students to stay on task and try to speak in English. *Note: The instructor seemed to pass by the two female students who weren't doing their work.
5. The instructor monitored the students writing and gave individual attention by checking to see what they were writing as well as their progress in the assignment. The instructor did an excellent job of giving advice to the students and made a point of giving positive feedback and reinforcement regarding what the students *had* completed. For example, the instructor used phrases such as, "That looks good," and "You're doing fine." For those who were behind in the assignment, the instructor used a very friendly way of reminding them by saying, "You will have a lot of homework this weekend, won't you?"

6. During the last 5 minutes of class, the students were instructed to fill out their participation paper for the week. The instructor emphasized that the students must be ready to speak on Monday. The students were reminded that there will be a unit test on Thursday and were given a handout on exactly what to study. ***Suggestion:** Ask individual students questions to check their progress and give suggestions for what they should do next.

II. GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The instructor's volume was very loud and clear. However, the delivery was a little fast at times. I suggest slowing down a bit and continue to use the "Get it?--Got it" technique to check for student comprehension--good idea!!!
2. The instructor did an excellent job of circulating around the class and giving individual attention to the students.
3. Class pacing: Since the students were doing independent study during this class, it is hard to gauge how well the class was paced.
4. The instructor demonstrated outstanding rapport with her students and they seemed very at ease to ask her questions.
5. It is very difficult to comment on the effectiveness of this lesson plan and the instructor's teaching style due to the "self-study" nature of this particular component of the lesson.
6. I suggest that the instructor look for ways to keep the class going at the same pace--especially since the majority of them were not ready to move on to the speaking portion of the assignment. ***Note:** If the students know that they will be given class time to do their homework, might this give them incentive *not* to do their homework?

References

- Wajnryb, Ruth. (1992). Classroom observation tasks.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wallace, Michael J. (1991). Training foreign language
teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.