

Expanding the dialogue: Incorporating classroom observations in curriculum development

Keywords

teacher observations, teacher development, program evaluation, curriculum

While classroom observations are a common means of teacher development they are less commonly used as a means of curriculum development. This paper will describe the adaptation of an observation program to include a curriculum evaluation component. In particular, it will focus on how observer feedback influenced the evolving curriculum of four Reading and Vocabulary courses.

授業観察は、教員の能力開発の方法としては一般的に用いられているが、カリキュラムの開発方法として用いられることはあまりない。本論では、カリキュラム評価の要素を組み入れて、現在の授業観察を改善し、利用する方法を論じる。特に、観察者のフィードバックがいかに開発中である'Reading & Vocabulary'の4コースのカリキュラムに影響を与えたかに焦点を当てる。

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Classroom observations have long been advocated as a means of teacher evaluation (Murdoch, 2000) and teacher development (Williams, 1989). Slayton & Llosa (2005) have also documented the use of systematic observations for evaluations of an educational program. The kind of observation program they documented, involving more than 20 observers incorporating a standardized form, is probably beyond the means, and even needs, of most language programs. Still, where there is an observation program in place, there is also the opportunity to generate discussion and feedback at the curriculum level. Observer input represents an opportunity to expand the dialogue beyond what might have been evident to the participants, including curriculum writers, teachers, and students. This article describes the expansion of an existing observation program beyond teacher development to incorporate discussions on curriculum.

Background

The language program

The English language program at Nagoya Women's University includes courses for full-time English majors in the International English Department as well as non-English majors in an Early Childhood Education Department. Unlike many tertiary language programs in Japan where "it is entirely up to each teacher to devise and deliver a curriculum" (Cowie, 2003, p. 41) there is a considerable degree of coordination.

1. The courses include common goals, materials, assessment and, to a lesser degree, classroom practices. These are outlined in an English Teachers' Handbook (2010), and discussed at pre-semester teacher orientations.
2. There is a considerable degree of communication among full-time and part-time teachers, particularly among teachers teaching the same course. In addition to informal conversations, regular meetings include pre-semester orientations as well as 'coordinating meetings' held twice a semester among all teachers in a given course (Venema, 2008).
3. There is a mechanism for yearly curricular changes involving negotiations among teachers and curriculum writers (Venema, 2008).

This paper will refer to curriculum writers and teachers. The former are typically the full-time teachers on campus during the spring break involved in updating the English Teachers' Handbook. The latter are the teachers who teach the classes. However, the distinction between the two was often blurred. Curriculum writers are also teachers and all teachers, both part-time and full-time, provide input that shapes the courses they teach (Venema, 2008). The author of this paper, as the final editor of the English Teachers' Handbook and part-time teacher coordinator, was in an advantageous position to both influence and document the process.

The evolving observation program

The onset of the teacher observation program coincided with the establishment of the original university department in 2004. A trained teacher observer is hired for a period of 2 to 3 weeks annually (originally bi-annually) to conduct teacher observations as part of a wider faculty development program. At the outset all teachers, both part-time and full-time, were asked to take part in observations twice a year over two semesters. The first observation in a given academic year was introduced as a means of teacher development, with the second observation serving an overt evaluative purpose (Barker, 2006). However, the use of observations for teacher evaluations can be problematic where that evaluative function serves to mitigate a

teacher development purpose. Williams (1989) argues that observations should be used for the developmental purpose of encouraging teachers to form their own judgements and insights as well as their own sense of self-evaluation. Within this overall goal, overt evaluations could serve to impede teacher development. With this in mind, the observation program underwent a number of modifications in 2006.

- The observations were made voluntary for all teachers. Teachers who were interested in being observed directly negotiated with the teacher trainer regarding a day and class.
- All observations involved only a visiting teacher-trainer and the feedback given in observer-teacher discussions was kept confidential.

The rationale for these adaptations is no doubt clear: unambiguously establishing the observations as a teacher development rather than teacher evaluation program.

The observations were flexible, involving no standardized procedure, but typically including the following:

1. A short pre-class consultation where the observed teacher had the opportunity to go over the lesson they were about to teach and direct the observer's attention to a specific aspect of the course.
2. The actual observation.
3. A post-observation consultation between the observer and teacher.
4. A final written, and confidential, summary by the observer to the teacher.

Course observations

Curriculum development

In a systematic approach to curriculum development, the work of curriculum developers is an ongoing process of evaluation and adaptation. Brown (1995) argues that evaluation is a central, unifying, component of curriculum that, "includes, connects, and gives meaning to all the other elements" (p. 217). These evaluations would be formative rather than summative, that is the focus would be on gathering information that could be used to improve the curriculum. In this sense a culture of evaluation is a critical

component of curriculum development, involving a continuous dialogue among stake-holders, including curriculum writers, teachers, and students. In this process, classroom activities play the defining role. As Johnson (1989) writes - "classroom implementation is the final stage in the curriculum development process and also the most important, because ultimately learning acts determine curriculum outcomes" (p. 10).

Rationale and goals

The rationale for adapting the existing observation program was multifaceted, including both administrative and educational concerns. From a purely administrative perspective it was expedient to adapt an existing, and already approved, program to meet the evolving evaluative needs of the language department. Similarly, by expanding the mandate to include course observations the demonstrable value of the observation program, which needed to be approved yearly, was strengthened. From an educational point of view, two years of defining, adapting, and coordinating the curriculum had resulted in a relatively stable curriculum that was ready for outside evaluative input.

The very act of evaluating and judging has important consequences for the curriculum and for the kinds of dialogue that take place within the language department. In this sense, expanding the observer's role to include input on curriculum differs in scale rather than method. The observer's role is to encourage deeper reflection on all aspects of the curriculum, just as developmental observations encourage the teacher to reflect on aspects of their teaching. Similarly, an outside observer can provide and/or facilitate insights that may not have been immediately evident to those involved, both curriculum writers and teachers.

Procedure

The program was adapted in 2006 to incorporate observations at the curriculum level. In addition, a number of adjustments were made to allow for observer input at the course level:

1. The observer was scheduled to observe a number of teachers teaching the same course, typically three or four. Since many

classes were held once a week the observer, who was only hired for a period of two or three weeks, was not always able to observe all teachers in a given course. Teachers were notified ahead of time of the scheduled observations as well as the rationale for doing so. It was stressed that the focus of the evaluation was not any individual teacher or class, but the coordinated course and syllabus as a whole. Teachers were also given the right to refuse but none in fact did. This was unsurprising in a program where most teachers had already been voluntarily participating in an observation program.

2. Prior to arriving the observer was given available documentation on the courses. This information included the Teachers' Handbook (2006 - 2010) as well as minutes of the previous coordinating meetings (see Venema, 2008), particularly the most recent meetings held before the observer arrived. The observer also went over the courses to be observed with the full-time teachers responsible for making yearly adaptations to syllabi.
3. The observer was asked to provide written feedback for the selected courses focusing on the following questions:
 - a. Are the objectives clear to all teachers and students and to what extent do they appear to be meeting real and appropriate student needs?
 - b. To what extent does it appear classes in different blocks of the same course are working effectively towards those objectives?
 - c. To what extent are the materials, course books, homework, and teacher activities furthering the objectives of the course?
 - d. Do you see any ways in which the course could be improved?

To provide feedback at this broad level the observer needed to draw on his/her own experiences and professional opinions, all the while taking into account the input of teachers and curriculum developers. It is precisely the subjectivity of the observer input that was sought: one more voice included in the negotiations involved in curriculum development.

No changes were made to the way in which observations were conducted. An overt focus remained on teacher development, and the teachers observed still received individualized feedback. The course level feedback avoided any direct mention of individual classes, and was shared among all teachers in a given course as well as those teachers responsible for writing the curriculum.

Observer Feedback

For sake of brevity and clarity I will focus on written feedback that influenced an ever evolving curriculum. The written feedback itself is just a summary (albeit a useful one) of the discussions, both informal and formal, between individual teachers and the teacher observers, as well as between curriculum writers and the observers. While it is beyond the bounds of this paper to provide documentation of those discussions, the written feedback will provide a summing up of the conclusions drawn. In addition, it should not be assumed that all observer feedback was immediately accepted and directly incorporated in curriculum adaptations. In fact, a differing focus could stress how observer feedback did NOT result in curriculum changes. The observer feedback was one more voice among many that included not just curriculum writers and participating teachers, but also students and university administrators. One observer was quite candid regarding what he felt were the limitations of the input he was providing:

One immediate reservation that I have about my own ability to give you a measured response to your question(s) is that during my visits I only really gain a general impression of the courses and the students as I flit from one group and one teacher to another. I would imagine that more valuable in-depth feedback would come from the teachers who really know the students and have worked their way systematically through the courses. However, I will be glad to pass on my impressions. (A. Caswell, personal communication, 2009)

Still, this paper will try to show how observer input can be influential and useful in developing curriculum by focusing on the input of two

observers over a period of four years, and their effect on an evolving curriculum for the first four levels of Reading and Vocabulary courses (R&V 1 - 4). In particular, observer feedback helped to shape a gradual transition in the relative weight given to vocabulary and reading goals, and it is those changes that will be the primary focus of this paper.

The courses: R&V 1-4

As the name would suggest, the R&V courses combined two goals:

1. Vocabulary. Students learned and were tested on words from a vocabulary list, originally the General Services list and Academic word list, but from 2007, words were selected from English Vocabulary In Use: Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate (2003). Students were tested weekly on their passive knowledge and were also expected to choose words to enter in a vocabulary notebook, with example sentences.
2. Reading. The focus began with extensive reading with graded readers in R&V 1 and then began to focus on balancing extensive and intensive reading, with a gradual shift to authentic materials.

The Feedback and adaptations

In November of 2006, the observer observed two blocks of R&V 1 and provided the following feedback:

The goals... are primarily focused on vocabulary. There is no real focus on reading skills such as predicting, skimming, scanning, guessing vocabulary from context etc. One suggestion would be to introduce a reading textbook that has reading skills work as well as a focus on the vocabulary that is in the texts with additional discussion exercises that allow students to practice the vocabulary.

The vocabulary goals are clear and address the needs of the students.

All teachers appeared to be working towards goal 1 of the course (vocabulary). This seems to occupy a large part of the course. The (vocabulary) textbook units are given

for homework but review tests seem to take up a large part of the class. It may be that teachers are mainly concerned about making sure the students know the vocabulary for the 3 review tests. The other goals seem to be taking a secondary role in the course. (M. Whyte, personal communication, November 2006)

The following year, the observer provided the following feedback on a later level of the same course, R&V 3.

This (vocabulary) is what I mostly observed the students working towards in the 2 R&V 3 classes that I observed. The students had time to practice and seem to be regularly tested on the vocabulary in their textbook. Students were also encouraged to and well supported with writing example sentences, which is an important (and difficult) thing for the students to be able to do. (M. Whyte, personal communication, November 2007)

The feedback focuses attention on a problematic aspect of the course, combining a focus on systematic vocabulary development as well as reading, both intensive and extensive, in a course held only once a week. In particular, the introduction of regular vocabulary tests appeared to focus students', and teachers', attention on vocabulary at the expense of reading. This was partially dealt with by reducing the number of words students were asked to include in their notebooks from ten to five in 2007 (English Teacher's Handbook, 2007). Still, it wasn't until the beginning of 2009 that the weekly vocabulary tests were removed from classes and moved on-line in the form of cloze exercises (see <<http://www.nwuenglish.org/WordLists.asp>>). The rationale was to allow more time for teachers to focus on reading in classes.

Still, in 2009, a different observer provided rather depressingly similar feedback:

With reference to aims, I feel they need to be more specific in terms of the reading sub-skills you want the teachers to develop, which therefore has implications for the tasks that would need to be set by the teachers to satisfy these aims. In my observation, I saw little evidence of pre-reading (or pre-listening) tasks.

Another issue to be considered is the somewhat unhappy marriage as I see it of Reading and Vocabulary in the courses. There seem to be 2 approaches I have noticed: a) Vocabulary (drawn from Vocabulary in Use) unrelated to reading texts or b) very intensive treatment of vocabulary in text e.g. R&V 4. An alternative to a) could be to develop lexical materials related to the articles in "Catch A Wave". With regard to b), is it not somewhat counter-productive to put such a strong intensive focus on new vocabulary in the text? Don't you want to encourage intelligent guesswork, and discourage over-use of the dictionary? (Caswell, personal communication, December 2009)

Reading and Vocabulary 2010

An ideal solution to the 'unhappy marriage' of reading and vocabulary would be to divide the course into two classes a week, each with a distinct focus on either vocabulary or reading. This being administratively impossible, and curriculum writers still being reluctant to discard altogether a focus on a systematic vocabulary development, a compromise has been reached. For the academic year of 2010/11 the vocabulary load has been reduced once more, and there is a renewed focus on reading in classes. In R&V 1 more class time is now devoted to introducing students to extensive reading (English Teachers' Handbook, 2010, p. 50). In R&V 2 the focus continues to shift to balancing extensive reading with intensive reading, including specific reading skills such as guessing, skimming, and scanning (p. 56). In R&V 3 the vocabulary load has been reduced and a textbook has been introduced to provide more intensive reading skills while maintaining a focus on extensive reading (p. 59). In R&V 4 the vocabulary load has also been reduced (from 20 to 10 words a week) while a more overt focus has been given to developing reading skills that would help students understand an English novel (p.61).

A concerted effort has been made to lessen the vocabulary load while simultaneously increasing the attention paid to reading, including extensive reading, intensive reading, and discrete reading skills. While the curriculum was negotiated among multiple participants, observer feedback did play a role in the changes made. The results

remain to be seen as the planned curriculum becomes realized in individual teachers' classes. There will no doubt be further discussions, possibly leading to adaptations. In addition, there will be further evaluative input from a classroom observer.

Discussion

While the primary purpose of the observations will remain to be teacher development, feedback at the curriculum level has proven to be a useful way to expand the voices involved in curriculum development. I believe the following conditions have made the observation program more effective:

1. The observer was not provided with observation checklists, rating scales, or narrowly defined questions. The rationale was that a broad focus would allow for input and insights not specifically solicited. It was precisely this opportunity for broadening the voices included in curriculum development that was sought. Additionally, leaving the evaluation task open-ended allowed the observer to remain focused on what was still seen as the primary, and complimentary, goal of the observation program: teacher development.
2. The syllabus evaluation observations occurred within a broader discussion that gave voice to all participants, including curriculum writers, teachers, and students. Within this broader dialogue observer feedback was viewed as a launching point for further discussion and possible action.
3. The goals and the results of the observation program were freely and openly shared. The focus was not on the evaluation of any specific teacher but of the implemented course as a whole. The observer was asked to provide feedback without any reference to individual teachers.
4. The observer was provided documentation of the curriculum in advance, including the Teachers' Handbook and minutes from the most recent relevant coordinating meetings. Upon the arrival of the teacher trainer, some time was spent going over the curriculum as a whole including course objectives, materials, classroom activities, and assessment.
5. The same observer was contracted over a multiple year span. This helped the observers to become more familiar with the program and courses. In addition, they were increasingly able to draw on relations developed with teachers over multiple observations.

Conclusion

Classroom observations will remain an important source of professional development. Perhaps sometimes overlooked is that they represent a simultaneous opportunity for curriculum development. For curriculum writers the critical question is, "To what extent does a course enable teachers and students to work towards appropriate goals?" An evaluative observation program allows this question to be addressed where curriculum is actually realized – inside the classroom.

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JALT2010 Plenary Speakers to lead us outside

The three headliners at JALT2010 intend to lead conference-goers outside... "outside the box", that is. All three plenary speeches acknowledge new directions and approaches for design and implementation of language teaching.



Alan Maley, Visiting Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK, will give a talk called "The art and artistry of language teaching". The speech will center on Maley's notion of an "alternative paradigm based on an aesthetic view of education". Learn more about Alan through his blog, which includes a video interview from the British Council. <www.teachinenglish.org.uk/blogs/alan-maley/alan-maley-video-interview>

Nicky Hockly, Director of Pedagogy for The Consultants-E, is an expert in the field of teaching with technology. This expanding niche in the field of language teaching will be on display during Nicky's talk titled "Five ways to integrate technology into language teaching". Teachers will take away practical examples of technology use in the language classroom. Nicky has lots of innovative tech ideas on her blog. <www.emoderationskills.com/>



Tim Murphey of Kanda University of International Studies, will deliver a plenary speech focusing on ways teachers organize, support, and scaffold activities and materials in order to empower students. Murphey refers to this as "agencying... creatively scaffolding students' languaging abilities". Several academic articles and teacher training videos are available at Tim's website. <www.kuis.ac.jp/~murphey-t/Tim_Murphey/Welcome.html>