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Collaborative Teacher Observations: A Case Study

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Teaching under observation is a basic and essential component of any teacher training program. Yet once novice teachers are released into the wild they are rarely if ever observed by other teachers. In this study, a system of teacher observation was piloted over two terms at a Japanese high school. The teachers (*N* = 7) observed each other's classes, regardless of position or seniority at the school, for the explicit purpose of collaboration, not evaluation. In this paper, the formation and evolution of this observation system are described. Through a summary of the participants' responses, practical advice is offered for teachers interested in setting up similar systems of teacher observation at their own schools.

授業見学は、教員のトレーニング・プログラムにおいて、基本的かつ重要な構成要素である。しかし、新人教員が一度現場に入ると、他の教員から授業を見学される機会はほとんどない。この研究では、二学期間にわたる日本の高等学校の授業見学を紹介する。7名の教員らが、学校での役職や年功に関わらず、評価しあうのではなく、教員同士の協力関係構築を目的として、それぞれの授業を見学した。本稿では、授業見学の制度としての成り立ちと発展を記述している。本研究に参加した7名の教員の反応を提示しながら、自らの学校で同様の教員の授業見学制度の立ち上げに関心のある教員に対し、実践的なアドバイスを提供する。

Observation is an essential tool for professional teacher development. Teachers need feedback and input from observers inside their classrooms in order to grow. Few would argue against the importance of observation as a general practice, but specific implementations of observation can be much more controversial. For example, a top-down observation system in which only tenured teachers observe nontenured teachers might be seen as authoritative and suspected of bearing more on hiring decisions than teacher development. A system that forces all teachers at a school to observe a single micro-lesson at a fixed time after normal class hours might be seen as inauthentic teaching and considered superfluous busywork. Despite these potential pitfalls, successfully implemented observation has been shown to lead to such benefits as higher confidence, enhanced beliefs in and enthusiasm for collaboration among teachers, as well as higher motivation, improvement in performance, and enhanced interaction among students (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003). In order to develop a system of observation that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the drawbacks, it is necessary to examine classroom observation in detail, first by looking at its history.

In *The Teacher Wars*, Goldstein (2014) examined the evolution of the teaching profession in America and shed light on two extreme perspectives on observation. On one side were teachers who feared that inviting others into the classroom would lead to heightened scrutiny of teachers' practices and decreased job security. This reflected a lack of confidence in and distrust of administrators. This point of view is best illustrated by Albert Shanker, the president of two major teacher unions from 1964 to 1997. On the other side were teachers and administrators who strove to open classrooms as much as possible in order to hold themselves and their peers accountable to high education standards. They feared that closing the metaphorical walls of the classrooms would leave teachers in black boxes, which would in turn discourage teacher development and stagnate progress in education. This point of view is best illustrated by Ella Flagg Young, who was the superintendent of schools in Chicago between 1887 and 1913. In designing the observation system of this study, I strove to reach a delicate balance between these two perspectives. The goal was to make observations deeply meaningful but not invasive.

In addition to these historical viewpoints, teacher observation has also been studied in recent educational research. The face-threatening nature of observation has been formally identified for several decades (Rowe, 1973). Since then, Freeman (1982) and Gebhard (1984) have created frameworks for approaches to teacher observation. These frameworks range from directive and supervisory approaches (that rigidly place the observer as the communi-

cator of correct teaching practice to the observee) to collaborative and creative approaches (that allow for more than one single best practice and for the development of both the observer and observee). Perhaps due to the variety of approaches to teacher observation, participants do not always agree on the purpose of their given system. Lam (2001) found in a study of 2,400 classroom teachers in Hong Kong that teachers were more likely to consider observation a means of summative evaluation—a form of teacher appraisal—than principals, who were more likely to consider observation a means of formative evaluation—a tool for teacher development. In a study of 161 Iranian University EFL teachers, Akbari, Gaffar, and Tajik (2006) found that although 65% of these teachers agreed that observation is necessary, 75% considered it stressful. Both of these studies highlighted the dual nature of teacher observation as both supportive and intrusive.

One important limitation of teacher observation that has been identified in recent research is a lack of inter-observer reliability. Hill, Charalambous, and Kraft (2012), Casabianca et al. (2013), and Cohen and Goldhaber (2016) all found that different observers of the same class had focused on vastly different points and assessed the lessons quite differently. This is potentially dangerous when observation is used in high stakes employment decisions and points to the need for a reliable model of observation. Some such models have been broadly proposed for all-purpose use in classrooms of various subjects (Teddlie, Creemers, Kyriakides, Muijs, &Yu, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, Quek, & Feng, 2006), but none are fine-tuned for EFL classes in particular. However, case studies of teacher observation of EFL classrooms have been conducted that indicate the importance of continuous (Lally & Veleba, 2000) and collaborative (Wang & Seth, 1998) models of observation.

The purpose of this paper is to provide another case study of the development and evolution of a teacher observation system, specifically in a Japanese EFL teaching context. By analyzing the successes and shortcomings of this system, it may be possible to suggest ways to implement observation and to work towards a reliable model of observation in similar teaching contexts.

Methods
Teaching Context and Observation System

The study was conducted in an EFL program at a private senior high school in western Tokyo. This school operates on a spring admissions calendar from April to March. There are 25 teachers in the foreign languages department, including native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), native Japanese-speaking teachers of English (JTEs), and teachers of other languages, including Chinese, French, German, and Spanish. The participants of this study were all NESTs in the school's EFL program.

In December of 2014 at a meeting of all six teachers of the EFL program, the researcher proposed piloting a system of classroom observation in order to exchange ideas and deepen collaboration. It was emphasized that these observations would not factor into employment decisions, because the goal was to cultivate a system of teacher development in which observers and observees could learn from each other. All six teachers agreed to participate in the two-term experiment during the winter (January through March) and spring (April through July) of 2015. This was the first time a system of observation was piloted at this school, so the teachers elected to keep the scheduling and coordination of observations flexible and through negotiation established an adaptable system with no guidelines describing who should observe what or when. Each teacher could decide whose class they asked to observe or who to invite to their[1] own class. Teachers could also decline invitations or requests to observe at any time. A modest goal was set for each teacher to observe one class and have one class observed in each term of the study. If this were achieved and the observation system should prove fruitful after the first two terms, the participants would discuss expanding it, such as by raising the target number of observations or by inviting JTEs to participate as well.

Participants

Information about the teacher participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Teacher	Sex	Age	Nationality	Years at the school*	Full-time or part-time	Terms participated
1	male	30s	UK	2.5	part-time	both
2	male	30s	USA	6	full-time	both
3	female	20s	Japan	3	full-time	both
4	female	30s	Korea	3	part-time	both
5	male	40s	USA	3	part-time	both
6	male	40s	Nigeria	1	part-time	winter only
7	male	30s	USA	0	part-time	spring only

Note. **as of the end of the winter term, 2015

Teacher 2 was the researcher of this study, so his responses to qualitative questions have been omitted from the analysis. Teacher 6 left the school at the end of the school year in March and was replaced by Teacher 7, who also agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, although there were seven total participants, only six were at the school in each term.

Because the majority of teachers had been working at the school for 3 years or more, there was already a collaborative work environment among them before the start of this study. They shared ideas and advice about classes and students frequently in their office and were open-minded about the observation system as a tool to deepen this exchange.

Materials and Procedures

At the end of each term, participants completed an online questionnaire via Google Forms. The questions were designed to collect both quantitative information about each teacher's level of participation in the study as well as qualitative information about their experiences and reactions to the observation system. An identical questionnaire was used at the end of both terms, consisting of seven questions in total:

1. How many classes did you observe this term?
2. How many times were your classes observed?
3. How did you organize each of the observations? (Did you invite or ask? Were you invited or asked? How did you choose whom to approach?)
4. Did you have a meeting or exchange after the class to discuss it further? How?
5. What did you learn from the class observations this term?
6. Would you like to continue this observation system?
7. How could we improve the system in the future?

The results of the questionnaire were exported to an Excel spreadsheet. Calculations were then made using Excel functions and the results were analyzed.

Findings and Discussion

Questions #1 and 2

How many classes did you observe this term, and how many times were your classes observed?

The number of classes teachers observed and had observed each term are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Observations Completed

Participation	Winter		Spring	
	Average	Total	Average	Total
As observer	2.17	13	1.17	7
As observee	1.5	9	0.67	4

In the winter term, teachers were successful on average at achieving the goal of observing at least one class and having at least one class observed. There are multiple possible reasons for the decrease in frequency of observation in the spring term. The first relates to the teachers' schedules. Grade 12 students do not have classes in the winter term, so teachers may have had more time to observe each other. In contrast, the spring term tends to be the busiest, because teachers need to establish their classes for the new school year. As a result, they may have had less energy to devote to observation. Another possible reason for the lower number of observations achieved in the spring term may be a loss of momentum of the observation system itself. In the winter term, teachers may have had a fresher impression of the system and been more enthusiastic about participating. This suggests that continuous encouragement for teachers to observe classes is necessary to sustain such a system.

Question #3

How did you organize each of the observations?

In the winter term, all teachers reported that they invited others to observe specific classes. In the spring term, five of the six teachers invited others. Teachers said that they communicated both via email and face-to-face and tended to discuss which classes and activities would be interesting to observe before deciding on a date. Overall, the coordi-

nation of observations seemed to function smoothly. This may be a result of the preexisting friendly and mutually supportive office environment as well as the flexibility of the observation system itself.

Question #4

Did you have a meeting or exchange after the class to discuss it further?

In the winter term, four of the six teachers reported that they had a meeting. In the spring, five of the six teachers reported so. These meetings took a variety of forms including oral feedback and written comments in the form of notes or email. Teachers met over lunch or in the office and reported in all cases that they found these meetings fruitful.

Question #5

What did you learn from the class observations this term?

Teachers reported gaining a variety of useful information and tips from their experience both as observers and observees. Several trends are introduced below, illustrated by quotes from the teachers' responses to this question.

Most commonly as observers, teachers seemed to notice specific things that they wanted to incorporate into their own teaching practices. For example, one teacher commented on the value of "keeping a tab on the total speaking hours of students in conversation activities as well as having a conversation strategy checklist" (Teacher 6, spring). Another teacher mentioned that they learned from observing "how other teachers encouraged the students on their opinions" (Teacher 3, winter).

Usually teachers picked up on topics that were new to them, but one teacher reported that they were reminded of old practices that they hoped to reintroduce:

> I learned that I conduct some tasks differently from other teachers (in a good way) which was not intentional! I also learned from other observations that I stopped doing some small things that I used to do in my first year of teaching, and I thought those might be useful to begin again (e.g. writing a clear agenda on the board, writing steps of an activity on the board). (Teacher 3, spring)

Some teachers did not report on specific features of the observed lessons but focused more on the general structure and progression of the lesson. Such topics are difficult to explain verbally outside of the classroom and highlight the benefit of being present in the class as an observer. "It was nice to observe a class that had been planned by the teacher, and it was nice to see another teacher's interaction style" (Teacher 5, spring). "It was use-ful to see how another teacher organised their class, and went step-by-step in explaining to the students" (Teacher 7, spring).

Interestingly, one teacher commented on the unique perspective that being an observer allows: "I could see from the rear how students who cannot hear what is happening at the front (conversations between the teacher and a student who speaks up) can easily lose focus" (Teacher 3, spring).

The diversity of responses to Question #5 indicate the unpredictability of the lessons teachers take from class observation, further affirming its merit and significance in teacher development.

Question #6

Would you like to continue this observation system?

Responses to this question were elicited on a 5-point scale. 5 indicated a strong positive, 3 a pure neutral, and 1 a strong negative response. In the winter term, the average response of the six teachers was 4.0, suggesting a positive attitude towards the observation system. In the spring term, the average response dropped slightly to 3.3, suggesting a more neutral attitude. This drop may be related to the decrease in frequency of the observations in the spring term, which was discussed above with the responses to Questions #1 and 2.

Question #7

How could we improve the system in the future?

Teachers identified many shortcomings of the system and often gave practical advice to make the system more effective. Particular patterns are introduced below, illustrated by quotations from the questionnaires.

One common issue related to the scheduling of the observations: "The main problem, for me at least, is that many of our schedules coincide. I'm not sure how to work around that!" (Teacher 5, winter). "Everyone is working different hours and as such, some people may have less time than others to dedicate to the process" (Teacher 1, winter).

Another teacher echoed this sentiment and proposed that there should be distinctions between full-time and part-time teachers' participation to better suit individual schedules: "I think it is good, but really should be optional for part-time teachers. The only reason for this is that we all have different schedules, and it is sometimes hard to fit in time to observe another teacher's classes" (Teacher 7, spring). Another teacher suggested

"mak[ing] a schedule and signup sheet readily available" (Teacher 4, spring). The same teacher also seemed to think it was unfair that only the EFL teachers participated in the program and proposed "mak[ing] everyone in the [department] do this mandatory" (Teacher 4, winter).

Some teachers made suggestions to alleviate the face-threatening nature of observation. One proposed reframing the observations to lessen teachers' feelings of focus and scrutiny:

> I think perhaps "targeting" it as "activities observations" rather than teacher observations might be more useful. I think all of the teachers at [the school] have lots of experience and their own styles and as such, it is perhaps more useful to observe classes to get ideas for different ways of doing/presenting activities rather than observing the teachers (which is kind of what happened this time). (Teacher 1, winter)

Another teacher commented on the importance of wording praise and critiques carefully in the follow-up meetings after observations:

> One concern is that I hope people are careful about their way of phrasing things when they provide feedback. People can get offended when they feel their way of teaching is denied, especially experienced teachers. I'd hope for everyone to respect one another as professionals and give a few main points for encouragement rather than pouring a bucket full of potentially "negative" parts of the class . . . just to avoid feelings of antipathy, for which I would really hate to happen as it defeats the purpose of observation. (Teacher 3, spring)

Other issues that teachers brought up were the timing and frequency of observations. One teacher stressed the importance of conducting them early in the term to allow for more formal follow-up and to maximize the uptake of new ideas:

> It should be done at the beginning of the term, so teachers can use ideas for their own classes. Also there should be a kind of get together (preferably during lunch) to exchange ideas among teachers and to serve as a form of bonding too. This could be once a month or even once in two months. (Teacher 6, spring)

Another teacher suggested that one-shot observations are not sufficient, because "to learn more about the students and teacher's teaching style would require, in my opinion, further/longer observations" (Teacher 1, winter).

Finally, one teacher commented on the lack of enthusiasm for observation that they sensed among their coworkers:

> I felt that people were happy to "go along" with the idea rather than [be] seen to be negative by saying "no," but did not really want to do it, perhaps feeling it was one more thing to do in an already busy schedule. However, I may be wrong? I don't want to seem negative as I genuinely do think that observations can be helpful/beneficial, however, I do feel that if the idea is going to work everyone needs to be honest/open about the process, which is what I am trying to do here. (Teacher 1, winter)

Despite this criticism, teachers seemed generally satisfied with the system, commenting on its flexibility and the sense of healthy pressure it gave teachers: "It seems like a sustainable and flexible system! . . . [The observations] kept me on my toes" (Teacher 3, spring). The various points teachers focused on in their answers to this question reveal the complexity of classroom observation and suggest that ongoing maintenance through open negotiation among the participants is essential for a system of observation to succeed.

Conclusions

This study provides further evidence of the value that observation has in teacher development and points to some features that should be taken into consideration when conducting observation in a Japanese EFL teaching context. In particular, teachers should be aware of scheduling difficulties and take steps to avoid offending one another. Perhaps most importantly, teachers should strive to find an appropriate balance of flexibility and supportive guidelines. Frequent renegotiation is important for adjusting the system to the given teaching context and for maintaining participants' interest and enthusiasm in the program.

The drop in frequency and the neutral attitude observed in the spring term may suggest that the observations were less successful as time went on. However, it is important to note that teachers provided many positive responses to the open-ended Questions #5 and 7 at the end of the spring term. Although not every teacher was observed in this term, observations did take place, potentially fostering teacher development. It is not clear whether the frequency of and enthusiasm for observation correlate positively with the amount of teacher development that is achieved as such development is difficult to quantify. It can only be said that observation provides a unique opportunity for teachers to evolve and expand their practice and that this opportunity is not available without opening our classroom doors.

Limitations

This study's main limitation was the small sample size. Due to this, the quantitative data has no statistical significance and can only suggest trends that should be researched in more depth with larger samples. Furthermore, the short span of the study provides an incomplete view of the evolution of a classroom observation system. Conducting a similar study with the same teachers over the span of a full school year or more might yield different findings in teachers' changing attitudes towards classroom observation over time.

Further Research

In this study, teachers' postobservation discussions were not analyzed in detail. It may be fruitful to examine the nature of these discussions in more depth and to investigate how they could be guided to become more productive in fostering teacher development.

Another topic that merits research is the relationship between the level of enthusiasm teachers have for observation and the benefits they receive from it. It is logical to believe that the more willing teachers are to participate in observation, the more they will learn, but this has not been confirmed. If there is a positive correlation between these two factors, then strategies should be designed to further motivate teachers to observe and be observed.

Note

1. In this paper, I have chosen to use the pronouns *they*, *their*, and *them* as singular pronouns of indeterminate gender.

Bio Data

Michael Ellis is the EFL program coordinator at International Christian University High School. He is interested in teachers' reflective practices (among many other topics) and is currently program chair of the JALT Teacher Development SIG. <maikeru.desu@gmail.com>

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