

## **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.

The focus is on observing another teacher's classroom and what two teachers can gain through observing each other's teaching.

This kind of activity is not directed towards 'carrying out any supervisory or evaluative observation'. Evaluation should be separated from observation and one should explore how observation can be a part of the process of teacher development.

### **Purpose and benefits of peer observation**

Observation is a basic part of the 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.

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 the teachers, observation also has social benefits. It brings teachers together who might not normally have a chance to interact and provides an opportunity for sharing ideas and expertise, as well as a chance to discuss problems and concerns.

Observation provides chance to see how other teachers teach, it is a means of building 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's a way of developing self-awareness of one's own teaching.

Observation includes certain 'visible' elements like: *timing, activities, questioning techniques, participation, classroom language..*

Some very important elements are not 'observable', like: *decision making, engagement, problems, teaching principles.* (These can be identified as a result of talking to the teacher.

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.

### **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. Depending on the purpose of the observation, the following procedures are suggested:

#### **Written narrative**

This technique involves a narrative account of the lesson as a whole. The narrative is written by the observer who tries to provide an account of the main structure and development of the lesson. The language used should be objective and precise and any form of evaluation should be avoided. 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.

### Field notes

Field notes consist of brief description in note form of key events that occurred throughout the lesson. Notes are sometimes time-based (e.g. notes are made at regular intervals, using an observation form with appropriate time intervals identified). Or, they may be linked to the key activities that occurred during the lesson. This technique is a flexible way of observing a lesson, the observer notes down relevant information.

### Checklists

A checklist is a structured inventory listing features of a lesson that the observer completes as he/she observes the lesson. It is highly focused and relatively easy to complete. It provides a systematic way of collecting information on specific aspects of a lesson.

### **Focus of an observation**

Many aspects of a lesson can be the focus of an observation:

- 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

Focusing on teacher's use of questions, observation can examine the following aspects of questions:

- What kinds of questions does the teacher ask most often?
- 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
- *Teacher's 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 of language they used, students' time on task during pair and group work, and the dynamics of group activities

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.

### **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, as follows:*
  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 non-evaluative 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 of threat, as does pairing teachers by choice and letting them negotiate the goals and procedures for observations.

(Taken from *Professional Development for Language Teachers*, by J.Richards and T.Farrel)