

## TEACHER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PEER OBSERVATION: THE REFLECTIVE APPROACH

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### ***Abstract***

*This article surveys the major models currently available for classroom observation purposes, duly pointing out their basic tenets and limitations. The survey is followed by a practical application to the author's teaching situation by means of a peer observation session conducted for professional development purposes. The paper finally documents the design, resources, implementation and outcomes of the observation session, attaching due attention to the conclusions emerging from this instance of reflective practice and to the observation refinements required for the next stages of this teacher education project.*

**Keywords:** collaborative supervision, non-directive supervision, error correction, reflective practice, post-observation analysis

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### ***Survey of the major intervention options***

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Three major models of classroom observation are commonly employed in the field of teacher education with a view to developing the training teachers' capacities to make the teaching decisions most beneficial to their students.

According to Freeman (Freeman, in Richards and Nunan, 1990: 103-117) the foremost intervention options available to supervisors in the teacher training process are the directive or supervisory approach, the alternatives approach and the non-directive one. Gebhard further refines the non-directive approach (Gebhard, *ibidem*: 118-131) into two types of non-directive supervision, namely collaborative supervision and non-directive supervision. In order to shed some of the *human behavior* shadows and bring some light on certain elements that influence the former, we provide a common ground for certain definitions. Moreover, we describe the basics of human nature, how actors are influenced by different information (may that be external or internal), and how their behavior changes based on the information available.

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### *The supervisory/directive approach*

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A quick survey of Freeman's and Gebhard's views on the types of supervision in teacher education reveals many similarities in terms of their first two approaches. The first model they both discuss is directive supervision which relies on a clear-cut power relationship, with the supervisor as an authority figure and the only source of expertise, thereby able to judge.

This classic prescriptive approach emphasizes the difference in status between the trainer and the trainee, with the observing trainer making comments on the lesson observed and suggestions for improvement. Since there are obvious underlying assumptions about how classes should be conducted and what an efficient teacher is like, this type of approach is perceived as heavily prescriptive. Apart from the diminishing role of the trainee and the potentially damaging power relationship, both conducive to low self-esteem in the trainee, the major limitation of this approach appears to lie in the subjective nature of the supervisor's criteria of what constitutes effective teaching. As Freeman clearly states it, "no intervention is value-free. Even when one intervenes through reflection or self-observation to change one's own teaching, one does so based on what sees as 'good' teaching" (*idem*: 116).

Researchers are still unable to point out the teaching behaviours that are unequivocally conducive to learning outcomes. As a result, effective teaching means different things to different people. As Gebhard pertinently put it as early as 1990 (*idem*: 157) "the search for effective teaching goes on. For these reasons it is difficult to justify prescribing what teachers should do in the classroom."

Therefore, a major deficiency of the approach is the fact that it promotes a dependency relationship, since the supervisors – in their capacity as teaching experts – make the decisions, keeping all responsibility to themselves.

On the positive side one should mention the clarity of standards which may be a most reassuring feature to inexperienced teachers, as well as the emphasis on improving particular teaching skills. Consequently, the outcomes of supervisory observation tend to be concrete, that is specific actions to be taken in order to meet specific ends. It is no surprise then that this approach tends to be favoured in pre-service teacher training, as it provides trainees with clear guidelines in their teaching activity.

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***The alternatives approach***

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The second major approach – the alternatives approach – is no longer prescriptive: the supervisor focuses on a teaching problem and suggests a number of alternatives to what has been observed in class. None of the alternatives to the option actually employed by the teacher is presented as the correct one. The training teacher is expected to consider all the alternatives put forth by the supervisor and to select what appears to him/her as the best choice, the ensuing discussion highlighting the underlying criteria of the teacher's choice.

This type of intervention aims to raise the training teachers' awareness of the alternatives available in deciding what and how to teach. The alternatives approach is also intended to help the trainees identify and articulate the criteria behind their decisions. In fact, the reasons for their decisions may often be more important, in terms of their professional development, than the actual choices.

Apart from raising awareness of the multiple choices available in a certain teaching situation, the approach also trains teachers to explore the consequences of their actions in terms of the students' learning, thus promoting a clearer understanding of the impact of their teaching decisions. The ultimate assumption is that once the teachers are fully aware of the implications, they will be able to make the best decision.

In this approach the focus shifts from the observer and his/her criteria to the training teacher and his/her activity. However, the observer still has considerable control since it is the observer's questions that direct the trainee's attention to specific teaching problems emerging from the class observed. It is in the process of answering the observer's questions that the teacher identifies the reasons for the actions s/he took in class, the observer's questions thereby serving to develop certain effective teaching criteria.

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***Collaborative supervision***

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Unlike Freeman who considers only the directive, the alternatives and the non-directive approach to be discussed later on, Gebhard speaks also about another approach to supervision, the collaborative model that will be briefly presented in what follows. As the name appropriately suggests, we are now dealing with supervision as partnership, in which the supervisor and the teacher share responsibility for the teaching decisions.

According to the fundamental principles of collaborative supervision the observer renounces his/her omniscient position, no longer telling the teacher what should have been done in class for a more effective lesson. Within the framework of the

collaborative model the observer now attempts to see the class through the teacher's eyes, adopting a positive, non-judgemental attitude, also getting involved in the decision-making process. This time the supervisor and the supervised are on equal footing, with the supervisor sharing her/his experience and working together with the teacher for addressing the problems observed in the latter's actual teaching practice. As a result of the implementation of this observation model the class may well become the outcome of a collaborative decision-making process involving teacher and supervisor alike, this time in a symmetrical relationship.

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### ***Non-directive supervision***

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Non-directive supervision is common to both Freeman and Gebhard. In this model the supervisor is expected to listen carefully to the teacher so as to be able to provide an understanding response in which the teacher's own comments are reformulated, thus reflecting the supervisor's understanding. Therefore, this type of intervention makes it possible for the training teachers to clarify their perceptions of their own teaching actions and for the supervisor to thoroughly understand those perceptions. However, understanding does not necessarily presuppose acceptance.

The non-directive approach focuses on the training teachers' views of teaching and creates opportunities for them to discuss their perceptions of their teaching practice, to address the problems they identify, and to generate their own solutions. Given the supportive, trusting relationship with the supervisor, the training teachers are free to express and clarify their ideas. Non-directive intervention also helps to develop the trainees' decision making skills in teaching matters and to further develop their sense of responsibility for their teaching decisions.

Another good point of the approach relates to the non-judgemental nature of the supervisor's understanding response. This non-judgemental attitude on the part of the supervisor is likely to induce a feeling of adequacy in the training teachers, thereby lowering their affective filters and ultimately facilitating their learning process.

However, this supervisory approach can result in high levels of anxiety and frustration when the training teachers' ability to reflect on their teaching practice and to generate effective solutions is hampered by their lack of experience. This classroom observation model may not work well with certain teachers, depending on their personality type, self-esteem, expectations, teaching experience, etc.

Non-directive supervision creates the appropriate framework for the training teachers to become aware of their teaching by means of analysis, to explore the consequences of their teaching decisions and to generate alternatives to their classroom/teaching conduct. Self-help-explorative supervision is one of the variations of the non-directive supervision model which is mutually beneficial to

the observer and the observed as they jointly explore actual instances of teaching practice, thereby gaining a greater awareness of their own teaching.

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### ***A relevant teacher education framework***

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In my home teaching situation classroom observation is commonly required for quality maintenance purposes and also for upgrading the teaching skills of new EFL teachers and in-service teachers who may not be fully familiar with the communicative approach to language teaching. Since they may well be experienced teachers, with successful classroom practice, I assume the directive approach will be perceived as culturally inappropriate, given the difference in status and, possibly, age between the teacher trainer and the teacher undergoing in-service training.

Directive supervision could turn out to be altogether counterproductive both with novice teachers and in-service teachers: on the one hand, it could stifle their teaching creativity since it might encourage uncritical adoption of the strategies recommended by the teacher trainer; on the other, it could induce the unquestioning acceptance of the supervisor's criteria of what constitutes effective teaching. As I see it, directive supervision might generate the slavish following of the routine prescribed by the supervisor, as a result of which the teachers may feel tempted to relinquish their sense of responsibility in making decisions concerning their own teaching. A better option seems to be the alternatives approach, in which the teachers can be alerted to the wide array of alternatives, ultimately making the teaching decisions that appear to be most beneficial to their learners.

The non-directive option might also be suited in view of the on-going development purposes of a programme for in-service teachers. This approach could be most fruitful when attempting to highlight the reasons underlying teachers' conduct, with the observer understanding the teacher's rationale, while at the same time offering him/her the outside perspective as well. In this case it is again the teacher who has the power to generate his/her own solutions, to make an informed decision as to what looks as the best teaching solution and to implement it. Thus the teacher has full authority, with the supervisor acting merely as a facilitator.

Therefore, the approach of choice should necessarily be collaborative, in view of the teachers' previous in-service experience. The supervisor obviously needs to treat the training teachers as his/her peers, since the supervisor is expected to act as a collaborator willing to share expertise with the teachers, to observe lessons in a non-judgemental manner, to understand and accept lessons in terms of what the teachers are trying to do. The observer should be able to listen carefully, since listening to the teacher's perceptions is of great importance in the analysis, reflection and opinion exchange process.

The overall objective is to help teachers develop autonomy concerning effective teaching decisions. The collaborative approaches lead to the teachers' professional growth through reflection and self-evaluation. Such collaborative options attempt to induce internal and open-ended changes in the teacher's reasoning and, thereby, in their decision-making processes. In this case, professional development means doing a more effective teaching job and, as all human development, it relies on reflection, analysis and transformation. As pertinently summarized by Head and Taylor, it is "the teachers' own understanding of how they go on learning and becoming better at what they are doing" (Head and Taylor, 1997: 18).

By way of conclusion, the most likely teacher training situation in my case appears to entail classroom observation for developmental purposes, with the teachers being observed presumably on an in-service course. The likely objective of the supervision would be to help the teachers acquire the basic skills of teaching, or to hone them, as the case may be, and also to develop their skills of self-analysis and evaluation, as well as an appreciation of the overall benefits of the communicative approach.

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### ***Application***

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For observation purposes I chose to observe a speaking class conducted by one of my fellows at the Prosper Language Centre in Bucharest, that was jointly set up by the British Council Romania and the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest. The context was self-monitored school-based teacher development, with two peer teachers involved in the observation process in view of a self-development project, as part of the teachers' on-going professional growth and language centre quality standard maintenance.

The observation was intended to occasion a closer look at our teaching practice and to provide an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate our pedagogical routine in an attempt to further our mutual professional development "while achieving a considerable degree of consumer satisfaction", in Wallace's words (Wallace, 1991/1995: 116).

The starting point of our reflective practice was to be found in Maingay's assertion that

*...much of what a teacher does in a language-teaching classroom is ritual behaviour rather than principled behaviour; and I believe that the most important role of an observer in most, if not in all, observations is that of making teachers think about what they do: of drawing their attention to the principles behind the rituals, of leading them away from ritual behaviour towards principled behaviour* (Maingay in Duff, 1988: 119).

The reflective approach seemed best suited to our intentions, as well as to our teaching and observing situation given our willingness and ability “to reflect on the origins, purposes, and consequences” of our classroom actions (Bartlett, in Richards and Nunan, 1990: 203), in our desire to spell out the meaning of our ritualistic behaviour, “so that rituals can generate fresh behaviour” (Maingay, in Duff, 1988: 120). The overall goal encompassed awareness, discovery and generation of more effective ideas for our classroom activity through reflection on our teaching practice.

As explicitly stated by Ellis, all awareness raising activities built on the assumption that “the practice of actual teaching can be improved by making teachers aware of the options open to them and the principles by which they can evaluate the alternatives” (Ellis in Richards and Nunan, 1990: 27), although the assumption may have limited justification. Our activity was surely no exception.

In our collaborative supervision session we attempted to follow Cogan’s eight-phase cycle (Wallace, 1991/1995: 117), which was rendered less demanding and time-consuming by the fact that we already had a trusting and mutually supportive relationship and we had joint responsibility for that particular group of learners. In line with Fullam, who states that “there is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves. ... People need one another to learn and to accomplish things” (Fullam, 1993: 18), we relied on each other to question our teaching habits and to generate alternative ways of teacher action.

Since my colleague was responsible for the group’s first language session in the week and I was in charge of the second, planning the lessons together was part of our routine. We both shared a concern for the effective management of errors in spoken English. Therefore we agreed that the observer should focus on this specific area of the teacher-student interaction in one 50-minute class. We decided that after the observation we should get together to look at the observer’s findings, analyse them and suggest improvements, where deemed appropriate.

Once we delimited our area of interest we started looking for an instrument for primary data collection, which was expected to offer us a clear picture of the amount of teacher correction available in a speaking class, as well as the patterns of correction resorted to by the teacher and their respective frequency. The idea was to develop the observer’s perception through some worksheet or task designed to help focus the process of observation.

For the observer to be able to make a documented recall of the teacher’s corrective responses we needed an observation sheet that could be done in real time. We realised that our observation sheet had to be observer-friendly (in that it had to be easy to use, requiring minimum learning time on the observer’s part), practical

(it should not require a transcript), and it should provide objective and reliable primary data collected as the lesson was proceeding. A quick survey of the major observation charts in use revealed that there seemed to be no such ready-made instrument suited to our specific purposes. Therefore, we decided to produce our own and observe the teacher's corrective strategies through our personal ad-hoc system produced in the Flanders tradition in which tallies could be made under one of the range of categories available. As common with all system-based observation meant for reflection on experiential knowledge, we intended our system to meet the following criteria: "1. To objectify the teaching process ...; 2. To provide a reliable record ...; 3. To promote self-awareness in the teacher...; 4. To provide a meta-language..." (Wallace, 1991/1995: 75) and 5. To hopefully aid in improving the quality of teaching.

As common with quantitative approaches, our observation sheet was relatively simple to construct, to revise and to use, and it made no great demands on the observer during the supervisory session or during the interpretation and discussion stage (Day, in Richards and Nunan, 1990: 48). Although we were aware of the inherent limitations of quantification and of our teaching assumptions, we could think of no better way to promote reflection on what Wallace calls "experiential knowledge". Besides, our observation chart was meant to objectify the teacher's corrective behaviour, by providing unbiased, reliable data to reflect on in an attempt to ultimately further professional growth, in line with Wallace who considers that "it is through reflection on professional action that professional expertise is developed" (Wallace, 1991/1995: 82).

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### ***Observation sheet: Evaluation***

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The observation occasioned extensive reflection on the professional action conducted. As common with reflective practice, we attempted to engage, to various degrees, in developmental activities that this type of practice is intended to foster, that is – in Wallace's words – "intellectual autonomy, independent inquiry, analysis and self-evaluation" (Wallace, 1991/1995: 116). Therefore, in our post-observation analysis we attempted, among others, to explore the relationship between the amount of error correction offered by the teacher and the focus of the lesson at that particular point, that is fluency or accuracy.

The interpretation stage of the primary data involved both teacher and observer in a reflective dialogue. The quantitative analysis made available data that, when analysed, highlighted preferences in terms of the feedback provided to teachers, thus promoting teacher self-awareness. The quantitative data ultimately generated a qualitative analysis.



The tally sheet revealed the teacher's corrective patterns but it failed to reflect the teacher's emphasis in providing error correction, that is if the teacher focussed only on the linguistic aspect of the message, thereby ignoring its information load. We soon realized that our instrument was adequate enough to deal with the former issue, but far too crude for the latter. For this very reason we need to further work on it and will make it available at a later stage, after upgrading it significantly.

As our post-observation reflective dialogue highlighted, the observation sheet was perceived as not focussed enough, that is attempting to address linguistic and content issues simultaneously. It was only after using the tally sheet for actual observation purposes that we realized that our working hypothesis itself needed a narrower focus, too.

Therefore, in our next attempt we plan to consider only the teacher's corrections of the linguistic code, disregarding correction of content information. We also decided to look at the students' perception of our corrective strategies by means of a short questionnaire in which the students would rank the teacher's corrective means in terms of the effectiveness they attach to them. This is work in progress and the questionnaire is to be produced.

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### *“The reflective practitioner”*

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At this stage we feel that our “reflective cycle”, to use Wallace's terminology (Wallace, 1991/1995: 49), went full cycle: we started from our teaching practice and moved to the reflective stage which generated new teaching ideas that were implemented in our classroom activities. Since the questionnaire is likely to undergo refinements imposed by our teaching practice, that is the students' response, our small-scale “action research” is but an instance of what Wallace calls “the continuing cycle of practice and reflection which leads to a dynamic, developmental concept of professional competence” (*idem*: 59). Allwright and Bailey (Allwright and Bailey, 1991: 197) advocate that turning good teaching “into exploratory teaching is a matter of trying to find out what makes the tried and trusted ideas successful. Because in the long run it is not enough to know that ideas do work; we also need to know why and how they work”. Reflective practice seems to thrive along these very lines. The reflective process and its underlying elements (see Lange in Richards and Nunan, 1990: 248-9) as applied to second language education appear to be most beneficial in view of our developmental purposes. In Lange's words, reflective teaching “allows developing teachers' latitude to experiment within a framework of growing knowledge and experience, and is thereby conducive to teacher development as the on-going process of

teachers expanding their cognitive, experiential and attitudinal repertoire” (*idem*: 249-250).

In our particular instance our initial exploratory investigation is most likely to be followed by a refinement stage, in which the original design will develop a more specific focus, since the reflective dialogue has indicated such a necessary adjustment. According to Allwright and Bailey, “... it will now seem necessary to move on to some slightly different conception of it - a new puzzle emerging from the old one” (*idem*: 133).

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