

【資料】

## Staff-led professional development: Implementing a peer observation system at a Japanese university

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スタッフによるプロフェッショナルディベロップメント：  
日本の大学におけるピアオブザベーションシステムの実施

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### Introduction

The Bunkyo English Communication Center (BECC) is an English teaching center at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University. It was founded in April 2008 (see Thompson & Foale, 2008), and currently employs eleven full-time lecturers, of whom nine are teaching staff and two are learning advisors, as well as an assistant director, director of studies and four management and administrative staff. The teaching staff, predominately native speakers of English, is responsible for delivering mandatory English classes twice a week to all first and second year undergraduate students at the university, as well as the bulk of classes to students in the Global Communication department.

This paper will describe the observation component of the faculty development system at the BECC, and how a new peer observation system for staff to use alongside the current system was implemented. I will describe the system that is currently in place, what its strengths and weaknesses are, why I decided to implement a peer observation system, and how I did so.

The faculty development system at the BECC and professional development

A discussion of what constitutes professional development is beyond the scope of this paper. In terms of what it means to staff at the BECC, in an anonymous online survey myself and a colleague carried out to assess the professional development needs of the teaching and advising staff, we asked participants to define professional development in their own words. Some of their answers included 'getting exposure to new ideas/methods or having the opportunity to reflect on current practices/beliefs in order to improve some aspect of your role or to grow as a professional' and 'a voluntary action to learn and/or gain new skills about one's job'.

One way of helping staff to engage in professional development at the BECC is the faculty development system (Unknown, 2012). This system states that it has the following goals:

- To promote the systematic professional development of BECC teachers while they are working at the BECC
- To provide evidence in support of any application for new contracts at the BECC
- To provide a record of professional development for future career purposes

To achieve these goals, the system utilizes two instruments: a portfolio of professional development, and formal observation.

The formal observation system consists of a pre-observation meeting between teacher and observer, the observation itself, writing a reflection on the observation and holding a post-observation meeting. The teacher is free to choose which class is to be observed, when the observation takes place, what they wish the observation to focus on and what lesson plan and teaching materials they wish to use. Although the system is formal, and to an extent evaluative, it is a world away from some of the classroom observations described in the literature that involve checklists, notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and uninformed observers who are not themselves teachers (see Williams, 1989, Wang & Seth, 1998, Bailey et al, 2001).

Although there is a lot of flexibility and choice within the formal observation system, there is no escaping the fact that the observations are obligatory if a teacher wishes to apply for a new contract of employment. This may cause teachers to view formal observations as being primarily related to evaluation rather than professional development. This may particularly be the case for some teachers in the BECC whose contracts are held with a different institution. For these teachers, they are observed by a senior member of staff from another university whose own ideas formed in their teaching context may not match those of the teacher. For formal observation, that it is in itself ‘formal’ and mandatory may cause some teachers to react negatively and not consider this form of observation to be beneficial to advancing their teaching practice. This is noted by Richards and Farrell (2005), writing about their experiences with teachers and their reactions to being observed:

‘Many teachers have a negative reaction to the idea of someone observing their classes ... Observation tends to be identified with evaluation, and consequently it is often regarded as a threatening or negative experience.’

This is certainly the case for some members of staff at the BECC whose negative experiences of formal observations from previous employers has left them with a skeptical outlook on the worth of observation.

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After having been through the formal observation system as a teacher, I felt that the feedback and reflections of the observations were useful, but that the potential of the formal observation system as a source of professional development was not being fulfilled. I decided to try and find a way of enhancing the professional development potential of the observation system at the BECC.

### How can professional development be enhanced?

It is first worth considering what the potential professional development benefits of class observation are. The benefits for the teacher can include:

- receiving feedback about the class from an 'objective' perspective (Richards and Farrell, 2005)
- receiving feedback about the class that the teacher would otherwise be unable to collect, such as student interaction (ibid, Bailey et al., 2001)
- the process of observation allows the teacher the opportunity to think beyond the everyday practical considerations of teaching a class and reflect upon their teaching practice (Wajnryb, 1992)

The benefits of observing another teacher's class can include:

- being able to see how someone else deals with the same everyday situations and problems that all teachers face (Richards and Farrell, 2005)
- being able to see new teaching techniques in action (ibid)
- as with the process of being observed, talking about teaching practice with another teacher allows the observer to reflect upon their own teaching and how they wish to improve (Bailey et al., 2001)

In the formal observation at the BECC, some of the reasons a teacher may not be able to receive the full benefits of having a class observed, apart from the concerns raised earlier, are practical. A teacher may receive only one formal observation per semester. This equates to only one ninety minute class out of the 120 class periods a teacher with a regular schedule is required to teach. It is impractical and unreasonable to expect the few members of staff carrying out the formal observations to take time out of their schedule to voluntarily observe more classes.

The other practical impediment to a teacher gaining the full benefits of classroom observation within the formal observation system is that they only ever take the part of the

observee, not the observer, and are unable to gain any of the benefits of observing another teacher's class.

A change to the system that enhances the professional development opportunities presented by the formal observation would have to overcome the limitations of the formal observation system, both psychological (evaluative nature of the system, link to contract applications) and practical (infrequent, teachers only being observed, not observing others). The solution to these issues may be peer observation.

### Why a peer observation system?

The potential benefits to teachers of peer observation go beyond simply overcoming the shortcomings of the formal observation system at the BECC. Teachers working together to improve their teaching practice can be a rich source of professional development. Edge (1992) states that through working together, teachers can:

- increase their awareness of their own strengths and abilities
- appreciate the strengths and skills of others
- develop the ability to respond to the needs of their own teaching situation
- feel more confident in their capacity to empower themselves

In relation to peer observation, there are numerous benefits when teachers voluntarily take part in classroom observations. Observation is effective when teacher initiated, and the opportunities for individualized teacher development provided can encourage teacher change when self-initiated (Burton, 1987, cited in Bailey et al., 2001). The responsibility of professional development can also shift from external sources, such as supervisors, to the teachers themselves (Richards and Farrell, 2005). Teachers can negotiate the focus of the observation and the observation tools used to a greater degree than the formal observation system; for example, an observation could focus only on the number of questions a teacher asks, or how long he or she waits for an answer (Bailey et al., 2001). There is also the opportunity for reciprocal observations, allowing both teachers to observe the same focus in each of their classes (ibid). Teachers working together to develop their teaching can also help to build collegiality in what is often an isolating profession (Richards and Farrell, 2005). In the survey of the teaching and advising staff at the BECC mentioned earlier, twelve out of 14 respondents indicated that they had found peer observations useful in previous jobs, and nine out of 14 indicated that they would be interested in participating in peer observations at the BECC.

However, there are also potential problems when teachers participate in peer observation

Staff-led professional development: Implementing a peer observation system at a Japanese university that may not occur in a formal observation system. Engaging in good 'observing etiquette' is important (Murphy, 1992, cited in Bailey et al., 2001), and that while observers in a formal observation system are likely experienced in observing and may have been trained in how to do so, teachers are less likely to be trained or experienced and may inadvertently behave in a way that the teacher being observed finds unacceptable, potentially souring their professional relationship. There is also the danger of an observer making evaluative comments which, as discussed previously, can be a source of great discomfort and anxiety in a formal observation. An untrained teacher observer may confuse or be unaware of the differences between observations, inferences and opinions, which is again a potential source of tension between colleagues observing one another's classes (Bailey et al., 2001).

### The BECC peer observation system

To try and avoid the potential problems just described, a system of how to conduct observations could help teachers to engage in collaborative professional development without falling into some of the pitfalls inherent in peer observation. The system would need to be flexible enough to allow teachers to make use of the many benefits of voluntary, negotiated observations, and simple enough to allow teachers to use it without any specific training (which would not be at all welcome or successful for busy teachers with full schedules). However, the system would also have to be structured enough to avoid potential issues with peer observations, and to allow teachers to gain the full developmental benefit of classroom observations. The system at the BECC is made up of four stages, which will now be described.

#### *1) Approach*

The first stage is for teachers to approach each other to discuss undertaking classroom observations. This may seem somewhat obvious, but it is important that teachers are clear that initiation is entirely down to those involved in observations, and has no connection to the formal observation system or contract renewal. Participation is also voluntary for both parties; a teacher approached by another has the right to refuse. Both of these conditions will hopefully lessen the stresses often associated with formal, mandatory observations.

#### *2) Negotiation*

Once teachers have agreed to conduct observations, there is a great degree of flexibility in how they proceed. As well as practical issues (How many classes will be observed? Will both teachers observe each other's class? When and where will the observation(s) take place?), teachers can choose what the focus of the observation is and what observation instrument to use. There are two main reasons that is important for teachers to choose a focus to the observation; it limits the scope of what the observer is looking for, and 'it provides a convenient means of collecting data that frees the observer from forming an opinion or making an on-the-spot evaluation during the lesson' (Wajnryb, 1992).

Once a focus has been chosen, an appropriate observation tool can be chosen. Appropriate procedures to record the focus of the observation are needed as 'classroom events sometimes unfold very quickly, so taking note of multiple events in real time is often impossible' (Richards and Farrell, 2005). This may be a written narrative, a checklist, or some form of recording of the lesson. This need not be a strenuous task for the teachers involved, as many observation instruments already exist (see Wallace (1991) for an overview of various observation instruments or Ruth Wajnryb's (1998) book of observation tasks for the language classroom).

### 3) *Observation*

Most of what occurs during the observation itself will have been agreed in advance during the negotiation phase. To a large degree, the behavior and actions of the observer will have already been agreed upon, but the following points from Bailey et al.'s (2001) 'Commandments for observing and being observed' may be a useful guideline for teachers unsure of how to conduct themselves during a peer observation.

'When I am observing thee thou shalt:

- let me know your needs of me as an observer and tell me the rules, if there are any.
- explain any extraordinary circumstances that may be affecting you or your students.
- introduce me; mention who I am, but thou shalt not keep alluding to 'our guest' .
- offer suggestions on how I can best collect my data without making your students feel uncomfortable or insecure; tell your students that they are not being evaluated.
- refrain from calling on me to participate unless you ask or tell me before class.
- not alter your behavior on my behalf; behave as usual; thou shalt act naturally.
- try not to get flustered about being observed.
- *not* ask my opinion or feedback of your teaching in front of the class.

When thou art observing me thou shalt:

- arrive early for class and introduce yourself to everyone at the beginning.
- sit behind the students, out of their direct view.
- observe and obey the same rules the students follow, and thou shalt respect the

opinions and ideas of the students.

- interact with the students only when requested to do so; thou shalt not disrupt the class or detract from the students' learning.
- observe with an open mind; thou shalt not get hung up on petty mistakes or gaps.
- share feedback with me in response to specific questions I ask, but thou shalt not talk to me about what I should or should not have done (unless I ask).'

#### 4) Reflection

The final stage foresees teachers engaging in some form of post-observation reflection. Many authors state the importance of post-observation reflection on one's professional actions in order to develop practice (Wallace, 1990, Freeman, 1998, cited in Bailey et al., 2001). The initial reflection on the lesson is likely to be individual; whether this is documented in any form is down to the teachers involved. The teachers may choose to swap reflections or observation notes, talk briefly about the lesson at lunchtime, or have a more extended meeting. How teachers choose to reflect is entirely their choice, and will no doubt be reconciled with the realities of the teaching day. A fuller discussion of reflective practice is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that some authors place importance in teachers taking time to meet and talking about the focus of the observation in order to co-construct meaning and agree upon the contents of the observation (Edge, 1992, Bailey et al., 2001).

The other important point to consider in the reflective stage, particularly if teachers are having a discussion or swapping reports, is to avoid evaluative comments (unless asked for). Bailey et al. (2001) provide a very useful distinction between observations, inferences and opinions. They provide the following example of the differences between the concepts:

<i>Observation</i>	The teacher treated every oral error by modeling the correct form.
<i>Inference</i>	The teacher was probably trained in the audiolingual method.
<i>Opinion</i>	The teacher's treatment of the students' oral errors was very heavy-handed.

Observations are factual, and two attentive observers in the same classroom would be likely to agree on an observation. In the example above, it is how many times or how often the teacher corrected oral errors. An inference is the reason for this observation, and is where observers may start to disagree, as they may use the observed facts to make different interpretations and come to different conclusions. An opinion includes an evaluative nature (that the teacher was heavy-handed in the above example), and is the area that those teachers engaging in peer observations should try to avoid.

## Conclusion

This paper has described how a peer observation has been set up at the BECC at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the current formal observation system, the rationale for creating a peer observation system was explained, and the structure of the peer observation system was detailed. It is hoped that the basic format of this system is generalizable enough to be of use to staff in various teaching situations thinking of embarking on their own peer observations. Finally, as this system was only created and introduced to teachers in May 2012, there has not yet been sufficient time to assess to what extent staff use this system, and what their perceptions of it are. These findings will be reported in a future paper.

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