

## Peers observation

---

Dr. Mohamed Mabrouk Masaud.



## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to suggest new approaches to formal classroom observation as a tool for teacher self-improvement. It is felt that the present system of formal observation in Libya is too authoritarian for real self-development. To further help in the process, peer observation is suggested as a means of building up teacher self-confidence. As "reflective practitioners", teachers can learn from their own experience. Peer observation can act as a support to formal observation. Both formal and informal classroom observations occur within the context of a whole teacher training philosophy. Thus, the teacher-training model is very important as the starting point for teacher development. Before turning to our discussion of observation, therefore, it is important to outline briefly the main models of teacher training.

## Models of Teacher Education

Wallace (1991) mentions three major models of teacher education.

In *the craft model* the expertise is transferred from the expert to the trainees by means of copying the techniques of the expert. Trainees study with a master teacher, imitate the techniques observed and with experience are supposed to develop into master teachers. According to Wallace (1991) *the applied science model* is the traditional and most widespread model of teacher training. Teachers receive knowledge in the form of facts, data and theory related to teaching. It is assumed that, in service, teachers will be able to put this received knowledge into practice. Any failure to do so will be put down to their misunderstanding of the scientific findings or to their inappropriate application of them.

It is believed that any change or addition to the body of knowledge can only be introduced by the experts. It is not considered possible that the practitioners themselves can add to the body of received knowledge. In discussing *the reflective model* Wallace (1991) claims that there are two types of knowledge. These are received knowledge of the type referred to above with regard to the applied science model and experiential knowledge that comes from practical experience. That is, the knowledge that trainees develop in action as they practise their profession.

Most in-service courses include input based mainly on received knowledge. Trainees may put new ideas presented to them in this way into practice and evaluate them according to this practice. Accordingly, they may or may not change their classroom performance. In either case, we may say that reflective practice occurs.

*The reflective model* assumes that the trainees will bring their own ideas, beliefs and attitudes to the training situation and highlights the importance of linking what they bring to the course with what they get out of the course. An important feature of this model is that it breaks down the barrier between theory and practice. It seems clear that this model is the most likely to help teachers develop most effectively.

In Libya at the present time, however, it is the applied science model that is used. Teachers accept the knowledge they receive as an unchangeable resource of expertise. In contrast, teachers should be encouraged to experiment, evaluate and re-evaluate their teaching. They should move from a state of being receptive to a state of being productive.

Current teacher training in Libya neglects the trainees' experience, beliefs and ideas. It is assumed that teachers come to courses with blank minds and that the information that comes from study and research is enough in itself to improve their teaching. They are supposed to be able to work in the

light of this received experience. In reality, however, teachers as doers are the central element in teaching. Thus, to fill the gap between practice and theory, teachers should be allowed to be reflective practitioners. They should take their part in ensuring the continuation of the process of reflection on received and experiential knowledge.

The approach of the reflective model supports and encourages teachers to explore and improve their teaching. This goal should, in fact, also be the goal of classroom observation.

### **Classroom observation in Libya**

As already indicated above, in Libya the dominant model of teacher training is an applied science model. In such a model, observation is synonymous with supervision. The formal observation carried out by inspectors from the Ministry of Education is the only tool for observing teacher performance. In Libya, pre-service teachers are subject to formal observation. Inspectors and teacher educators are expected to attend classes with them and eventually their verdict will indicate whether a student is qualified to be a teacher or not.

In-service teachers are also supervised by inspectors. They visit teachers in school without any advance warning. In the schools the inspectors look at the teacher's lesson plan, ask the students some questions to see if they understand the teacher's explanations and finally make their observations and give the teacher their instructions. Teachers are expected to listen and to do what they are told if they are to satisfy the inspectors. This means that the main objective of teacher observation is to test or evaluate.

In this supervisory approach the relationship between teachers and inspectors in Libya is not a good one. This can be attributed to the nature of the supervision. Teachers feel frustrated when they are told what to do and inspectors believe that they have the power to control the teachers in this way. Moreover, some inspectors concentrate only on the negative points of a teacher's performance. There is little chance for discussion between teacher and inspector. What makes the situation worse is the small number of inspectors compared with the huge number of teachers. There are not enough inspectors to monitor teachers adequately. Some teachers are visited only once or twice in a whole year. Their frustration is great when they are given marks based on only one or two unconnected visits.

Generally speaking, then, there is a shortage of proper teacher observation in Libya. The small number of inspectors reduces its effectiveness and the nature of the supervisory approach gives little opportunity for teachers to improve their teaching. Accordingly, teachers have very little enthusiasm for developing their teaching skills. If the situation of Libyan teachers is to improve, it is important to use classroom observation as a tool for teacher training and development.

### **The aim of classroom observation**

The real aim of classroom observation in Libya is to monitor and improve the quality of teaching. It is the inspectors who are appointed to do this job. As suggested above, however, because of the authoritarian nature of formal observation, the process has become a tool for testing teachers rather than one that will help teachers towards independence and self-development. Teachers are encouraged to concentrate on fulfilling certain requirements laid down by the inspectors rather than to examine their own performance. Further, the instructions given by the inspectors are often not up-to-date. Inspectors are supposed to be experienced teachers who have not been out of the classroom for more than 5 or 6 years. In fact, however, most of them have not been teaching for 10 to 15 years.

Classroom observation should aim to encourage teachers as individuals and to help them to improve their skills so that they can help learners to learn more effectively. It should be carried out by people who are close to the classroom and who have had every opportunity to continue developing their own skills. Overall, it should be a tool of teacher development.

Peer observation is another way of developing teachers. It gives them an opportunity to look at their work from different perspectives. It can help teachers to focus on classroom activities such as types of interaction, ways of asking questions, ways of correcting mistakes, student behaviour and the like with a different type of awareness.

### **Observation as a tool of development**

If we agree that the aim of classroom observation is teacher development and that one way forward is to provide the teachers themselves with the tools and opportunities for carrying out the job, let us consider how we might develop such an alternative. With this in mind let us first, however, examine the available approaches to in-service teacher observation. Freeman (1982) believes that there are three main approaches.

The first is *the supervisory approach*. This is the traditional approach, which is popular in many countries and is the one that has been described above as being current in Libya. As suggested above, the way it is put into practice there discourages Libyan teachers. It is the assumption here, therefore, that both Libyan inspectors and Libyan teachers need to re-evaluate their approach to classroom observation.

The second approach is *the alternative approach*. Here observers suggest different approaches to what they have seen in class. They do not give direct instructions for change. They do not show preference for one or other of the alternatives offered. They must ensure that the alternatives offered are realistic and do not conflict with the local philosophy of education. Such an approach is likely to improve the relationship between the teacher and the observer. A good relationship is essential if each is to respect the other's ideas. The alternative approach is more likely to establish a relationship of equality. It can break down the power relationship that so easily develops in the supervisory approach.

The third approach is *the non-directive approach*. It aims for better understanding and confidence between observer and teacher. It is a self-evaluation process which initially depends on the teacher's experience. This is treated as the basic source of learning. The observer's role in the process is to help teachers compare their objectives with what actually happened in the classroom. In this comparison the observer must accept that the teacher's own experience comes first. When observer and teacher have come to understand and trust each other, the observer can participate in the self-development process by offering comments and suggestions from his own experience. Even then, however, observers must understand that their experience is to be considered primarily as a supportive resource for teachers. They must not underestimate or undermine the teacher's own experience.

In discussing classroom observation with regard to these three approaches Freeman (1982) mentions a hierarchy of needs which differ according to a teacher's progress from the beginning. The beginning teacher needs to know what to teach. The observer may thus use the supervisory approach at this stage. This is also appropriate because at this stage most new teachers do not mind being told what to do. They need the observer to instruct them. This is where the present strength of classroom observation lies at the moment in Libya. It is important, however, that the process develops beyond this point.

In the following stage the teacher needs to know how to teach what they teach. At this point the observer as a resource can suggest different alternatives. In this way the teacher has different choices. Having explored the alternatives offered the teachers are in a position to set their own objectives.

This leads on to another need. Teachers then need to know why they teach what they teach and why they teach it the way they do. At this stage observers can support teachers, encouraging them to match their experience with their goals.

According to Freeman (1989:41) these three stages lead the teacher from training to development:

Training and development are two basic educating strategies that share the same purpose. ... They differ in the means they adopt to achieve that purpose. While training is knowledge and skills delivered through external intervention, development mainly depends on individual teacher attitude and awareness to achieve change.

If we are to follow Freeman's argument it is clear that the observer's role is very important in helping teachers develop themselves. In the early stages new teachers need to be trained and at this stage it is justifiable to tell them what to do. The situation is different, however, when teachers have gained some experience and know what to teach. At this stage the observers' role is essential in helping teachers develop. To do this they must strengthen their relationship with the teachers so that teachers and observers have confidence in each other.

If the inspectors in Libya adopt the approach outlined above, apart from the excitement that comes from being exposed to new ideas, they will, first, have an important role in developing teachers and therefore improving teaching. Second, they will gain the teachers' respect and support. Third, their own self-esteem will develop, as they become more effective.

In recommending these changes in attitude, one of the main objectives of this discussion is to encourage both teachers and inspectors to discuss issues like teacher development. Is the present supervisory approach effective? Does it help teachers to develop? If not, how can we improve the observation process? Are there any alternatives to the supervisory approach as it is at present carried out?

In this respect, an important issue related to teacher observation is to do with the way of teaching. As Parrott (1993:1) says "there is no general *right way* to teach". The supervisory role of Libyan inspectors has unfortunately led to the assumption that there is only one right way to teach. This way is the model that the inspector says is right and which the teacher must follow. In contrast, the notion that should be emphasised is that teachers should have confidence in themselves and their work. They should take into account the differences that occur in any group of learners.

### **Implementation of a different approach to formal classroom observation in Libya**

- 1 First, a discussion of the ideas outlined above would be held with interested inspectors.
- 2 following this initial discussion these inspectors would arrange a meeting with teachers. At

the meeting issues like the following would be discussed:

- What should happen when an observer visits a teacher?
  - What things should an observer not do on a visit?
  - How can a good relationship be built between a teacher and an observer?
  - How can an inspector best support a teacher?
- 3 A second meeting of inspectors should be held and, based on a reading of Freeman (1982) and their earlier discussion with the teachers, they should come to some agreement about modifications to and developments beyond the present approach.
  - 4 The inspectors should hold a seminar where they would present a new model of teacher observation as a possible solution to some of the problems raised in their previous discussion with the teachers.
  - 5 Following the discussion recommendations would be prepared and sent to the Ministry of Education.
  - 6 The recommendations would be distributed to as many inspectors and teachers as possible.

### Peer Observation

If we are convinced that observation is a process that should aim at teachers' self-development, in addition the formal observation carried out in the way suggested above, peer observation also has a valuable role to play. For teachers who are interested in exploring as many possibilities as they can, peer observation can become another learning tool. When themselves observing in a classroom, teachers are exposed to a range of experiences and activities. If these are used as the focus of a following discussion they are likely to find different ways of improving their own teaching. Observing their peers is a stimulus which urges teachers to learn from their own experience.

If peer observation is to be introduced into Libyan schools, a meeting should be held to explain that it is a self-development process. Further, the process of carrying it out should be discussed. For instance,

- a teacher invites a colleague to work with him
- they agree on which aspect of teaching they wish to tackle - use of questions, learner attention, use of the blackboard, patterns of classroom interaction and so on
- they agree on a suitable time for observation
- during the observation they both collect data on the agreed topic as a focus for observing and as the basis for a follow-up discussion
- after the observation they meet to exchange opinions and ideas about the aspect of teaching they have examined

### Guiding principles for observing

Whether observation is formal or informal, Wajnryb (1992) provides some useful guidelines for observers. These should be discussed with teachers when introducing peer observation.

- Observers should make sure that their presence does not affect the classroom dynamics. For instance, if they sit with the students (rather than behind the teacher or isolated from the learners) they will be part of the learning experience and will be less likely to distract the learners.
- Observers should realise that the data they collect on a single observation is very limited. They should not judge or make generalisations based on only one lesson.
- Observers should be careful about examining lesson plans. Sometimes seeing a plan can influence the observer's opinion in such a way that they do not see what is really happening

in the classroom. Sometimes teachers feel that they are under close examination and feel threatened or embarrassed.

- Observers should not complete an observation without discussing the experience with the teacher. Post-lesson discussions are important for both teacher and observer. Both must ensure that such discussions are controlled so that they become a meaningful experience.

### Tasks for peer observation

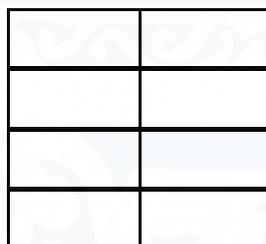
The following tasks adapted from Wajnryb (1991) are intended to guide the teacher through peer observation.

#### Task 1 - Attending to the learner

The objective of this task is to make teachers aware of their behaviour towards their learners. How does their verbal and non-verbal behaviour affect the learners' participation?

##### *Before the lesson*

- Two teachers arrange to observe each other's lesson.
- They should agree on a suitable list of attending strategies.
- They should draw a diagram of the seating plan of the classroom and should decide on suitable observation symbols. For instance, in the following, each square represents a learner and the key suggests how it is possible to symbolise the teacher's behaviour.



##### *Teacher's behaviour*

The use of:

- |                  |     |                    |
|------------------|-----|--------------------|
| a learner's name | (N) | a raised voice (R) |
| a nod            | (↓) | a hand gesture (H) |
| a smile          | (☺) |                    |
| a frown          | (☹) |                    |
| eye contact      | (⊙) |                    |
| a touch          | (T) |                    |

##### *During the lesson*

- Observers should sit themselves in a position where they can observe the teacher's behaviour towards individuals
- When the teacher uses a student's name write it in the appropriate square on the seating plan
- Record the teacher's behaviour towards each individual using the symbols above. Sometimes two will be used together - a smile and a name or a smile and eye contact
- If the school is co-educational, use M or F to indicate the student's sex.

- Observers may wish to record the student's response to the teacher's behaviour. For instance, if a student gives an answer in response to a hand gesture from the teacher, it might be recorded (✓) or if a student stops talking in response to a look from the teacher it might be recorded (x).
- Observers may wish to record student's attending strategies towards each other. For instance, does one individual allow another student to speak when they both begin to answer together?

### **After the lesson**

A discussion after the lesson is important for both teachers who take part in the process. They need to find out, for instance,

- which attending strategies are apparently most used
- whether, in co-educational classes, the sex of the student affects the distribution of the teacher's attention
- whether the way the learners are seated affects the distribution of the teacher's attention
- whether bright students tend to dominate and weaker ones hide
- how many times the teacher used student's names and whether their use was positive (This might lead to a discussion of ways in which teacher's can learn student's names.)
- what conclusions can be drawn about the teacher's attending behaviour
- whether the list of attending strategies agreed on was appropriate or whether more should be added
- whether any of the strategies on the list were deliberately used
- if the teachers had agreed to observe student response, whether the teacher's attending strategies encouraged students' contributions
- if the observer had observed the student's attending strategies towards each other, whether they encouraged each other's learning

### **Task 2 - The language of feedback to "wrong answers"**

From experience, it is clear that some teachers are more encouraging towards their students than others. For instance, in more information-based classes' feedback of the type *"Not quite right, try again"* or *"That's an interesting point. Can we come back to it later?"* is much more encouraging than *"No"* or *"That's not right"* or *"You don't understand"*. Teachers should be aware of the effect of their feedback of this kind and the objective of this task is to examine the language used in dealing with student's responses. This should take account of the student's response to the teacher's question; the teacher's feedback to the student's response; and the student's response to the teacher's feedback.

### **Before the lesson**

- Two teachers agree to observe each other.
  - They devise a form to help them record the necessary data. It should include space for recording
    - A Teacher's question
    - B Student's response
    - C Teacher's feedback
    - D Student's response to the feedback
- A second column should provide space for any supplementary support from the teacher such as the use of the blackboard, or a facial expression, or a gesture.

### During the lesson

- Observers should collect data and fill in the form as they watch. They should be careful to include only data related to learner "error" of the type mentioned above.
- They should record whether the feedback is positive and encouraging (+) or whether it is negative and discouraging (-). This can be done in a third column.

### After the lesson

The teachers should meet after the lesson and discuss whether the feedback given gave the learners an "opportunity to experience the effect of what they produce". (Brown (1988:16) in Wajnryb, 1992:50). That is, teachers should not accept everything a learner says as "correct" or "good" but, when there are problems, they should indicate this. Such indications should be made in an encouraging way. A possible checklist for discussion would be to consider:

- whether the teacher provided information that helped the learners to correct themselves
  - whether such information was expressed other than verbally by means of facial expression or gesture and the like
  - whether, in general terms, the teacher was encouraging or discouraging from the point of view of the learner
- and, in light of the above, consider
- what is the teacher's role with regard to feedback (Should the teacher immediately provide the "correct" answer?)
  - to what extent learner's benefit from teacher approval or disapproval and how best can it be communicated.

### Conclusion

The two tasks illustrated above are just two examples of observation tasks, which can make teachers more aware of what they do in the classroom and how it affects the learners and their learning. They are adapted from Wajnryb (1992) who stresses the idea of the teacher being a "reflective practitioner, that is a teacher who is discovering more about their own teaching by seeking to understand the processes of teaching and learning in their own and others' classrooms" (Wajnryb, 1992:9). Parrott (1993) also illustrates many interesting tasks, which can be adapted for the Libyan context.

In general what is important is teacher development through a process of self-awareness. This development can only occur if teachers themselves play an active part in the discovery process.

## Bibliography

Allwright, D. (1988). *Observation in the Language Classroom*, Longman, London

Edge, J. (1992). *Cooperative Development*, Longman, London

Freeman, D. (1982). "Observing Teachers: Three Approaches to In-Service Training and Development", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.16, No.1, March

Freeman, D (1989). "Teacher Training, Development and Decision Making: A model of Teaching and Related Strategies for Language Teacher Education", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol 23, No 1, March, 1989

Parrott, M. (1993). *Tasks for Language Teachers*, CUP, Cambridge

Richards, J.C. & Nunan, D (1992). *Second Language Teacher Education*, CUP, Cambridge

Wajnryb, R. (1992). *Classroom Observation Tasks* CUP, Cambridge

Wallace, M. (1991). *Training Foreign Language Teachers*, CUP, Cambridge.