Establishing systems & processes for classroom observation of teaching in EAP

Douglas Bell

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

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Douglas Bell

Author correspondence e-mail: douglas.bell@nottingham.edu.cn

Orcid Account： http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4319-0380

Abstract

Classroom observation can boast a long and venerable history in English Language Teaching and is now an accepted feature of professional life. Such observation is either seen as being evaluative in nature, in which case it is typically linked with appraisal systems and carried out by a line manager, or it may be viewed more developmentally, in which case it is more commonly conducted on a peer-to-peer basis. While the mechanisms for both types of classroom observation in General ELT contexts are now quite well established, the same cannot always be said of observations in EAP, where approaches may be more idiosyncratic and based on the preferences of individual institutions. In the specific case of evaluative classroom observation, a further consideration is whether the observation should be focussing on the same kinds of features as those found in General ELT contexts or looking for evidence of something else. This reflective paper charts the evolution, establishment and delivery of one such EAP-specific approach to evaluative classroom observation, which was conducted at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) between 2009 and 2015.

Introduction

Classroom observation of teaching has long been a common feature of General ELT (Rinvolucri, 2002; Bailey, 2001; Richards, 1998; Wajnryb, 1992; Williams, 1989) and is now an accepted practice that most teachers can expect to encounter at different times throughout their professional careers.

Broadly speaking, classroom observations tend to fall into one of two camps: they are either seen as opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD), in which case the person being observed is typically one of the observer's peers and the observation itself is likely to be conducted on a voluntary basis; or they are seen as an institutional quality control mechanism, in which case the observer is likely to be a line manager or more senior teacher, and the observation will be mandatory and most likely form part of a performance review process. In both types of observation though, in theory (although not necessarily in practice) systems and processes are usually put in place to determine how exactly the observation should be conducted; what, if any, particular features of the observed lesson are likely to be focused upon, and finally, how feedback will be delivered by the observer.

With regard to systems and processes for the latter form of observation i.e. evaluative observations conducted by a line manager or senior teacher, although there are now a number of established

procedures and proformas in place for General English teaching (Copland, 2008; Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2008; Vasquez and Reppen, 2007; Randall and Thornton, 2001; Wajnryb, 1992), the same cannot always be said of EAP, where it seems that the way in which evaluative classroom observations are approached can differ considerably from institution to institution. In some cases, individual institutions may have designed their own in-house procedures and materials, but in others, there may be occasions when observation instruments, which were designed for General English teaching contexts, are then applied uncritically to EAP. As perceptions of effective pedagogy in EAP teaching are not always the same as perceptions of effective pedagogy in more General ELT contexts (Bell 2013), this can result in an unfortunate mismatch of both expectations and outcomes.

This paper will discuss some of the issues, which were encountered during the evolution, establishment and delivery of EAP-specific systems and processes for evaluative classroom observation at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) in the period 2009-2015.

CELE 2009: the edge of a new frontier

Although I was probably not fully aware of it at the time, when I first joined UNNC in 2009, the Centre for English Language Education (CELE) was about to move into a new stage in its historical development. One of the major catalysts for this change was a call from the Provost of that period for there to be a major overhaul of the existing Year 1 syllabi and teaching materials. Hitherto, all the Year 1 content delivered by CELE in Ningbo had been supplied by CELE colleagues employed on the Nottingham home campus in the UK and the prevailing model was generally one of conformity. Indeed, a frequently voiced aspiration was to have one uniform set of Year 1 syllabi and materials which would be core to the CELE operations not only in the UK and Ningbo, but also on the Nottingham campus in Malaysia, and it was standard practice at that time to talk in metaphorical terms about the 'mother ship' and its 'satellites'. The ethos which underpinned each of these metaphors was that there should only ever be 'one Nottingham', albeit spread across diverse geographical locations.

I cannot comment on the extent to which the Provost personally subscribed or did not subscribe to this notion of there just being 'one Nottingham', as it was never a topic of conversation that I can recall us directly discussing. However, I do remember that not long after starting in my role as the new Director of CELE at UNNC, it was made very clear to me that from the Ningbo side anyway, there had been a growing dissatisfaction with the way in which the Year 1 programme was being run. One of my immediate goals, therefore, would be to take the lead on carrying out a comprehensive review of the existing systems and processes and make appropriate suggestions for improvement.

A full discussion of the tumultuous events, which duly unfolded over the subsequent 18 months, could easily fill a book and goes far beyond the scope of this current paper. Suffice to say though, that after much debate, it was formally agreed that CELE UNNC should be allowed to break away from the prevailing academic model and develop a series of EAP syllabi and materials of its own. In taking this strategic decision, the intention was that the syllabi and materials to be developed as part of a revised Year 1 programme would be more closely aligned to the specific needs of the

Ningbo context. In time, this resulted in a model of EAP delivery, which replaced the existing programme with the teaching of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) modules in Semester 1, followed by a focus on English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) modules in Semester 2. Where students had previously received a common diet of EAP material, irrespective of their subject area, now there was a system of streaming and tailoring of classroom content based on target academic disciplines. Broadly speaking, this meant that the Year 1 Science and Engineering students learned EAP for Science and Engineering purposes and were assessed using language and task-types deemed appropriate to those fields, while the Business, Arts and Humanities students were taught and assessed following an analysis of their particular linguistic needs in those disciplines.

One of the by-products, which emerged from this brave new world of revised curricula, syllabi, teaching materials and assessments, was that there was now a heightened need for ensuring more parity of standards across the academic piste. In my role as the Director of CELE and Academic Head of the Year 1 Programme, I was accountable to the University Management Board and was expected to be able to show that in terms of teaching quality at least, although they were now following quite different syllabi, the classroom experience of the Year 1 students from a discipline such as say Engineering was still broadly comparable to that of the students from say Business or International Studies. It was in trying to find a means of more effectively measuring and evaluating what was going on in the classrooms across each of these very different domains that my ideas of implementing systems and processes for evaluative classroom observation first began to take shape.

Approaches to Teacher Evaluation

In the early years of my tenure as the new Director of CELE, the dominant and time-honoured means by which teachers were evaluated was via the analysis of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) questionnaires.

Traditionally, these questionnaires were administered once each academic semester and students were invited to indicate their perceived quality of both teachers and teaching by responding either positively or negatively to a series of fixed statements linked to a 5-point Likert Scale. Each section of these fixed statements was then followed by open boxes, in which students could provide comments to elaborate on their ratings.

The efficacy of using such SET questionnaires as a means of measuring teacher and teaching quality remains open to debate and a full discussion of this falls far beyond the scope of this paper. However, it soon become clear to me that SET scores alone were at best only a very blunt instrument and of limited use when trying to understand the finer points of what may or may not have constituted effective pedagogy. 'Bad' SET scores, for example, did not necessarily indicate a poor teacher, as it became evident from a more detailed investigation of a cluster of such results that strict, albeit otherwise highly capable teachers, were sometimes being marked down by their students much more vigorously than those who were lenient. Conversely, 'good' SET scores were not always a cause for rejoicing either, as it became clear that in some cases, certain individuals were routinely 'gaming the system' and either directly asking their students to give them positive

ratings, or playing to the gallery in such a way that the students were basing their evaluations more on factors related to teachers' looks or personality traits, than on their command of effective classroom teaching practices.

Against this rather messy backdrop, I decided that introducing a system of evaluative classroom observation might provide a more finely tuned instrument for assessing teaching quality and more accurately measuring the Year 1 student experience.

Approaches to Classroom Observation

As a skim through the reams of my inherited hanging-file records soon showed, it seemed that a system of evaluative classroom observation of sorts was in fact already in place. In the past, EAP tutors, particularly those newly recruited to CELE, had apparently gone through at least one classroom observation with a line manager. However, on the evidence of the surviving paperwork at least, this practice did not appear to have been very systematic in nature and it was unclear what the outcomes had been. As with so many institutional processes, while reading through the tattered records from that era, my main impression was that the system had most probably been driven more by clerical than pedagogic concerns, and in time, as is so often the case with these things, it seemed to have gradually faded from both importance and attention. When going through the historical archives, one of the other things that jumped out at me was the nature of the classroom observation instrumentation itself. Firstly, there appeared to be no consistency in the overall approach: dog-eared photocopies of paperwork from various sources evidently had been mixed in with a plethora of documentation cobbled together from different pre-sessional programmes and language schools. Secondly, and much more worryingly to my mind, many of the observation instruments themselves were clearly meant for evaluating classes in General English teaching, not for classes in EAP. In this regard, references to how observers should judge teachers on their successful use of warmers and games, not to mention the copious use of smiley or frowny faces in the final ratings sections, told their own story. Not surprisingly perhaps, I soon concluded that both the procedure of observation and the instrumentation being used for its delivery left much to be desired, as neither were what I myself would consider fit for EAP purposes. As a strategic priority, I resolved, therefore, to work with my managers and the wider team of teachers to carry out an immediate and comprehensive review.

Out with the Old and In with the New

One of the more noticeable outcomes of the post-2009 curriculum reforms was that teaching across the Year 1 programme had become more standardized, with EAP teachers now being expected to teach towards specified learning outcomes. These were spelled out in a series of institutionally determined lesson plans, commonly known as teaching grids. What this meant in practice was that on any given day, the teachers responsible for teaching designated groups of students should, broadly speaking, have all been teaching the same lesson content and most probably doing the same sorts of things. Teachers were free, at their professional discretion, to replace the institutionally recommended materials with materials or activities of their own, but the same target learning outcomes still had to be met i.e. it was not permissible for a teacher to depart from the recommended schedule of work completely. For someone unfamiliar with the wider CELE

context, this might, on first encounter, seem unduly prescriptive and an unnecessary managerial interference with individual tutors' professional freedom. However, it must always be remembered that at the end of each academic semester, the 1200+ Year 1 students in CELE's care would be assessed using prescribed suites of coursework assignments and examinations, and that successful progression to the students' chosen degree programmes would then be contingent on their results. It was extremely important, therefore, to strive for pedagogical parity and to try to ensure that all Year 1 students were generally being exposed to the same designated content. After all, it was their grasp of this which was being assessed, and which would ultimately determine their academic future. Had the 80 or so individual CELE EAP teachers at that time simply been left to their own devices and allowed to teach whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, there can be little doubt that the final spread of Year 1 student results would have had a much more jagged profile. This, in turn, would have had very important ramifications for the students' onward progression. For all of these reasons, it was essential that EAP teaching in the CELE context should operate within clearly marked boundaries.

From the perspective of trying to implement a system of evaluative classroom observation, the inherent uniformity of the Year 1 curriculum meant that in many ways, the task itself should be relatively straightforward. After all, everyone in CELE already knew what was supposed to be taught; the questions remaining were more to do with how exactly this should be done, and on which criteria an observer should judge whether or not what was being delivered at the individual teacher level was in fact effective.

As a starting point, I felt very strongly that before any observations ever took place, we should collectively have a shared understanding of what an evaluative observation would be looking for. In other words, we needed to begin by drawing up a series of agreed observation criteria and defining what we considered to be appropriate approaches to delivering EAP. As I have already mentioned, it seemed to me that one of the immediate weaknesses in the previous approaches to observation was that this common ground had evidently never been fully established. As an adjunct to this, there was also the matter of whether pedagogical approaches commonly found in General English teaching should still be desirable in EAP. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Bell 2015; Bell 2013; Bell 2007) it is my own unashamed belief that some of the approaches typically seen as good practice in General ELT may not always be quite so desirable if they are uncritically applied in EAP contexts. Conversely, some of the big dichotomous No-Nos (teacher talking time is a good example) which would almost certainly evoke criticism and censure on a CELTA or DELTA, might, in certain EAP contexts, be perfectly acceptable or even actively desired. In short, it was important that we should first have a shared understanding of what constitutes good practice in teaching EAP, and not just blithely assume that this would always be the same as the teaching of English in other contexts. This understanding would then form the bedrock of what line managers would be looking for when conducting their observations.

In devising the observation criteria, another of my core principles was that as far as possible, there should be collective ownership of the final product, with the process itself always aspiring to be bottom-up in nature, rather than rigidly top-down. To this end, as indeed, we had tried to ensure during the earlier needs analysis and curriculum reform processes, working group committees and

sub-committees were formed, drawing their membership from *both* the management teams and the general teaching staff. The resulting proposals and documentation which came from these groups were then regularly circulated to everyone in CELE for further consultative discussion and commentary.

Space precludes a detailed exploration of the various to-ing and fro-ing of such proposals and drafts of documentation, but after a series of iterations, we finally settled on a 3-stage model of pre-arranged evaluative observation. It was agreed that this would consist of a pre-observation meeting between the observing line manager and the observee, during which the teacher being observed would be invited to talk through a lesson plan and highlight any anticipated issues; the observation itself, during which the observing line manager would be tasked with completing a detailed running commentary (see appendix) and then a post-observation meeting, during which the observer and the observed would have the opportunity to discuss the lesson in some detail and reflect on whether or not the intended teaching and learning objectives had been achieved. When taken together, this entire process represented an investment of some 3+ hours of observer time per individual EAP teacher (the pre and post observation meetings were each around 30-40 minutes in length, while a typical classroom observation would be in the region of 2 hours) forcing even the most cynical of individuals to admit that this new system of classroom observation was clearly *not* just another administrative box-ticking exercise and that the management was genuinely taking the process very seriously.

The Pros and Cons of Different Approaches

Having outlined above that we finally settled on a 3-stage model of pre-arranged evaluative classroom observation, before I discuss whether this model actually worked, or share any of the results that were achieved, it is worth me going back a step or two to consider what some of the alternative models might have been and to comment on what the academic literature has had to say about these.

One of the first points for consideration is whether evaluative classroom observation should be planned or unplanned. As Monahan and Fisher (2010) have alluded to in their wider discussion of 'observer effects', there exists a school of thought which views pre-planned classroom observation as being far too contrived to have any real meaning. After all, the argument goes, if someone knows in advance that they are going to be observed, then they will simply put on a carefully choreographed performance. While this might look very good on the day and tick all the necessary management quality control boxes, who is to say that the teaching is still being carried out to the same standard on all the other days when nobody is watching? The proponents of this line of thinking not surprisingly eschew pre-planned classroom observations and argue instead for unannounced line manager drop-ins. This, they say, provides more accurate data and is a much better gauge of teaching quality.

My own thoughts on this are yes…and no. To my mind, what such a system wins on the swings, it then very quickly loses on the roundabouts. For example, while the unannounced drop-in approach gets nicely around the choreographed performance issue and undoubtedly gives the observer a no-frills insight into what is happening on a given day in a given class, it also loses

much of the rich potential for the observer and the observed to learn anything from one another. As I started this paper by saying, classroom observations broadly fall into two categories. On the one hand, there are the observations whose sole purpose is professional development, while on the other, there are the observations whose main goals are appraisal and quality control. However, between these two extremes, I personally see no reason why an evaluative appraisal observation cannot simultaneously fulfil a professional development function, and this is one of the reasons why I have a problem with the unannounced line manager drop in approach. Aside from it lacking a systematic professional development angle, I also dislike the unannounced drop-in model because by its very *modus operandi*, it turns evaluative observation into a managerial witch-hunt; something to be feared. To my mind, creating this kind of environment only serves to widen the divide between teachers and managers and creates an entirely unnecessary 'us and them' mentality. As Watson-David (2009, 5) has tartly observed, under these conditions, observation becomes 'about as welcome as a poke in the eye with a sharp stick'. In striving to implement a new system at UNNC, this was clearly far from the kind of teacher reaction I was hoping to encourage.

In my now 30+ years of experience in English Language Teaching, whether serving as a teacher or as a manager, I must say that I myself have never felt that striving for higher quality should be perceived as a threat. To be honest, when pressed to give an answer, I think that most of the professional teachers I have encountered down the years have also admitted to the same. For the most part, I have found that people who are serious about their work and their chosen career generally want to feel confident that they are performing to a high standard. It is therefore not the act of being observed and evaluated in itself which can cause resentment, but the sense of unfairness which comes when evaluations are carried out too subjectively; without due consideration of the wider context; without established criteria for measurement, or a shared baseline of what is to be expected. In this regard, when compared with the unannounced line manager drop-in, the pre-planned observation model clearly had some advantages.

Aside from whether the observation should be pre-planned or random, another issue is the difficulty in recording what actually happens in classrooms, while acknowledging the potential for bias on the side of the observer. As Kennedy (2010), referencing the earlier work in this area by Wragg, Wikeley, Wragg and Haynes (1996), has pointed out:

Classroom events are difficult to capture on paper and must be *'inferred from sequences or patterns of events'*. Wragg et al (1996) refer to this as being high inference, where it is important that the observer exercises subjective judgment.

(Kennedy 2010, 226)

This issue of observer subjectivity leads to a wider set of questions connected to how classroom observation data should most effectively be gathered. As is so often the case in English Language Teaching, the literature often seems to position this in dichotomous terms, with fixed 'box-tick' observation instruments on one side of the scale and more free-flowing, holistic mechanisms on the other (Randall and Thornton, 2001; Wajnryb,1992; Wallace, 1991). Largely as a result of the

training I had received when first [1]qualifying as a teacher trainer almost a decade earlier, my own preference in this regard was undoubtedly more towards the holistic end of the spectrum and this manifested itself in our adoption of a running commentary style of observation instrument (see appendix). I felt that if observers could first be encouraged simply to record what they witnessed, without passing judgment, then this should help to keep subjectivity to a minimum and reduce the likelihood of post-observation disagreements over what had and had not taken place. As my teacher training course tutors had often commented, when they are done well, running commentaries of lessons can be the next best thing to a live video-stream, providing an accurate snapshot of everything the observed teacher says and does. Having been on the receiving end of such approaches to evaluative classroom observation during my time at Bilkent University, and recognising both their fairness and efficacy, I was keen to establish similar systems for teacher development and training in Ningbo.

The Proof of the Pudding…

In my writing thus far, I have outlined the different forms that classroom observation may typically take; provided some historical background on the specifics of the CELE context that I inherited at the time of my Directorship and offered a rationale for why I personally believed that a new system of evaluative classroom observation needed to be introduced. I have then briefly discussed some of the pros and cons of different approaches to evaluative observation and what the literature has had to say about these. Before closing this paper, it is only fitting that I now say a little about the fruits of our endeavours and consider what was achieved, as well as discussing any difficulties or challenges that were encountered.

Perhaps the first point to be made was that in dealing with a department of over 80 academic staff, the mammoth task of observing individual tutors needed to be broken down into manageable chunks and carried out as a collective effort. Even had I wanted to, thanks to the operational logistics, there was simply no way that I myself would be able to observe every individual teacher; the task therefore had to be spread out across the wider middle-management team with Senior Tutors each observing some 10 or more individual staff. For my own part, although I did on occasion go into some individual EAP teachers' classes, I was more typically involved in observing the Senior Tutors and on providing them with guidance and mentoring in the mechanics of how best to conduct pre- and post-observation meetings or complete their running commentaries.

Although it may sound suspiciously glib to say so, and some will possibly now accuse me of having a selective memory, my recollection of the first rounds of observations is that overall things generally went very well. The 3-stage system meant that tutors were fully aware of what would happen at each part of the observation process. By putting the agreed observational criteria into the public domain from the outset, nobody could honestly say that they had not been forewarned what their line managers would be looking for, or claim that the observations themselves were unduly impressionistic or subjective. While there were sometimes disagreements between

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[1] At the end of the 1990s, while working as an EAP tutor at Bilkent University in Turkey, I completed a Postgraduate Diploma qualification in Teacher Training. I still owe a considerable debt of gratitude to my tutors at that time, Deniz Kurtoglu-Eken and Marion Engin, for sharpening my understanding of the finer points of evaluative classroom observation.

observers and the observed about how to interpret some of the activities in the weekly teaching grids, for the most part, it seemed that the new system was working well. There were, however, a handful of cases that brought their own particular challenges and I would be remiss in my charting of this history, if I did not now also provide some discussion of these. I will elaborate further in the section below.

… or The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men?

One of the most significant challenges that we faced was what should be done with teachers who, for whatever reason, were underperforming. When I had first conceptualized my ideas around a new system of classroom observation, I think the penny had not yet fully dropped for me that this might result in us shining a light on some practices which we, the management, would then be forced to act upon. Even though the observation system had been set up with evaluation and appraisal clearly in mind, somewhat naively perhaps, I think my original expectation was that while a small number of teachers might need to be given a few suggestions on how to improve, in an institute of CELE's longevity and professional standing, surely we would be unlikely to encounter any outright 'fails'. This proved to be a rather over-optimistic reading, as there were, unfortunately, at least a couple of cases when the teachers we observed were deemed to be performing significantly under-par. In these instances, the first mechanism that was invoked was to suggest a repeat observation a few weeks later and to hope that with further line manager guidance and support, the under-performing teachers would be able to improve. Where things became rather more problematic, however, was when such teachers then went on to perform poorly in a second or even third observation. In these cases, having now opened Pandora's Box, we were honour-bound to involve the university HR department and require the under-performing teachers to engage with a formal Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). Though very rarely invoked by the university, PIPs were a much more drawn-out affair, typically lasting for anywhere between three and six months and requiring regularly documented meetings between the staff member and their line manager, during which particular performance goals were set and their attainment evaluated. Operating as a formal HR mechanism, the stakes around PIP were naturally much higher and potentially had more negative consequences for teachers, such as non-renewal of contract or even dismissal from post. Thankfully, the very small number of teachers who found themselves taking part in PIPs did ultimately seem to benefit from them and reach the required level of proficiency. However, this was a timely reminder for me that when setting up evaluative observation systems, institutions must also ensure that they have appropriate mechanisms in place to deal with any performance issues, which might then emerge. With the benefit of hindsight, this was an area that could have been given much greater attention and is something I would certainly want to consider in more detail if I was ever in a similar situation again.

Another concern was how to ensure adequate parity of procedure across the team of observing line managers. Although everyone was supposed to be following the same script and applying the same criteria, it soon become clear that on occasion, some individuals were being more zealous (or more lenient) in their application of the criteria than others. A typical issue in this regard was the matter of time management and how closely a given teacher should be expected to follow the suggested timings on the teaching grids. Some line managers evidently took a very rigid approach to this, concluding that lesson aims had not been adequately met unless the grids were closely followed, whereas others were more relaxed in their interpretation. Not unreasonably, this mix of standards did cause some friction with teachers, not least because it later became clear that some of the

institutionally suggested timings were themselves overly ambitious. Once again, with the benefit of hindsight, more work could have been done on tightening these things up and on establishing better moderation systems across the teams of observers.

Closing Thoughts

In this short reflective paper, I have presented a case for the evaluative observation of teaching. Although introducing such a process undoubtedly brings some challenges, I remain confident that the positives still outweigh the negatives. It is my conviction, therefore, that evaluative observations still have an important role to play in ensuring the effective delivery of EAP.

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Appendix

Sample running commentary proforma.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4" align="center"><u>RUNNING COMMENTARY OBSERVATION RECORD</u></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">Date: ……   Teacher Being Observed: …………   Observer: …………

Number Of Students: ………………….</td></tr>
<tr><td>TIME ⊕</td><td>DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY & INTERACTION PATTERNS</td><td></td><td>OBSERVER COMMENTS & QUESTIONS</td></tr>
<tr><td>9am</td><td><i>T greets class. Asks them to take out their previous work</i></td><td>T-SS</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>