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OB•SER•VA•TION

[ob-zur-vey-shuhn]

OB•SER•VA•TION

noun

1. an act or instance of noticing or perceiving
2. an act or instance of regarding attentively or watching
3. the faculty or habit of observing or noticing
4. notice: to escape a person's observation
5. act or instance of viewing or noting a fact or occurrence for some scientific or other specialpurpose: the observation of blood pressure under stress. www.dictionary.reference.com

All good teachers agree that in order to continue to provide top quality education for our learners, it is part of our job to keep up-to-date with the latest materials and theories. Pedagogical thinking has come a long way since it was first raised as a science in its own right, especially in EFL. The issues are myriad and complex but this issue's column is about those aspects which concern you directly, rather than your learners or the language itself. Continuing professional development (CPD) and, in particular, observations have become an essential part of the educational calendar. But why is this? The fact you have gained a professional qualification is enough... isn't it?

In all good language schools in the UK, teachers are observed regularly. We are observed by our new employer soon after we start work and then again on an annual basis. Additionally, we might be observed by our peers from time to time and finally, we are observed whenever the school as a whole undergoes an inspection. Now that UK language schools are registered with both the British Council and a second regulatory body (either the Independent Schools Inspectorate or OFSTED) this seems to happen with unprecedented frequency.

Since starting at my current school at the end of January, I have been observed three times and I have prepared for lessons to be observed over 15 times. Comparing notes with teaching colleagues around the UK I've discovered this is not unusual and I've discovered that there are a wide range of views about the experience, varying from the glowing to the glowering.

From my personal point of view, I've realised that how I feel about an observation distinctly depends on who is doing the observing and why. After nine months out of the game, my observation in the spring as a new member of staff was highly stressful and brought on a severe bout of railing against the system and self-recrimination — both of which were out of proportion to the event. Then a long round of detailed observation lesson planning for the school's OFSTED inspection brought a new slant to my thinking and started me questioning the validity of such observations. And finally, a couple of short notice peer observations in the recent hectic summer season added another angle to the topic.

Beginning with the excruciating **observation with my then — DoS (Director of Studies)**, I know I am not alone in dreading such experiences. I understand that, on a basic level, the school needs to be sure they have invested in the right person for the job. To put it in business terms, the payroll outlay needs to be justified and the customers need to be seen to be receiving a good standard of product. But, when you are the individual under the microscope, it can be quite unpleasant. When you train as a teacher there is a definite need for someone to observe you in training and give you feedback. But once you have gained the relevant qualification, rightly or wrongly, there is a sense that you can now forget about being watched and just get on with it. You have the toolkit.

So, standing in a classroom with a group of students you've met a few times before waiting for the person who decides whether or not you're going to continue to get a paycheck to turn up is somewhat unnerving. And I would argue that, while the DoS may appreciate that people suf-

fer from nerves, the end result is a lesson that wouldn't normally happen. The students know they are being watched and this affects their behaviour. Additionally, as a teacher you suddenly return to the CELTA or Delta or Masters in which you gained your teaching stripes. In my case, that meant a major focus on hitting my timings and achieving my main aim *at all costs* as this had been the main criticism during my most recent qualification. The side effect of trying to do this was that I almost entirely forgot about the learners themselves. And I know how bad that sounds.

In my preparations for the lesson I had focused so much on the staging, and the activity of each stage that I had omitted to take time to think about the actually learning I wanted to happen and the meaning of the target language I had chosen whereas, in a normal lesson, I start with that. Effectively, my classroom turned upside down for an hour and I became some kind of performing seal in a circus. It was only during the post-observation dissection with the DoS that I even noticed I hadn't focused on form or pronunciation. This was for a lesson on a set of functional language. Now, because of the breadth of my training and the level of lesson planning needed for a Delta my plan was reasonably strong, so the learners took away a useful set of language and had grasped the meaning. But, and it's a big but, I don't think they learned as much as they normally would if my attention had been on them throughout the process and, to me, this is a serious drawback.

One DoS I spoke to about observations agreed that the main purpose of the initial observation is for quality control. But she added *"when you see them in the classroom... (it)... could lead further to thinking about areas for development, or perhaps they've done something really interesting which could be useful for helping other teachers develop and you didn't know that until you've seen them"*. So, it's not as simple as deciding whether or not to keep on a new member of the team, there are added developmental layers both for the individual and, potentially, for other people in the staff.

From my experience, the initial observation certainly led to some soul searching about my teaching style and the comments made. As a result, I read up about phonology and, while I had always included certain aspects, I started to do a lot more drilling and more different types of drilling, which turned out to be a pleasant surprise and something the learners have almost consistently responded well to. So, overall, my teaching was developed by the experience. In my mind, this trade-off that occurs between the potential short-term loss of learning in one lesson and the long term gains made in subsequent lessons is worth it, and cancels out the drawback.

Turning our attention for a moment to the observer, Angela Vaughan, Teacher Trainer at Kings, pointed out that *it's vital to ensure that staff feel supported and 'energized', rather than judged and penalized*. And added *it is important to have a line-manager/senior colleague who is actually trained in how to observe. Untrained observers* (in her view) *can do a lot of harm*. I think she has raised a serious point and one which some schools or management underestimate. When teachers are observed, they can feel exposed and uncomfortable. Any criticisms, while they may be necessary, need to be delivered sensitively and in a supportive manner or there is a real risk that the staff become alienated and demoralised. Anyone in a position where they need to deliver critical comments on somebody's else's performance will be familiar with how different personalities can take the same feedback in different ways. And some people will always react badly to perceived personal attacks. Therefore, training for observers and regulation of peer observations so that they avoid negative backwash is essential.

All of which brings me to my **second form of observation — those by peers**. The summer in the UK is peak season for language schools and this year I found myself doing double shifts for ten weeks often teaching 90 minutes lessons practically back to back. As the majority reading this are secondary school educators you may well be scoffing into your tea that this is a normal day for you but I am used to less demanding schedules and it was hard going. What it also meant was that the school brought in a lot of temporary teachers to help manage the increased workload. Often these teachers were inexperienced and I found myself unofficially supporting a few of them. As a result, one of them, Linda, asked if she could watch me teach as she liked my ideas about how to take things off the page in the planning stages. I must admit to being honoured to be asked. Back in Sydney when I got my first job in TEFL, I was surrounded by a buzzing supportive network of teachers who helped me develop the nascent skills learned on the preceding CELTA and I felt like I was being given an opportunity to pay that back. In the end, Linda watched me twice.

The major difference between the two observations Linda had in my classes and those where I was observed by an authority figure is that I didn't prepare anything special. I planned my lesson just as normal, she watched and took notes and then we chatted about it afterwards. It had to be that way as with the double shifts and being a mum to two small children, I had no time to do anything more. As a result, she was able to observe an experienced teacher deal with a typical problem as it arose. As sometimes happens, the grammar the course book focused on was not sufficiently dealt with so when the students

attempted the practice activity they were unable to complete around a third of the questions due to gaps in their knowledge. So I went off-book, filled the gaps, created an oral practise activity and we carried on.

Linda learned two lessons. One, things go wrong for everyone and two, the book is only a guide not a master. But, from a selfish point of view, I learned to stop being scared of observations. I realised I was confident enough in my abilities not to turn to jelly just because my lesson didn't go to plan when someone was watching. I managed the situation and everyone left the room satisfied with the lesson. I hope I would say the same thing if it had happened in front of the boss!

Alexandra Clark, current DoS of Kings Colleges, also feels observations are important for established members of staff saying sometimes *“teachers, perhaps, get a little bit complacent and an observation is a way of keeping them on their toes”*. Angela echoes this by saying, *“Even now, after decades of teaching, I have a mental checklist of things that I know I should be doing (but perhaps don't always do!) if I'm going to have someone coming in to observe me. So, the first advantage is as a prompt for teachers to maintain good practice.”*

In addition, they both agreed that CPD is often at the core of subsequent observations. By seeing teachers in action, depending on the stage they are at in their career, it's possible to *“feed in new ideas or other ways of doing things which they might not have thought of before”* or, if a teacher is very experienced then an observation gives a manager an insight into ways which that teacher's expertise could be enhanced. Perhaps by attending a conference and then running a teacher training session for their peers.

So, we can see observations as a discourse between manager and employee for the benefit of both parties. In this sense, I have started to see observations as a metaphorical springboard from which point it's possible for a teacher and her manager to jump in a number of directions, all of which are positive.

But what about **inspections by external bodies**?

As I mentioned near the start of this article, UK language schools are inspected by two out of three possible regulatory bodies. All language schools need to be British Council accredited. Without this, it would be impossible to sell our courses to students overseas. And the British Council is an internationally respected organisation whose website provides excellent resources for both the student, the teacher-in-training and the qualified professional. I suggest you try <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/continuing-professional-development> as a good start-

ing point if you are looking for something to reinvigorate your skills.

Aside from the British Council, all schools in the UK now need to be inspected by either the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) or OFSTED, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Earlier this year, my current school underwent and, to the relief of all, passed an OFSTED inspection. This is something that state schools have endured for a number of years and the **Guardian Secret Teacher blog** (<http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog>) regularly lets off steam about them. The main argument for having this kind of national inspectorate is **to compare and regulate our children's education**. Schools receive a rating from Outstanding, Good, Fair or Poor, which are given a number rating 1–4 with 1 being the highest. An outstanding schools is deemed to provide an educational environment that holistically develops children towards becoming the best adult they can be. It's all very nurturing and inclusive except that the end result of this is that any school with a 3 or 4 struggles to fill its places and any school with a 1 is consistently oversubscribed and more classes are added to its campus. Thus the child in the outstanding school may have to compete with up to 149 other children for attention from day one of Reception class. That's right, the first year of school could see my son lost in an outstanding crowd of prefab classrooms surrounding a shrinking playground to cater for all the parents who want their child to get the best education or enjoying the space and more individual attention of an undersubscribed OFSTED rated 4 school where he won't learn much or be developed well.

From my colleague's experience, being fortunate enough to live in the catchment area for a 1 rated school is no guarantee of your child's entry to that school. He assumed his daughter would get into the excellent local church school as they could almost see it from his house. He missed out and is fighting a battle through the appeal system to try and ensure his only child doesn't have to go across town to the level 4 rated school she was assigned to. My son's school application has to be in by January. I'll keep you posted on how that goes.

I can see a similar effect might now occur in the language sector and I am ambivalent about the perceived benefits. Obviously, bad language schools exist but the British Council system of inspections and their pass/fail results ensured the worst were recognised and international learners who had done their homework could avoid them. Now that schools are being rated on a sliding scale, I can see a kind of homogenisation occurring and the ability of teachers to explore methodologies restricted. There were two big areas of learning that we focused on in preparation for the OFSTED inspection — **differentiation and assessment for learning**. These were terms that

had been unfamiliar in a language school on a daily basis prior to this year but became the buzzwords for a period. Our lesson plans became almost as detailed as those for a Delta but with less appendixes. On reflection, Alex Clark said *“It turns out we are probably doing them anyway but we hadn’t been taught to look at teaching in that way.”* And this is the nub of the problem of the government inspection. The staffroom I work in is full of teachers who plan lessons with interactive stages which enable learners to take charge of their own learning experience. Our planning is thoughtful and learner-focused, or as Angela would wisely say *“learning focused”*. But our inspectors speak a different language and come from a different planet in terms of their educational background.

On the two days of the inspection, it turns out that we were not actually assessed by EFL teachers or even language teachers and I feel strongly that our Good result is a poor reflection of what is truly happening in our classrooms. The one-size fits all approach of a national rating systems is not flexible enough to take into account the number of ways it is possible to deliver a good education or the number of ways in which a group of people might learn. Additionally, as you are all aware, there are significant differences between the way in which you deliver subjects to different ages and in different fields. So an inspector who has not worked in the area he or she is inspecting is at risk of missing the learning that is taking place. It could be argued that the lesson plan should alleviate this but I disagree. The lesson plan is not a book on the history of ELT or twenty years’ experience in the language classroom.

Focusing in on the last point, something I explored during my academic studies was the idea that it is very difficult to extract from a classroom what learning, if any, has taken place. This connects to the OFSTED idea of assessment for learning. From my understanding, under their guidelines, it is important to ask the learners at regular short intervals to reflect on their activity and identify what they have learned. There are two main drawbacks for this.

This narrow form of assessment does not take into consideration the type of activity an EFL student might be doing. Students involved in preparing for a presentation may feel they are learning nothing new but, as they are not pedagogically trained, they are not aware of the range of language skills being utilised and developed in the group work they are undertaking. The end result seems to be that it is our job to make explicit the linguistic purpose of the activity so that students may feel they are usefully engaged and so that an OFSTED inspector can observe them regurgitate that they are developing their

fluency as well as their listening skills, pronunciation skills and note-writing abilities.

Or, in what appears to be a straightforward grammar focused lesson it may be that a particular learner, rather than grasp the core meaning of the grammar that day, may instead gain some useful lexis or a way of using intonation for emphasis or even an awareness of an aspect of elision or catenation which they didn’t previously have. On one level, you have failed to teach them the grammar but they walk away having learned something that was right for them at that time. Can we truly say that was a bad lesson? As Willis sets out in the Lexical Syllabus, teachers know *“that input doesn’t equal intake”* and my own experience supports this theory. Vaughan agrees that *“Often the most valuable learning emerges from the unpredicted or the unpredictable”*. This entirely connects to the buzzword I picked up during my Delta, which was emergent language. This idea is meant to encourage us to latch on to moments when students have a genuine desire to learn something so our skills are being used to fill a real gap in their knowledge.

I feel quite strongly that the OFSTED style of inspection with its seemingly rigid view of the essential components of lessons, at least as described by my state school peers, are not necessarily fit for purpose. What I do agree with is its aim of providing education that puts learners first, provides better outcomes and aims to achieve excellence within the profession.

Clark sagely put it this way, regulatory inspections are *“something we have to do so we have to try and look on it in a positive way as you could think very negatively about it.”* With that in mind, I am happy that the government does try to ensure that our children’s educators aim high and that the EFL sector is joining the mainstream in this ambition. While the current system may be flawed, it is better than no system at all.

In the process of writing this article, I came to realise that my initial reservations about the benefits of observations were, in fact, personal flaws and that observations are, instead, an essential tool in any educational establishment and more than that, for teachers themselves observations are essential for the maintenance of standards across the industry. Individual teachers may bemoan the event but, in doing so, they reveal their own shortcomings. Good teachers welcome observations as opportunities to fine tune areas or to share good practice.

Go forth, observe and be observed — and let me know what it does for you next time. Email me emmapageuk@gmail.com