

Implementing a Peer and buzz observation System in higher education: an example of good practice

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Abstract: *Following the UE strategic plan that promotes quality and ongoing improvement in our academic offer, and situates the University as a reference of excellence in higher education in Spain, the Language Center implemented an internal structure for observations. The aim of the program is threefold: (1) to foment teacher development, (2) to assure standards internally and (3) to apply for external quality accreditation. The structure for observation was implemented progressively: 1) Peer/Buzz: With the objective of giving all the teachers the opportunity of observing their peers and, consequently, improve their learning strategies, a Buzz week was implemented for first time in the Language Center. 2) Developmental Observations: An internal observation team conducted developmental (i.e. non-judgmental or graded) observations. These observations gave teachers opportunities to receive supportive developmental feedback on their 'blind spots', and to discuss and reflect on how they can improve as teachers. 3) Formal management observation: Formal observations were carried out by management in an informal manner. These were employed for quality assurance purposes.*

Key words: quality assurance, teacher development, observation, feedback.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Classroom observation describes the practice of sitting in on another teacher's class to observe, learn and reflect (Bilash, 2011). As Richards and Farrell (2005) stated observation is a basic part of the learning of many occupations, particularly in vocational and technical fields, playing an important role in other fields, such as business, law and medicine. Following the academic model of the Universidad Europea of Madrid which recognizes and reinforces good practices, enhances new learning and participative methodologies, a whole observation structure has been implemented in the Language Center.

Waxman (2003) emphasizes the importance of classroom observation for three main purposes: "1) description of instructional practices; 2) investigation of instructional inequities for different groups of students; and 3) improvement of teachers' classroom instruction based on feedback". Researchers believe that this last point, feedback based on observations, is a key element to the improvement of teachers' professional development.

Feedback provides teachers with the information of how their classroom functions, so they can later implement the necessary changes. This system is based on the belief that teachers value and recognize the feedback given by the observer, and as Waxman states "the observational feedback was intended to be used as a guide for teachers with which they and their colleagues could reflect about their practices on their own and decide what action to take".

There are different aspects of the class that can be analyzed. As language professors, researchers considered the following aspects more relevant: use of Language 2, students' interaction, teacher talking time, teaching strategies, or development of the four skills (reading, listening, writing and oral skills).

1.1 Full Bell QAD

The Language Center management, with the aim of growing, developing and ensuring that the quality of language teaching was up to standard, as well as providing further opportunity for staff development, examined different options of applying for a quality seal. After careful consideration, Bell Educational Trust was chosen due to their expertise in the field of language teaching and their collaboration with the Laureate network. In order to prepare the staff for a future Quality Assurance and Development (QAD) visit a Bell consultant visited the Language Center last year (June 2013) with the aim of analyzing the effectiveness of the English language department and to provide suggestions for further development. Among the main goals of the Bell visit was the provision of training and development activities that would address the UEM English teacher's learning needs.

In the course of the 5 day visit, the department needs were analyzed in meetings with managers and professors alike. During the visit it was agreed that there would be 20 minute drop-in observations designed to get an overall impression of the quality of teaching. It was also agreed that names of the teachers would not be mentioned in the report.

After this week of teacher observations, a final report was issued with a series of recommendations for improvement. Among the longer-term suggestions for future development was the development of a system of observations for quality assurance purposes. This consisted of Buzz Week, Developmental Observations and Formal Management Observations.

This paper outlines how the observation program was designed and carried out, with the aim of providing an example of good practice that is replicable in a variety of other contexts. Researchers decided to start with a buzz week experience as the most non-threatening, non-judgmental type of observation, and to then move on to peer observations, again with a very clear aim of collaborative learning rather than assessment. Management observations formed the final step in phase 3 of the program, and were initially implemented in a non-intrusive way before Bell final visit with the objective of providing feedback on teacher performance.

	Trimester 3 (2013)	Trimester 4 (2013)	Trimester 1 (2013)		Trimester 2 (2014)	Trimester 3 (2014)	Trimester 4 (2014)	Trimester 1 (2014)	Trimester 2 (2015)
Month	June	July	November	December	March	May-June	July	Oct-Nov	January
<i>Language Center Teachers</i>									
Training									
Peer buzz									
Observer election									
Observation survey									
Buzz week survey									
Focus group									
<i>Observation team</i>									
Meetings									
Training observations									
Intereafability									
Observations									
Final report									
<i>Management</i>									
Formal observations									
Meetings with Observation team									
<i>Bell Quality Assurance</i>									
QA Previsit									
Meetings									
QA Final visit									
Final QA report									

Table 1. Chronogram

2.-OBSERVATIONS

2.1. Buzz week gave teachers the opportunity to observe their peers with the aim of developing their teaching practices and acquiring some tips to improve their daily teaching. During a week in November, all teachers visited other colleagues in their classes for fifteen minutes and without having to give previous notice. Apart from the obvious benefits, such as new ideas to implement in class, etc., one of the major gains was that collaborative work increased considerably. The UEM Language Center was at the time comprised of thirty-four teachers of English, Spanish as a Foreign Language, German, French, Chinese and Italian. Although the Buzz week was carried out mainly in English, the other languages

were also considered. The activity proved highly successful with a total amount of 104 visits.

Once the event concluded, a survey was sent out to staff to gather personal opinions on the effectiveness of the experience. Results from the survey reflected that the majority of the professors observed, found the event useful or very useful, thought that it fomented collaborative work and had implemented some of the tips observed in their classes. However, the most remarkable outcome was that 100% of the professors who participated in the survey, stated that they would be willing to repeat the experience. (*see figure 1*)

Therefore, in view of the magnificent results obtained, a new Buzz week was scheduled for Trimester 3.

2.2 Developmental Observations. As recommended, a developmental observation team, constituted by a group of experienced teachers, was formed by the management team. The selection of observers was based on either their teaching seniority or a Master qualification in Education. To ensure that the observations remained developmental, and that confusion between observation for development and for quality assurance was avoided, no managers should be included in this team. A wiki was created with a chart where teachers could express their preferences for their observers, with the only requirement of establishing a different observer per trimester. (*see figure 2*)

With the observation team formed, a series of workshops and meetings were conducted to unify criteria and establish the protocol that should prevail. A **Code of Practice** was established for all observers, by which:

- the role of the observer should be clearly understood by the students
- observers would be seated away from the overt line of vision for the tutor or the group, but at the same time, able to see both the tutor and the group
- constructive feedback would be provided to the teachers at the end of the session
- the feedback would remain anonymous, however, results would be recorded on an excel sheet for final report.

It was also established that the observations would last 1.30 minutes and that each teacher would be observed once per trimester, by different observers.

After some discussions it was decided that two different checklists should be adopted, one provided by Bell that should be exclusively applied to management and used in the final report, and another to be used to give instant feedback to the professors (*see figure 3*). A final report with the global outcomes and suggestions for improving the quality of the Language Center teaching practice would be issued by three of the observers at the end of trimester 3 and addressed to the director of the Department. Further teacher training would be considered based on the results, to ensure success in the achievement of a Quality Seal.

Also, as a preliminary practice and with the aim of testing the efficiency of the checklists, an observation round was organized among the observers in trimester 1 and results

compared. Some changes were implemented before initiating the developmental observations.

Observations started in the middle of the second trimester and, time was given for professors to settle into the new groups and feel comfortable with the dynamics of the course. A **pre-observation meeting** was scheduled to ensure that the professors observed were aware of the purpose of the observation, as well as, creating a comfortable, psychological atmosphere among both teachers and observers. Therefore, teacher and observer had a pre-observation meeting to discuss the objectives of the class and a Pre-observation Record Form was filled in. Professors were asked, to specify which relevant area of their teaching they would like the observers to focus on. “A teacher will naturally look for support on an issue that is difficult for him or her, but it is often a great method of being exposed to a new and different approach to teaching” (Bilash, 2011).

One recurrent point was feedback on teacher/student talking time and effective error correction.

In order to ensure that the observers’ ratings were consistent with regard to the criteria established for teaching performance, it was decided that **Inter-Rater Agreement Measurement** should be adopted. According to Graham, Milanowski, Miller and Westat, (2012), Inter-Rater Agreement is the degree to which two or more evaluators using the same rating scale give the same rating to an identical observable situation. Surprisingly, few differences were found in the criteria of the observers. For example, there were some disagreements on the levels of students-teacher interaction, or whether the teacher supported the syllabus. Looking towards an agreement, a meeting was held with the objective of reaching a consensus. Evaluation ratings with an ample consensus among the observers produced reliable feedback and turned into a helpful tool in the professional development of the professors, needed for the ultimate objective of achieving the QAD.

Once all professors were observed in trimester 2, another survey was sent out to staff to gather their opinions on the observations. As in the Buzz week survey, the results showed that 100% of the professors found the developmental observations useful or very useful; the majority of the professors also considered that the professionalism of the observer was excellent or very good as well as the feedback supplied. The role that intrusion plays in the field of teaching is well-known, therefore, one of our main concerns was how the professors might feel about being observed. In fact, there were some concerns at first about the observation plan. It has long been proven that many teachers –even the most experienced ones- dislike and even fear being observed (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011). They argued that most professors are unaccustomed to being observed and the observation provokes nervousness and tension among them. Therefore, building an atmosphere of trust among observer and observed is of great importance.

Nonetheless, the survey results showed that over 80% of the staff expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the experience and 17 professors stated having felt comfortable with the observer and only 3 professors felt a bit intimidated (*see figure 3*)

The second round of peer observations was conducted shortly after trimester 2. Once observations were completed, a final report was issued, a focus group meeting with professors conducted and, a series of training sessions and workshops scheduled. Formal Department Management Observations were planned for October, as well as, a Bell quality assurance visit scheduled for November of 2014.

2.3 Formal Management Observations training

Before the full Bell QAD visit, managers visited all professors to ensure that all the Language Center teaching staff was ready for the final QAD visit and the Center standards complied with the Bell Educational Trust requirements. A training session on teacher observation was given to all the Language Center staff by the Bell coordinator. In the session both managers and teachers were given an insight into the procedures employed during the observations

3.- CONCLUSION

To conclude, the observation program was a highly rewarding and an effective developmental tool. It definitively fomented staff interaction, collaboration and improvement of the teaching practices in the classroom. Although, implemented in the language classroom, it could be easily extrapolated to other fields. In spite of the minor initial resilience on being observed, the survey showed that the majority of professors were content with the process. The Language Center passed the audit with some recommendations. During the visit, various areas of strengths, and areas for potential improvement were identified.

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ANNEX

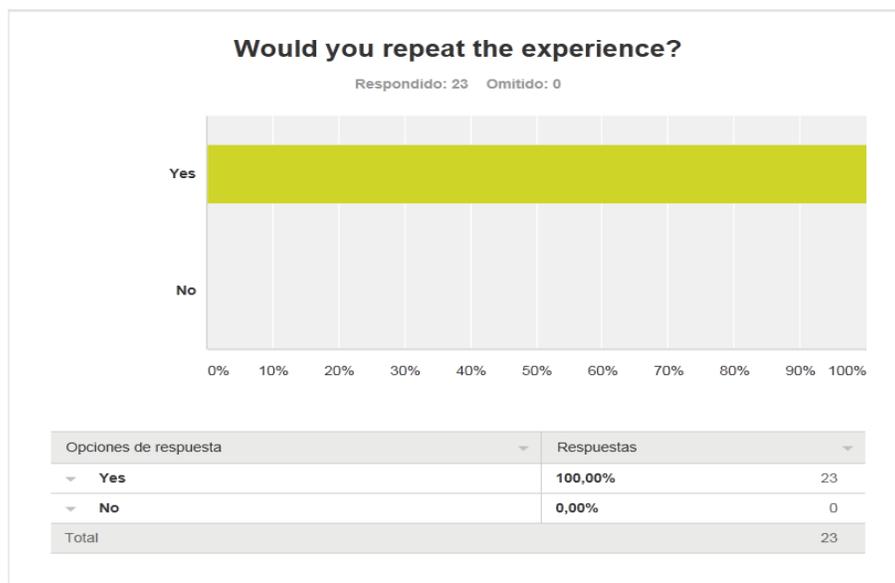


Figure 1. Buzz week: teacher satisfaction question

Observations	2014									
Trimester	2					Trimester 3				
OBSERVERS	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4		OBSERVERS	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
Rod	Esther M	Martin	Gabriel	Miguel		Rod	Isabel B	Kelly	Cindy	
Amy	Ken	Ana I.	Almudena	Declan		Amy	Ismael	Birgit	Isabel	Miguel
Ana	Arancha	Conchita	Kelly	Ismael		Ana	Ken	Martin	Danny	Almudena
Wendy	Isabel B.	Jerry	Leticia	Cindy		Wendy	María	Belén	Chantal	Mario
Ilene	Sara	Miriam	Danny	Isabel G		Ilene	Conchita	Jerry	Gabriel	Leticia
David	Birgit	Mitch	Jose M ^a	Mario		David	Esther M	Ana I	Mitch	Lorraine
Pam	María	Belén	Chantal	Lorraine		Pam	Arancha	Miriam	Sara	Declan

Figure 2. Observation form created to choose observer

Ranking		PEER OBSERVATION FOR DEVELOPMENTAL PURPOSES, 2014														Trimester 2
Yes																
No																
Professor	Observer	1.- Acceptable standard of English	2.- Lessons are taught mainly in L2	3.- Lessons start on time	4.- Lessons show evidence of good planning	5.- Local curriculum and syllabus	6.- High level of student interaction	7.- Evidence of good classroom management	8.- Opportunities for development of four skills	9.- Effective grammar teaching	10.- Pronunciation work	11.- Activities supplementary to coursebook	12.- Error correction	13.- Training toward independent learning	14.- Learning objectives explained to students	Comments on things to be improved
Professor 1																excellent game
Professor 2																
Professor 3																
Professor 4																
Professor 5																
Professor 6																
Professor 7																
Professor 8																
Professor 9																
Professor 10																
Professor 11																
Professor 12																
Professor 13																
Professor 14																
Professor 15																
Professor 16																
Professor 17																
Professor 18																
Professor 19																

Figure 3. Checklist following Bell parameters

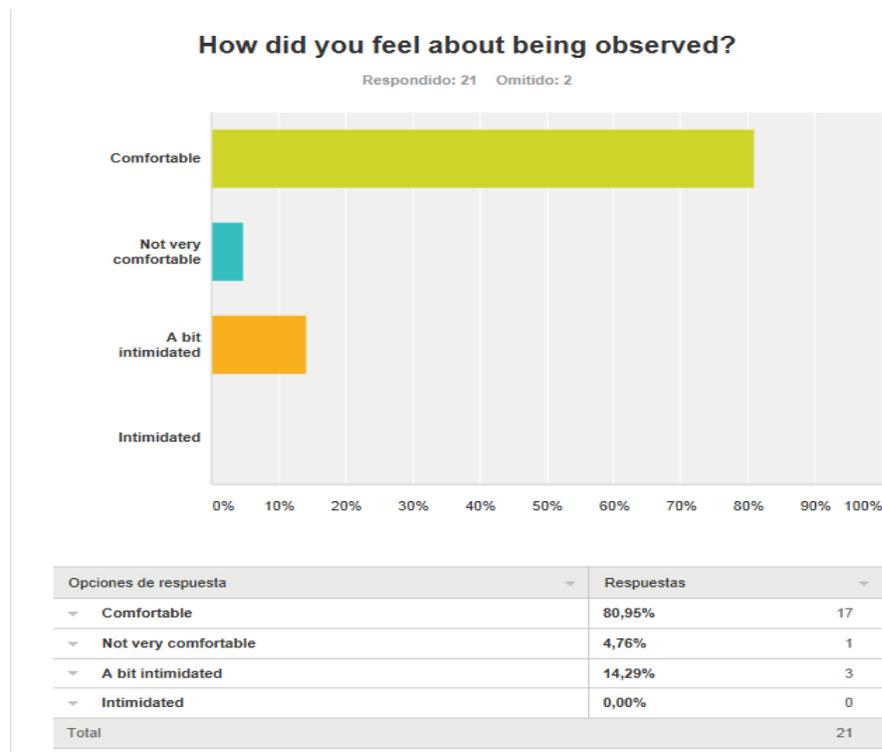


Figure 4. Teachers' feelings on being observed.