

# Reflective Teacher Observation Model for In-Service Teacher Trainees

*“I take substantial comfort from the growing interest in observational research. For perhaps in the argument between theory and practice, it is observational research which is the intermediary. In twenty years’ time the major advances in our understanding of ELT will ... be seen as coming not from the psycholinguistic end of our profession ... but from this sociologically inspired sphere of investigation—the scientific study of what actually and beneficially happens in classrooms.”*

(Bowers 1986, cited in Sheal 1989, 92)

It has been twenty years since Bowers made this comment connecting observational research with the achievement of major advances in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. Since that time, the practice of ELT has profited from the direct study of methods and techniques, often undertaken by teachers themselves. The result is a great amount of classroom action research indicating how teachers are developing their skills through the observation and evaluation of various approaches, methods, and techniques used in the classroom, thereby establishing a link between theory and practice.

Classroom observation of in-service teacher trainees by supervisors and trainers is part of this action research trend, even though all too often such an observation consists of the

observer storming into a classroom, observing silently for a period while taking notes, and then walking out, accomplishing little except anxiety and confusion. However, it is possible to conduct collaborative classroom observation with constructive feedback, which promotes trainee development by allowing them to freely evaluate the theories and classroom techniques that they have studied in their training courses and degree programs. Observation can encourage teacher trainees to reflect upon their teaching and make such reflection a permanent part of their teaching regimen. In this article, I will present a Teacher Observation Programme (TOP) for in-service teacher trainees that benefits teacher practice because it is a *reflective* model. I will begin by discussing a rationale for this TOP,

and will then describe a proposed implementation of the programme.

### **Rationale for the Teacher Observation Programme**

Ur (1992, 56) points out that the teaching of classroom observation and practice is “regarded as less prestigious” than teaching theory. Some teacher training courses emphasise theory so much that they completely neglect its application in the classroom. This dependence on theory can make teacher trainees insecure about their teaching practices. When ELT literature introduces new concepts such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the eclectic approach, trainees get apprehensive about what is considered “correct” and what they have been doing professionally.

Classroom observation can also be threatening for teachers who have to present a lesson to their students in front of an observer who is considered an “expert.” This intimidating situation becomes worse if the observer’s evaluation directly affects whether the teacher receives his or her professional qualification or promotion (Tsui 1993). Nevertheless, classroom observation, under the appropriate guidance of trainers and observers, can give trainees the confidence to discover how to apply the new ideas they learn in an in-service teacher training course. Trainees committed to receiving a professional certificate sometimes dedicate up to a year towards this endeavour; therefore, they should be given every opportunity to take advantage of professional practice, which includes observation. A TOP should be a compulsory part of every long-term teacher training course, which is all the more important for courses taught by trainees who have had no prior observed practical teaching or pre-service training.

### **Implementation of the Teacher Observation Programme**

The aim of a TOP is to facilitate focused, critical, reflective practice among trainees by enabling them to observe different teaching styles and to reflect upon their own teaching. By the end of a TOP, trainees should be able to plan reflective lessons; teach lessons using various techniques and methodologies; rationalise a range of teaching procedures

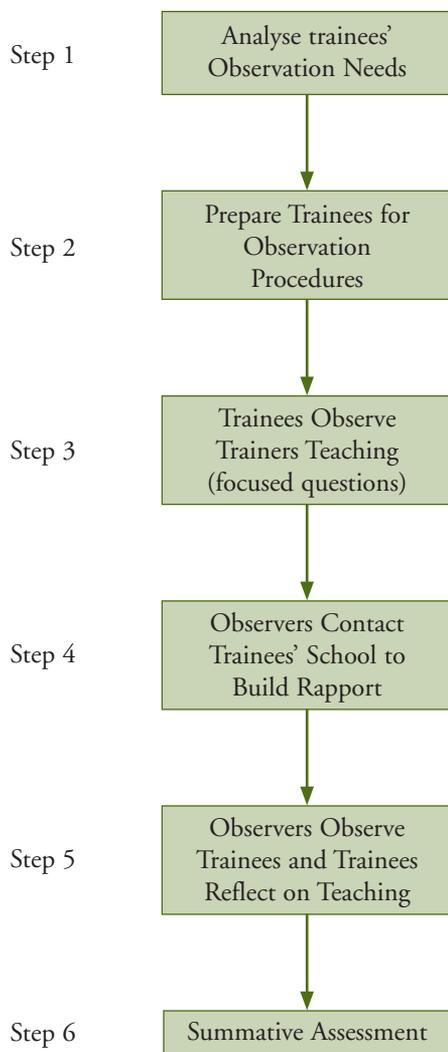
and processes they use with their classes; and reflect upon their teaching and make changes if necessary. The TOP model I propose has the following characteristics:

- It is *reflective* (Wallace and Woolger 1991). Wallace’s (1991) three models of teacher education can be applied to teacher observation: (1) in the *craft model* the observer expects the trainee to follow directions and imitate a master teacher; (2) in the *applied science model* the trainee is required to choose an approach that has scientific validity, such as CLT, and then base the lesson on that approach, leaving no room for change or unpredictability; and (3) in the *reflective model*, “the role of the student teacher is to develop” (Swan 1993, 243), and the responsibility for development resides with the trainees, who must constantly reflect on their practice.
- It is *collaborative* (Wallace 1991). The observer in this model helps the trainees to develop and refine their reflective practices. A true dialogue between observers and trainees is essential for the reflective TOP since there must be agreement about what was supposed to occur and what actually did occur (Wallace and Woolger 1991). Trainees should be informed throughout the observation process that the responsibility for their professional development lies with them, and that the observers are there not only to evaluate but also to help.
- It is *developmental* (Williams 1989). A developmental model of observation ensures that teachers are given the chance to “develop their own judgments of what goes on in their own classroom...sharpen their awareness of what their pupils are doing and the interactions that take place in their classes...and heighten their ability to evaluate their own teaching practices” (Williams 1989, 85). A TOP is developmental when it incorporates detailed post-observation sessions and allows trainees the flexibility to design the observation tools and decide who they want to include in the observation,

which may include a peer or colleague in addition to the observer. Such a model would replace the unreflective “learn-the-theory-and-then-apply-it” model described by Ur (1992).

**Six steps of a reflective Teacher Observation Programme**

Figure 1 depicts six steps for implementing the reflective TOP. For the model to be truly reflective, each of these steps must be discussed beforehand with the trainees. Therefore, depending upon trainee input, this proposed reflective TOP might be modified.



**Figure 1: Six Steps of a Reflective Teacher Observation Programme**

**Step 1: Analyse trainees’ observation needs**

As the first step of the TOP, observers investigate the needs of the teacher trainees regarding the upcoming observation. Observers use surveys, interviews, and possible field trips to the trainees’ schools to gather data about the trainees’ level of knowledge and what the trainees hope to achieve by teaching an observed lesson. Observers should use this time to get a complete picture of the instructional context, including what textbooks trainees use, what curriculum they follow, and how much flexibility they have from their school administration to try out something new in their classrooms. Observers then make a rough draft of a trainee observation plan.

**Step 2: Prepare trainees for observation procedures**

In Step 2, observers share the results of the needs analysis with the trainees and invite their feedback. As they discuss the rough draft of the observation plan, the observer and trainee effectively design the observation procedure together. This includes deciding together on the number of observations, the type of observation tool to be used, the number of observers (as a peer might observe as well), the scheduling of the feedback sessions, and the assessment criteria.

To prepare for the observation, trainees are introduced to reflective lesson plans and encouraged to use them during the observation. These plans allow a teacher to manage time and objectives, and they are reflective because they contain a column for notes, which is useful when the lesson plan is used again. Ho (1995) offers extensive ideas on reflective lesson plans, and Appendix 1 contains one that I adapted and used during an observation.

**Step 3: Trainees observe trainers teaching**

In Step 3, in-service trainees adopt the role of observer and observe their trainers teaching students in various contexts. Since most trainers teach in different types of teaching contexts (elementary, high school, and university), trainees have an excellent chance to observe diverse types of classes with students

of all levels. A group of no more than five trainees can observe one trainer at a time, and a variety of trainers can be observed.

To focus their observation, trainees use a range of observation tools. Focused observations are “more meaningful” when the trainees are informed of what they are “supposed to be looking for” (Sayavedra 1993, 154). This is achieved by using a set of questions specifically relating to methods and techniques, such as the use of materials, student participation, and the nature of error correction. Sayavedra presents a comprehensive list of possible focused observation questions that a group of trainees can refer to before they begin observing. (See Sayavedra 1993, 156–57.)

For their own observations, trainees will need a less complex observation tool, and the focused questions will help them develop one. Such a tool need not be too comprehensive or complex, and may include simple columns for time, events, and comments, as the one in Ur (1996, 322). Appendix 2 contains a sample observation tool that will get trainees thinking about their own simple yet effective observation instrument. An ideal way to make trainees reflect on the observation tools they create is to have them peer teach and observe each other while using the tools, and then have them meet and discuss what revisions they would like to make.

#### **Step 4: Observers contact trainees’ schools to build rapport**

It is imperative that observers create a collaborative relationship with not only their trainees but also with the trainees’ schools; this has been suggested by many teacher educators, including Wallace (1991). The observer who is an outsider to the school’s culture will not be able to adequately interpret the students’ or trainees’ behaviour, and neglecting the educational context could skew the observation results. Observers should therefore coordinate with trainees’ schools to fully comprehend the situations under which the trainees are required to teach.

#### **Step 5: Observers observe trainees and trainees reflect on their teaching**

Step 5 is the heart of the proposed TOP for which Steps 1 to 4 were preparation. The observer visits the school and observes the

trainees teach their classes. This step includes a pre-observation conference, the actual observation, and a feedback session.

#### **Pre-observation conference**

The trainee meets the observer to discuss the observation plan well before the class because “suggestions made to the teacher just before they teach a lesson can undermine a teacher’s confidence” (Randall and Thornton 2001, 58). Observers go over copies of lesson plans with the trainees and make suggestions. However, at this stage the observers must not rely too heavily on the aims and sub-aims of the lesson plan because classroom interactions are extremely complex, and if we concentrate on training teachers “to view the aims and sub-aims as the building blocks of a lesson, we run the risk of hindering their ability to view the whole of the lesson” (Malloes 2002, 8).

The observer and trainee also discuss the observation and evaluation criteria to help the trainee reflect on important issues and focus on what the observer will look for. In conjunction with the focused questions in Step 3, these evaluation criteria can also help trainees develop their own observation tools. (See Appendix 3 for observation and evaluation criteria.)

#### **Observing the class**

At this point, all of the previous steps merge to make the observation a collaborative, developmental, and non-judgmental endeavour, and the observer becomes a partner in the process and not just an intimidating “expert.” In addition to carefully completing the observation tool, the observer can consider becoming a participant and joining in or monitoring group work, talking to the students about their learning, or even co-teaching.

#### **Feedback from the observation**

The feedback session can be either immediate or delayed. Many teacher educators vouch for delaying feedback because even one day gives trainees time to digest their lesson and come to a more complete self-evaluation. Denman (1989) states that delayed feedback “gives the trainee the opportunity to come to a more mature, more balanced appraisal of the lesson” by viewing the lesson holistically and avoiding “the narrower point-by-point, stage-by-stage criticisms that tend to be chronological but not wholly evaluative.”

Four post-observation feedback stages from Wallace and Woolger (1991) relate well to the reflective TOP because they stress the collaborative nature of the feedback process. These stages are outlined below.

- *Stage 1: Establishing the facts: What happened?* In this stage, the observer and the trainee go over each step of the lesson in detail. “In this way, each participant can be clear about how close together (or far apart) their interpretation of the events is, and also how far they agree on the significance of the events” (Wallace and Woolger 1991, 322).
- *Stage 2: Objectives and achievements.* The discussion then moves towards the objectives the teacher had in mind for the lesson. Achievement of the objectives is discussed along with what the students learned from the lesson and how the teacher evaluates the student learning outcome.
- *Stage 3: Generating alternatives: What else could have been done?* In this stage the trainee is encouraged to think about the positive and negative effects of teaching alternatives he or she might have used. Wallace and Woolger (1991) admit that this can be the most difficult stage because considering alternatives is a challenge for teachers. “Somehow, the trainees must be brought to the point where the discussion of alternative strategies, procedures, and so on is not seen as a criticism (or even an implied criticism), but as an essential element in their on-going professional development” (Wallace and Woolger 1991, 322).
- *Stage 4: Self-evaluation: What have you learned?* In the last stage the trainee and the observer both reflect on what they have learned from the observation. When trainees discuss their interpretation of what they have learned, the observer should listen attentively because the discussion will indicate the trainee’s ability to self-evaluate and the capacity for self-improvement.

#### **Step 6: Summative assessment**

If teacher trainers include the observation assessment with the final evaluation

for all assignments in a teacher training course, I suggest that the observation assessment be *summative* rather than *formative*. A formative assessment is an evaluation of all observations, including those when the trainee was unaccustomed to the process. A summative assessment takes place only on the final observation, which allows the trainees to benefit from repeated observations and feedback sessions, after they have been helped to reflect upon and improve their teaching. In addition, the final observation assessment might include evaluations from more than one source, including peer and student evaluations of the lesson.

Another assessment option is to ask trainees to develop an *observation portfolio*, or a folder of all lesson plans, handouts, reflective notes, observers’ suggestions, and even audio or videotaped materials. A portfolio gives the trainees autonomy, enhances their reflective practices, and allows the observers the opportunity to assess more objectively.

In some cases, a videotaped or webcam-based observation may be a necessary option, especially in countries where teacher trainers live many miles from the teachers they are supposed to observe and the time and cost of travel makes trainee observation impractical. In these situations, trainees could videotape themselves teaching a lesson or, where communications infrastructure permits, use a webcam to broadcast their classroom lessons on the Internet for the observers to view.

#### **Conclusion**

Williams’ (1989, 86–87) seven principles of teacher observation are pertinent to a reflective TOP. These principles are:

1. *Development:* The aim of the observation should be to develop the teachers’ own judgments about what is going on in their own classrooms.

2. *Limited and focused content:* Observers should not tackle too much in one visit but rather focus on one or two items, depending on the teacher’s needs.

3. *Course-link:* Observers should try to link the visits to the course so that the teacher’s attention in the classroom is focused on items being discussed in the course.

4. *Teacher-centredness:* Observers should try to allow the teacher to take much of the

responsibility for the observations. The purpose of the visits should be discussed with the teachers so that they are involved in the rationale behind them.

5. *Future development*: Observers should try to leave the teacher with an instrument for self-development after the course.

6. *Positiveness*: The visit should be helpful, not destructive. Observers should stress the positive aspects of the lesson, what went well, and build on these.

7. *Flexibility*: Observers should be flexible and should respond to the teacher in the post-observation discussion.

These principles have in common a concern for the professional development of teacher trainees, which is accomplished through collaboration and understanding their needs. Trainees who sense that observations are based on their real instructional context and who are involved in all stages of the process will be more inclined to reflect on their roles as teachers and to grow from the experience. I hope that through this proposed TOP we can evoke the best of our trainees' knowledge and abilities and perhaps even take them a few steps towards independently carrying out action research.

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**SADIA ALI** has been teaching ESL/ESP for ten years to baccalaureate and tertiary level students. Currently, she teaches composition at the Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Her areas of interest include the use of educational technology to teach language, portfolio assessment, and teacher education.

# Appendix 1 Reflective Lesson Plan

Reflective Teacher Observation Model for In-Service Teacher Trainees • Sadia Ali

Lesson Plan	Reflective Notes and Journal Entries
<p><b>Class:</b> Composition I  <b>Week:</b> Twelve (12), 10:00–11:20 AM  <b>Room:</b> 22</p> <p><b>Objectives</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recap use of present tense in summary writing.</li> <li>2. Offer general guidelines on summary writing.</li> <li>3. Encourage peer review.</li> </ol> <p><b>Procedures</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm up (10:00–10:05): Quickly recap previous lesson. Tell today’s objectives.</li> <li>2. Review verb tenses in summaries (10:05–10:15): Distribute Handout 1 (Tenses in summary/subject-verb agreement). Students complete the Handout individually. Take holistic feedback (answer key on the reverse side of teacher’s Handout).</li> <li>3. Student discussions (10:15–10:25): Return students’ first drafts. Put them in groups. Students discuss in groups and list important points to be included in the summary from the passage. They decide what should not be included in the summary. Students make changes in their drafts.</li> <li>4. Group revision (10:25–10:45): Distribute Handout 2 (summary writing skills). Ask students to read and discuss in groups if their summaries include the important points mentioned in the Handout.</li> <li>5. Peer review (10:45–11:10): Shuffle and distribute students’ drafts to the class. Give Handout 3 (peer review) to the students. Students review their peer’s work using the checklist. They may discuss within groups to confirm their opinions/decisions.</li> <li>6. Homework: Students work on drafts at home and email by 11:00 AM on November 24.</li> </ol> <p><b>Note:</b> 10-minute cushion time to email draft.</p>	<p><i>Activity was difficult for some students. Next time it should be done in pairs.</i></p> <p><i>This took longer than 10 minutes.</i></p> <p><i>Students could have reported on salient features of peer review or on the prominent and recurrent errors in class for everyone’s benefit.</i></p>

# Appendix 2 Sample Observation Tool

Reflective Teacher Observation Model for In-Service Teacher Trainees • Sadia Ali

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Trainee \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_ Observer \_\_\_\_\_

Classroom Behaviour	Observer's Comments
Organisation/Clarity	
Enthusiasm/Motivation	
Interpersonal Relationships	
Instructional Skills	
Professional Characteristics	

**Additional Notes:**

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# Appendix 3 **Teacher Observation and Evaluation Criteria**

*Reflective Teacher Observation Model for In-Service Teacher Trainees • Sadia Ali*

**I. INSTRUCTIONAL SKILLS** — The teacher demonstrates, in his or her performance, a competent level of knowledge and skill in designing and conducting an instructional experience.

Indicators:

- Writes and teaches to clear objectives — Utilizes principles of learning — Provides a variety of instructional experiences
- Uses appropriate instructional strategies for students, subjects, and goals — Monitors ongoing performance to adjust lessons
- Uses school's goals and guide effectively — Demonstrates creativity in the teaching process

**II. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION** — The teacher demonstrates, in his or her performance, a competent level of knowledge and skill in organizing the physical and human elements in the educational setting.

Indicators:

- Provides a classroom climate conducive to learning
- Provides a model in demeanour and appearance that does not detract from teaching effectiveness
- Assesses individual differences, provides appropriate student grouping and uses appropriate instructional resources to meet individual needs
- Involves students in planning and evaluating their own work where appropriate

**III. STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND ATTENDANT PROBLEMS** — The teacher demonstrates the ability to manage the non-instructional human dynamics in the educational setting.

Indicators:

- Communicates clearly established parameters — Recognizes conditions that lead to problems — Assists students toward self-discipline
- Responds reasonably to discipline problems — Effectively utilizes the assistance of administrators or support personnel

**IV. KNOWLEDGE OF SUBJECT MATTER** — The teacher demonstrates a depth and breadth of knowledge of theory and content in general education and subject matter specialization(s) appropriate to the grade level.

Indicators:

- Gives evidence of subject matter competency in area(s) to be taught
- Recognizes the relationship between one's subject matter field and other disciplines or subjects
- Keeps abreast of new developments in the subject matter area

**V. INTEREST IN TEACHING PUPILS** — The teacher demonstrates an understanding of and commitment to each pupil, taking into account each individual's unique background and characteristics. The teacher demonstrates enthusiasm for or enjoyment in work with pupils.

Indicators:

- Plans educational experiences based on students' unique background and characteristics
- Enjoys working with students
- Provides prompt, meaningful communication among parents

## Teacher Observation and Evaluation Criteria *(Continued)*

*Reflective Teacher Observation Model for In-Service Teacher Trainees • Sadia Ali*

**VI. PREPARATION AND SCHOLARSHIP** — The teacher exhibits, in his or her performance, evidence of having a theoretical background and knowledge of the principles and methods of teaching and a commitment to education as a profession.

Indicators:

- Keeps abreast of current and effective emerging principles of teaching
- Contributes to school and professionalism
- Maintains professional rapport with colleagues, parents, and community

**VII. EFFORT TOWARD IMPROVEMENT WHEN NEEDED** — The teacher demonstrates an awareness of his or her limitations and strengths and demonstrates continued professional growth.

Indicators:

- Participates in career development
- Utilizes self-evaluation as a tool for professional growth
- Responds constructively to recommendations

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## ANSWERS TO THE LIGHTER SIDE COIN TOSS

1. QUARTER
2. MINT
3. COPPER
4. EAGLE
5. LINCOLN
6. CONGRESS
7. STRIKING
8. INVESTMENT
9. HALF DOLLAR
10. PENNY HOCKEY
11. WEST POINT
12. COINAGE ACT
13. FEDERAL RESERVE
14. COMMEMORATIVE
15. NUMISMATICS