



Module 13

Peer Observations

Teacher Development

Video Length: Approximately 14 Minutes
Notes to the Trainer

For best results, have participants go through the readings for this module prior to viewing the video. As you work through this module, use pairs or groups whenever you think it might be effective. After each group activity, debrief the answers and use them for further discussion of various points. Refer back to the main points when appropriate. It is important that teachers apply the concepts in the module to their own classrooms and situations. The goals for this module are 1) to create an understanding of the importance of observation feedback in helping teachers improve their professional skills; and 2) to demonstrate the use of peer feedback so that teachers can think about how these concepts can be used effectively in their own situations.

See Appendix A for additional handouts that can be used for general observation and discussion tasks with any of the modules.

Before Viewing

Ask participants to get into groups and talk about experiences they have had both being observed and observing others. In the discussion, they could consider the following, from the position of either the observer or the observed:

- For what purpose they were being observed / observing.
- What their relationship was with the observer / observed; e.g., a peer, a supervisor, a mentor, a student teacher, a parent, etc.
- What observation procedures were used.
- What was done with the information from the observation.
- In what ways it was a positive or negative experience.
- What they learned from the experience.

If they have never been observed, they can use a time that they were the observer instead. If they have never been in either role, they can imagine what an observation might be like.

As they discuss these questions, they should take notes. They can compare these notes with their observations from viewing a formative peer review process in the upcoming video segments.

Module 13: Peer Observations

Preview Vocabulary

Terms	Definitions
Bias	An opinion about something—in this case related to teaching and learning—that influences how you deal with it.
Colleague	Peers; people you work with.
Confidential	Spoken or written in secret and intended to be kept that way.
Debriefing	Getting information about an observation shortly after it is completed.
Feedback	Advice or criticism about the degree of success of something observed.
Formative observation	Teachers observing each other to help improve their teaching and to help them develop professionally.
Observation instruments	Guides, checklists, or other forms. Used during the observation process in order to have a reliable, systematic approach to observation.
Paraphrase	Use different words and phrasing to describe what someone else has said or written.
Peer observation	Teachers observing each other's classes in order to improve their teaching ability and get new ideas about teaching.
Pre / post	Before / after (in this case, observing a class).
Professional development	An on-going effort and learning process undertaken by individuals (teachers) to improve their teaching and other professional skills.
Summative observation	Observation to evaluate teachers for an administrative purpose such as employment, salary, or pay raises, promotion, etc.

Now start the video. Listen to the introduction. Complete the guided observation and reflection tasks for each of the video segments. The next part of the manual is for trainees and is available on separate pages for ease of copying.

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Module 13, Peer Observations

Introduction, Expanded Narrative

Classroom observation can take different forms and be done for different purposes. The two most commonly used forms of observation are summative observation and formative observation.

- **Summative observation.** This observation is an evaluation, which rates the teacher who is being observed. It can be done for administrative or supervisory reports for the purpose of job retention, promotion, salary increases, etc.

- **Formative observation.** The purpose of a formative review is to help teachers become better teachers and more knowledgeable professionals. With peer observation, teachers observe each other's classes, give each other feedback, and share ideas.

There are some definite advantages to using peer observation. Observers are familiar with the teaching situation, both its goals and its limitations. Peer observation can also help individual teachers try to improve their skills without the fear of recorded evaluation. Such observation done well can help to create a strong supportive atmosphere among the faculty in a school.

There are also some potential problems with doing peer observations that must be guarded against. Data collection may be biased due to 1) an observer's own belief systems about teaching and learning; and 2) personal relationships and peer pressure. Teachers may not be able to observe others' teaching objectively, which could have a negative effect on peer relationships. For this reason, it is very important to train teachers well in the use of the peer observation process. The benefits can be well worth the effort.

Module Focus

In this module, we'll focus on formative observation, specifically peer observation. Peer observation can be a particularly effective kind of formative observation because it provides the opportunity for faculty self-assessment and improvement, while at the same time allowing for the monitoring of teacher performance in a non-threatening way. It can benefit both the person being observed and the observer. Both can learn. The "peers" in this process can be either equal pairs or one can be in a mentoring relationship with the other. The most successful peer observation contains the following elements:

- Training for faculty to learn how to do peer observation.
- A set of agreed-upon instruments to allow for a systematic process of observation.
- An administrative system that allows teachers time to observe each other.
- A set of procedures that includes preparing for the observation, doing the observation, and a post-observation debriefing of the observation.
- Mutual respect and trust that the results of the observations will be confidential, shared only by the observer and the observed.

Successful peer observation brings these results:

- Teachers have the opportunity to see other's teaching styles and techniques and reflect on their own teaching.
- Positive changes occur in classroom learning, which benefits the students.
- Teachers in the school develop stronger, more collegial relationships.

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In this module, you will see the three steps listed above:

1. Preparing for the observation.
2. Observing in the classroom.
3. The post-observation debriefing.

As you watch, consider how you might adapt the techniques you see to your own situation.

Video Segment #1, Preparing for the Observation: Observation Guide **[Read before viewing.]**

1. The observer (T1) in this segment is asking for information about the class she will be observing. List the points of information she asks for and receives from the teacher she is going to observe (T2).
2. Write down the two aspects of her class about which T2 wants information.
3. Notice the way the two teachers interact with each other: verbal behavior, non-verbal behavior, and affect (emotion).

Reflection

[Read and answer after viewing.]

1. Compare your answers with a partner or your group. Do you agree? What information about the class did the observer (T1) ask for? What else might you ask if you were the observer? If you were doing this in your situation, what information might you need before you begin an observation?
2. What are the advantages or disadvantages of observing a particular point in a teacher's class? Explain. In your group, discuss aspects of your own classes about which you might want a peer to give you constructive feedback.
3. What did you notice about the way the two teachers interacted? Do you feel they were mutually supportive? Do you think they trusted each other? Give examples of verbal, non-verbal, or affective behavior that support your opinion. Would these behaviors fit your situation? If so, explain how. If not, what behaviors would be more effective in your situation?

Video Segment #2, Observing in the Classroom: Observation Guide **[Read before viewing.]**

1. As you watch this video segment, list the behaviors of the observer. Notice where she is sitting, how she acts, what she is doing, classroom atmosphere, etc.
2. Watch a second time and focus on the behavior of the teacher. Notice how she reacts to being observed and her behavior with her students.

Reflection

[Read and answer after viewing.]

1. Compare your list of observer behaviors with a partner or others in your group. Where did the observer sit? What did she express with her non-verbal behavior? Did she interact with the teacher or the students? How did she record her notes on the observation? Compare this observer's behavior with the behavior of an observer in your class. Was it the same? If so, describe your visitor's behavior. If not, explain how they were different and whether the difference was better for your situation.
2. Does the teacher's behavior appear to be what you might expect in a formal observation? Explain your answer with examples. Does she interact with the observer in any way? If so, how? What do you notice about her behavior with her students? How does her interaction with the observer compare with a normal observation in your situation? Discuss anything you might do differently if a peer observer came to your class.

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Video Segment #3, Post-observation Debriefing: Observation Guide **[Read before viewing.]**

Before this debriefing session, the teachers observed each other's classes, so during the session they take turns giving feedback. Before you watch the next video segment, divide a piece of paper in half. On one half, write *Positive Feedback* and on the other write *Suggestions for Improvement*. Use it to take notes for #2 and #3 below as you watch the video.

1. The first time you watch the video segment, list the types of information the teachers exchange in this debriefing.
2. Watch the video segment again. On your paper, note the things each teacher liked about the other's class. Pay attention also to the observed teachers' reactions to the positive feedback.
3. At the same time, note any suggestions for improvement they make. Pay special attention to the language and manner that is used to make suggestions.
4. Listen for language that the teachers use at the end of the session.

Reflection **[Read and answer after viewing.]**

1. Again, compare your lists of types of information. What do you think about the type of information exchanged? If you were the observer, what comments might you make on the brief part of the lesson you saw?
2. Look at column one on your sheet. How many different things are noted? What did the teacher in the second observation say in response to the comment, "That was a really wonderful class!" Did she agree? Disagree? Why do you think she responded the way she did? How would you respond to such a comment about your teaching? Would you feel pleased or uncomfortable? Or both? Discuss giving compliments with your group. In your situation, what is an acceptable way to express to a peer that you liked the class you observed?
3. Look at the second column on your sheet. How many items are noted there? Compare it to the first column. What are your observations about this debriefing session? Did the debriefing cover the focus items requested by the first teacher observed? (Refer back to the *Video #1, Preparing for the Observation* section of this module, as needed.)
4. In your opinion, was this a helpful session for the two teachers? Did it give them some useful feedback for improving their teaching? If yes, in what way? If no, what suggestions would you give them to improve the process?

Summary Discussion

1. Do you think peer observation could be effective in your own teaching situation? Explain.
2. Review your lists and the ideas above. In your group, think about the advantages and disadvantages of trying to initiate a peer observation process in your unit or school. Consider these aspects:
 - Areas that could benefit from such a process
 - Reaction and possible support from your administration
 - Teacher reaction, both positive and negative
 - Available resources
 - Ways to overcome limitations or areas of difficulty

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Now You Try It—An Action Plan

Step 1

You can read some of the articles on the topic of contextualizing language (see Module 13 Readings plus the List of Additional Readings and Resources in *Shaping the Way We Teach English: Readings and Resources*). Using the video, you have seen a few examples and ideas from other teachers' classes.

Now, choose a partner (a peer). Together, prepare for a formative peer observation. Use the *Peer Observation Guide for Formative Review* that follows, as needed. Decide on the focus for an observation.

Step 2

Role play (practice) being both the observer and the observed. Your questions might ask for:

- Information about the class
- Information about the purpose of the lesson
- How the lesson fits into the overall curriculum
- What you want the observer to focus on
- Time and place of the observation

Step 3

Share your plan with others in this training group. Change your plan, as needed.

Step 4

If you are currently teaching, schedule times when you can observe each other's classes and afterwards debrief.

If you are not teaching, you can fill out the observation instrument as if you had observed the class and role play a post-observation debriefing session.

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Peer Observation Guide for Formative Review

Reminder

1. Observations should consist of the following:
 - a. Pre-observation meeting at which agreement is established about what is being observed
 - b. Observation
 - c. Post-observation meeting at which results are discussed
2. Videotaping is recommended. It facilitates a lively post-observation discussion.
3. A second observation can be planned to follow-up on any changes the instructor wants to implement as a result of the initial observation.
4. Both parties should be in agreement that this observation process is confidential unless otherwise stated and agreed on in advance.

Pre-observation Discussion Guide

Use the following questions as a guide to better understand the context in which the observation will take place.

1. What class is it?
2. What is the teaching point of your lesson?
3. What is your reason for choosing this lesson or teaching point? (What is the observation focus?)
4. What has led up to this lesson (if it's part of a larger sequence)? What comes afterwards?
5. What are your perceptions about this group of students?

Post-Observation Discussion Guide

Use the following as a guide for debriefing the observation afterwards.

1. Ask the person who taught how s/he felt the lesson went.
2. Reconfirm the observation focus points (what the teacher asked you to observe).
3. Offer positive comments on what you think went well; the strengths of the lesson.
4. Offer tactfully worded suggestions for improvement. These should be limited to the area(s) you were asked to observe. Ask questions for clarification, as needed.
5. End on a courteous note.

Reflection

Ask yourself the following after the observation process is complete.

1. How do I feel about the process as a whole?
2. What will I do in the same way next time? What will I do differently?
3. Is there other information I'd like to have about this kind of review? If yes, where will I get it?

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Answer Key to Module 13, Peer Observations

Here are some suggested directions for answers to the questions for this module. Actual answers may vary depending on local context and the kinds of experience that viewers bring to the task of interpreting and applying video and text concepts.

Module 13, Video Segment #1, Preparing for the Observation

1. The observer asked:
 - Which class she would be observing.
 - For information about the class proficiency level because she had never taught that class before.
 - What the teaching point of the lesson was going to be.
2. The teacher being observed asked the observer to look at:
 - The language she was using in the class. Was it appropriate for the low listening proficiency and limited vocabulary of some members of the class?
 - The sequencing and rhythm of the whole lesson. Was she going too fast or too slow? Were the transitions from one activity to the next natural?

Notice that in this case, the teacher being observed chose the focus of the observation. It is also possible that the two teachers can negotiate what they want the focus to be. The important point is that the observed teacher needs to have an important voice in deciding what the focus will be.

3. The two teachers in this segment are both highly experienced teachers with many years of teaching experience between them. Their teaching unit requires even the most experienced teachers to do some peer observation every year and submit a report on it as part of their yearly evaluation. They are colleagues and feel it is important to be supportive of each other's efforts. Notice that:
 - The observer verbally puts herself in the position of learning from the person being observed by saying she had "never taught that class before."
 - The observer indirectly compliments the person being observed by saying, "Sounds pretty challenging" and "sounds interesting."
 - The observer pays attention to what the observed teacher is saying. She takes notes. She looks at her attentively. And she uses back-channeling, or verbal expressions to show she is paying attention. For example, "OK," "uh huh," "sure," "good, good," "sounds great," and "I'm looking forward to it."
 - The teacher being observed answered every question as cooperatively and completely as she could. She tried to give the observer the information she needed in order to make an informed observation.

Two important points to notice in this preparation phase are that the two teachers spoke in a friendly and respectful way to each other. They both tried to be as cooperative as possible. Also, the observer tried to get as much information as she could about the class she planned to observe.

Module 13, Video Segment #2, Observing in the Classroom

1. The observer is sitting quietly at the back of the class, behind the students. She is not speaking to either the teacher or the students or interrupting in any way. She is paying attention to the teacher and to what is going on in the classroom. She smiles at the teacher's enthusiasm. She does not appear to be using an instrument for this observation, but is writing her own notes.

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2. The teacher appears to be teaching the class as usual. Her behavior and appearance are informal and relaxed. Although we do not see it in the video, this particular teacher did prepare her class in advance for the observer's visit, explaining who she was and why she was there. After that, she ignored the observer's presence.

The teacher discusses the placement of the thesis in an essay at the beginning of the segment. She monitors student work, giving positive reinforcement and informational feedback when needed. She appears very informal in her student interactions.

The important thing to notice about the behavior of both the observer and the teacher is the level of informality. The teacher is not worried about the observation because this is a friendly peer and the information she gathers will only stay between the two of them. Because the teacher is serious about wanting to improve her teaching, she wants the observer to see a regular class with normal behaviors, not a "show" class she might design for a summative evaluation observation.

Video Segment #3, Post-observation Debriefing

1. They complimented each other on their "great" classes. The first observer once again said that she had never taught the class. They listed reasons why they thought the classes were good. The first teacher observed explained some of her reasons for doing what she did. The first observer gave a suggestion for improvement.

2. & 3. Debriefing sessions are good places for teachers to explain their reasons for doing what they do in class. This is an important learning aspect of such sessions and can change the observers' perceptions about what they saw. Some comments from the debriefing included:

Positive Feedback

1st Observation:

- A great class, wonderful.
- Creative approach.
- How involved the students were.
- Clear instructions, not paraphrased, but repeated exactly the same each time. Appropriate for learners with low-level listening skills.

Suggestions for Improvement

1st Observation:

- Spoke too fast at times.

Notice that when the observer mentioned paraphrasing, the teacher explained that she deliberately did not paraphrase because of the students' low listening proficiency. She felt that to give the same instructions a different way would confuse the students. They might think they were getting a new direction. The observer appreciated that explanation. She felt that was a learning point for her.

Only one suggestion for improvement was made, that perhaps the teacher spoke too fast. The observer softened the criticism with language like, "I have one small piece of feedback – do what you will with it." "I didn't notice students reacting negatively, but just a personal reaction."

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The observed teacher was not offended by the suggestion. She not only agreed with the observer, but said that this was a continual problem for her. She even prepares the students for it, telling them to raise their hands and ask her to please slow down. Because they feel relaxed in her class, they do this. The observed teacher thinks this gives students confidence in talking with teachers. However, she knows she can't place the sole responsibility on the students and so tries to monitor herself.

Making suggestions for improvement is not an easy thing for peers to do. It is especially difficult to do with experienced teachers, who may feel that because they are so experienced, they should not be criticized at all. This is why training in peer observation is so important. Teachers participating in the process need to believe that they can improve. Has anyone ever taught a perfect class?!

One technique that can be helpful in peer observation is video taping the session you are observing. As teachers watch the video tape together, the observers can point out certain parts of the lesson, giving observed teachers the opportunity to see problems themselves.

This debriefing session had many more compliments than suggestions for improvement. There is no problem with that if the classes were as good as the observers felt them to be. If they weren't, then the observers might have included a few more suggestions. Since the purpose of this process is to improve teaching, it is not helpful to say only positive things if there are some areas that need to be improved.

However, there can be a problem if there are too many negative comments or criticisms. It is good practice to include at least as many positive comments as suggestions for improvement.

In response to the teachers focus request, the suggestion about speaking speed could relate to appropriate use of language. There was nothing in the portion of the session seen here that addressed the question of sequencing and rhythm of the whole lesson. If that happens, the observed teacher can simply ask the observer directly what was noticed about that aspect.

4. At the end of the session, the teachers thanked each other. The observed teacher invited the observer back again.