Observing and Providing Feedback to Teachers of Adults Learning English

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Background on Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both native English speakers and learners whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills needed to improve their literacy levels, and adult secondary education (ASE) classes to earn high school equivalency certificates. Both ABE and ASE instruction help learners achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL), ABE, or workforce preparation classes to improve their oral and literacy skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for program administrators who are working with teachers of English language learners in adult education programs.

Introduction

Effective and collaborative supervision of language teachers involves understanding teacher and learner characteristics and needs, approaching supervision from a developmental rather than an evaluative perspective, and engaging in reflective communication. (See the companion to this brief, *Supporting and Supervising Teachers Working With Adults Learning English* [Young, 2009], for more information about collaborative supervision.) Teacher observation is an important component of supervision, and there are various ways that teacher supervisors can approach this task. There are also many positive reasons for conducting teacher observations using a collaborative approach. Observations can give administrators an understanding of how teachers are carrying out instruction; the ways that curriculum, materials, and special projects are implemented within and across levels; difficulties that students may be having; advantages and challenges of using technology; and promising instructional practices that can be shared with other teachers. This brief addresses three types of observations: formal, walk-through, and alternative. Each type is described, and examples are provided for implementation within a collaborative approach to adult ESL teacher supervision.

Formal Observations

Annual review of teacher performance is the most common purpose of classroom observations. Supervisors generally use a standard observation form or checklist, which they complete while observing the lesson. After the lesson observation, the supervisor and teacher meet for a post-observation conference to discuss the strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement of the teacher's practice. Some of the areas that a supervisor may focus on in an adult ESL language lesson are classroom management and organization, classroom interactions and student participation, student and teacher attitudes, use of resources and materials, language teaching techniques and methodologies, and evidence of language acquisition and learning (Stoller, 1996).

There are a variety of ways to design and use an observation form to collect data about the lesson observed in a consistent way (Bailey, 2006). Wajnryb (1992) provides an extensive collection of language lesson observation tasks and data collection formats, and an example of a classroom observation form that follows the stages of a language learning lesson plan is provided on pages 5 and 6 of this brief.

In a collaborative model of supervision that encourages teacher reflection, the supervisor talks beforehand with the teacher to be observed to find out the area(s) in which the teacher would like feedback. For example, Stoller (1996) suggests that the teacher might ask the supervisor to pay attention to one or more of the following questions:

- How clear are my directions?
- What kinds of questions do I ask students?
- Do I give all students equal attention?
- What is the distribution of student and teacher talk in class?
- What kinds of verbal and nonverbal feedback do I give students?
- How often do students direct their comments to classmates, and how often do they direct them to me?
- How well do I answer students' questions? Are my answers more complex than the questions merit?
- How well am I implementing the curriculum?
- How well do I handle unanticipated classroom events?

According to Vasquez and Reppen (2007), in a collaborative post-observation conference, "Posing questions to teachers during these interactions allows them to engage in reflection, to think critically, and to approach teaching as a decision-making process" (p. 164). Reflective questions might include the following:

- What would you perceive to be the strengths/weaknesses of the class that I observed?
- What do you think worked particularly well?
- What would you have changed or done differently?

- What are your feelings about the effectiveness of activities, the variety of activities, your pace/timing, the clarity of your instructions, the level of student involvement?

Similar questions are provided in an observations chart on page 4.

Walk-Through Observations

Administrators are ultimately concerned with the use of strategies that support instructional programs and teachers and that are most likely to result in improved student outcomes. Based on the belief that an administrator's quiet, constant, and supportive presence is essential for the good management of a program, frequent classroom walk-throughs allow administrators to be present in classrooms on a regular basis (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004). Walk-through observations have been described as a "short, focused, yet informal observation. … There is no intent to evaluate the teacher; rather it is a time to gather information about curricular and instructional practices and decisions teachers are making" (Downey et al., 2004, p. 2). Walk-throughs are most effective when their purpose and frequency are established collaboratively between the teacher and administrator; there is an established atmosphere of openness, transparency, and connectedness; and teachers experience them as the supportive involvement and collaboration of administrators rather than as evaluations of their performance (David, 2008).

For example, a program may decide to integrate technology into instruction as a strategy to respond to varied student learning styles and increase student familiarity with technology as an information management tool. When walk-throughs have been established as part of the program's operational culture, teachers know that administrators are going to look for examples of technology integration because they participated in the decision to pursue this focus. If administrators unilaterally impose a focus or program direction and then conduct walk-throughs to ensure that their directive is being followed, the walk-throughs become evaluative.

When done in the context of collaboratively developed program goals, walk-throughs can help to create shared accountability between teachers and administrators. Administrators can see for themselves the lost instructional time when computers are not working, or they can see how much more effective it would be if there were additional computers available in the classroom. They can also notice an effective practice or strategy in one classroom that another teacher might benefit from observing and implementing. Administrators have the opportunity to identify promising practices and look for support for teachers who need it.

Through the use of walk-throughs, teachers feel the benefit of frequent and regular administrative presence in their classrooms in many different ways. Conversations about their classroom practice can move more quickly because the administrator is already aware of the context. Requests for assistance, guidance, and support are framed by the administrator's experience of brief but frequent observations in the classroom. Administrators need to emphasize that their interest in conducting walk-throughs is to ensure that they are well informed and aware of all of the intricacies of the programs for which they are responsible. As they engage in establishing program goals, priority outcomes, and desired instructional practices with teachers, administrators can explain that they will be involved in the classroom, doing what they can to support teachers, and that walk-throughs will allow them to know firsthand about the classroom context. They can assure teachers that walk-throughs do not involve checking up, but rather checking in.

In conducting walk-throughs, administrators use a number of different tools, including notes, tracking logs, and checklists. Some administrators make a point of leaving a brief note for every teacher whose classroom they visit. A little more than a thank you note, it expresses appreciation for the visit and then makes a positive observation. This also gives administrators the opportunity to remind teachers in an informal way of their instructional strengths and of the ongoing nature of such visits. It also reinforces the understanding that classroom walk-throughs are a normal and natural part of the way the program does business. For example, after conducting a brief walk-through, an administrator might write a note like one of these to the teacher:

> *"I enjoyed my walk-through visit to your classroom last night. I was really impressed with the way you welcomed the new student who joined the class halfway through the session. Thanks so much. I look forward to stopping by again soon."*

> *"Thanks for including me in your activity last night during my walk-through visit – that was fun! I really liked the detail and clarity of the agenda you had up on the board with learning objectives identified for each segment of your lesson. Can I share your practice with other teachers? I'd love to see your strategy used throughout our program."*

It can also be useful for the administrator to keep a tracking log to determine, across a program or agency, if a particular instructional strategy is being emphasized, as agreed upon, or to identify particular areas for intervention or support. For example, program staff may have collaboratively decided that more consistent use of Total Physical Response (TPR; Richards & Rodgers, 2001)[1] will support the learning of beginning English language learners. An administrator may create a tracking log to record the number of instances of TPR observed over the course of a 4-week period during walk-through classroom visits. This information can then be used to provide feedback to teachers and to open discussions. After the 4-week period, the administrator might share an observation such as the following with the teachers: "*My TPR tracking log for the last four weeks indicates that TPR is showing up much more frequently in four classrooms than it is in the other two. I'm wondering why that is; what more can we do to support the use of TPR?*" This feedback is not evaluative but supportive and gives teachers the opportunity to ask for help.

When looking back at the tracking log, an administrator might notice that despite having visited a particular classroom at different points during the session, each time the teacher was sitting behind the desk and students were working silently from a workbook. If the administrator observes this once, no conclusion can be drawn. On its own, the practice implies nothing to

worry about, but repeatedly and at different times, the practice suggests that the teacher is not engaging students in a sufficient variety of learning activities. The administrator might consider providing training in this area.

Checklists can also be used by administrators to support their walk-through practice and to serve as a needs assessment. For example, if administrators want to identify an issue to emphasize at an upcoming professional development event, they can do a series of walk-throughs with a checklist to test out a perspective, such as this: *"I don't get the sense that the teachers in our higher level ESL classes are doing enough work on developing critical thinking skills. I'm going to do walk-throughs of all high-level classrooms over a 3-week period and record instances of activities where students are being asked to analyze, synthesize, etc."* Checklists can also be used by administrators at the request of teachers who might ask for specific feedback, for example, *"Can you keep an eye out for how often you see evidence in my classroom of appropriate wait time when I ask students questions? I'd really appreciate the feedback."*

A checklist can be simple, with a few items that the supervisor wants to see in almost every visit, or it can be long and detailed with a comprehensive list of elements, practices, or strategies that should be demonstrated during the course of an entire session, but just a few of which would likely be seen during a single brief walk-through. Over time, during the course of many walk-throughs, an administrator may be able to mark off many of the items on the checklist, noting the date and time of each visit that the observation is made. This gives a holistic sense of a teacher's practice without the need for the administrator to sit in the classroom for an entire session. It also avoids the possibility of a "show" lesson, in which teachers put on their best performance during a scheduled observation.

While providing valuable information about teachers' performance, walk-throughs are different from a formal teacher evaluation process. Rather, the practice engages teachers in dialogue and reflection about their own teaching practices and about program or agency goals.

Alternative Forms of Observation

Additional ways of learning about teachers' instructional practices, strengths, and professional development needs include teaching portfolios, unseen observation, peer observation, and student work and feedback. Teaching portfolios are used in teacher education programs to evaluate preservice teachers' competence, knowledge, and readiness to teach. They may also be used for inservice teacher observation and support. One study of a K–12 school district found that the use of teaching portfolios was favorably looked on by both teachers and administrators and was preferred to the traditional "snapshot" observation format, in which an evaluation of a teacher is based on a single classroom observation session (Attinello, Lare, & Waters, 2006). Administrators can encourage teachers to create or add to these portfolios with samples of lesson plans, assessments, journal entries, curricula, instructional materials, and student work.

Powell (1999) and Quirke (1996) suggest an alternative way of collaborating with teachers called "unseen observation,"

which leads teachers through a reflective process before and after they teach a lesson. Although the supervisor does not observe the lesson, the teacher's self-reflection regarding his or her instructional practice is shared and discussed afterward in a nonevaluative way with the supervisor. A less structured way of having teachers reflect on their practice is through the use of teacher journals and self-assessments. Bailey (2006) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these types of alternative observation.

In programs with more than one adult ESL teacher, peer observation can be a valuable alternative. Instead of individual post-observation conferences between supervisor and teacher, the supervisor may lead a post-observation focus group to allow teachers to share their experiences observing colleagues' classes. Finally, supervisors may review samples of student work, engage students in conversation at break times, and distribute student surveys of their learning experiences and goals met. Communicating with students and soliciting their feedback is essential for administrators, but it should not be done without teacher knowledge. Teachers and administrators should come to consensus as to when and how to solicit and review student feedback.

Conclusion

Adult ESL teacher supervisors have a variety of approaches to choose from when considering how to observe and provide helpful feedback to teachers regarding their classroom instruction. The observation approaches described in this brief can be used by new and experienced supervisors. Supervisors may use a more traditional approach that involves a single observation of a complete lesson and a reflective post-observation conference. When conducting formal classroom observations, the supervisor should consult with the teacher beforehand to identify a specific area on which to focus and provide feedback. Quick classroom walk-throughs, a more informal approach to teacher supervision, can provide a richer depiction of student learning and instructional strategies than one-shot formal observations. Like formal observations, walk-throughs require thoughtful planning, communication of the process and expectations to the teachers, and sharing of reflective feedback in collaboration with teachers. Use of less common, alternative approaches to teacher supervision allows a broader perspective and possibly increased support for teachers.

Note

[1]TPR is an approach to second language learning in which learners physically follow commands given by the teacher. Initially, the teacher gives a series of commands while demonstrating each one. Learners then demonstrate comprehension by acting out the commands as the teacher gives them. Finally, learners themselves begin to give commands to the teacher and to each other as they feel comfortable speaking in the target language. See Richards and Rodgers (2001) for more detail on the TPR approach to promoting language acquisition.

OBSERVATION REVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS	OBSERVER	INSTRUCTOR
What went well in the lesson?		
What were some challenges in the lesson?		
How do you think the students reacted to the lesson?		
What surprised you and why?		
What would you do differently next time?		
Would you like to share this lesson or some part of it with other instructors?		

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CAELA NETWORK INSTRUCTOR CHECKLIST FORM

Instructor: _____ Title/Topic of Lesson: _____

Observer: _____ Class Title: _____ Date: _____

Directions: Use this checklist for classroom observations. Place a check beside the activities observed.
If the element was not covered, note in the space beneath the element or under Observer's Comments.

	INSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENTS (The instructor did the following)	✓	**DEMONSTRATED ACTIVITIES** (Check all appropriate boxes below; fill in information at appropriate spaces)
INTRODUCTION	Provided review of previous work as warm-up exercise for students		Used an activity that fosters social communication
			Used an activity to review previous learning
			Used an activity to orient group to new topics
			Other:_____
	Stated lesson objectives and reviewed the agenda		Indicate observed activity:_____
	Provided opportunities for students to become familiar with lesson materials		Previewed vocabulary
			Used visuals to preview (e.g., table of contents, headings, graphic organizer)
	Checked students' background knowledge on the topic/lesson		Asked questions about the topic
			Engaged students in an activity (e.g., Jeopardy, word association)
			Other:_____
PRESENTATION	Used appropriate presentation style(s) for content and audience		Lecture Discussion Role play
			Demonstration Case study Other activity/game
			Other:_____
	Gave adequate/appropriate explanation of new concepts		Describe:_____ _____
	Responded to students' questions		Answered questions immediately
			Deferred responding until later in the lesson
			Posted questions for later
	Periodically checked students' comprehension		Asked general questions (e.g., Is there anything you do not understand?)
			Asked content-specific questions
			Asked students to summarize in their own words
			Other:_____
PRACTICE	Set up practice activities clearly		Clearly modeled activities
			Gave clear oral and written instructions
			Gave examples and/or demonstrations
			Scaffolded learning
			Other:_____
	Gave practice activities during class		What was observed?_____
	Monitored/assisted all students (individually, paired, and grouped)		Listened to each group interacting
			Answered only clarifying questions
			Other:_____
	Used a variety of communicative strategies for practice of language skills and content		Students paired/grouped for speaking
			Students exchanged writing for targeted oral feedback
			Students prepared projects/posters, etc., and shared with class
			Other:_____

	INSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENTS (The instructor did the following)	✓	DEMONSTRATED ACTIVITIES (Check all appropriate boxes below; fill in information at appropriate spaces)
APPLICATION	Gave students time to apply what was learned		In a new situation during the lesson
			In their own situation after the lesson
	Gave students time to share their application (work)		Paired/grouped students
			Whole class
			Other:_____
	Gave students an opportunity to comment/evaluate each other's work, as appropriate		What was observed?_____ _____
EVALUATION	Evaluated students' application of concepts		Used communicative activity
			Used a test
			Other:_____
	Gave students an opportunity to evaluate the lesson, as appropriate		Used written reflection
			Used oral feedback
			Other:_____
FOLLOW-UP	Gave students opportunities to review materials over time		Assigned homework
			Used warm-up/closing activity
			Used review games or discussion
			Other:_____
	Gave students opportunities to ask questions		Orally or in writing during class
			Posting electronically
			Other:_____
	Gave students a task to further investigate content		Assigned homework
			Linked with future lessons
			Other:_____
	OBSERVER'S COMMENTS:		

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