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# Observation Tools for Professional Development

**Professional development of teachers, including English language teachers, empowers them to change in ways that improve teaching and learning (Gall and Acheson 2011; Murray 2010). In their seminal research on staff development—professional development in today's terms—Joyce and Showers (2002) identify key factors that promote teacher change. Three of these factors are observation, feedback, and practice.**

Teacher observation is one step in the process of identifying changes that teachers may want to make (Gall and Acheson 2011; Joyce and Showers 2002). Observers might be peers, other educators who may be more knowledgeable and experienced, supervisors, principals, or government officials. Observation tools, checklists, or rubrics may be used by observers to record notes about the lesson. Feedback after observations that help teachers reflect on what worked, what did not work, and what they might modify is another important element in the teacher change process (Schön 1987; Tenjoh-Okwen 2003). Evidence-based feedback is particularly useful (Gall and Acheson 2011; Joyce and Showers 2002). In fact, Salas and Mercado (2010, 20) urge supervisors to "talk across the data" during feedback sessions.

Opportunities to practice changes in teaching are also important. Sometimes, teachers may practice changes in their teaching with a small group of students and a teacher who observes. Or a teacher may practice with a peer group or study group of colleagues. Although not the ideal, teachers frequently practice in their classroom without an observer present (Joyce and Showers 2002).

Let's take a moment to consider the ways in which professional development is enacted in other professions. Carpenters and plumbers, for example, may watch a master perform a task and then perform the same task with the master as observer. Medical interns move as a group through a hospital with a senior doctor who examines patients and leads discussions with the group about those patients (Henry and Malu 2011). In the maritime and aviation fields, massive television screens linked to computers simulate ocean and air environments. Officers who seek advanced training perform tasks in the presence of experienced captains and pilots who interact with, guide, and offer feedback to these officers during and after these simulations; the effectiveness of this process is supported in the training literature (Carson-Jackson 2010). Is this notion of a simulated experience possible to use in the professional development of teachers? Let's hold onto this question for just a moment.

If we consider the role that professional development—focused on observation, evidence-based feedback, and practice—plays to empower and promote teacher change, how might teachers engage in this process to make changes in their teaching? Research often presents information that includes descriptions of observation tools and suggestions for providing feedback (Ali 2007; Chesterfield 1997; Gall and Acheson 2011; Millrood 2003; Stoller 2003).

This article takes a different approach: inviting readers to interact with it as they read. Readers will have the opportunity to perform a variety of tasks that integrate the notion of simulated experience with the valuable role that practice plays in learning. In this article, readers will be asked to create and use observation tools to gather evidence—or data—in an English teaching scenario. Discussions follow each practice opportunity, guiding readers in interpreting and reflecting on the data. The article concludes with further suggestions about observation tools, evidence-based feedback, and practice that may encourage a lifetime of professional development designed to improve teaching and learning.

## THE T-CHART OBSERVATION TOOL

When we observe a lesson, the T-chart helps us record data about teacher talk and student talk. By using tally marks, we record the number of utterances made during a lesson. More detailed tools and charts with complex recording procedures are available to document more information than the basic T-chart used here (see Chesterfield 1997; Gall and Acheson 2011). However, when I introduced one of these detailed tools to a group of experienced supervisors who had not used such tools before, they were confused by the procedures of what, where, and how to record the data they observed. Their reaction led me to use a T-chart that is quick to design and easy to use, allowing observers who have never used tools to record observations in teaching settings to quickly grasp what to record and how to record it, and immediately feel comfortable using the T-chart.

Before you read further, kindly consider the following. For the remainder of this article, I invite you, the reader, to be an active participant. Please take a moment to gather a pencil or pen and a piece of paper so that you can actively engage with the text that follows. When you have pen or pencil and paper in hand, please continue reading.

Let's make the T-chart now. On your piece of paper, draw a large uppercase letter *T* so that it extends approximately halfway down the page. Above the top left side of the *T*, write the word *Teacher* and above the top right side, write the word *Students*. Your drawing should resemble the one in Figure 1.

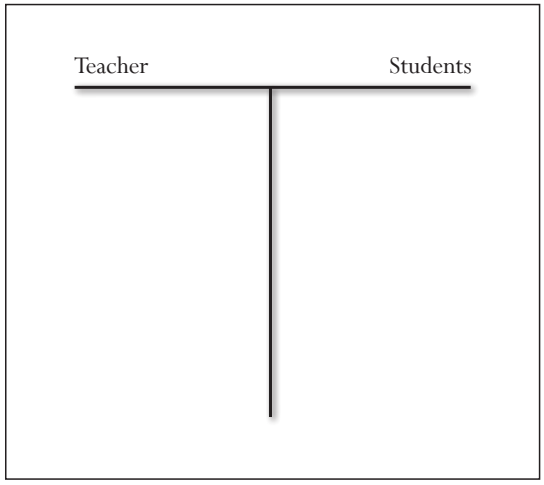


**Figure 1. T-chart tool**

Now let's define the term "utterance" because we will use the T-chart to record the number of utterances made during an observation. Although linguists have a complex definition for this term, for our purpose, we will define the term "utterance" to mean a phrase that contains meaning. One utterance can be a complete sentence, but if the sentence is compound or complex, then it can be considered two or more utterances. Comments such as "Yes" need not be considered utterances, but phrases such as "Good job" should be.

Consider the following utterances. When a class greets the teacher, the students may say, "Good morning, Mr. Ramouhale." Using the above definition, this is considered as one student utterance. Their reply to a question, "We are fine," would also be one student utterance. To record the data on the T-chart, we make two tally marks under the Students column. In the case of a string of utterances made by the teacher, "Very good," using our definition, is one teacher utterance. "Today we are going to continue our study of reading strategies" is one teacher utterance. "Who remembers what this means—reading strategies …" is one teacher utterance,

and "What are some reading strategies that we have studied already?" is one teacher utterance. Thus, we would record four tally marks under the Teacher column.

Now it is your turn, as the reader, to practice using this tool. In the section that follows, a teaching scenario simulates a classroom observation. The scenario includes the transcript of a lesson that we might observe in classrooms around the world. This lesson focuses on reading with a class (represented by the letter *C*) of elementary school students. There are 40 students in the class. Mr. Ramouhale is the teacher (represented by the letter *T*). The text in brackets tells the movements and thoughts of the characters in the scenario.

Please read the following teaching scenario with the T-chart beside you. As you read, mark a tally in the Teacher column for each utterance made by T (the teacher) and one in the Students column for each of the individual student utterances (represented by their names). Also mark one tally in the Students column for each of the C (class) utterances. Do not tally any of the script that is in brackets. When you mark teacher and student utterances, be sure to note them under the appropriate column. Further directions await you at the end of this scenario.

## TEACHING SCENARIO

T: Good morning, class. How are you today?

C: Good morning, Mr. Ramouhale. We are fine. How are you?

T: I'm fine, too. Today we are going to continue our study of reading strategies. Who remembers what this means—reading strategies—and what are some reading strategies that we have studied already?

[The class is silent. No one raises a hand.]

T: I see that you are thinking. So, I want you to do a think-pair-share. Turn to your neighbor and talk about reading strategies and see if you can remember some of them. I will give you two minutes to talk.

[The students talk in pairs. Mr. Ramouhale walks around the room and listens to their conversations. He takes notes about what he hears, writing the students' names and their comments in his notebook. At the end of two minutes he returns to the front of the room.]

T: Now, who can tell me what "reading strategies" means? Let's see.

[The teacher looks at the class and sees Sam's hand is raised.]

T: Yes, Sam, I heard your conversation with your partner. Can you answer my question?

Sam: Yes, reading strategies are things we do when we read. They help us understand what we read.

T: Very good, Sam. Thank you. What are some of the reading strategies we have learned?

[The teacher looks at the class and sees that Enoch has raised his hand.]

T: Enoch, can you answer?

Enoch: Yes. Ask questions.

T: Good, Enoch. That's one strategy. You ask questions as you read. What is another reading strategy that we have learned?

[The teacher looks at the students and sees that Patience has her hand up.]

T: Patience, do you know?

Patience: Predict.

T: Can you tell me more?

Patience: You try to predict what the story is about. You guess what will happen.

T: Exactly right. Now, today I am going to tell you about another reading strategy.

This strategy is called "visualizing." Can anyone guess what this word means? *Visualizing*?

> [Mr. Ramouhale knows this is a difficult question, and he is not sure if anyone will be able to answer. He looks at Freddy because Freddy is one of the brightest students. Freddy seems to be thinking, so the teacher decides to call on him.]

T: Freddy?

Freddy: [Silence]

T: I know you didn't raise your hand but I wonder. Is it possible for you to answer this question?

Freddy: Maybe if Thabo helps me. Can he help me?

T: Yes, sure. Thabo, do you have any ideas about the word *visualize*?

Thabo: Maybe it means … view … look.

T: Good guess. The reading strategy called visualizing means to make a picture in your head about what you read. Charles, can you tell me what I said?

Charles: Visualizing is like using the words to make pictures.

T: Yes, that's right. Now, I want you to take out your exercise books and a pencil.

> [Mr. Ramouhale waits while the students get their materials ready.]

T: Look up at me when you are ready.

> [When Mr. Ramouhale sees that most of the students are looking at him, he continues.]

T: Now I am going to read the beginning of our next story. I want you to draw anything that you hear from the story. Draw it in your exercise books. I will draw on the chalkboard, too. I will draw the pictures that come to my head while I read the story. When I am finished reading, we'll look at our drawings. Are you ready?

C: Yes, Mr. Ramouhale.

## T-CHART TOOL RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Figure 2 shows my tally of utterances for this teaching scenario. As you can see, I recorded 48 teacher utterances and 14 student utterances. Do you have the same results that I do? It is not essential that your tally numbers are exactly the same as mine. It is important, however, that our numbers are similar. Differences of four to six points in the total of teacher tallies and one to three points in the student tallies are insignificant. It is more important that we have numbers that are in the same range.

What do these results mean? Take a moment to jot down your reflections about these results and what you think they might mean. When you have finished writing, please continue reading.

Data from our T-chart clearly show more teacher talk than student talk, more utterances made by the teacher than the students. These results might mean that this is a teacher-centered, authoritarian-style classroom with little opportunity for students

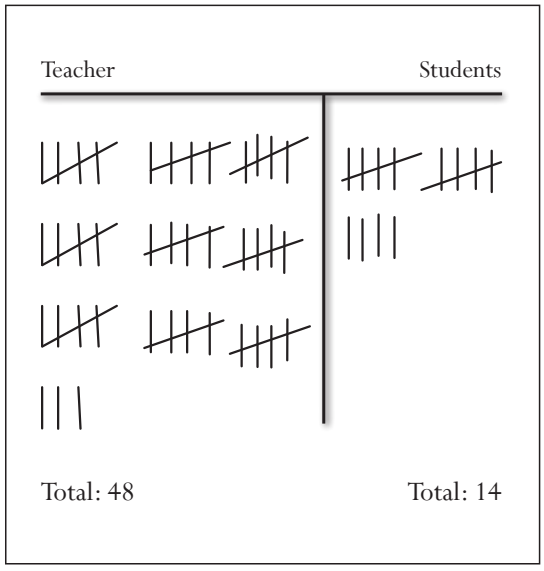


**Figure 2. T-chart tool with results**

to speak. On the other hand, it might mean that the teacher is presenting new material or information, in which case it would be logical that there would be more teacher talk. Which is the more accurate interpretation? Return to the scenario to see if Mr. Ramouhale gave us clues we can use to answer this question, and then continue reading below.

Mr. Ramouhale tells the students, "Today we are going to continue our study of reading strategies," and further along, he expands on this by saying, "I am going to tell you about another reading strategy … called 'visualizing.'" In these two sentences, Mr. Ramouhale has told his students, and us, the goal of this lesson: to present new information to the students. Knowing this goal, we can more accurately interpret the results of the tallies. While presenting new information may not necessitate more teacher talk than student talk, frequently it does. By paying attention to the tallies, teachers can reflect on what they are doing in their teaching.

On the other hand, suppose that Mr. Ramouhale said, "Today we are going to review the reading strategies we have learned." The tallies then should result in a much lower concentration of teacher talk.

This T-chart tool gives teachers evidence that lets them "see" what is happening when they teach. It opens up conversations about the nature of teacher talk and the reasons for it, the circumstances in which it can be effective and even necessary, and the situations in which it can be ineffective and possibly coercive and authoritative.

## THE SEATING CHART TOOL

There are various versions of the Seating Chart tool (Chesterfield 1997), also referred to as Seating Chart Observation Records (Gall and Acheson 2011). As with the T-chart, this tool can be drawn at the beginning of an observation. It may take a minute or two to create, and it requires the observer to be careful and accurate in representing the classroom on paper. On the other hand, the teacher whose classroom will be visited can create it in advance and give it to the observer at the beginning of the lesson.

Suppose we visit a classroom without the Seating Chart. We will need to create it when we settle in the back of the room by drawing a simple sketch, using shapes to indicate the classroom floor plan, including the location of the teacher's desk, chalkboard, student desks, and other classroom furniture. I suggest drawing a rectangle for the teacher's desk, a long narrow rectangle for the chalkboard, and small squares or rectangles for the student desks. Boxes must be sketched accurately, exactly the way the furniture appears in the classroom—in rows, U-shaped, or in small group clusters.

Once the boxes are drawn, codes give additional information about the classroom. Place the letter *T* inside the box that represents the teacher's desk and the letter *G* (for girl) or *B* (for boy)—or you could use *F* for a female student and *M* for a male student—inside each student-desk box, carefully representing the gender and location of each student. When you've drawn the tool, it is time to record data.

Before we practice using the Seating Chart, we need to consider the data we will record with this tool and the ways in which we will record the data. This tool can help us record teacher and student questions and answers and what the teacher does during student pair work. To record the data, we can use the following system. Each time the teacher (T) calls on a student, asks a student a question, or listens to a student during pair work, put a tally mark in that student's box. Each time a student asks a question, put a question mark in the student's box.

This time, let's pretend we will observe Mr. Ramouhale, who has prepared a Seating Chart tool for us (see Figure 3). Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the tool. Note that in Figure 3 I have indicated the names of the students who speak. If you are now familiar with the figure, return to the teaching scenario earlier in this article. Reread it, marking your tallies for the various student and teacher comments onto Figure 3. When you have finished, please resume reading below.

## SEATING CHART TOOL RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Before we continue, please check that you have recorded your data accurately. You should have recorded the following. In Sam's box, you should have two tallies (one for the teacher question asked to Sam and a second for the time Mr. Ramouhale listened to Sam and Enoch's conversation during think-pair-share); in Enoch's box, two tallies (for the same reasons Sam has two tallies); for Patience, two tallies (the teacher asked her two questions); for Freddy, one tally and one question mark (the tally because the teacher asked him a question, and the question mark because Freddy asked the teacher a question); for Thabo, one tally; and for Charles, one tally. Compare your chart with mine (see Figure 4).

Once again, please take a moment to jot down any thoughts you have as you look at the data. Does anything strike you? When you finish jotting down your ideas, please continue reading.

There are three types of data that this tool documents. It tells us the gender of those who speak and are spoken to, their location in the classroom, and the kind of talk the students and teacher engage in, answering questions or asking questions.

Now look again at the data in Figure 4. What happened in Mr. Ramouhale's class in terms of gender, location, and talk? Consider where the boys are sitting and where the girls are, and the location of the students Mr. Ramouhale calls on. Most of the students he calls on sit in front and to the left of his desk. Showing this chart to Mr. Ramouhale and engaging him in a conversation about the data can be a powerful learning experience, and it may help him reflect on his teaching.

Consider the data about gender. There has been considerable research in the United States about girls (Gilligan 1982) and boys (Wilhelm and Smith 2005) and their conversational patterns in school and outside school (Tannen

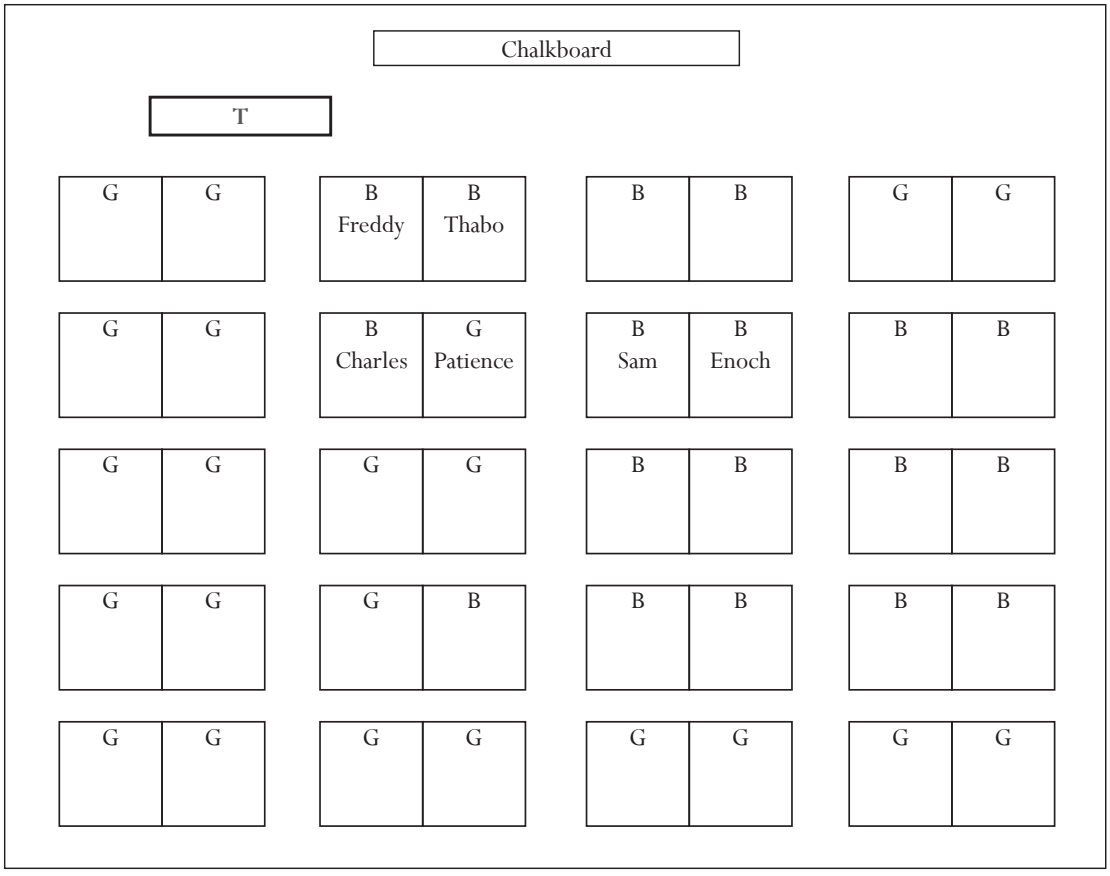


**Figure 3. Seating Chart tool for Mr. Ramouhale's class**

1990). Tannen (1990) found that when outside-school conversation styles were in conflict with in-school styles, students struggled to participate and contribute in classrooms. While this research may not explain gendered classroom talk in other countries, the Seating Chart tool can help teachers examine the gender behaviors that may contribute to the conversation patterns it documents.

Culture may also influence the seating arrangements in classrooms even as individual learning styles, friendships, and other factors may be equally influential. For example, family status in a town or village may determine where a teacher assigns children to sit. Children who have problems seeing the chalkboard may be placed in the front of the room, and those who are disruptive may be sent to the back of the room. If children are given an opportunity to select their own seats, it is almost certain, regardless of the culture, that friends will want to sit together. These are just a few possible ways to interpret seating arrangements that teachers can consider for themselves as they reflect on the meaning of the data recorded on this tool.

In addition, it is important for teachers to realize where they stand and where they look when they teach. It is not unusual for teachers who are right-handed to focus on the left side of the room. This phenomenon may be at play for Mr. Ramouhale. On the other hand, factors such as children's attentiveness or disruptive behavior may influence where he looks and whom he calls on. This tool can help to mirror what Mr. Ramouhale does.

## OBSERVATIONS: USING AND ADAPTING THE TOOLS

It is important to note that there is extensive literature that documents the importance of conferences prior to observations (Gall and Acheson 2011; Stoller 2003). Trust, respect, and compassion between teacher and observer are equally important (Showers, Joyce, and

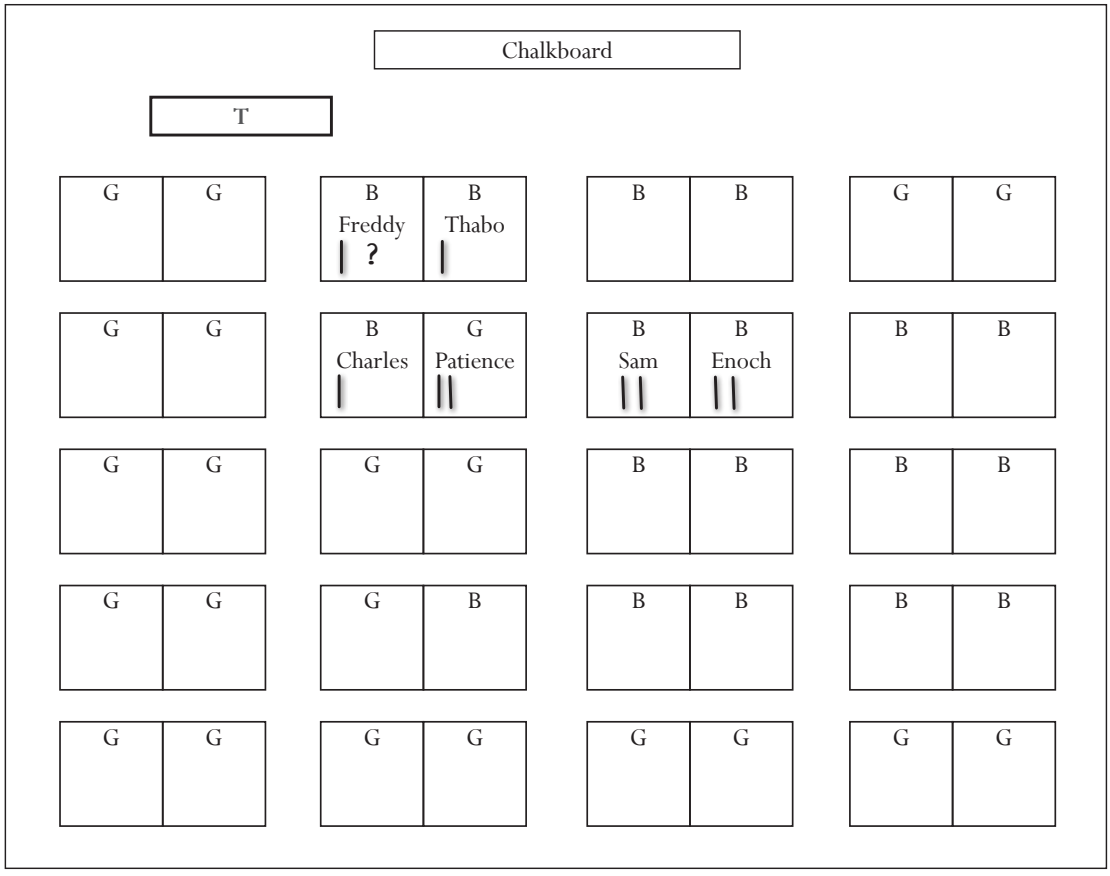


**Figure 4. Seating Chart with recorded data from Mr. Ramouhale's class**

Bennett 1987). Teachers should take the lead in such conversations, highlight the purpose for the observation, and include questions, puzzles, concerns, and challenges that the teacher wants the observer to focus on—the kind of evidence the teacher would like recorded—and the observation tool(s) to be used.

These observation tools can be used by teachers, teacher study groups, supervisors, administrators, and government officials. English-language and content-area teachers can also benefit from the tools. Each of these groups will likely have a different goal when using these tools. It is most important that the group identify its goal and then use the tool as a means to reach the goal. Alignment of the goal with the tool is critically important.

For informal groups of teachers, including pairs and study groups, the goal for using these tools will be for professional development—to improve teaching. By conducting informal peer observations, teachers give one another valuable feedback about their teaching. That information can determine what a pair or study group wants to explore, including articles to research and read.

Pairs and groups of teachers might begin by reading and discussing this article. Next, they may want to practice using these tools in different settings. If videotaping a class is possible, teachers might select one tool and use it while reviewing the video. An alternative is to select video segments from YouTube (www.youtube.com). It may be useful to start by viewing and practicing using the tools with small-group discussion clips; a search using the phrase "small group discussions" will offer a wide selection of such clips. Once teachers feel comfortable gathering data from small groups, search terms such as "classroom observation" generate lists of videos that include large-group and whole-class settings. Such clips provide more challenges that are useful for practice and discussion.

Supervisors, including principals and government officials such as inspectors, may use the tools described in this article to evaluate teachers; I caution against this practice, however, unless there have been clear pre-observation discussions with teachers to explain expectations for the lesson, including the lesson objectives. Anything less would be unfair to teachers. As an example, consider teacher talk and student talk. If supervisors observe a lesson knowing that the teacher is presenting new information, they will expect to record a higher number of teacher utterances than student utterances on the T-chart.

Others may also find these tools useful in professional-development workshops, perhaps using the teaching scenario included here or writing one that more closely matches the topic to be covered in the workshop. The combination of scenarios, practice with the use of these tools, and professional discussions can be extremely helpful in promoting teacher development.

When using these tools, observers should indicate the beginning and end time for the recorded data on the tool. For example, if it takes Mr. Ramouhale three minutes to present "visualizing," that is important information to have because it suggests that the lesson is running smoothly. If it takes him more than ten minutes, this is also useful because it suggests other factors are at play during this part of his lesson.

As pairs and groups of teachers, supervisors, and others work with these tools over an extended period of time, they may find new questions about teaching. Return to Figure 4 and consider what might be a follow-up to our observation of Mr. Ramouhale. Tallies in Figure 4 leave us with questions about his teaching. We might wonder where he stood while speaking with the students. Where did he move during the think-pair-share?

We can adapt the Seating Chart in a way that will help us answer these questions. For example, to record Mr. Ramouhale's movements, we might draw lines wherever he moves. A star (★) can represent the place where we begin to document movement. We can use an angle bracket (>) to mark the spots where he stops to look at or speak with students. An X can mark the place where

we stop recording movement. Returning to the teaching scenario, we can record Mr. Ramouhale as he moves around the classroom during the think-pair-share activity. Please take a moment to add your record of his movements onto the Seating Chart (Figure 3) and then compare your completed Figure 3 with mine (Figure 5). With this new information, we have further reason to wonder about gender and student talk and more evidence to share and reflect on with Mr. Ramouhale.

Up to this point, we have focused our discussion on Mr. Ramouhale's interactions with his students; however, we know from the teaching scenario that Mr. Ramouhale's lesson included two minutes of think-pair-share time when students worked together. Let's imagine that Mr. Ramouhale wants to know what happened during this two-minute interval. Is it possible to modify the Seating Chart or the T-chart to gather the data that will help us answer this question? Take a moment to jot down your thoughts, and then continue reading.

My question above has no one right answer. There may be as many different answers as there are teachers who look for these answers. Great pleasure can come from working with colleagues because our questions may become puzzles that we solve with creativity and resourcefulness. Here is my suggested answer, though. I offer this as one way to modify these observation tools to examine student work during think-pair-share.

Given the number of students (40) in the class, the observer and Mr. Ramouhale would do well to identify two or three pairs (more than that would be difficult to do in two minutes) they wish to focus on and the reason or purpose for this focus. For example, imagine that Mr. Ramouhale selects three groups in the back of the room because he rarely hears from them. Once he has selected the groups and has articulated this reason for their selection, the next step is to consider what he wants to know about their conversation. Is it important to understand if there is equal participation in these pairs?

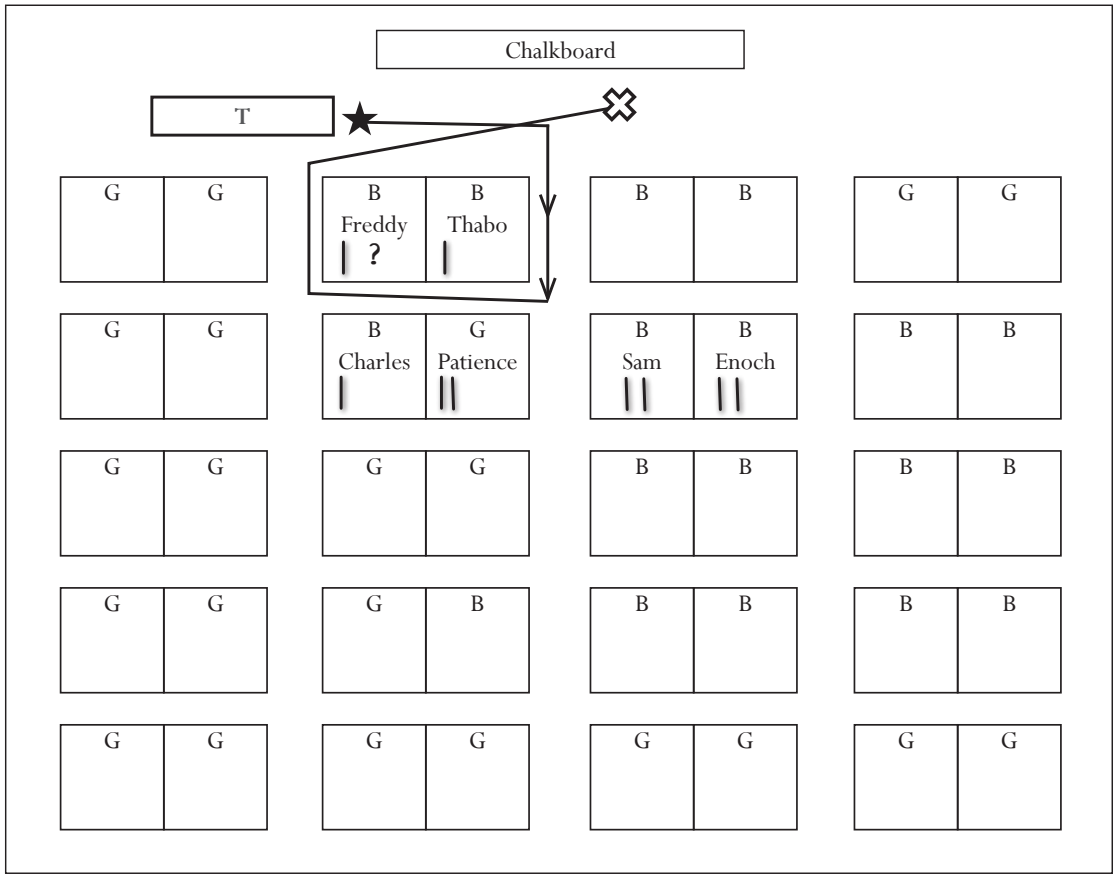


**Figure 5. Seating Chart with Mr. Ramouhale's movements**

Or does he want to understand the quality of their conversation? His answers to such questions can help him and the observer select and possibly modify the data-gathering tool.

Because the observer usually sits in the back of the classroom, Mr. Ramouhale's selection of the three pairs in the back of the classroom requires no movement or repositioning of the observer. If the pairs were elsewhere in the room, the observer might need to take up a position so the group conversations could be overheard.

Once the activity begins, the observer records the data. If Mr. Ramouhale wants to know whether pairs are participating equally, the T-chart can be used to record student utterances. The observer can make three T-charts (replacing the words *Teacher* and *Students* with the names of each student in each pair) and tally the three pairs of utterances. If Mr. Ramouhale wants to know more about the quality of the two-minute conversations, the observer might focus on questions and answers, recording question marks (for questions) and tallies (for statements). The more thoughtful the teacher and observer plans are, the easier it is for the observer to gather data that make the most sense for the goals of the observation.

I encourage readers to use these observation tools creatively. When the tools are adapted to particular needs and settings, they will be useful and meaningful, allowing observers to gather the most relevant data that will help answer questions that can prompt development and growth in teaching.

## FEEDBACK: TALKING TOGETHER

The quality of feedback is just as important as the environment in which this feedback is given and received. Observers—including peers, study-group members, professional developers, and supervisors—should work carefully to ensure that they create safe, secure spaces in which feedback can be exchanged, and such feedback should be given thoughtfully and with respect for the teacher (Ali 2007; Schön 1987). Observers should always remember that they are guests in a teacher's classroom, there by invitation and a shared desire to improve teaching and learning. Feedback should be shared honestly and openly, focused on data gathered from the observation tools and not on perceptions. Teachers should have control over the conditions in which the feedback is offered.

Researchers are in disagreement about how soon after an observation feedback should be given. Some urge within a short time (Stoller 2003) so that few details about the lesson are forgotten. Others recommend waiting a few days, thereby giving teachers time to reflect on their lesson (Ali 2007). The timing of when to offer feedback is less important than ensuring that feedback is given.

Observers can help teachers by beginning the dialogue with questions such as, "What did you like about your lesson? What worked for you? If you speak with your family tonight, what will you say went well in this lesson?" These questions enable teachers to focus on the positives and prompt them to be reflective. Observers should give teachers adequate time to respond to questions. Thoughtful responses encourage reflection. It is important for observers to help teachers stay focused on the positives. Teachers should be encouraged to avoid using the words *but* and *however* because they typically turn a conversation negative.

Skilled observers will have data recorded on the tool and be ready to present the data to teachers. Such observers will let teachers comment first on the data. If observers are the first to tell teachers what they see in the data, this strips teachers of the opportunity to interpret and reflect on the data for themselves. As the conversation progresses, observers should keep the focus on what worked well in the lesson. One way to do this is by using a building metaphor: talk about "building" or "constructing" change, implying that the "bricks" to add next can become areas for improvement. For example, observers might say, "I think you handled [this teaching event] well. What would you like to work on next?" The first statement affirms teachers' work, while the question

gently includes teachers in an analysis of their practice and what they want to focus on next.

## PRACTICE: LASTING CHANGE

Change does not happen quickly. When teachers decide to make changes in their practice, research shows that they must apply the new changes about 25 times "before all the conditions of transfer are achieved" (Showers, Joyce, and Bennett 1987, 86). An environment in which teachers have opportunities to practice and receive feedback within a supportive, trusting social network of peers or knowledgeable others is critical for creating lasting change.

With a bit of practice, teachers, professional-development groups, supervisors, and others can learn to use the T-chart and Seating Chart tools in ways that will enable their use in diverse classroom settings. These tools can be used in English-language classrooms and across content areas, making them valuable in interdisciplinary professional-development settings. The use of these tools will not only help teachers improve their teaching but will also help them ask new and different questions. These questions have the ability to encourage teacher pairs, study groups, and others to modify and adapt these tools as they search for answers to these new questions. Such a cycle can support ongoing professional development that has the potential to last a lifetime.

These tools will not prompt changes overnight, but they can open up important conversations about teaching and learning. The seeds within these conversations stimulate growth in teaching that gives students around the globe opportunities to learn constructively so they can lead productive lives in the ever-changing world of tomorrow.

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