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The Observational Practicum: A Stepping-Stone to Praxis in TESOL

While a practicum is usually regarded as a place to *practice teaching*, or as a place to turn what one has learned in the classroom into real practice, an *observational practicum* can also substantially further one's professional growth. Indeed, an observational practicum can be an ideal site for novice ESOL practitioners to develop the groundwork of *praxis*, which requires reflection and action in teaching to provide students with meaningful L2 learning. Drawing from scholastic literature in TESOL and her own observational practicum experience, the author advocates conducting an observational practicum as a means to practice *seeing* teaching before intensively *doing* teaching.

Defined as "the practice teaching course" (Richards & Crookes, 1988, p. 9) or "a period of teaching practice" (Crookes, 2003, p. 1), a *practicum* is usually recognized as a critical component of teacher education designed to put one's learning into action. While a practicum may consist of both direct experience of *doing teaching* and indirect experience of *seeing teaching*, the focus is often on the former, turning what one has learned in the classroom into real practice as the final step toward becoming a full-fledged teacher (Canh, 2014; Crookes, 2003; Johnson & Golombek, 2013; Payant & Murphy, 2012; Richards & Crookes, 1988; Stoynoff, 1999). In other words, seeing teaching through observation seems to be only preliminary or supplemental to the following teaching-practice components. Indeed, Richards and Crookes (1988) stated, "[t]he practice teaching typically begins with observation of the cooperating teacher, with the student gradually taking over responsibility for teaching part of a lesson, under the supervision of the cooperating teacher" (p. 20), and Crookes (2003) positioned observation as "in support of a practicum" (p. 33) in presenting his practicum model.

However, an *observational practicum*, a practicum that centers

on intensive observation of someone else's teaching rather than actually *doing* teaching, can also substantially further one's professional growth, enabling her or him to connect theory to practice and thereby reconstruct the world she or he sees and interacts with. In fact, an observational practicum seems an ideal site for *praxis,* especially in the beginning of one's professional development. *Praxis*, as the world-famous educator Paulo Freire (1970) advocated, is an educational process of reflection and action to provide students with effective and meaningful learning experiences as opposed to one-directional, teacher-centered education. In the realm of TESOL, praxis can also be interpreted in the scope of reflective teaching, through which teachers "collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 1). Indeed, praxis, or reflection and action, should be the basis of ESOL pedagogy because it is the foundation of ongoing teacher development that trains teachers to provide meaningful education for students in the real world. Therefore, ESOL practitioners should be consciously trained to conduct praxis. However, this does not mean that praxis can be achieved *only* through *doing* teaching. In fact, to be able to *do* teaching effectively, one also should know how to *see* teaching effectively.

As an international student from Japan with little teaching experience, I benefited from an observational practicum in my second semester of the MA TESOL program at San Francisco State University (SF State) in that the practicum provided me with the groundwork of praxis, and this benefit of observational practicum seems applicable to many other novice practitioners. Thus, this article explores the potential of an observational practicum, drawing from literature in TESOL and my own observational practicum experience.

Literature Review: The Practicum in TESOL

According to the survey results in Richards and Crookes's (1988) study, many MA TESOL and related programs in the US required a teaching practicum for their students, and the foremost importance of the practicum was placed on providing teaching experience, even though it could be accompanied with more indirect experiences, including observation of experienced teachers. Likewise, Palmer (1995) conducted a survey on American MA TESOL programs and revealed that two thirds of the respondents required a teaching practicum for their students. Although a few decades have passed since these studies were conducted, the importance of a practicum and its emphasis on teaching practice still seem applicable today. While more recent re-

search has focused on the social, interactional aspects of a practicum (Gan, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2013; Payant & Murphy, 2012) and EFL contexts (Canh, 2014; Yunus, Hashim, Ishak, & Mahamod, 2010), the emphasis on actually *doing* teaching seems universal across contexts in that previous literature mostly reported how and what practicum participants experienced in actually practicing teaching.

However, especially for novice practitioners with little teaching experience, actually practicing teaching causes a high level of anxiety and tension. For instance, in Johnson's (1996) study, when a student teacher had to substitute for her cooperating teacher who called in sick, she felt "she wasn't ready" (p. 30) since she did not think that she knew her students very well or that she had fully developed her teaching skills. Similarly, the novice student teachers in Kanno and Stuart's (2011) study felt highly insecure, and it took time before they started to feel confident as teachers. Moreover, as Farrell (2007) reported, student teachers can even receive failing grades for their practicum courses if they are not prepared to see and do teaching properly.

To mitigate these negative consequences and maximize the outcome of actual practice of teaching, observation has been reported to be effective. In fact, the majority of participants in Wardman's (2009) study chose observation as the most valuable component of their practicum because it provided them with rich insights into their classroom and teaching as a solid "starting point" for their own teaching practice (p. 132). Further, one of the participants even thought her second practicum placement was more fruitful than the first since she was able to observe more and teach less. In other words, the increased amount of observation made the practicum more focused and feasible, thereby helping the participant become aware and confident that she was developing as a teacher. In another practicum program, according to Gan (2014), student teachers benefited from an intensive observation of their supporting teachers in the first week of the practicum as it enabled them to recognize important elements of teaching, including eliciting answers from students inductively, playing the role of a facilitator, and connecting grammar points with students' daily lives. Likewise, Molina's (2015) participants who conducted nine weeks of intensive observation were able to not only recognize how the mentor teacher scaffolded her teaching and how students participated in class differently, but they were also able to obtain more hands-on teaching tips, such as how to react to students' responses and how to adjust when the lesson did not proceed as planned. Moreover, through observation, these participants connected theory that they had learned as MA TESOL students to actual teaching practice and thereby revised their assumptions about L2 learning from practice, an example

of which is the possible effectiveness of students' use of their L1 in class. In short, observation enabled participants to understand the class context, teaching, and learning in the real world, enriching their views on ESOL pedagogy. Thus observation not only provides basic ideas about what an actual classroom looks like but also serves as the groundwork of one's teaching practice and confidence as a teacher.

Indeed, these accounts suggest that novice practitioners will benefit immensely from first conducting a practicum that is more low-stakes so they can focus on understanding what happens in an actual classroom before conducting a more practice-oriented practicum. One effective way to realize such a safe, yet meaningful, practicum environment is to switch its focus from *doing* to *seeing* teaching, by aiming at developing participants' critical observation skills.

An Observational Practicum

In contrast to a practice-oriented practicum as the term *practicum* usually implies, an observational practicum revolves around observation of other practitioners. In my case, in my second semester of the MA TESOL program, I observed a mentor teacher for a semester as one of her two teaching assistants (TAs) in a public speaking class within the ESL program at a US public university. The practicum consisted mostly of observation but was accompanied with some segments of teaching, including leading small workshops inside and outside the classroom.

During the practicum, I kept observation notes as a record of the class and as a future reference for reflection and analysis since, as Richards (2003) advocates, it is effective to take notes about the ecology and interactions of the classroom participants. In my observation notes, I wrote down the classroom members' remarks and interactions using two different columns, one for the mentor teacher and the other for the students, and I reviewed the notes after each class, adding comments and questions in blue ink (see Appendix for a sample note).

In addition to recording with rich detail, observation should be accompanied by reflection and analysis (Richards, 2003). My observation was reflective since I took a practicum class concurrently with my TA-ship, and the class required four observation papers that were reflection papers based on classroom observation. While the topics of the observation papers were open, students were required to focus on one specific topic related to teaching for each paper. Here, not only did I use my observation notes to complete the assignment, but the assignment itself also shaped my observation notes since it encouraged me to take either a top-down approach, choosing a particular element of the classroom to focus on before observation, or a bottom-up ap-

proach, attempting to find an outstanding element through observation. Moreover, the practicum class provided me with opportunities to talk about my TA-ship experiences with the instructor and classmates, which facilitated further reflection.

In sum, an effective observation requires not only recognition and recording of the classroom ecology and interactions among participants but also close analysis of the data collected to reconstruct the results of observation in relation to theory and to a wider context. These different aspects of observation suggest that observation is not an easy task. However, being such a complex construct, intensive observation and reflection involved in an observational practicum have the potential to turn into the cornerstone of one's professional development, providing her or him with skills to capture teaching/learning in the real world. The following sections support this benefit of an observational practicum by shedding light on how I deepened my understanding of scaffolding; it was the notion that I believe would not have been made so tangible and outstanding other than through an observational practicum—to the extent that I eventually applied it to actual teaching and internalized it as a pillar of my teaching practice.

Scaffolding

The notion of scaffolding in pedagogy first developed in the field of child education. According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), scaffolding in education is a "process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90), guiding the child in an inductive rather than deductive manner. In short, scaffolding in pedagogy refers to the "temporary but essential nature of the mentor's assistance" (Maybin, Mercer, & Steirer, 1992, p. 186) to bridge learning by providing learners with additional, intermediate steps. Therefore, specifically in the context of classroom teaching, "when introducing new concepts, the teacher is responsible for the sequencing and pacing of learning, and for challenging students to extend their current levels of understanding" (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001, p. 13). The concept of scaffolding has been widely examined in the field of TESOL as well, focusing on how teachers can scaffold their classes (Foley, 1994; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) and how learners can scaffold each other (Gagne & Parks, 2013; Kayi-Aydar, 2013) to facilitate learning.

Microlevel. Hammond and Gibbons (2005) distinguished two different levels of scaffolding: micro and macro. According to them, microlevel scaffolding occurs within interaction between the teacher and students and thus it is dynamic in nature. Examples of micro scaffolding include "linking to [students'] prior experience," "recapping,"

and "cued elicitation" (p. 21). In my practicum context, I observed some instances of micro scaffolding in a class on how to make and use PowerPoint slides effectively. The mentor teacher first asked students to brainstorm about their experiences of listening to lectures with PowerPoint slides, guiding students to reflect on whether the slides were helpful or not. Then, the mentor teacher showed students her sample PowerPoint slides, mentioning some of the issues discussed during the brainstorming session.

Here, the mentor teacher not only linked to students' *prior experience* with PowerPoint slides to help students recognize different aspects of PowerPoint slides (c.f., delivery and design) and thereby build schema on the topic but she also *recapped* by revisiting students' previous remarks to enable them to build the new knowledge on top of what they already had. For instance, when later in the class the teacher talked about the importance of speed in delivering PowerPoint presentations, she mentioned the student who had talked about how hard it was to follow her previous teacher's lecture because the teacher flipped the PowerPoint slides too fast. This *recapping* not only reminded the students about the elements they had brainstormed but also acknowledged their contributions based on their experiences.

Moreover, the teacher used *cued elicitation* by asking questions such as "How about the color/font [used in the slide presented]?" and "Do we know what it [a graph] is [about]?" to draw students's attention to important factors involved in effective PowerPoint slides. This way, even though the questions were closed ended (display), rather than open ended (referential), the teacher still successfully induced students' analyses and responses rather than just giving them answers.

Macrolevel. While the class exhibited various instances of microlevel scaffolding, it also exemplified macrolevel scaffolding. In Hammond and Gibbons's (2005) framework, macro scaffolding occurs at the curricular level, meant to connect "both to students' starting points and to the broader goals of the curriculum" (p. 13). One type of macrolevel scaffolding involved how to sequence tasks, designing tasks so that one task will feed the following task. In the class I observed, the mentor teacher scaffolded tasks, providing the sequence of *presentation-practice-production* (Harmer, 2001). First, the mentor teacher provided a lecture about how to make effective PowerPoint slides. Then, my partner TA and I led a workshop about how to use PowerPoint slides effectively in an actual speech, demonstrating both effective and ineffective example speeches using a sample PowerPoint slide. Finally, the students created and demonstrated their own short speech using another sample slide.

In this sequence, each step scaffolded students' learning, enabling

them to first develop skills to critically examine the effectiveness of PowerPoint slides and to use slides effectively in speech through the *presentation* provided in the lecture and workshop, and eventually to develop and deliver a speech on their own, *practicing* and *producing* the learned content. In other words, students were able to take time to understand and practice what is involved in the effective development and delivery of a PowerPoint presentation before actually demonstrating these features in front of the class. Without such an opportunity and sufficient preparation time, or the macro scaffolding, the last demonstration task would have been too difficult and anxiety inducing for students.

Moreover, macro scaffolding can occur on an even larger scale. In terms of the class I observed, not only individual lessons but also the whole curriculum of the course was scaffolded. The course consisted of four units that centered on different speech types (individual narrative, individual descriptive, individual argumentative, and group descriptive/argumentative), but each unit repeated the same basic procedure (brainstorming of topics, development of a speech outline, delivery of a speech, and submission of a unit portfolio). However, with each speech unit, students needed to assume greater responsibility, demonstrating previously learned skills to be evaluated more severely in the next. For instance, they were required to use more reliable sources, create more effective PowerPoint slides, and be more precise in speech timing as the units progressed. This gradually increasing level of difficulty resonates with a characteristic of scaffolding in Hammond and Gibbons's (2001) framework, "challenging students to extend their current levels of understanding" (p. 13). Since the class was a public speaking course, the whole curriculum was designed to train students to develop and deliver higher-quality speeches with each unit.

In sum, the course of observation and reflection in an observational practicum enables participants to connect real-life teaching practice with theory and to further analyze and evaluate the class at both micro and macro levels. Furthermore, the outcome of an observational practicum may have such a great impact that it can become a critical component of participants' *teaching philosophy*, or beliefs and values that propel one's teaching practice (Crookes, 2003; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). In my case, the observation experience around scaffolding developed into an important part of my teaching philosophy: to scaffold learning, and if the scaffold is missing or not solid enough, to add or reinforce the scaffold. The next section demonstrates how observation can be applied to actual teaching practice by introducing my own teaching practice in the following semester.

Application to Teaching Practice

The semester after I completed the observational practicum, I worked again as a TA in the same ESL program, but this time with another instructor, in a grammar class, and as the sole TA in the class. In this context, I worked closely with a few struggling students by offering them weekly tutoring sessions outside the class. The following sections describe how I applied micro and macro scaffolding that I observed in the previous semester to my own teaching practice.

Microlevel

As was described earlier in this article, micro, interpersonal scaffolding is organic in that it occurs in interaction, and thus it requires instructors to be adept at communicating with students and identifying their learning needs on the spot (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). Though it occurred gradually, I was able to incorporate microlevel scaffolding into my tutoring. For instance, even though at the beginning of the semester I tended to just explain grammatical rules to my tutees, later I increased the tutees' responsibility and autonomy in their learning by asking questions such as "Why do you think so? Can you explain?" and "Can you come up with your own sentence? Can you put it on the board?" These practices not only exhibited some types of micro scaffolding presented in Hammond and Gibbons's (2005) model such as *cued elicitation* and *increasing the prospectiveness*, or facilitating learners' deeper thinking and linguistic output, but they also met Applebee's (1986) criteria of effective scaffolding such as *student ownership of the learning event, shared responsibility,* and *transfer of control* in that I gradually switched the tutee-tutor roles in interacting with my tutees.

Macrolevel

In contrast to micro scaffolding, macro, curricular-level scaffolding requires more general content knowledge, but it also requires knowledge of a specific teaching context and learners since the kind of scaffold required depends on local factors such as curricular goals and learners' needs (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). I exhibited the macrolevel of scaffolding in one of my tutoring sessions in which a tutee and I worked on the basics of the parts of speech and grammatical functions. I decided to focus on these topics as a result of the previous tutoring session, which had covered basic sentence structures as a review of the preceding grammar class. As the tutee and I were talking about sentence structures, I sensed that the tutee did not know what each part of speech meant and confused the parts of speech with grammatical functions (e.g., a noun versus a subject/object), even though

in the grammar class these metalinguistic terms were used commonly on the presumption that students already knew them. Thus, I decided to go one step back to scaffold my tutee's learning by helping her understand what four basic parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) represented and how to distinguish these parts of speech from three grammatical functions (subjects, verbs, and objects). In other words, here I provided my tutee with metalinguistic devices, which enabled her to complete the next task of understanding and analyzing sentence structures.

Thus, while an observational practicum centers on observing others rather than actually practicing teaching, it in fact promotes application of *seeing* to *doing* teaching. This application is possible since the skills to critically *see* teaching fostered in the observational practicum enable participants to actually *do* teaching by reflecting on, planning, and providing teaching so that it will facilitate their students' learning.

Reflection on an Observational Practicum: Why Beneficial?

This section revisits and frames the benefits of an observational practicum.

Reduction of Affective Load

First and foremost, an observational practicum provides time for novice practitioners to reduce anxiety and develop confidence in teaching. As previous literature has suggested, novice teachers tend to feel a high level of anxiety, which takes time to dwindle (Johnson, 1996; Kanno & Stuart, 2011). In this regard, an observational practicum has a considerable advantage over a practice-based practicum since in the former, novice practitioners have sufficient time to gain insights into actual language classrooms, build confidence as knowledgeable ESOL professionals, and reduce their affective load. Thus, it is ideal for novice practitioners to experience an observational practicum toward the beginning of their professional development so that they will be better prepared for a more practice-based practicum to be conducted later, maximizing its outcome.

Development of Critical Observation Skills

Another important factor of an observational practicum is that it fosters critical observation skills, which enable ESOL practitioners to connect theory with practice and grasp both the micro and macro views of teaching (Richards, 2003). Since in an observational practicum participants can distance themselves from the teaching practice taking place, they are able to see and analyze teaching objectively and

deeply while maintaining subjective insights into the classroom as a member of the community (Richards, 2003). In fact, although teaching practice itself is useful and necessary for teacher development, I found in my experience of leading small workshops that in actually doing teaching, one can easily fail to attend to the macro aspects of teaching such as the goals and objectives of the lesson and course, instead being preoccupied only with rather minor elements of teaching, including what questions to ask students and how to follow the sequence of teaching as planned. For instance, according to Kanno and Stuart (2011), it was not until a few months after the practicum started that a participant started to pay more attention to the "larger picture" of his lessons, considering the goals and objectives by asking himself, "'What exactly is it that I am doing here?'" (p. 244). His accounts suggest that originally he had not been able to see his class beyond day-to-day, miscellaneous aspects of practicing teaching. Similarly, a participant in Johnson and Golombek's (2013) study reported that in her practicum she used to "let the content rule over the objectives" (p. 15). Therefore, it is probably necessary to step back from teaching practice in order to grasp a wider, bird's-eye view of teaching, thereby connecting theory with practice and developing micro and macro views of teaching, which opportunity an observational practicum offers.

Application to Teaching Practice

Finally, as my tutoring experience following an observational practicum exemplified, the content of an observational practicum can transfer to one's actual teaching practice. In my experience, the notion of scaffolding, which was originally too abstract a concept to fully understand through literature alone, became more tangible and even developed into a core part of my teaching philosophy. Therefore, even though it may take time to fully internalize observed skills and knowledge, an observational practicum is still highly beneficial in constructing micro and macro views of teaching, on which one can reflect and base her or his own teaching practice.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that novice preservice practitioners with little teaching experience conduct an observational practicum before participating in a more high-stakes, practice-oriented practicum. While a practice-oriented practicum often regards observation as only a preliminary process to actual teaching components, an observational practicum advocates reversing the proportion of and emphasis on observation and practice. An observational practicum revolves around intensive observation and reflection, ideally accompa-

nied by microteaching experiences to facilitate application to teaching and further reflection. This intensive observation supported by small teaching components will enable participants to acquire invaluable insights into teaching through critical observation, reflection, connection to ESOL theory, application to one's own teaching practice, and reflection for further improvement—in short, the groundwork of praxis. Indeed, an observational practicum will provide ESOL practitioners with the essential foundation of their professional development, empowering them to be effective seers and doers of ESOL pedagogy.

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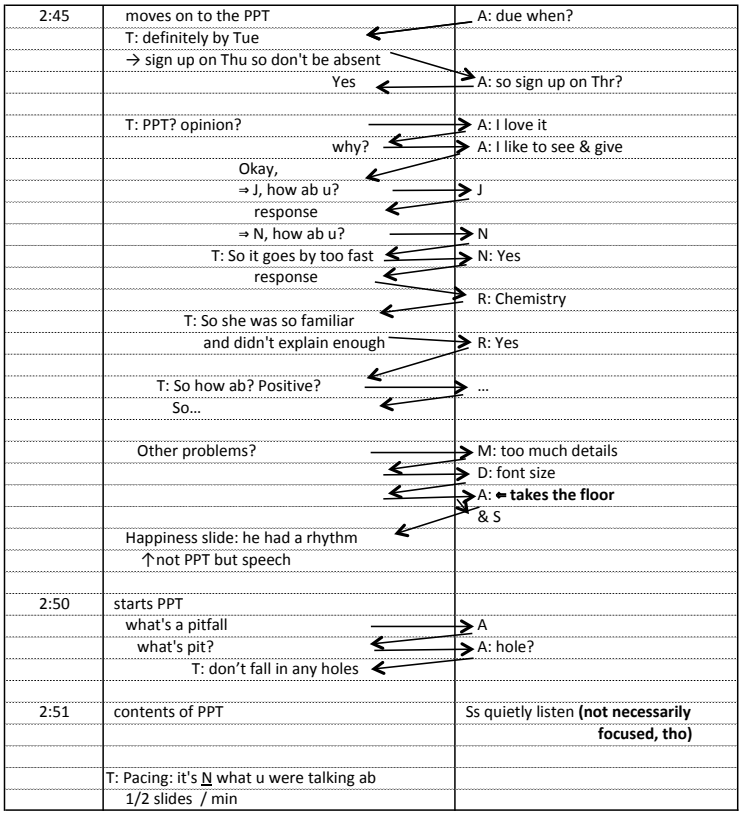
Appendix

The following image is a page from my observation notes. The left column shows the time of recording (e.g., "2:45"). The middle column describes what the mentor teacher did and said, including the questions she asked of students (e.g., "How about you?" or "What's a pitfall?"). The right column is what students did and said, including who responded and what ideas they contributed. The arrows on the notes depict the flows of interaction, their starting point representing who initiated the interaction and the tip leading to who responded. Finally, the bold letters (e.g., "takes the floor") and underline ("it's N what [yo] u were talking ab[out]") are what I added afterward in blue ink when reviewing the notes.

The notes show some instances of microlevel, interactional scaffolding. For instance, the mentor teacher elicited different aspects of PowerPoint slides (e.g., pace, amount of information, font size) from students' *prior experience*. The teacher later *recapped* when she referred to one of the aspects, the pace, mentioning the student (N) who originally contributed the idea. In addition, the teacher *recasted* by rephrasing and clarifying what students had said (e.g., "So it goes by too fast").


2:45
moves on to the PPT
A: due when?
T: definitely by Tue
→ sign up on Thu so don't be absent
Yes
A: so sign up on Thr?
T: PPT? opinion?
A: I love it
why?
A: I like to see & give
Okay,
⇒ J, how ab u?
J
response
⇒ N, how ab u?
N
T: So it goes by too fast
N: Yes
response
R: Chemistry
T: So she was so familiar
and didn't explain enough
R: Yes
T: So how ab? Positive?
...
So...
Other problems?
M: too much details
D: font size
A: ⬅ takes the floor
& S
Happiness slide: he had a rhythm
↑not PPT but speech
2:50
starts PPT
what's a pitfall
A
what's pit?
A: hole?
T: don't fall in any holes
2:51
contents of PPT
Ss quietly listen (not necessarily focused, tho)
T: Pacing: it's N what u were talking ab
1/2 slides / min