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Looking for the Big Picture: Macrostrategies for L2 Teacher Observation and Feedback

While an extensive body of literature in TESOL studies the different paradigms that drive second language (L2) teachers' conceptualizations of their professional identities and practice (Freeman 2002; Richards 1998; Johnson 1999; Parrott 1993), there is still a need for more research into how L2 supervisors construct the realities of supervision and how their interpretations of those realities inform their interactions with teachers. Often, supervisors charged with improving teacher practice through a collaborative cycle of formal observation, feedback, and evaluation use their memories of experiences with supervisors as a guide. Unfortunately, the memories that supervisors typically work from derive from a vertical top-down supervisor-teacher relationship. Consequently, both parties commonly frame observation and post-observation exchanges as a time for the supervisor to identify and correct what was "wrong" in that particular classroom on that particular day—hopefully with little protest on the part of the teacher. We believe that L2 teacher observation and feedback can and should be much more.

In this article, we argue that rather than a checklist of what was "right" or "wrong" and a prescription for fixing those errors, teachers need broader strategies to make their instruction respond dynamically to the changing contexts and circumstances of classrooms. Referring to L2 teachers and the L2 classroom, Kumaravadivelu (1994) calls these big ideas about teaching *macrostrategies*. Broad guiding principles such as "Maximizing Opportunities for Student Production" or "Promoting Learner Autonomy" are macrostrategies subsequently applied by individual teachers as they develop "situation-specific, need based microstrategies or classroom techniques" (Kumaravadivelu 1994, 32). We contend that supervisors need macrostrategies too—big ideas about teaching and big ideas about working for and with teachers.

Six macrostrategies for supervisors

The six macrostrategies enumerated below are specifically directed toward supervisors. At the same time, however, we believe that teachers working by themselves or wanting to work better with their colleagues can consider how these guidelines might enrich their own reflective practice.

Strategy 1: Examining subjectivities

One place for supervisors to start is with themselves—in an articulation and examination of the array of assumptions or biases about teaching and teachers that they bring to their roles. For example, one potential supervisor bias revolves around teachers' mastery of language. While such concerns might be justified—or even institutionally mandated—unexamined and disproportionate preoccupation with certain aspects of a teacher's English proficiency might actually deflect the supervisor's attention away from other immediate and critical issues in the classroom, such as the frequency and types of opportunities for student interaction afforded in an instructional sequence.

Even when there is a high degree of consensus among stakeholders at the institutional level as to what constitutes appropriate instructional practice, the supervisor's own experiences as a teacher or as a language learner may unduly influence the criteria for classroom assessment. Likewise, a teacher's difficulty in complying with rules and procedures outside the classroom setting may lead a supervisor to inadvertently conduct the class observation with a negative predisposition about who that specific colleague is and who he or she is capable of becoming—predispositions that can also sour the nature and tone of the dialogue during the post-observation process. Needless to say, this could create the potential for an antagonistic or adversarial relationship because of what may be perceived as an emphasis on the supervisor's concerns rather than the teacher's (Stoller 2007).

We do not suggest that supervisors could or would want to eliminate every assumption that they have about teachers and teaching altogether. However, in their interactions with one another, supervisors and teachers alike will benefit from the individual and collective examination and reexamination of their thinking about issues such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, and a range of other assumptions.

Richards (1998) characterizes teachers' classroom practices as the embodiment of information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions for teaching and learning. Becoming a teacher is not solely dependent on the development of a skill set, or the mastery of principles and theories (Parrott 1993). Rather, teachers are guided by internal frames of reference grounded in personal experiences, both academic and other, and their interpretation of them. So too are supervisors. Supervisors need to recognize their own biases and how those biases might influence the perception of an observation and the feedback that follows. In the end, if a planned point of reference during the teacher–supervisor interaction cannot be linked to specific outcomes or goals that pertain to instructional practice or learning, it may be best to consider it as a potential source of bias or subjectivity.

Strategy 2: Articulating institutional values

As is often expected from teachers, L2 supervisors and institutions also need to articulate their stances toward teaching and learning. Only then is open dialogue possible. Ideally, supervision is grounded in thoughtful discussions of teaching and learning. How administrators, teachers, and students might work together to create sustainable and nurturing environments for language learning requires dialogue. Such dialogue should include a continuum of participants—administrators, teachers, students, and their parents—coming together to discuss the collective vision of the mission of their institution and the sort of teachers and instructional pedagogy that might advance that mission. Even though talking and listening to each other takes time, thinking together is an essential part of the recursive, participatory, and ongoing process that is professional development. We also suspect that when members of an institution collaboratively construct an agenda for teaching and learning, they are more likely to see it come to fruition. Likewise, supervisors might better align their observations and feedback with individual teachers when the larger institutional goals are clearly articulated.

An excellent way to promote dialogue is through focus groups. Supervisors might, for example, meet monthly with a team of teachers to talk about a specific issue or series of issues related to the classroom. Similarly, rap sessions or town-hall meetings are ways of creating spaces to address teachers and supervisors' professional concerns, doubts, suggestions, and ideas. As classrooms change with the introduction of new technologies, curricula, and enrollment, the expectations and reality of effective teaching will also change. Organizational cultures that foster the exchange of ideas will allow all of the stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process to adapt to those changes more quickly and successfully.

Supervisors should also share experiences and engage in collaborative problem solving with other supervisors—learning from and with each other as they develop a common language for talking about teachers and teaching. By doing so, the perception on the part of teachers that supervisors' opinions about teaching and learning change "depending on who you talk to" can be avoided. To that end, supervisors need to periodically meet and discuss issues related to teaching and supervision in order to bolster both the consistency in the messages they convey to teachers and their credibility when it comes to results.

Strategy 3: Understanding teachers as individuals

At the same time as we argue for the need for discussions at the individual and institutional levels about teaching and learning, we also recognize that our colleagues are unique individuals often at very different points in their professional lives. For example, at the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, a large binational center in Peru, some 40 supervisors collaborate with more than 400 teachers who are all at unique points in their professional development. Simply put, not all teachers are the same. Differences should be a starting point for informed and responsive supervision that might include, in many instances, recognition and celebration of an individual teacher's achievement. While standardization of quality and consistency of instruction are often institutional goals, supervisors still need to be able to talk to individuals.

Beyond discussions, teachers looking to extend their practice need concrete examples and/or alternatives to help them achieve their highest professional aspirations. Again, how those alternatives are delivered or generated depends on who that teacher is and where that teacher is in his or her career. We have found newer professionals to be receptive to more direct approaches in terms of alternatives for their practice. For example, if a junior teacher is struggling with classroom management, a supervisor might offer a menu of alternatives for the teacher to try in the following days, weeks, and months. In terms of a mid-career teacher or veteran, the supervisor might identify an area of concern and work with the teacher from scratch to come up with a menu of alternatives that the teacher will commit to implement in the classroom.

Teachers who consistently demonstrate a high level of performance might also be recruited as mentors for their colleagues or as facilitators of teacher inquiry groups for problem solving specific classroom or institutional issues. In some instances we have advocated for supervisors to team teach with their colleagues; this is a way to move toward a more horizontal and collaborative approach and to create concrete alternatives for and with teachers in a community of collaborative professionals (Salas 2005).

Finally, because teachers are normal people with complex life circumstances, supervisors may be called upon to interact with them in situations that are not academic in nature. Supervisors' willingness to make themselves available in such circumstances contributes to the notion that they are not only there to observe and evaluate teachers; they are also there to be good listeners who care about and understand the teachers with whom they work. Supervisors should understand and validate the fact that teachers, as well as students, bring their entire being to the classroom. This contributes to the macro context, where macrostrategies are enacted.

Strategy 4: Talking across the data

Whether supervisors are talking with a novice or a highly experienced teacher, their feedback will be more effective if they base their dialogue on empirical data such as handwritten or video-recorded observations, teacher-generated lesson plans, student prod-

ucts, and more. For example, if the issue is lack of sufficient corrective feedback, a teacher should and will expect to receive a better response than "I did not observe enough corrective feedback in your class," or "You didn't seem to correct your students enough." By referring to the actual number of opportunities there were to apply corrective feedback strategies and comparing them to the number of attempts during the lesson to do so, both supervisor and teacher can reach a more objective understanding as to whether it is lacking or not. Clearly, a data-driven discussion focused on an issue like the frequency and types of questioning that a teacher employs in a lesson enables supervisors to talk in a more convincing manner about what they perceive as something that is or is not happening in a classroom.

The observation and feedback sequence is, above all, a process that should begin some days or weeks in advance with collaborative planning or a review of existing data and informed goal setting. Teachers might preface the actual feedback session with written reflections on the observed lesson and their teaching in general—both strengths and areas for improvement.

While we embrace a reflective practice paradigm that encourages teachers to think aloud in exploratory ways about who they are as teachers, where their teaching comes from, and where it is going, we caution that if the feedback session is not focused enough both the supervisor and teacher risk leaving unsatisfied. To that end, talking across the data is a macrostrategy for ensuring that the dialogue between supervisor and teacher is grounded in a healthy, but not exaggerated, degree of specificity.

Strategy 5: Looking for the big picture

While advocating for data-driven discussions, we recognize that it is all too easy for teachers and supervisors to get bogged down in the minutiae of what happened or did not happen during a particular observation. From our point of view, supervisors and teachers' dialogues are more meaningful when both the supervisors and teachers attempt to recognize larger patterns across observations and think ahead as they engage in a collaborative effort toward the achievement of current and long-term goals. In other words, a holistic description of where a teacher is in his or her professional trajectory and what feedback is most useful to future goals should frame the dialogue between the two professionals.

Rather than concentrating on mere compliance with expected practices, techniques, or procedures, supervisors and teachers should keep their attention focused on the bigger picture—what students are taking away from a lesson. By being open to multiple ways of arriving at the same goal, supervisors communicate respect and trust toward their classroom colleagues. Empirical data establishes a baseline from which a collaborative plan of action can be devised and against which results can eventually be compared. By looking beyond the scope of a single lesson, supervisors create the groundwork for professional thinking and praxis that ideally feeds into sustainable and long-term teacher development.

We emphasize that supervisors should look less to correcting what did not work in a particular class and think broadly of an individual's professional needs. For example, supervisors can examine the observational data and classify instances of what they see happening into larger categories, such as "Issues of Planning," or "Classroom Management Issues," or "Student Interactions." As such, the resulting feedback and discussion coalesces around the larger pedagogical issues that the supervisor and teacher have committed to reflecting on together and extending in practice. In other words, the driving questions a supervisor brings to an observation and feedback session sounds something like, "What sort of professional is this teacher, what sort of professional is this teacher in the process of becoming, and how can I help him or her to become that professional?"

Strategy 6: Providing alternatives and resources

Being a supervisor who teachers can turn to requires that supervisors be prepared and, furthermore, engaged in their own ongoing professional learning. Carefully thought-out professional development initiatives that allow supervisors to consolidate skills and expand their knowledge of key issues are essential for the success of an institution. Professional development might, for example, focus on data generation techniques for class observa-

tions, post-observation conference role plays, or conflict resolution, just to name a few. Face-to-face and online/distance-learning courses, in-house training sessions, ongoing professional reading and discussion sessions, and participation in important conferences are among the many alternatives that can play a part in the long-term professional development plan for supervisors.

Such development is vital to the success of any supervisor who must rise to the degree of professional competence that teachers expect during the post-observation conference or any other instance where interaction occurs. Unfortunately, institutional decision makers who tend to focus more on teacher development sometimes neglect the professional development and training of supervisors; oftentimes, this leads to a crisis management situation for supervisors rather than a more appropriate focus on careful planning and preparation for working with teachers (Bailey 2006). Nevertheless, continuous professional learning enhances L2 supervisors' credibility overall and leads to a greater willingness on the part of teachers to engage in collaborative efforts.

Special contexts and circumstances of supervision

We recognize that many institutional configurations do not allow for or encourage sustained horizontal interaction among supervisors and teachers. In some cases, teacher supervision is limited to an annual report penned by a state bureaucrat with limited experience or investment in teaching or teachers. In other cases, teachers are simply supervising themselves. In such instances we encourage professionals, be they supervisors or teachers, to consider the macrostrategies we have enumerated here as a starting point for examining how we understand ourselves as professionals and how we understand the dynamic circumstances and layered contexts of our work and the work of our colleagues. To that end, less dogma and more flexible macrostrategies can help those of us working within larger institutions to embrace ourselves as the professional educators we are in the process of becoming.

We have also found it particularly healthy for supervisors to recognize their own limitations as professionals. That is to say, we are not always effective with everyone. When an issue repeatedly arises between a supervisor and a teacher that appears irresolvable, we recommend a structured intervention that takes the form of a simple moderated discussion about whatever is happening or not happening in that professional relationship, or in more extreme cases, some sort of conflict resolution. We also recognize that just as supervisors are constantly thinking about how teachers might develop within the institution, supervisors also need opportunities for feedback, dialogue, and development related to their professional identities and roles. Thus, supervisors should seek out opportunities for reflective practice by engaging in initiatives such as team observation, filming or audio recording feedback sessions with volunteer teachers, and even preparing their own supervisor portfolios. Additionally, to understand how they are doing, supervisors might also turn to teachers—asking them periodically for feedback about the support they are providing and how that support might be enhanced.

Conclusion

Just as the knowledge base for teaching foreign languages remains highly contested, what a supervisor needs to know and be able to do and where that knowledge comes from are all questions that remain little addressed in the research or practice literature for L2 teaching and learning. That said, based on our experiences working with teachers and supervisors, we have tried to make the case here that effective supervision requires flexibility and, perhaps most of all, attention to the bigger picture of sustainable teacher development.

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