

Using Video for Teacher-Driven Peer Observation

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1 Introduction

Classroom observation is widely acknowledged to be an important part of continuing professional development.

However, conflicting and otherwise busy schedules mean that, in practice, ongoing observation is a tool infrequently used - especially in the smaller departments common in foreign English-teaching programs at Japanese universities and similar contexts.

Beginning in 2010, Chubu University's Ohio Program of English Language Teaching has been using video classroom observations together with twice-yearly teacher training meetings to enhance ongoing professional development efforts. Each semester, one instructor's class is recorded, and as part of a full-day in-service meeting at the end of the term, that instructor guides the other faculty through a focused observation task of his or her own devising.

2 OPELT and PASEO at Chubu University

The Ohio Program for English Language Teaching (OPELT) is an outgrowth of the ongoing collaboration between Chubu University and Ohio University. Since 1990 OPELT has served Chubu University by providing highly qualified, native-English speaker TESOL professionals in their general English classes. The OPELT mission expanded in 1998 when the Program for Academic Studies in English Overseas (PASEO) was established and OPELT was placed under the administration of the Chubu University Language Center (LC). The LC provides vital support in a variety of areas including assisting with the course registration and testing process, keeping the PASEO student and budget records databases, maintaining the multi-media language labs, managing the self-access language room, and assisting PASEO faculty with translations, university procedures, and technical support, among many other areas.

2.1 OPELT Mission Statement

The primary mission of OPELT has three parts: instruction, cooperation, and professional development in terms of instruction, OPELT aims to deliver high quality, comprehensive, EFL instruction to Chubu University students, faculty, and staff in areas such as English for Academic Preparation (PASEO classes) and English as a Foreign Language (non-PASEO classes).

OPELT also aims to assist in further strengthening the Chubu-Ohio University sister-university relationship and to promote the exchange programs between the two universities through annual activities including the Ohio University Study Abroad Orientation, the Ohio University Study Abroad Pre-Departure Workshop, the PASEO Ena Retreat, and the Ping Scholarship Advisor Program.

Finally, it is OPELT mission to provide a career development platform upon which TESOL professionals may gain practical experience in areas including but not limited to Teaching English as a Foreign Language, collaborating as members of the Chubu University faculty, student advising, Computer Assisted Language Learning, teacher training design and facilitation, writing tutoring, curriculum and materials development, test design and writing, practical classroom research, website management, program administration, textbook selection and review, placement test administration and supervision, and the study and use of the Japanese language.

2.2 Lesson Observation and the OPELT Mission

It is in the interest of supporting this third goal, professional development, that the lesson observation system was devised and implemented. Although constructive, peer-led lesson observation tasks are widely regarded as an important tool for the continued professional development of both new and experienced teachers, it is all too rare to see them actually implemented in a mindful way at the university level. Spot lesson observations in response to problems or complaints, or observations of new teachers' lessons with general teaching techniques in mind, may occur, but this only leads to the reinforcement of the unfortunate idea that a "good" teacher need not be observed. In addition, when lesson observations do occur, they tend to provide little in the way of useful feedback. A non-task-focused observation is likely to focus primarily on the observer's opinions about the lesson, which will necessarily be colored by his or her teaching philosophies, which may well be quite different-but no more or less valid-than those of the observed teacher. With these points in mind, the current video lesson observation system was implemented at OPELT beginning in 2010.

3 The Lesson Observation System

3.1 Philosophy

All OPELT instructors are professional, trained teachers, with potentially very different teaching styles and philosophies. Although there is a time and a place to challenge these basic assumptions, these lesson observations are emphatically not such a forum. To this end, the instructor being observed is instructed to prepare an explicit, focused task for the observers, based on an aspect of his or her teaching that the instructor feels needs improvement or attention, and it is the responsibility of the observing teachers to limit their feedback to the assigned task and area of investigation. In the unlikely event that a lesson does not meet the fundamental PASEO curriculum and philosophy, it is the responsibility of the Director and the Director alone to privately discuss this with the instructor.

3.2 System

A lesson observation is conducted at each In-Service meeting, held for a full day each semester after classes are over; the observed instructor rotates between all five OPELT instructors.

It is the observed instructor's duty to prepare an explicit, focused observation task for observing instructors to perform, including a description of an aspect of his or her teaching that the instructor wants to investigate. This task and any associated worksheets are developed in close cooperation with the Director of OPELT, and the Director may suggest changes or refinements to the task.

The instructor is responsible for having his or her lesson recorded during the semester. Many instructors take advantage of the Chubu University Media Education Center's high-quality class recording services, while some more technically-minded instructors record the lesson on their own. A full lesson is recorded, and the instructor chooses a segment of the lesson to fit the design of the task.

During the In-Service meeting, the OPELT faculty observe the segment of the lesson selected by the observed instructor, perform the task, and discuss the results of the task with the observed instructor. Discussion is strictly limited to points the observation task asks to be observed, and the ramifications with respect to the area of teaching that the observed teacher wants to investigate. With a well-designed task, this is usually extremely enlightening for all instructors, but the focused discussion often leads into a more-general discussion of classroom management, strategies for dealing with problematical situations, and so on. The wide range of teaching experience, teaching philosophies and teaching styles among OPELT instructors means that this discussion is often wide-ranging but always useful.

4 Lesson Observation Tasks

To give an idea of the kind of lesson observation tasks used in the program, a short description of some tasks used in the past will be presented.

4.1 Japanese Language Use

The instructor who designed this task is an experienced teacher who has been living and teaching English in Japan for more than 15 years. He speaks Japanese at a near-native level, and occasionally uses the students' first language in the classroom. Although a purely English-language classroom is not official policy for PASEO classes, they are designed around a "semi-intensive" course with as much English use as possible.

This instructor had received comments on the semester-end PASEO course evaluations to the effect that he used "too much Japanese" in the classroom, and designed a task to assess how much Japanese he did use in the class, any effect it had on classroom atmosphere, and whether it interfered with potential teachable points.

The task he designed was simply to observe three distinct parts of a lesson and record the number of times the following occurred:

- 1) The instructor spoke in Japanese
- 2) A student spoke in Japanese and the instructor responded directly

Observers were also asked to make notes of the type of interaction.

It was found that, over roughly 20 minutes of lesson and three different types of activity (teacher-centered lecture, teacher-led discussion, and guided student interaction) the teacher only used or responded to Japanese less than four or five times, and usually as clarification for important procedural points unrelated to the lesson's teaching goals. The instructor remarked that this was a good deal less Japanese than he would have expected he used - that is to say, his own feelings about the extent of his Japanese use in class were, as far as the task revealed, incorrect.

Some observers did feel that any use of Japanese missed potential teachable moments, and the ensuing discussion allowed all instructors to clearly lay out their philosophies and arguments for or against an English-only classroom.

4.2 Clarity of Classroom Instruction

The instructor who designed this task is an experienced instructor, with extensive teaching experience not only in Japan, but in other countries where English is not the first language and with adult English as a Second Language learners in the United States.

This instructor was interested in investigating aspects of her class that she feels go consistently well, to see if they are as well-crafted as they could be.

The three segments of the lesson observed were chosen carefully to showcase a variety of types of classroom instruction: a purely administrative task (addressing envelopes used to send grade reports to students), a straightforward grammar practice task (practicing a grammar point in conversation), and a more complex group task (an activity to create a map of the University campus). Observing instructors were asked to answer the following questions regarding the instructions given:

- 1) Does the instructor's attempt to simplify her speech to be comprehensible for low-level students inhibit clarity, grammaticality and/or accurate vocabulary choice?
- 2) Are there ways in which her instruction giving could be accurately and appropriately simplified to better assist comprehensibility?

The instructor found the activity helpful, as the reflection required to create the task alone was a healthy process, and she felt that she was able to identify some communication habits she has and areas in which she would like to do more. In particular, she found areas in the three segments of her lesson in which she would have liked to give more visual assistance, and has implemented this change in her classes moving forward. She also remarked that she gained a great deal from the ideas and sharing with the other instructors after the discussion of the observable data.

4.3 Student Actions in Detail

The instructor who designed this task is a relatively new instructor, who had been with OPELT, her first English-teaching job after finishing university, for one year at the time of the observation.

This instructor was worried that some students were not engaged in the class, and wanted to try and determine first of all whether or not other instructors noticed the same issue, and if so whether the root of the problem was in the difficulty of the tasks used in class, the content of the tasks used in class, or potential other factors she was missing while teaching.

The task was relatively complex: each observing teacher was tasked with observing a single student throughout a single part of the lesson. Observers were asked to take notes on:

- 1) Student involvement in the task
- 2) Student behavior
- 3) Student responses to the instructor

Observers were also asked to answer the following holistic questions about the student's behavior:

- 1) Is the student involved in the task? Do they focus on the class work? The teacher? Other students? Something else?
- 2) What does the student do during the lesson?
- 3) How does the student respond to the teacher or the content? Does the student show understanding?
- 4) What other factors (motivational, mental, physical, etc.) can you observe affecting the student?

The instructor learned the following from the observation task: First, that many of her students were more actively involved in the lesson than she, looking at the class only holistically as the teacher, had realized. The observing instructors found that, in general, although the students sometimes let their attention wander, and although some students had difficulty interfacing with the class, on the whole, students were engaged, involved, and actively responding to the instructor. One of the primary issues seemed to be a common one with Japanese students, a general difficulty in "reading" their body language and facial expressions to determine if they understand classroom instructions, material or tasks. Experienced teachers noted that, in their opinion, most of the students did understand the material but were simply not showing that understanding as actively as they might have.

In the ensuing discussion of the class and the observed instructor's teaching methods, other instructors brought up their interpretations of specific issues that may have been interfering with some students' active involvement in the class, and ideas for strategies about how to deal with similar situations in the future. The instructor found this discussion very helpful, and again has said that she is actively incorporating suggestions brought up in the discussion into her lessons.

4.4 Numbers and Patterns of Teacher Interaction with Students

The instructor who designed this task is an experienced teacher who has been teaching English in Japan for 10 years. Unusually for OPELT instructors, however, he does not have formal education in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language and had never been exposed to the idea of a focused observation task of the sort used in this program.

For this reason, the first time this instructor was called upon to do the lesson observation task, he elected to design a task with the aim of learning about the process of designing and carrying out a focused lesson observation. Working together with the director of OPELT, he selected a fairly fundamental type of observation task for his first observation.

The task he chose was a task to track the numbers and types of interactions between instructor and students, and between students and students, in the classroom. Observers were given a seating chart of the class and noted each time the instructor interacted with a student, and each time a student interacted with another student. Observers also noted whether the interaction was primarily one-way or two-way communication.

At the time of this writing, this observation has not yet taken place, so the results are not yet known. However, as the primary purpose of the task and the process of task design was to introduce the concept of focused less observation tasks to the instructor with the guidance of the OPELT director, this instructor's task does provide an illuminating example of how focused observation can be carried out.

5 Benefits of the Lesson Observation System

This lesson observation system has provided a number of tangible benefits to OPELT instructors; not only to new teachers, but to experienced teachers and of course to the program as a whole.

5.1 New Teachers

The most important benefit for new teachers is exposure to specific, usable feedback from more-experienced teachers, but at least as importantly, this feedback is presented from the point of view of a peer rather than a superior. This reinforces new teachers' confidence in their knowledge and education in language pedagogy, and helps to foster a collegiate atmosphere in the program.

In addition, by design, the bulk of the feedback is independent of pure personal preferences in teaching. Each teacher is unique, and advice that boils down to differences in personal philosophy is all too easy to ignore, if not actively unhelpful. By basing the discussion in empirically observable data, this bias can be avoided.

New teachers also get experience from designing the observation tasks themselves, which necessarily requires them to reflect on their own teaching in a mindful way. Self-assessment is widely-acknowledged as an important tool in continuing professional development, and even after instructors leave OPELT and enter teaching environments without our peer-led observation system, the skills they acquire in designing and carrying out self-assessment will continue to be helpful to them.

Finally, new teachers get important chances to observe more-experienced teachers' lessons, again as peers instead of students. Many new instructors never have a chance to observe an experienced teacher's lesson during their education, and few teaching programs offer continued chances to do so. Exposure to a wide variety of teaching philosophies and styles is an important factor in further growth and development as a teacher.

5.2 Experienced Teachers

It is quite unusual for experienced teachers to have the chance to have their lessons observed, and the benefits of lesson observation are well-understood.

First, the guided lesson observation is a chance to investigate unexamined habits, or to verify or falsify suspicions about existing habits. Many teachers have ideas about how they run their classes minute-to-minute, but as we have seen from the examples of tasks used in the PASEO observation program, these suspicions are as often false as true. Verifiable, quantifiable data about one's own lessons is a powerful tool in the teacher's professional development toolkit.

In addition, not a few experienced teachers have never designed or carried out a lesson observation task at all, or at least have never done so since their initial education as teachers. Real-world design and implementation of observation tasks is quite different from the theoretical ideal, as is real-world analysis of results.

Finally, the lesson observation system gives experienced teachers a chance to mentor newer teachers in a strictly-guided fashion, again independent of personal preferences or teaching styles. This benefit has two aspects: First, experienced teachers can teach new instructors by example, with real video footage of a classroom in action, exposing the newer teachers to classroom management and teaching techniques that might never come up in an open discussion of teaching. Second, experienced teachers' observation task design can show what aspects of their teaching they feel is the most important, which again can impart important information about day-to-day classroom management that might not come up in more general discussions.

5.3 The OPELT Program

The lesson observation system provides an important venue for the OPELT director to keep abreast of potential problems with PASEO classes, whether these are teaching issues, class or curriculum design issues, or student problems.

The impact the lesson observation system has had on student satisfaction survey results has been quite striking. Due to the fact that students have the option of taking PASEO classes without registering for credit, PASEO has traditionally conducted its own student satisfaction surveys to supplement the surveys conducted by the university as a whole, which only target for-credit students. Since the institution of the lesson observation system in Spring semester 2010, students' self-assessment of their own English abilities (Fig. 1), satisfaction with PASEO classes as a whole (see Fig. 2), and satisfaction with PASEO teachers (see Fig. 3) have all shown a marked pattern of continuous improvement.

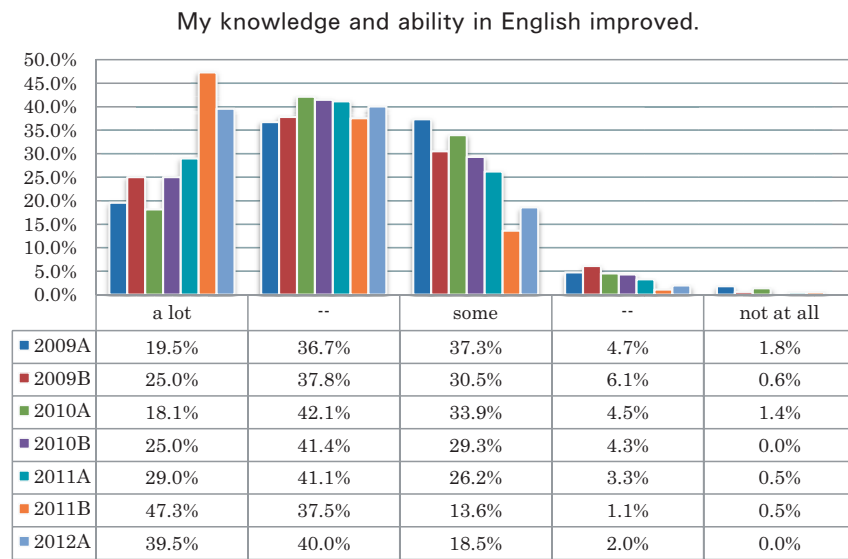


Fig. 1: Student Self-Assessment of English Abilities

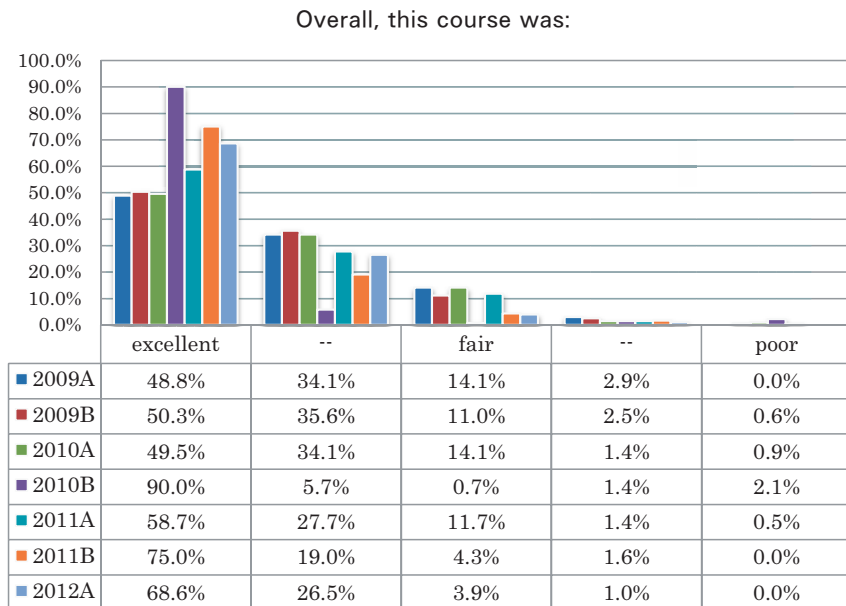


Fig. 2: Overall Course Satisfaction

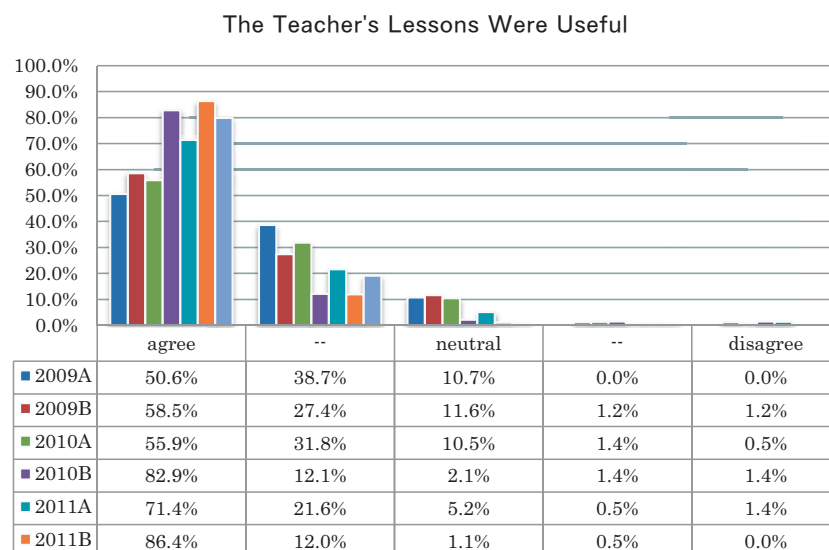


Fig. 3: Student Perception of Teachers' Lessons

Naturally, correlation does not equal causation, and there are likely other factors at work to help to explain this increase in student satisfaction, but it seems reasonable to assert that a new focus on teacher training and professional development should have a positive impact on the quality of PASEO classes and on student satisfaction with them.

Simply by observing part of one instructor's class per semester, the OPELT director has more information about what happens in PASEO classes than many program directors have access to. In OPELT, as is not uncommon in similar programs, simple scheduling difficulties make it difficult, if not impossible, for the director to observe classes during the term. This opportunity for lesson observation, combined with information from the PASEO course evaluation questionnaire, allows the director to be aware of any potential problems with lesson management that may occur.

In addition, lesson observation allows the director to be aware of clashes between lesson design and the PASEO curriculum, allowing PASEO to maintain its uniformly high level of lesson quality, and of problem students, allowing the director and all teachers to discuss strategies for dealing with disruptive students or, if necessary, alerting the university administration to outstanding problems.

Finally, and most importantly from the director's point of view, the peer-led lesson observation system encourages a collegiate and open atmosphere, where instructors can and do ask each other openly for advice about teaching and are able to give meaningful and helpful feedback, with other teachers' preferred techniques and teaching philosophies in mind. Particularly in a small, insulated program such as OPELT, where the short tenure of instructors means a dissatisfied teacher has little reason to remain with the program, maintaining a professional, open atmosphere is of critical importance. Indeed, in the two years since this program was instituted, the change in atmosphere at OPELT has been profound and positive, thanks in no small part, I believe, to this program.

6 Ongoing Research

Ongoing research into the outcomes of this lesson observation system will focus on the following areas.

While many of the theoretical benefits of programs such as these are well-supported in the literature, the benefits to the program as a whole can be observed by myself as director of OPELT, and informal talks with teachers have shown support of the program, it is necessary to verify the claims I have put forth in this paper in a scientific manner. The following details how I am doing so.

6.1 Interviews with OPELT Instructors

I am currently conducting interviews with current and previous OPELT instructors in an attempt to collect data to definitively support or counter my ideas about how the program has helped teachers and the program.

6.2 Effects on Student Satisfaction

As many students do not take PASEO for credit, and the PASEO system means that class placement does not correspond with class splits in the Tora-net system, it is necessary for OPELT to collect data on student satisfaction independently of the online Tora-net student satisfaction questionnaires. This data is published each semester in a PASEO Enrollment Report.

The PASEO course evaluations have shown steadily increasing levels of satisfaction with PASEO lessons and teachers over the past two years. This does correspond with the time period in which the lesson observation system was implemented, but more-careful analysis, and most likely more time, will be required to establish the existence of a causative relationship. A number of other changes have occurred in PASEO during the same time period, any or all of which may also have had an effect on student satisfaction.

Fortunately, in addition to numerical data in the form of survey results, all students who respond are encouraged to leave detailed comments, and most do so. In-depth analysis of these comments will be performed, and the comments will be related to numerical survey results. In this way, I hope to see what, if any, concrete effect the institution of the class observation program has had on PASEO student satisfaction.

6.3 Data on Lesson Observation at Other Institutions

I would like to compare the success of this program with professional development programs at other similar programs, collect data about frequency and kind of lesson observations performed at other institutions, and to what extent programs of other kinds do or do not produce similar outcomes to the OPELT program.

To do this, I will conduct a survey of directors and instructors at other institutions to see how widespread frequent lesson observation is, how well it is received, and what kinds of tangible benefits it is seen to produce.

7 Summary

For the past two years, the Ohio Program for English Language Teaching has been performing peer-led observation of PASEO English classes, using video and teacher-driven observation tasks.

This observation system has produced positive professional development outcomes, not only for instructors new to teaching English as a Foreign Language in an academic environment, but also for experienced instructors. Indeed, it has produced positive outcomes for the program as a whole above and beyond any simple improvements to teaching or classroom management.

Although more-focused research is necessary to verify and quantify these outcomes, the simple presence of an ongoing opportunity for peer-driven professional development is, I believe, intrinsically valuable. It is all too rare for instructors at the university level to have the chance to receive useful feedback about their teaching methods.

It is my hope that other departments might see the benefits of a program like this. Professional development and ongoing mindful attention paid to teaching methods are not useful only to teachers of languages or to new instructors. Any teacher who spends any amount of time in the classroom can benefit at the very least from active self-reflection and self-observation tasks, and if fellow faculty can be involved in peer observation, the potential benefits are profound.

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