

## **Peer Observation Consortium Creation and Implementation**

**Cian O'Mahony**, Asia University

**Benjamin Schwartz**, Asia University

### Abstract

This paper reports the inception, creation, development and implementation of a peer observation program undertaken by the Peer Observation and Teaching Development Committee (POTDC) in the Center of English Language Education at Asia University, where the authors work. The conditions necessary for a successful peer observation program are listed, and the necessary procedures and guidelines are described. The results of a previous peer observation project are discussed, followed by a description on how to implement a successful process, the benefits of peer observation and the restrictions to its implementation. The conclusions drawn from this paper are that peer observation is an invaluable tool for encouraging instructors to reflect on their own teaching approaches, and thus improve the quality of teaching. It is, however, imperative that the observations take place in a supportive and constructive environment.

## Introduction

The Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University in Musashino City, Tokyo, Japan, is the English language teaching department. Within the faculty there are a number of committees tasked with various administrative and academic responsibilities related to the continued development of teaching, research and promotion of intercultural understanding at Asia University. This article documents the inception, creation and ongoing development of the faculty's newest committee: The Peer Observation and Teaching Development Committee (POTDC). The new committee has two main objectives: fostering the instructional development of new and current lecturers through a voluntary Peer Observation Consortium; and a teacher development program that would oversee visiting practicum instructors training to become ESL and EFL teachers.

Instructors at CELE are required to complete a yearly project as a part of their professional duties. Examples of projects are: publishing a paper in the CELE Journal and presenting research at a conference. As such, at a meeting in the spring of 2016 the Vice Director announced a new voluntary project idea that would meet the required yearly project obligations. The process involved observing five colleagues teaching Freshman English, taking notes using a British Council peer observation form, meeting with the observed colleagues individually for feedback and comments, and at the end of the year participating in a concluding forum to discuss the observations with other teachers. Reception to this idea was lukewarm, but Ben Schwartz, an author of this article, decided to organize the project into a Peer Observation Consortium. When colleagues realized there would be coordination and support for the project, interest grew, and in 2016 six out of 25 Visiting Faculty Members (VFM) participated in the consortium.

Each member of the consortium was participating in order to gain experience in observing teaching colleagues as well as being observed. In addition, by completing five observations they would be fulfilling their yearly project requirements. Some instructors commented at the time that they felt nervous about being observed but all agreed it would positively contribute to their development as educators. In addition to feeling nervous about being observed, some instructors commented that they only wanted to be observed on certain types of teaching days: introduction of new vocabulary, beginning of a new unit, etc. Furthermore, other instructors were wary about being observed in less traditional project-based classroom environments. Instructors also commented that it would be somewhat inconvenient to

lose five free periods to observations, but agreed that if planned properly and spread out over two fifteen week semesters, the impact would be negligible. It was recommended by the organizer that teachers plan observations wisely for two reasons. First, as a practical matter, it would make sense to spread observations out over a longer period of time in order not to have to rush at the end of the year, and second, in order to see a broader set of classroom experiences as student-teacher and classroom dynamics evolve quite a bit from the beginning of the year towards the end of the year. By observing classes at the beginning, middle and end of the year, teachers would be able to see various stages of development within the classroom and likely gain the most from the observation experience. Unfortunately, only a few of the participants followed this advice with the majority leaving their observations to the middle and end of the second semester of the year.

After communicating the specifics of the project with participating instructors through e-mail and in person, the coordinator thought it best to allow instructors to proceed on their own with little monitoring of their progress outside of informal communication. The first step was for instructors to identify times on the schedule when they would be free to observe a colleague who would be teaching at the same time. This was relatively simple as the schedule is public. After each observation, it was the observer's responsibility to schedule a brief meeting with the observed participant. In this meeting, it was expected that the observer would share feedback verbally and in writing while inviting dialogue and written feedback from the observed instructor. At the end of the short meeting, a signed copy of the feedback was given to observed participants for their records and project portfolio. While no requirement existed for the number of times to be observed, it was informally considered polite for participants to allow others to observe their classes if scheduling permitted. So, in theory, at the end of the project, a participant would have five observation forms of colleagues they had observed as well as a number of feedback forms from having been observed. Though all observer participants had five observations, not all had been observed five times.

The observation forms were open sourced from [www.teachingenglish.org.uk](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk) and are included in the appendix of this article. These particular forms and guidelines were used because they are consistent with CELE observations conducted by the Vice Director and Director once a year. This way the peer observations would benefit teachers by preparing them for more "high stakes" observations by their supervisors.

Produced by the British Council, the documents are titled: “A Guide to Continuing Professional Development – Peer Observations.” Within the document are advice and guidelines for successfully carrying out peer observations as well a description of proper etiquette for both the observer and teacher. Notably, the document states that the process involves the following stages:

1. Pre-observation discussion of the lesson and focus of observation.
2. The lesson.
3. Post-observation reflection on the lesson, learning points and action plans.  
(British Council)

Observation etiquette guidelines are extensive, so only a few of the more salient and relevant ones to our organization are included below:

#### Observer etiquette

- Respect the confidentiality of what you observe and discuss.
- Be on time for the lesson.
- Don’t join the lesson or ask the teacher or students questions during the lesson unless you have agreed upon this before the lesson with the teacher.
- Don’t forget to set up a time for discussion and reflection with the teacher.
- Remember to record the observation (take notes).

#### Teacher etiquette

- Tell your students beforehand that your observer will be coming, and introduce him or her to the class.
- Be on time.
- Think about where you want your observer to sit, and prepare a chair/table for him or her. (British Council)

The observation form is one page and contains spaces for data to be filled out by the observer including the name of the teacher, the name of the observer, the date, the class level, the number of students present and the focus of the observation. There is also a large space for observation notes to be completed by the observer and another large space for post-observation discussion and reflection to be completed by the teacher. The focus of the observation is

something that an observer can decide for him or herself depending on what he or she is interested in professionally. Examples of focuses were classroom management, activity development, vocabulary instruction and simply general observation.

In December of 2016, the concluding forum was scheduled by the project organizer in order to share feedback among participants as well as complete the requirements for the yearly project. The following is a description and summary of that meeting as well as a conclusion as to the efficacy of the project.

### **Summary and Results of POC Project 2016**

As the organizer of the project, Schwartz scheduled a 2:30PM concluding forum for December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016. Seven teachers attended the forum, including the six participants as well as another teacher interested in hearing the feedback. Some instructors felt uncertain as to what was expected of them, so the following discussion recommendations were made:

- Talk about your own teaching philosophy and how that plays out in your classroom.
- How did the observations impact your own lessons?
- Talk about specific activities that you learned and subsequently incorporated into your own classroom.
- What sort of teaching styles did you notice? Were you surprised by anything?
- Did this project cause you to reflect on your own teaching environment? If so, how? Did you change as a result, or try new things?
- What was the focus of your observations? Why was that your focus?
- Did you notice anything regarding teaching different levels of students?
- What did you notice was consistent and inconsistent between classes/teaching methods/activities/teaching styles?
- Was this project useful? If so, how? Would you like to do it again?

The following are the verbatim minutes of the meeting with instructor names removed for anonymity. The minutes were prepared by CELE VFM Caroline Handley.

## Forum Minutes

Instructor 1 started the discussion, first confessing that he had been quite nervous about it, but found the experience to be greatly beneficial for his teaching and his confidence. He then shared what he had learned and how it had helped him reflect on his teaching philosophy. He noted that the experience made him think more about teacher and student talk time and also about the use of L1 in the classroom (both how it can help and how it can interfere with learning). The experience also made him think more deeply about his aims in each lesson and the purpose of each activity he used. He also started to consider how small things, such as the layout of the classroom, can impact student participation.

Instructor 2 spoke next, and talked about how one of the things he noticed most in every class he had observed was the atmosphere created by the teacher, which reinforced how important a relaxed and active classroom environment is for learning. He also focused on his reflections on his own teaching, noting that the observations had helped him realize he needed to pay more attention to how he spoke to students, particularly in giving clear instructions, and also that he could be less strict as a teacher without losing control, a change he thought would bring positive results for his students. Finally, Instructor 2 also mentioned particular activities he would like to introduce into his classes next year, such as 'stand up review' and games like Kahoot.

Instructor 3 shared how observing other teachers made him challenge some central beliefs he had held about teaching and reassess his teaching style. He explained that during his CELTA training, it had been impressed on him that everything that was said in the classroom should be in English. However, when watching other classes, he discovered that students who were allowed to use Japanese helped each other understand a task or to translate an unknown word, and that this helped the lesson to progress and improved student learning, causing him to rethink the level of L1 in the classroom. Instructor 3 also talked about his teaching style, saying that he had always thought it was very important to bring lots of energy into the classroom to motivate the students. Having observed teachers who were much calmer in their approach yet still able to create a motivating atmosphere, conducive to student participation and learning, he realized his preferred style was not the only way to achieve the same results. This also made him reflect on how important student-student relations are to engagement and that sometimes as a

teacher he needs to devote more effort to improving these relations rather than thinking about how he is promoting student participation.

Instructor 4 also talked about what he had learned from watching other teachers, but his focus was more on course design rather than teaching style or classroom management. He said that he realized that he tended to plan his classes from lesson to lesson, but seeing other teachers plan a sequence of interconnected lessons showed him how longer-term planning could improve learning outcomes. He also reconsidered how he used the textbook in his classes. Watching other teachers adapt and extend textbook activities with great effect made him think about how he dealt with textbook activities which were not entirely appropriate for his students' needs. He realized that in such instances, his reaction had been to completely redesign the activity and try to produce something better. Although this is not necessarily a bad thing, Instructor 4 admitted that he could probably adapt the activity instead and achieve the same goal.

Instructor 5 concentrated her contribution on the topic of project-based learning. Immensely impressed by other teachers she had observed, she immediately decided to introduce project-based learning into her own classes as a significant part of the course. She spoke about how well she thought other teachers had used projects with their students as well as of her own experiences of project-based learning. She gave a lot of useful details about how she implemented this in her classes, from the introduction of the topic, right through to final poster presentations. She emphasized that providing class time to work on projects rather than making it all homework was essential for its success with low-level students, as was providing some training in public speaking. She also spoke about the benefits of using projects in personalizing student learning and improving students' awareness and understanding of foreign cultures.

Finally, Instructor 6 spoke about her experiences, although after so much discussion with the group, she felt like most of what she had wanted to say had already been said. This was probably exacerbated by the fact that it was her project-based class that had inspired so many teachers in their classrooms and their reflections. However, one important thing she did have to add was the use of visuals in the classroom. Visuals were something she had not thought about much before seeing other teachers use them effectively. The observation experience encouraged her to employ visual materials in her classes since. As soon as she started to incorporate more visuals into her lessons, she noticed a significant increase in student engagement and, as a result, is planning to continue using them.

## **Formation of the POTDC**

Due to the positive participation of instructors, consensus amongst participants that the consortium was a successful and positive initiative that contributed to their development as educators, and the belief that CELE would benefit from continued observation programs and ongoing teacher development, the project organizer, (Schwartz), decided to propose a permanent committee. The committee's main aims were to oversee and coordinate observations, assist with the onboarding and development of first year CELE instructors and other voluntarily participating instructors, coordinate visiting practicum teachers, and assist with the overall development of pedagogy and excellence in teaching at CELE. The committee would be called: Peer Observation and Teaching Development Committee (POTDC). In the new committee proposal, the following objectives were stated:

This committee will mainly coordinate and oversee peer observations throughout the year. It will be suggested that peer observations be mandatory for all first-year instructors. The committee would ask senior instructors to cooperate by agreeing to be observed as necessary. In addition, this committee will oversee visiting practicum instructors training to become ESL and EFL instructors. Finally, the POTDC would serve to provide resources and knowledge for teacher development.

The Vice Director submitted the proposal to the administration in order to request the creation of the new committee. In January 2017, the proposal was approved and became the new committee. In April 2017, (Cian O'Mahony), a CELE VFM, joined (Schwartz) the POTDC. Together they began to plan for the implementation and development of the new program.

## **Implementation**

Peer reviewing through our committee will aim to build community as colleagues offer each other constructive feedback and ideas. Instructors are often forced to over-rely on student evaluations as the sole measure of good teaching, and combatting this is something our committee will ensure. With the collected information and considerations from the peer reviewing process, the instructors can develop skills for professional learning, thinking, and



action, notice and learn from teaching experience, reflect on practice to review and assess his or her own practice independently and plan effective lessons. Furthermore, instructors can observe how teaching strategies and new teaching techniques are being implemented or tried out, and how specific stages of the lesson are being implemented. It is important for the observers to identify what worked well in a particular lesson and the aspects which proved to be successful, but also the areas which could be developed further with the aid of some suggestions.

Initially, we distributed a survey to every VFM (Visiting Faculty Member) enquiring to what extent instructors would like to be involved with the committee and its peer reviewing plans. Furthermore, instructors were also asked to indicate which part of the year, if any, they were interested in contributing to the committee (Appendix A). The results were conclusive and left us with a definitive idea of the levels of contribution going forward.

Two instructors indicated their desire to use peer reviewing as the university's mandatory yearly project. Seven instructors expressed a desire to be observed only (and not to observe others), five instructors wished both to be observed and to observe others, with three instructors being unsure and nine instructors expressing no interest to be involved at this point.

With this information we have been able to organize a departmental (CELE) group and work together to create and revise peer review of teaching processes and instruments that will support our collective work as educators. Each contributing instructor will commit to observing five other instructors, be observed by five other instructors, write feedback for each observation, meet with their fellow instructors to discuss feedback and at the end of the calendar year, and collectively meet as a group and share feedback from their experiences within the consortium at a 'Concluding Forum' in December.

Once the surveys were complete and the data results were analyzed by the committee, the participating instructors were left to carry out their observations at their own convenience. As most teachers had previously indicated their desired period of the year to be involved, the committee members' roles evolved at this point. We began to oversee and monitor, as necessary, by frequently consulting with the contributing instructors. As observing at least five teachers is mandatory, we felt it could be more invasive and detrimental than constructive to be in constant communication with all the instructors, unless they explicitly expressed that wish. We concluded that being facilitators through this period would be ultimately far more beneficial.

The committee encouraged all instructors to consult with fellow observers prior to observing their classes to ensure all teachers' schedules were accommodated and nobody was being observed at a time, or for a class, that was not convenient to the instructor. This proved to be one of the more straightforward facets of the peer observation process last year and something we do not envisage being a problem again.

By using the British Council's guide provided, instructors not only have a reference point, but also a supporting model and a framework for their observations. Observers can find supporting information on topics such as observation etiquette, how to conduct a successful peer observation, observation tasks and documentation and different types of peer observation. To make the process more reliable, transparent and valid, we administered each instructor with observation forms with the aim of helping peer evaluators track and evaluate teaching and learning practices.

After much consideration and research, we decided to use a standard British Council 'Peer Observation Record' report form. The form documents all the relevant and essential parts of each observation such as the teacher-observer's name, focus of observation, date, level, number of students present, observation notes and post-observation discussion and reflection comments. We found this form to be extremely comprehensive and coherent, while remaining easily understandable. These forms can prompt observers to provide some synthesis and evaluation of their observations. Observers are instructed to complete one of these report forms for each observation they conduct and to bring these forms to the end-of-year 'Concluding Forum'. Instructors being observed have no commitment to documenting the observation so as to allow them to focus entirely on the teaching of their classes. Instructors are advised to create a thorough inventory of teacher and student practices that define the learning and teaching environment. These may vary widely among teachers and across disciplines, and can be drawn from a broad array of pedagogies, depending on learning goals.

Typically, the written evaluation will include some clarification of the methods, the process, the data collected, and of course any constructive criticism or positive feedback that is necessary, along with suggested improvements. This should be the substance of a formative assessment by the peer evaluators, one that will be shared with the committee, contributing teachers and the teacher under peer review, at various intervals. If the evaluation is formative, as

most will be, this may accompany a series of suggested improvements for teaching, the use of professional development resources and further peer evaluation.

Post-observation discussions between instructors and observers are something that the committee strenuously recommends each observer to carry out thoroughly. The short period immediately after an observation is a critical time and stage in the reviewing process as all teaching practices observed are still fresh in the mind of the observer. Although it may not be convenient to discuss and give feedback instantly, we advise our observers to provide their comments promptly to avoid oversights or confusion.

Observers may use this time to discuss any essential aspects of the lesson they observed. Suggested areas include, 'lesson structure' - the way the lesson opens, organization of activities, links between transitions; classroom management strategies - maintaining order, setting up groups, time management; types of teaching activities - whole class, pair and individual activities; teaching strategies - presentation tasks, teaching techniques. Further suggested feedback can be given on the following areas: teacher's use of materials and resources - use of textbook, own design materials, YouTube; teacher's use of language - instructions, use of questions, feedback techniques, explanation of grammar and vocabulary; students' use of language - use of L1, problems with pronunciation, grammar; student interaction - time on task, student to student talk (Richards & Farrell, 2011).

As mentioned above, at the end of the calendar year, the committee will host a 'Concluding Forum' where all instructors /observers, who were involved during the year, will collectively be invited to share their journey and experience throughout the year. It must be noted that for those instructors whose contribution to the peer observation consortium are their yearly projects, attendance at this meeting is mandatory. At the beginning of this meeting we will distribute a handout to each instructor with question prompts and a summary of our own reflections as a model can be used. We will then begin the discussion by sharing what we learned throughout our own processes, with the hope of providing a comfortable platform for others to build on to enable a positive and fruitful forum.

Each instructor will then be asked to discuss their journey through this process, highlighting what they have learned and perhaps what has surprised them the most. After every instructor has posited their findings and thoughts, and a significant group discussion has taken place, the floor will then be open to all for any further questions or suggestions. The committee

will then inform the participating members of its plans and hopes for next year and going forward, after which each contributor will be thanked and encouraged to continue this process next year again.

### **Reflections and Expectations**

While peer reviewing may be a process that facilitates a more rigorous evaluation of a teaching portfolio, it is essential to note that peer observations alone are often insufficient data on which to base a complete and exhaustive teacher's assessment. Peer observations are merely a snapshot of teaching, and thus must be only one aspect of a teaching portfolio that is subject to peer evaluation, including evidence of student learning, course materials, student evaluations and self-evaluations, just to name a few. It was with this in mind, that we advised all contributing instructors to not view the results of their observations as indisputable or conclusive, but as merely a sample observation of one class.

One area of concern we shared involved the methodology of the process. We agreed that there are limitations to most observational techniques, with some of these limitations or concerns relating to methodological issues which can hinder the drawing of valid conclusions. We, as a committee, are trying to ensure a valid and reliable sample of teaching is provided for all observers. Our initial concern for new participating teachers was that some observer effects may occur as students and teachers are acutely aware their behaviors are being monitored. Teachers were encouraged to avoid letting the observation process be obtrusive to their lesson. The presence of an observer can change student or teacher behaviors, perhaps resulting in reactive effects. Teacher anxiety or teachers under-performing can interfere with the drawing of valid inferences about what typically occurs in their classroom. Contrastingly, teachers' instruction may be marginally better than usual when they are being observed and the possibility that this threatens the validity and reliability of data exists.

Although some instructors noted that the observation process was a source of anxiety to them last year, it is worth mentioning that some of our feedback on this specific topic was also quite positive. Several teachers who agree it was a source of anxiety further noted that with the increase frequency and exposure to the peer-reviewing system, their anxiety to the process decreased significantly when it came to being observed by the Vice Director and Director of

CELE. Going forward, we will promote this finding to perspective instructors who are considering joining our committee or participating in the peer-observation process next year, or any time in the future. Based on the findings and feedback from last years end of year meeting coupled with our continual communication with all involved, we have clear expectations of this process. We envisage all observations to be developmental and not judgmental, as these observations are designed to improve teaching only. We fully expect this collaborative process to be based on equality between peers with both parties looking to gain from the process. Furthermore, taking the potential for unwanted anxiety in the classroom into account, we fully expect the observations to be independent and confidential of all management processes relating to promotion, under-performance or renewal of contracts, and so on. We foresee this process to be a unique opportunity for professional and personal development, and also an opportunity to promote effective teaching and further enquiry into learning and teaching.

The future of the consortium looks very bright and we are expecting the same positive feedback as last year from our ‘Concluding Forum’. Last year, CELE’s Professional Development Committee kindly allowed us to host their monthly meeting to facilitate our committee but this year we will be organizing and conducting our own end of year forum independently.

As student enrollment continues to be high and increasing numbers of instructors reach the end of their five-year contracts, new instructors will inevitably be joining CELE. Consequently, we are envisaging even more participation next year from new instructors to returning instructors.

There are a few areas of the peer observation process we plan to prioritize with potential new participants, learning from some of last year’s feedback. We will emphasize the importance of trust in the relationship between observer and the instructor if the process is to be a useful development tool. We will place less emphasis on teaching content and individual performance, and more on the exploration of what works and reflection on the assumptions under-pinning practice. Furthermore, the committee will place more stress on the mutuality of the peer review process. New participants will be made aware that it is not a one-way process of the observer commenting or critiquing the instructor being observed—rather it is a two-way opportunity to potentially discuss teaching practices. Our aim will be to disband the notion of feedback being possibly seen as critical.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, peer observation is a pragmatic, effective and collegial approach to teaching enhancement that the 14 participants, as with the previous instructors, will benefit from immensely. It is also an exceptional activity for CELE Visiting Faculty Members to consider undertaking in order to gain insights into new teaching approaches, and a possible source of feedback and evaluation on their own practice. As an added bonus, participation in the peer reviewing process also meets the required CELE yearly project criteria for instructors. The committee's peer reviewing process can aid teachers in becoming more aware of the issues they confront in their classrooms and how these can be resolved. Observation can also help narrow the gap between what actually occurs in the classroom and one's imagined view of teaching. As observations involve an intrusion into a colleague's classroom, procedures and practices for carrying out observations need to be carefully negotiated between the participating instructors.

The committee's guidelines and procedures for peer observation, the practice of pre-class discussion and in-class observation, the reporting instructions and the 'Concluding Forum' are all developed to enable an open-teaching culture in CELE. The use of peer observation will advance learning and teaching substantially, by allowing instructors to learn from their peers' pedagogies, and to share their conclusions of how students learn in various class contexts and within varying types of pedagogy.

As with most practices, there are a few limitations. Instructors were reminded that peer observations serve merely as a snapshot of teaching and should not view the results as a definitive judgment of their teaching skills, although it provides an additional source of evidence of the quality of the instructor's teaching beyond the occasionally unreliable student evaluations.

## References

- British Council. (2012). *A Guide to Continuing Professional Development – Peer Observations*. Retrieved from [www.teachingenglish.org.uk](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk)
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## Appendix A: Observation Consortium Survey

### Observation Consortium Participation survey

Please answer according to your level of interest/commitment to joining the Peer Observation Consortium (POC).

\* Required

1. What's your name? \*

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Please tick the box that best applies to you. \*

*Mark only one oval.*

- I am planning to participate in the POC for my yearly project.
- I am not interested in the POC as my project, but I am interested in observing and being observed.
- I am willing to participate by being observed.
- I don't wish to participate in the POC on any level.
- Not sure.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. If you are interested in participating in the POC, please check below for WHEN you would like to participate.

*Mark only one oval.*

- Spring term: May, June, July
- Fall term: September, October, November, December
- I would like to participate in both terms.
- Both terms are acceptable for me.
- Not sure.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_