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Exploring My Style of Teacher Supervision

Andy Vajirasarn

This is a report on a pilot study regarding language teacher supervision styles. The author holds a certificate in language program administration, and the pilot involved teachers of the Japanese language one of whom was also involved in the certificate program. The teachers teach at an American language institute and they agreed to be observed by the author, following procedures detailed in clinical supervision. After the lesson observation, a one-on-one conference was held with the author and the observed language teacher to discuss the lesson. This report focuses on the supervisory discourse during these conferences.

Key words: teacher education, teacher observation, leadership styles, supervisory discourse

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In this paper I analyze my ability to give feedback as a teacher supervisor. I was able to recruit the help of two language teachers who, for the sake of this paper, allowed me observe their classes. One of the teachers and myself both hold qualifications in Language Program Administration. Following procedures outlined in clinical supervision, (Abbot & Carter, 1985) I observed three lessons, and gave feedback to the teachers of those lessons during a post-observation meeting. This paper focuses on a partial transcript of the last two sessions. In particular, I examine my own comments and feedback to these teachers in order to determine what type of supervisor I seem to be, according to the frameworks and models found in the literature concerning teacher supervision.

Setting and Participants

All of the lessons that I observed were Japanese

classes at the Defense Language Institute (DLI), in Monterey, CA. DLI is a language training facility for members of the United States Department of Defense (DoD) who are assigned to learn a foreign language. The students are mostly full-time military personnel (enlisted soldiers as well as officers), but some civilian personnel are also students. Basically, the typical DLI student is a soldier or officer who has been given orders to learn a foreign language to be used in their future military career.

During my first visit, I observed a lesson taught by a teacher I will refer to as “A-Sensei”. This class had five students: three soldiers in their early 20’s, and a colonel and his wife, in their early 40’s. A-sensei and I could not meet immediately after the lesson for a feedback session, so we scheduled it for the following day.

On my second visit, three weeks later, I observed two lessons. The first lesson was taught by another

teacher, “H-Sensei”. In H-sensei’s class there were nine students of various ages. More than half were in their mid-30’s or younger. I was able to meet with H-sensei a few hours later to conduct the post-observation feedback session. The second lesson I observed was taught by A-sensei. The participants were the same as when I visited three weeks earlier, with the addition of one more classmate, a repeater in the course. Due to our busy schedules, we were not able to hold a post-observation session until two days later. These Japanese lessons were taught mixing Japanese and English. All the feedback sessions were conducted in English.

Procedures and Methods of Data Collection

The procedures that we followed were similar to those described in Abbot and Carter’s (1995) article on using clinical supervision with language teachers. The steps are outlined as follows:

1. Pre-observation conference
2. Observation
3. Analysis and strategy
4. Post-observation conference
5. Post conference analysis

In the case of A-sensei’s lesson observation, I was asked to notice the teacher’s eliciting techniques and prompts. For H-sensei, I was not asked to focus on anything in particular, so I decided to pay attention to how the teacher set up lesson tasks.

During the lesson observations, I used a tape recorder and field notes. For the feedback sessions, I used a tape recorder to record our spoken interactions. I later transcribed certain sections, to be used for analysis in this paper.

The Feedback Sessions

The following section analyzes the interactions between the teachers I observed and myself. At the first post-observation meeting, I asked A-sensei about the lesson, and she talked about what she did in the classroom and what her intentions were. I only gave comments, no criticism about her lesson. Due to this lack of interaction (on my part), session one’s data was rather sparse. Fortunately, I was more active in the other two sessions. This paper will focus on transcripts of the second and third meetings.

In the second session, with H-sensei, I inquired about the use of English in the classroom. This group was in the 36th week of the program, and I felt that they could have used Japanese much more than they did. In the third session, I voiced my concern about how little the textbook was used in the lessons.

Let’s turn to a more detailed look at feedback sessions two and three. The following is an examination of any mitigation (Wajnryb, 1995) or the lack thereof, in the transcripts. Let’s recall that mitigation is defined by Fraser (1980, cited in Wajnryb, 1995, p. 71) as “a term used for various linguistic means by which a speaker deliberately hedges what he/she is saying, by taking into account the reactions of the hearer.” Possible reasons for using mitigation are to avoid face-threatening situations and to make delivering bad news or criticism an easier task.

In addition to mitigation, I also notice instances of pragmatic ambivalence (Wajnryb, 1998) in a few of my utterances. Pragmatic ambivalence occurs when an utterance has more than one possible perceived illocutionary force, and the situational context does not offer enough clues as to which force is intended.

Feedback Session 2

The transcription of the first ten minutes of this session yielded 168 lines of speech. I say 67 of those lines, which means I am talking only 40% of the time.

Table 1. Breakdown of supervisory discourse in feedback session 2

Questions	10
Okay	13
Hmm (to buy time)	2
Hmm hmm (back channeling)	3
I see	1
Yeah	1

In this 10-minute segment, I am saying, “okay” 1.3 times a minute, as well as asking one question per minute on average. This seems to indicate a very active session on my part.

I started the session by asking how H-sensei felt about the lesson (lines 1-6), considering that she had inadvertently prepared for the wrong activity. I think that some mitigation is involved because I followed that question with some extra utterances meant to clear up the situation, rather than just ask, “Why didn’t you prepare for the right lesson?” H-sensei admits, “I should have checked earlier...[my team-teaching partner and I] talked about [this class] yesterday. But [the point where the last lesson stopped] never came up.”

More mitigation can be found in lines 87, 98, and 127. Here, I used “I noticed (that)...” in each case. Wajnryb (1995) defines one type of mitigation as distancing. By using “I notice”, I apparently attempted to distance myself from the situation and refer to my page of notes as if they were an objective third-party observer. For me, presenting my comment or question

in the manner, lessened the possibility of a confrontation.

As for pragmatic ambivalence, my comment in line 38, “They get along very well” could possibly be seen as an occurrence of it. This could be a subtle request for information on how the teacher keeps motivation high, or how the dynamics in the classroom are, etc. Or I could have simply been “noticing” that the students get along well. As an alternative, I could have simply asked a straightforward question.

In line 87, I remarked, “Yeah, I noticed a lot of English was spoken.” Again, this could mean that I simply noticed English or this comment could mean that I have some criticism for this part of the lesson. In my “they get along very well” comment, I was simply making an observation. There was no hidden or implied question behind the comment. In the case of the “noticing English” comment, I did indeed want to criticize the use of English in the class, albeit through a low face-threatening manner.

The teacher responded with an explanation for the students’ use of English, and the justification of her own use of English in the classroom. She mentioned that it was the first period of the day, and that the students had been speaking English with their friends and family up until class started. They just needed some time to get back in “foreign language mode.” The teacher also said that she gives explanations of tasks in English to make sure that the students know what it is they are supposed to be doing.

Feedback Session 3

This third session was with A-sensei again. The transcript for this is taken from the middle of the session, a chunk of about five minutes. Table 2 lists data on my utterances.

Table 2. Breakdown of supervisory discourse in feedback session 3

Questions	11
Okay	9
Hmm (to buy time)	2
Hmm hmm (back channeling)	3

A look at the transcript reveals more information. From the start of where this transcript picks up, I was confused about the function of the textbook. It did not seem like the books were being used in class, or at least the dialogues from the book were not used in class. In lines 1-2, I pose my question, with an amount of mitigation evident in the short pause before I say the main question. “You...[hesitation] don’t read those textbook dialogues?” I was genuinely curious, and my tone was meant to express this. The same utterance could be expressed angrily or in an accusing manner, if desired, simply by changing the delivery.

In lines 18-19, instead of a direct question like, “Do you always start out role-plays this way?” I used a moderately mitigated impersonal question: “Is that a usual technique for presenting the material before a role-play?” I used mitigation here because I was unsure whether the technique that she used was the DLI-institutionalized way to do it, or if it was her own personal way. In order to avoid any hurt feelings or resentment, I chose to phrase my question using an impersonal construction.

Finally, we do have one occurrence of “I notice” in line 60. There is also some quantity of pragmatic ambivalence here, since I do not actually pose a question to her: “And let me see...I notice just about every one of your, uh, utterances [during the Japanese lesson] was a masu or desu.” After her response of “Yes,” I finally pose the question that was on my mind: “Do you make an effort [to use the polite form]?”

Identifying My Leadership Style

Though originally from the field of business management, Situational Leadership theory can offer useful models for language teacher supervision. Osburne’s (1989, cited in Bailey, 2006, p. 228.) article on situational leadership and teacher education, based on her EFL teacher training experience in China provides a useful discussion of two elements of leadership behavior, task behavior and relationship behavior.

Task behavior refers to how much (or little) the leader explicitly dictates tasks to the “followers”. Relationship behavior refers to how much (or little) the leader maintains personal relationships with “followers” and provides socio-emotional support. Four styles are thus possible with these two continua: high task/low relationship, high task/high relationship, low task/high relationship, and low task/low relationship.

Gebhard (1984) explicitly discusses supervision in the field of language teacher education. He elaborates on six models of supervision: directive, alternative, collaborative, nondirective, creative, and self-help explorative. Freeman (1982) has also written on the development of in-service language teachers. He denotes three approaches to teacher observation: the supervisory approach, the alternatives approach, and the non-directive approach.

In terms of situational leadership theory, I think that the data from these sessions would place me in the quadrant of low task/high relationship. I did not seem to threaten or confront the teachers I observed. Although I make the teachers relaxed enough to talk about their teaching, I did not offer constructive criticism or explicitly say, “I wish you had done more of this” or “Next time I think you need to do that.” My interactions were more like a teacher doing peer

coaching (Benedetti, 1997) than a demanding authority figure. My questions are honest attempts at understanding the situation rather than evaluative remarks disguised as questions.

While I usually start out seeming to be a Collaborative supervisor (Gebhard, 1984), with questions such as, “How did it go?” and “What did you think of the lesson?”, I actually fall into the Nondirective supervisor. In Freeman’s terminology it is the Non-Directive Approach (1982).

According to Freeman (1982), “The question serves as the fulcrum for the Non-Directive Approach to observation...The observer’s goal is to build a relationship with the teacher which is supportive in the fullest sense. The objective is not to judge or to evaluate, but to understand.” (p. 24.) In the 15 minutes I have transcribed, I ask 21 questions. None of the questions were asked with an accusing tone. There are also occurrences of mitigation, pragmatic ambivalence, and 22 cases of back-channeling “Ok’s.” These types of utterances show that I did indeed try to create a supportive and understanding atmosphere in the post-observation conferences.

Conclusion

In the situational leadership model (Osburne 1989), in addition to leadership styles there is the concept of “follower’s readiness” levels: job readiness (knowledge or ability to perform without direction from others) and psychological readiness (confidence and willingness). The idea is to be able to shift one’s leadership style to match with a follower’s readiness level. Bailey (2006) takes it one step further by making a connection between job readiness and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. Although Vygotsky was concerned with children’s learning ability, the

notion can also be applied to practicing teachers interested in making progress in their profession.

In this paper I have detailed the project of observing three language lessons, and subsequently, giving feedback to the teachers of those lessons. Using data gleaned from a transcript of an audio recording of these sessions while referring to models of teacher supervision from the literature available, I have identified my present supervisory style as the Non-directive approach. For further development as a leader, I see that it would be beneficial to be competent in more than one style, and I can set this as one of my future goals.

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THE AUTHOR Profile

Born and raised in Los Angeles, CA, Mr. Vajirasarn holds a BA in French from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and an MA in Teaching Foreign Languages from the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS). He teaches English as a part-time lecturer at Tama University, Tokyo Women's Christian University, Waseda University, and Aoyama Gakuin University.