

## **The interaction of training and observation in one teacher's development**

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This chapter began as a comment at a conference to one of the editors, where I remarked of the teachers present, "We are the freaks who give up our Sunday to sit in a university classroom and talk about work!" How did I reach the stage where I voluntarily attended a teaching conference on my day off? I had experienced a trajectory from enthusiastic, to satisfied, to frustrated with my career. It was in this state of frustration that I reflected on the root cause and realized that I felt compelled to develop my skills much further to continue in my career, which I had previously enjoyed and intended to continue. It was initially the lack of explicit development opportunities and investment in professional development by the *eikaiwa* companies I had worked for that frustrated me. However, in spite of the limited development opportunities, I improved my practice by implicitly learning from other teachers.

I eventually improved as a teacher but how I did so was not clear to me at the time. In this chapter, I shall explain the professional development affordances available through training and observation while I was a private language school teacher in the suburbs of Tokyo. Using personal experience of events to write about practices within the profession (Rodriguez, Shofer, Harter, & Clark, 2017) allows me to "foreground dialogue, incompleteness, the impossibility of separating or collapsing life from/into texts." (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p.10). This means that my personal experiences are emphasized, from my point of view. Any conversations excerpts are my recollection and may be biased or limited by my own memory. In other words, I endeavour to tell the truth, although it is a subjective truth.

### **Training**

Upon arrival in Japan in 2003 for my first stint as an *eikaiwa* teacher, I was enthusiastic; I had a new home, a new job, and a goal of studying Japanese in my spare time. However, on-the-job training (OJT) five days after landing was a rude awakening. I was given a binder of pages from a textbook then told to pick out a language point and plan backwards. I was one of the least able trainees in my group and by the afternoon I wondered whether I had made a mistake. The problem was not the training, but the overall system of minimal instruction to create a minimum viable

lesson and then learning to teach paying students by trial and error. If I had been required to take a TEFL course I would have had four weeks to gain the knowledge required to teach a rudimentary lesson. My company rushed through it in three days of OJT. By keeping training expenses low this was beneficial to the company, but it was stressful for me, and probably annoying for the students subjected to my early lessons.

In both of the companies I worked for, the classroom environments were, with few exceptions, either glass cubicles or open-plan rooms of tables, with up to nine chairs. This arrangement functions as a panopticon (Foucault, 1977), which “makes it possible to observe performances (without there being any imitation or copying), to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications” (p.203). In addition, due to the materials used for the cubicles, voices in adjacent classrooms could be heard clearly. This panopticon allows those outside to look and listen inward, and those inside to look and listen outward. Although the primary reason was supervisory convenience, as a previous manager informed me, in contrast to Foucault’s (1977) assertion that it would be “without there being any imitation or copying” (p.203), it provided affordances for my colleagues and I to observe one another ad-hoc. This panopticon experience meant neither successful nor unsuccessful teaching could be conducted in hiding; providing the impetus of staff room conversations, leading to informal teacher development, meaning that both successes as well as failures informed the classroom practices of my colleagues and I.

One month after my initial training, I attended a further one-day session where I learned games to play with children and encouraged to feel less self-conscious. Once back in the school, colleagues as well as students could see anything so it was impossible not to feel self-conscious. One example was when a urologist, whom I would help prepare a presentation for an international conference in the next lesson period, witnessed me dancing and chanting “What colour is it? It’s blue! It’s blue!” while a pre-school child ran in the aisle between the cubicle classrooms, unconcerned by colours, English, and also me. While personally embarrassing, students occasionally commented on such occurrences. “I don’t think I could be that enthusiastic,” one female student remarked. Unfortunately, I rarely felt like enthusiasm compensated for lack of pedagogical knowledge.

Due to the panopticon, teaching was mediated through collegial discussion about incidental, informal observations with colleagues who commented on struggles, particularly where they lay in direct contradiction to training. In this particular school, I learned a lot from Andrew and Tom, as

well as Gary, all teachers within their first year of joining the company. Andrew was skilled at teaching young learners. He also had a strong rapport with the teacher in charge of coordinating young learner materials and activities in our school, who had quite different working hours to me. While Andrew became her de-facto deputy, and my schedule was so similar to his, I had ample opportunity to take lesson ideas from him and therefore indirectly from the young learners coordinator.

Much of the practice that teachers engaged in at the first school I worked at was co-constructed by trainers, more senior colleagues and ourselves, through a mixture of advice regarding what works and what doesn't work. This was built upon with observations, which are discussed below, and it is important to remember that in language teaching, knowledge transmitted in training does not occur in a vacuum but interacts with the practices of the trainees and their colleagues, and may be assimilated to certain degrees or even outright rejected as unworkable or not worthwhile.

My training experiences provide examples of the realistic language school environment at the start of my career. I was required to teach according to a provided textbook in order to provide student (customer) satisfaction. I was thus reduced to what Gray and Block (2012) term a "skilled technician" (p. 119), in this case delivering behaviourist pattern practice rather than using expert knowledge to provide theoretically sound teaching and learning experiences. I was not guided toward providing exceptional lessons but providing sufficient opportunity for students to practice speaking. Woods (1996) states:

The traditional thinking (as evidenced in audio-lingual methods) is that the learners know neither the target language nor the ways of learning it. The teacher, meanwhile, is considered to know the language (or at least be able to demonstrate it), but not to know the way that it is to be learned or taught. (p.189)

The way to teach and learn was provided, initially at least, by centralized OJT and follow-up training and workshops. However, bearing in mind that trainers in most *eikaiwa* school are promoted from within the teaching staff, and mostly have no qualifications higher than certificate level, this can lead to practices remaining unquestioned and being perpetuated regardless of efficiency.

Gray and Block (2012) state that the neoliberalization of education in Britain has given rise to a situation where “teacher education is set to be transferred to schools away from universities” (p. 121). In Japan, this can be applied to certificate-level courses underwritten by accrediting bodies but sold as marketable commodities by commercial entities. However, in *eikaiwa*, this is taken further with English language teaching qualifications regarded as an irrelevance by the market leaders. Furthermore, language schools that are also certificate course providers still accept teachers without teaching qualifications. In both *eikaiwa* companies that I worked for, it was standard to pay around ¥5,000 extra per month for teaching qualifications. Unfortunately, any difference between a certificate, diploma, master’s degree or teaching qualification was unrecognized. Teacher education was absent, with OJT the preferred mode guidance, followed by very occasional short workshops. Unfortunately, these interventions did not always address teachers’ pedagogical concerns and were top-down from the central office as opposed to coming from the teachers themselves.

One colleague who previously worked in *eikaiwa* said “You don’t learn to cook haute cuisine at McDonalds; likewise, you don’t learn to teach at *eikaiwa*”. Personally, I disagree with the strength of the comment but I am sympathetic to the overall message. I found that teachers I worked with developed their skills *in spite* of the companies, and that finding pride in their work was a motivating factor in doing so. “Even if the nature of the job is not meaningful to an employee, aspects of the work can become more meaningful when the employee reformulates and transforms given tasks, relationships and roles.” (Falout & Murphey, 2018, p.225). That is, in spite of there being no onus upon the teachers, there was internal motivation to find meaning in and make the best of a situation which was not ideal. Some of this was trying new text-based activities, finding ways to facilitate greater learner autonomy or finding out about different methods and approaches. None of this was guided nor were books provided for professional development; teachers were sharing good practices between themselves and developing practices among themselves in order to mitigate the shortfalls in provided training.

## **Observation**

Due to *eikaiwa* schools being businesses, customer satisfaction was the prioritized over teaching quality, in my perception. The main way that both of my companies conducted quality control measures was by teacher observation. This was required at least twice per year for my first company and once for the second, and more often if there were student complaints. Both companies used observation for performance management purposes (regarding contract renewal and possible

wage rises). Though dreaded, these observations were the only CPD explicitly made available to teachers other than branch workshops or rare centralized training. However, the formal observations for performance management were less constructive than collegial discussions in the staff room. There is also a factor that teachers, myself included, are conservative when a manager, who has little to do with the day-to-day teaching at their school, is observing. The observations at my companies were conducted using checklists that included items such as greeting students, teacher demeanour, and maintaining dress code, which were given perhaps greater importance than items such as presenting new language, conducting practice activities and facilitating student language production. It could be that observations were regarded negatively due to teachers generally prioritizing teaching over customer service, while observers were required to prioritize the latter.

Post-observation, a meeting would be booked where teachers received feedback and advice from the observer, often in the form of a mini-workshop. These post-observation meetings between a supervisor or an area manager and the teacher had high stakes for teachers deciding to stay in Japan, due to performance-related pay rises and contract renewals being tied to the outcomes. Mostly, these meetings were problem-solving sessions akin to the type of problematizing in Carr and Kemmis (1986), albeit with teachers encouraged to think about improving their performance in areas of the observation that scored low on the checklist criteria rather than maximizing the learning affordances of students. While teachers are situated in and reacting to their classroom experience during such problematizing, they construct a truth based upon their point of view, while the observer does the same albeit at a distance. As Kumaravadivelu (2012) states, “Teachers' identity formation, then, resides largely in how they make sense of the contemporary realities, and how they negotiate contradictory expectations, and how they derive meaning out of a seemingly chaotic environment.” (p.58). Therefore, post-observation meetings, where teachers negotiate the truth of their experience with observers, has the potential to disrupt their teacher identities, either beneficially or detrimentally.

Schön (1983) asks “Is professional knowledge adequate to fulfill the espoused purposes of the professions? Is it sufficient to meet the societal demands which the professions have helped to create?” (p. 13/374). The question is still apt. To what extent are these supervisor observations and the attendant feedback sessions fit for purpose, especially given the potential for identity disruption? Based upon my experience, it is of variable quality. As previously stated, most managerial staff do not have teaching qualifications and rely only on their experience and beliefs regarding good teaching.

In the second company I worked for, one of the Young Learner trainers conducted an observation on one of my classes made up of four boys aged six and seven. It was a successful lesson in my opinion, with all of the boys participating in the games in order to practice language necessary to complete a question and answer activity at the end of the lesson. In the observation feedback I had scored excellent or good in all sections. However, the target for development (have learners repeat teacher instructions more often) felt arbitrary and simply like a requirement for the Young Learner trainer to complete for his line manager rather than something that actually required attention.

My feelings toward this development target tainted my working towards it; I did work towards it but it was a case of paying lip service to it rather than having an intrinsic motivation to work do so. Instead, with the same class, I worked toward solving a problem of how to maintain positive affect among losing players of games in the classroom. A way around this was found by talking to another teacher and making the losing player the referee (or 'boss' as I had termed it) in following game rounds, or choosing whether they went first or last.

While the formal observations mandated for performance management facilitated development with extrinsic motivation due to a feeling of requirement, in the panopticon environment described previously, it was possible to conduct informal peer observations. These were a rewarding form of CPD, because:

Observation provides a chance to see how other teachers teach, it is a means of building collegiality in a school, it can be a way of collecting information about teaching and classroom processes, it provides an opportunity to get feedback on one's teaching, and it is a way of developing self-awareness of one's own teaching. (Richards & Farrell, 2005. p. 87).

Such observations may also take place without dialogue between observer and observed teacher due to time constraints or even simply forgetting to discuss something due to the movement in the teacher's room during breaks. It is therefore low stakes and lessens the chance of losing face.

Tom, a teacher that started working at my first company a few months earlier than me, was skilled at mining the required textbook for useful language and keeping his lessons active. He moved seamlessly from an opening activity to using the book as a reading or listening activity to

present language for controlled practice and then free practice. He kept his talk about the lesson to a minimum, but talked to his students, providing authentic communication. This was something I aspired to, and by analyzing what went on in his lessons, led me to ask more questions in my own, and reducing my commentary about lesson staging by giving simple instructions for activities.

Conversely, Gary, who arrived around one month later, taught middle-aged and elderly housewives slang such as 'sick' and 'off the hook'. This led to overhearing scaffolded conversations about sick ballet and how a classic melodrama DVD was off the hook according to two ladies in an intermediate lesson. Because not all teachers are brilliant, observations can provide negative evidence of good practice. The way that students continued through the lesson, repeating the slang items in controlled practice and attempting them in free practice was so distracting from the task of monitoring my own students I remember it vividly sixteen years on.

I feel there are two distinct ways that observations such as these have influenced my teaching. The first is more predictable in that seeing effective classroom practice and mimicking it makes for practice to build skill development. Additionally, being observed and questioned about my own practices afforded an opportunity to reflect with greater purpose because not only my practice or my colleagues' practice was at stake but also the learners' instruction.

The other way is by seeing ideas fail in the classroom I could usually understand why and how they failed and decide to use the activities with adaptations in order to avoid problems, or to outright reject them as unworkable. This tended to work better with casual observations of regular instructors rather than those in management positions giving a formal workshop, perhaps due to seeing the activity taking place in a lesson with actual students rather than with teachers roleplaying as students.

## **Conclusion**

Within the training and observation during my time as teacher in chain *eikaiwa* schools, there were some experiences that were explicitly intended to provide influence on my pedagogy, although casual observation experiences and collegiate conversations between lessons provided more long-term impact. While I am not stating that this is the universal *eikaiwa* teacher experience, it is possible to develop as a teacher in spite of the limitations of corporate *eikaiwa* that lack CPD programmes and access to forms of teacher education beyond centralized training sessions.

Overall, casual observation has allowed me to synthesize ideas taken from others, though those ideas have been reflected upon and adapted for my own teaching style. Early in my career, I could discuss the ideas I took away with the teachers directly, and see how they worked in context. In fact, because these ideas were initially seen in a classroom context, they were already assessed as useful or else dismissed. This assessment and choice shows that teachers can exercise control over how they want to develop, and this freedom can lead to collegial discussions in staff rooms. At some point it may even lead to spending a weekend talking about work with other professionals in the teaching community.

My current professional development process is a more evolved version of my observation in the panopticon. Instead of limiting the community to the language school, the greater panopticon that social media provides allows an expanded commons from which to take ideas and engage in dialogue with the wider language-teaching community. I engage with practitioners on social media, read blogs, research papers and other professional publications; I take the ideas within, often in combination with my own ideas or those of others, to create something new to me. I also share my own ideas on social media and on my blog. While this use of others' ideas could lead to a lack of originality, I believe originality in teaching comes from a continued synthesis and re-synthesis of others' ideas along with my own. While it is not possible to see the initial ideas I take from social media in the classroom (because of issues regarding video recording one's classes and broadcasting on the internet) at the current stage of my career I know what is likely or unlikely to work in my classroom due to having amassed experience of evaluating activities seen in my colleagues' classrooms and reflecting upon them.

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