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# Professional Development

## Reflect on Your Teaching Skill Through Observation

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### Introduction

In this paper, I will report how effective it is for first-year teachers to observe experienced teachers' classes to develop professionally. First of all, I would like to ask you to remember how the first year of your teaching went. In my case, after classes I constantly reflected on what I taught and sometimes wondered if it was truly effective for my students. Theories I learned in my master's degree program and teaching experience in the U.S. were helpful, but I wondered how I could better my teaching skill even though I thought I knew what I should teach; if the American way of teaching is effective, would it be likewise in a Japanese context?

For example, when completing my master's degree, I was determined to adopt more group work to change my way of teaching in Japan into a more communicative approach. I was convinced by the theory of interactive language learning to try more group activities. According to Brown (2001), group work gives students more opportunities to speak and engage in face-to-face communication than does a class where teacher talk is dominant. Thus, overall communicative competence will improve. In addition, I saw students improve their speaking abilities through pair and group work in ESL classes in the U.S. This is very different from English education in Japan, where students expect more

lectures and explanations from a teacher.

Even though I knew it was worth trying group work, I sometimes did not feel comfortable using it in my classes in Japan. My internal voice asked, “Is it difficult for Japanese students to do group activities because they did not do that in their previous education?” “If they cannot do group activities well, will they be embarrassed, and will I create a negative atmosphere in the classroom?” In short, I was afraid of students’ reactions to group activities.

When I encountered this problem, I realized that in the university workplace, there are not enough opportunities for part-time teachers to talk freely about their problems and get suggestions from other colleagues. When I was a graduate student, I observed other classes and invited other teachers to my classroom. These interactions among teachers were very helpful for improving my teaching skill. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe my discovery about how observation was beneficial to me, a novice teacher. In this paper, two research questions will be investigated:

1. What are the advantages for a novice teacher in observing an experienced teacher’s class?
2. Can a Japanese teacher lead group activities successfully in Japan so that Japanese students improve their communicative competence?

## **Procedures**

First of all, I needed to decide whose class I should observe. I selected one teacher from whom I might be able to find the answers to my research questions. Since I wanted to focus on observing one particular element—using group work well—I chose Tim Murphey at Dokkyo University, who successfully leads group work in Japan. Through talking with Murphey and reading his articles, I was sure that he had students interact, speak a lot, and learn from their classmates, who were their “near-peer” models. According to him, near-peer role-modeling is “modeling peers who are close to the learner in age, ethnic

origin, living situation, and proximity” (Murphey, 2001).

The class I observed was Murphey’s advanced speaking class of 20 students. Murphey had students talk in pairs about “three people you admire.” As homework, the students had already written about the three different people. In addition, he videotaped every student—two at a time—conversing for five minutes, while the other students spoke with other partners, changing pairs every five minutes.

As Murphey suggested, I did not sit as an observer in the back of the class, but participated in the class as a student and did all the activities with students.

## **Findings**

I found that playing a student’s role and experiencing a student’s point of view, I was able to clearly see what the students were actually doing during the pair activities. From a student’s perspective, I would like to mention what helped me to improve my own English during the activities. First of all, I monitored and modified my own speech and was able to improve speaking after interactions with other students. In total, I was paired with three students in pairs. Each time when I changed partners, I realized I spoke better than in the previous conversation. For example, because one partner showed by her puzzled facial expression that she did not understand a certain part of my story, I noticed I needed to correct that part and did so with the next partner. The more partners I practiced with, the better I summarized what I really wanted to say. I “progressed” in quality of speaking through the negotiation of meaning in real conversations.

Moreover, I learned a lot from near-peer role models. Some students seemed pleased with taking the risk of making mistakes and spoke English with enthusiasm. Usually, Japanese students feel shy about speaking and are afraid of making mistakes, so I was very impressed. The energy of Murphey’s students affected me. In this ideal classroom atmosphere, I enjoyed the process of improving my speaking. I

learned to have a positive attitude while learning English from my peer models.

Furthermore, I felt comfortable trying out English with other students because Murphey had created a safe environment for them to speak English. During the activity, he sometimes shouted and had students repeat the expression, "Relax! Be happy!" He also asked students, "What time is it now?" and had them answer, "It's time to be happy!" Everyone smiled and laughed at those moments and I felt my affective filter was lowered thanks to these humorous expressions.

As I mentioned above, Murphey's class showed me that it is effective for Japanese students to practice speaking English in group activities. Then I considered where my fear came from in incorporating group work and why group work seemed difficult. Now I understand that fear came from lack of experience. I am new at this so do not have a lot of teaching experience yet. In addition, my own students felt that group work was different from lectures they had had in their previous classes. Because of the lack of experience with group work from both the teacher's and students' sides, I worried that group activities might not work well.

In addition, one reason group work seemed difficult is that a teacher cannot expect to know or to plan exactly what is going to happen in the classroom in advance. Depending on students' reactions in the classroom, teachers have to think on their feet, be flexible, help students, and solve their problems. In this sense, a lecture is easier than group work. In a lecture, teachers can plan what they are going to teach in advance and simply follow that plan in class.

Back in my class, I came to feel confident in using group work. This was because now I strongly believed that group work is effective for Japanese students and thus worth trying. Through the observation, I was convinced that students would be able to benefit greatly from group work.

Moreover, I came to believe that someday I will be able to lead group

activities as well as Murphey. His class is my “model.” The memory of participating in the class remains vivid in my mind. With that image, I can visualize how I would like to incorporate group work in my class. To that end, I also set a clear goal, which is to improve my teaching skill to his level. To begin with, I will take a first step of helping students feel relaxed by making jokes and showing I care for them. A second step will be to believe that they will improve in speaking English and to let them speak with that belief as well.

In fact, it is even helpful for me to recognize why group work seems difficult in Japan. Since my students and I do not have a lot of experience doing group work, I find there is nothing wrong with feeling it is challenging. In this way, I can take the pressure off myself. I, a first-year teacher, cannot lead group activities successfully all the time, but I am willing to try, make mistakes and improve day by day.

Another positive change is that now I send messages to my students such as, “I believe you can speak and improve your English through group activities.” Even though the message is unstated, students may realize what a teacher is thinking (Dornyei, 2001). For example, when my students speak, I listen to them very carefully, smiling, making eye contact with them, and nodding in order to send non-verbal messages, which are “I’m listening to you. What you are saying is interesting.” In this way, students and I will be comfortable enough to do group activities and confident enough to improve our respective performances: my teaching and their English abilities.

## **Conclusion**

Going back to the research questions, I found that observing an experienced teacher is very advantageous for a novice teacher. The observation was very helpful for me to come to believe that group work is worth trying in Japan, and also that I will be able to conduct it as well as the experienced teacher did. As for the second question, it became clear from this experience that a Japanese teacher can lead

group activities successfully so that Japanese students improve their communicative competence. Playing a student's role in the experienced teacher's class, I modified my own speech, took a positive attitude from my near-peers, and progressed in speaking ability. I believe Japanese students can do likewise. As a matter of fact, in my class, as I have begun to conduct group work better, my students have begun to do it better, too.

However, I think I could not have learned as much if I had not played a student's role and seen what was actually going on during the group activity. A student's eyes are different from a teacher's. Through a student's eyes, I was also able to reflect objectively on the classes I taught. Then I was able to modify my classes. On the other hand, Murphey mentioned that he thought a good deal more about his own class with an observer present. He told me that he reflected on what and how he was teaching during the observation. Therefore, I think observation is advantageous for both the observer and the observed. I highly recommend that teachers observe others' classes and also accept observers in their own.

For further research, I would like to observe other Japanese teachers using group activities. This is because I expect that they would be closer models for me because we Japanese teachers share the same kinds of difficulties in doing group work. I also think this research would have been better if other novice teachers, experienced teachers, and I would have discussed mutual observation sessions.

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