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Research Article

What Goes on in There?
An Observer's Perspective on Classroom Observation

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Abstract

One mechanism for conducting reflective practice (RP) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is through observations. Existing literature on classroom observations (Farrell, 2018a; O'Leary, 2020; Reed & Bergemann, 2001) provides comprehensive insights into the issues surrounding this practice. However, there is less commentary on classroom observations in a Japanese university context, especially from the observer's perspective. To counter this lack of empirical data, fifty-four EFL teachers in Japanese universities responded to a survey about their engagement with classroom observations and their attitudes towards them. The results indicate that while more than half the respondents observed another teacher's class at the university level, a substantial number did not. Additionally, the number of times respondents observed another professional's class was limited. The data also offered interesting insights into their encounters with classroom observation and the perceived benefits from the observer's standpoint.

外国語としての英語(EFL)の教室でリフレクティブ・プラクティス(RP)を実施するための1つのメカニズムは、観察である。授業観察に関する既存の文献(Farrell, 2018a; O'Leary, 2020; Reed & Bergemann, 2001)は、この実践をめぐる問題について包括的な洞察を提供している。しかし、日本の大学の文脈における授業観察、特に観察者の視点からの解説は少ない。このような実証的データの不足を補うため、日本の大学のEFL教員54名が、授業参観の実施状況や参観に対する意識についてアンケートに回答した。その結果、半数以上の回答者が大学レベルで他の教員の授業を参観している一方で、参観していない教員も相当数いることがわかった。さらに、回答者が他の専門家の授業を参観した回数は限られていた。また、データからは、授業参観との出会いや、参観者の立場から見た利点についても興味深い洞察が得られた。

In response to the continuing demand for quality English language teaching worldwide in various situations, conscientious language practitioners and institutions must strive to uphold standards and develop their teaching practices through professional development. Professional development is multifaceted, and activities such as continuing education, language conferences and reflective practice present opportunities for language educators to hone and upgrade their skills. One of the most direct, immediate, and collaborative methods for language teachers to analyze and develop their practical pedagogical implementation in the classroom is through classroom observation.

Classroom observations feature heavily in pre-service training initiatives, with novice teachers learning from more experienced ones. This hierarchical framework typically involves senior professionals mentoring new entrants by engaging in pre-lesson discussions before observing and analysing a lesson or a series of lessons and providing feedback. Under the right conditions, observations allow teachers to explore classroom anxieties, resolve issues with a particular class, identify areas for improvement, procure another perspective on practical teaching skills and foster an environment of trust and collegiality among coworkers.

While much attention has been given to classroom observations as a mechanism for reflective practice over the past thirty years (see Farrell, 2018a; O'Leary, 2020; Reed & Bergemann, 2001), there remains a paucity of empirical research on the extent of them within EFL university settings in Japan. Additionally, limited attention is dedicated to the amount of continuing in-service peer observations as educators progress through their careers. This is surprising as teachers observing another's classroom should be considered avenues for professional development.

This study addresses the dearth of documentation on university English language teachers in Japan's experiences of classroom observations. Specifically, it targets the role of the observer in a fellow professional's classroom and reports on their attitudes towards this practice. It aims to reveal the frequency of classroom observations, the relationship between the observer and the teacher being observed and the observer's perspective on the process and is guided by the following two research questions: Have university English teachers in Japan observed other teachers? How was the experience of being an observer?

Literature Review

In order to develop professionally, it is important that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers continue to reflect on their pedagogy and build awareness of their instructional processes. One vehicle for optimising teaching style and performance is through classroom observation which is a feature of reflective practice (RP). Dewey (1933) describes RP practice as "an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds that support it and the future conclusions to which it leads" (p. 9). Reflective practice involves a deliberate effort to collect data, engage in dialogue with others, critically analyse and reflect on the data and instigate changes inside and outside the classroom (Farrell, 2015). RP is a complex process as it requires educators to disconnect themselves in a controlled and unemotional manner from their emotions and engage in a process of critical self-reflection.

However, while most literature advocates for the necessity of RP in professional development, there is also considerable awareness of its limitations. One criticism levelled at RP is that language teachers often approach it with suspicion, perceiving it as a tool for institutional evaluation (Filer & Walsh, 2024; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Walsh, 2013). This idea that RP is an evaluative tool is deeply ingrained in teachers' beliefs, making it challenging to alter this mindset.

Some critics also argue that RP in its current form has become stagnant, with Walsh (2013) concerned that it has become "tired, overused and outdated" and is "currently only operating in a limited, rather superficial way" (p.112). To revitalise RP, Walsh (2013), like other commentators (see Bradbury et al., 2010; Johns, 2000), advises that reflective practice should be a dialogic activity involving multiple respondents.

Subsequently, there has been a move towards a more language-mediated approach to RP. Mann and Walsh (2017) suggest that RP should manifest in many forms, including ad hoc self-observation, online discussion forums, critical incident analysis, structured reflection, and video and dialogic reflection (p. 225). Each of these allows educators to exchange and gain insights into various aspects of language teaching and systematically reflect on their teaching methods and student learning outcomes. If implemented correctly, they can foster collaboration and nurture learning communities within an organisation.

An effective mechanism for fostering dialogue and collaboration in the EFL context is through classroom observations. Walsh (2013) emphasises that observation is a highly efficacious way to encourage dialogue and reflection grounded in evidence. In this context, language professionals engage with each other to critique their performance based on data collected during an observation. Day (1990) explains that this practice allows teachers to identify effective and ineffective classroom practices. Classroom observations, though complex and time-consuming, offer potential benefits to teachers when well implemented. Farrell (2018b) lists nine attributes, including developing awareness of one's teaching, a mechanism for collecting information about pedagogical processes, an opportunity to view other teaching styles, data collection, learning effective teaching strategies and building collegiality.

In many EFL teaching contexts in Japan and around the world, novice teachers at language schools or large institutions are often mentored by more experienced educators, with classroom observations a key feature of their pre-service training. This hierarchical system is also maintained at in-service training events or performance evaluations. However, some critics argue against this top-down approach (see Cosh, 1999; Fanselow, 1988). Fanselow (1988) believes that observations should be seen as a process, not a product. He argues for a perspective where the goal is "self-exploration" for all individuals involved in classroom observations rather than just a "helping" function. Cosh (1999) concurs and stresses that during the practice, teachers should not be passive recipients of feedback but involved in "a process of active self-development through reflection and self-awareness" (p. 23). Unfortunately, in recent times, these hierarchical structures persist as, according to Farrell (2018b), classroom observations continue to be unnerving for observed teachers as many observers are there to provide a summative assessment of their teaching.

O'Leary (2020) recommends that observations be a professional development feature for all educators regardless of their position within an organization and advocates for peer observations. However, he laments that a major pitfall in peer observation is that "most teachers rarely observe others or are rarely observed by their peers" (O'Leary, 2020, p. 158). The extent of peer observations in Japanese EFL university settings is difficult to verify as, apart from anecdotal evidence, little is known about the practice. This lack of documentation prompted Filer and Walsh (2024) to survey 54 English teachers at universities in Japan on their classroom observation experiences. The data indicated that observations were not a significant part of their working environment. Interestingly, while many respondents were sceptical of their purpose, the majority conceded that they are a necessary part of professional development.

Much of the literature on classroom observations often focuses on the perspective of the observed and their mentoring with feedback and advice on their performance. However, as Wajnryb (1992) suggests, classroom observation is an opportunity for all educators to develop their professional growth. Despite the involvement of both observers and those being observed, the observer's records of this practice are less well documented. The following study aims to rectify this lack of information by chronicling the experiences of EFL teachers as observers of other teachers' classes in Japanese universities.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the lived experiences of classroom observations

of EFL teachers at university in Japan. The methodology is divided into two main components: data collection, and data analysis.

Data Collection

The study involved 54 university teachers based in Japan. The respondents were recruited through word of mouth, announcements on social media, and connections through existing language teaching communities. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using digital platforms, including email and online survey tools. A Google Forms questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed to interested teachers, allowing for easy distribution and collection of responses. The survey was designed to primarily provide an overview of the situation regarding classroom observation among university teachers in Japan. The instruments used included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to gather quantitative and qualitative data.

The survey began by asking respondents about their teaching history at universities in Japan. To address RQ1, respondents were then asked whether they had ever observed another English class and, if so, how many times.

To provide answers to RQ2, respondents rated how useful they had found observing classes at the university level, on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all useful) to 5 (very useful). The questionnaires also included open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide detailed feedback on their experiences by observing three subsets of teachers. These subsets were for teachers who had observed: junior teachers (teachers with less experience at university), fellow English teachers (at the same or similar level) and senior English teachers (supervisors or managers). These questions aimed to gather insights into what aspects of observing other teachers were of note

Data Analysis

Integrating quantitative and qualitative data provides balanced insight into classroom observation from the observer's perspective. The quantitative results were simply analysed using charts and graphs, as seen in the results section below. The qualitative results were analysed by organising the comments into three sections: generally positive, neutral, and generally negative. The findings from this study are expected to offer valuable insights for educators when they may be considering professional development, especially implementing some form of classroom observation.

Results

Overall, 54 respondents replied to the survey. As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents have varying years of experience teaching at the university level in Japan. As the questions were optional, one respondent failed to reply to this question.

Table 1

Participant Experience Teaching at Universities in Japan

0-5 years experience	6-10 years experience	11-15 years experience	*16-20 years experience*	*21+ years experience*	*TOTAL*
11	19	8	5	10	53

The following are the results of the question: Have you ever observed another English teacher's class at a university in Japan? 34 (63%) answered "Yes" they had observed, and 20 (37%) answered "No" they had not observed another teacher's class.

Respondents were then asked to provide more detailed information about these observations. The results were organised into three categories for the three separate subsets of observed teachers. Respondents were also required to say how many times they had observed these groups of teachers. The results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Amount of Experience of Observing an English Language Class

Teacher Observed	Never	1-3 times	*4-6 times*	*7-9 times*	*10 or more times*	Total Observations	Median Number of Observations
Senior English Teacher	6	14	1	0	3	63	3
Fellow English Teacher	5	15	8	0	5	120	5
Junior English Teacher	3	8	1	0	2	41	2

The data in Table 2 reveals that the most frequent type of observation that has taken place among the respondents is between fellow teachers compared to the other two subsets. Of the 54 respondents, they have observed a fellow English teacher a median of five times in their career compared to three times for a senior teacher and two times for a junior teacher.

Respondents were then asked to consider how useful they had found being an observer in these classroom observations. The results can be seen in Table 3 and are related to the following survey question: On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being very useful, how useful was this for you in terms of professional development?

Table 3

Participant Quantitative Feedback on Observing an English Language Class

Teacher Observed	Number of Respondents	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	5	Average
Senior English Teacher	17	2 (12%)	2 (12%)	9 (53%)	0 (0%)	4 (23%)	3.10
Fellow English Teacher	29	1 (3%)	3 (10%)	6 (21%)	10 (35%)	9 (31%)	3.80
Junior English Teacher	12	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	4 (33.5%)	4 (33.5%)	1 (8%)	3.25

From the results in Table 3, we can see that there is a difference in how useful being an observer is depending on who is being observed. The average score of 3.8 for observing a fellow teacher is higher than both other subsets: senior teacher (3.1) and junior teacher (3.25). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the maximum score of 5 was selected more often for fellow teachers (31%) than the other two groups.

Respondents were asked to comment on their experiences of observing the three subsets of teachers. The results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Participant Qualitative Feedback on Observing an English Language Class

Teacher Observed	Number of Respondents	Positive Feedback	*Neutral Feedback*	*Negative Feedback*
Senior English Teacher	15	8 (53%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)
Fellow English Teacher	23	21 (91%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
Junior English Teacher	9	5 (56%)	4 (44%)	0 (0%)

Fifteen respondents provided feedback related to their experiences of observing a senior teacher. Analysis of these comments reveals that 8/15 (53%) were positive with 4/15 (27%) being neutral and 3/15 (20%) negative. One positive comment, as can be seen in Table 5, mentions how observing a senior teacher "forms part of reflective practice for me" (Respondent A). However, the comment from Respondent C, who claims to have "got absolutely nothing from the observation" outlines one possible negative side of observing a senior teacher.

Twenty-three teachers provided responses about observing a fellow English teacher. Upon analysis of the results, the comments can be categorised as follows: 21/23 (91%) were positive, 8/23 (9%) were neutral, and 0/23 (0%) were negative. From the overwhelmingly positive comments, Respondent D mentioned how useful it is as they "always come out with new ideas". Respondent G goes into more specific detail by commenting how they "learned techniques for increasing motivation...tips for improving rapport with students".

Nine of the respondents provided feedback on their experiences of observing a junior teacher. From this group, we can see that 5/9 (56%) were positive with 4/9 (46%) being neutral and no negative comments. Among the neutral comments Respondent I said that they "made them nervous but was able to pass on some advice".

Table 5

Selected Participant Responses Relating to Observing an English Language Class

Respondent (Teacher Observed)	Comment
Respondent A (Supervisor)	Watching another teacher's class is helpful to see in-class relationships and behaviours. It also forms part of reflective practice for me.
Respondent B (Supervisor)	It was good because I realized that the supervisor wasn't perfect!

Respondent (Teacher Observed)	Comment
Respondent C (Supervisor)	I got absolutely nothing from the observation other than a shock that classes can be taught like that by someone with decades of experience.
Respondent D (Fellow)	Very useful. I always come out with new ideas.
Respondent E (Fellow)	Peers are usually the best to learn from because they give a damn about what they are teaching.
Respondent F (Fellow)	Occasionally you see something that will fit nicely into your own teaching repertoire or an alternative or extension to something you already do. Additionally, observations have quite a reassuring aspect in that you see teachers meeting the same challenges you do.
Respondent G (Fellow)	I learned techniques for increasing student motivation. I learned tips for improving rapport with students.
Respondent H (Junior)	I saw a couple things that gave me inspiration for my own teaching.
Respondent I (Junior)	I made them nervous but was able to pass on some advice

Discussion

RQ1. Have university English teachers in Japan observed other teachers?

This study's results indicate that the majority of respondents have observed an English language lesson. However, it is surprising that more than one-third of respondents have never had the experience of observing a fellow teacher's class. Therefore, this supports O'Leary's (2020) contention that there may be a lack of engagement in classroom observations. This does present a concerning situation that there are plenty of teachers in the Japanese university education system whose professional development may not be fully realised due to never observing another teacher's class. It could be argued that those teachers are not gaining alternative perspectives which can help teachers to continue to develop and hone their craft.

From the respondents who had observed other teachers' classes, the breakdown of who and how many times they had observed reveals some interesting points. Firstly, it is notable that by a clear margin the respondents had observed fellow teachers more often than the other groups. One plausible reason for this could be that there are more teachers the respondents consider "fellow" teachers at their institution than "senior" and "junior" teachers. Therefore, there could be a statistically higher chance of this type of observation taking place. However, another reason could be that these are the types of observation relationships that teachers find the most productive, as the results relating to RQ2 suggest. If teachers are able to be in control of observing classrooms themselves, it seems that observing peers, or "fellow" teachers is the most popular option. This may be because it removes any sense of hierarchy and therefore the potential for feelings of being judged the observed teacher may experience, and the feelings of having to evaluate and guide the senior teacher may be inclined to do.

RQ2. How was the experience of being an observer?

To support the previous point about the frequency of observations of fellow teachers being higher than the other subsets, it is no surprise to see the results reveal that this combination was seen to be the most useful to the observer. The results in both the quantitative and qualitative sections of the survey show that the teachers involved prefer to observe fellow teachers to senior and junior teachers. In particular, it is notable that the comments from the respondents were extremely positive (91%) which points to how teachers view this form of observation as more effective than others.

Results for observing both senior and junior teachers appear to be less favourable, as highlighted by Respondent C's comments. These reactions to observing senior teachers might not be in the majority, but they do indicate a negative feeling that should not be ignored. However, despite this, it is important to accept that classroom observation, in any form, can have positive results for the observer as long as it is conducted in a positive manner. Teachers can be sensitive regarding their classes being observed and the notion of being judged by another teacher may lead to anxiety. Therefore, to make classroom observations be seen more positively, in all situations, careful feedback and discussion between the observer and teacher is essential. This should lead to both parties feeling more relaxed and able to focus on the developmental, and collegiate aspects of the observation, rather than an evaluative process which could create an uncomfortable atmosphere and result in a negative impression of classroom observations.

The positive comments from this research reinforce the notion that once teachers are comfortable observing one another, it is a process that is ideally conducted regularly. Conducting classroom observations could lead to more

opportunities for the observer to, as Respondent D comments, "come out with new ideas". There should be no limit on the number of times this is done because there will always be opportunities to learn, and then bring that knowledge into their own classroom practice.

This research seems to suggest that there is a benefit for EFL teachers in observing other teachers. The results of this study indicate a relatively high level of positivity in observing others, especially fellow teachers. As a result, there should be a greater focus, than is currently the case, on the advantages of classroom observation for the observer compared to the teacher being observed because it is clearly a mutually beneficial process when done with sensitivity and professionalism.

Implications

The findings of this study carry implications for university language professionals and administrators throughout Japan who seek to prioritise classroom observation as a mechanism for continuous professional development. This cohort of EFL university teachers indicates that reflective practice in the guise of classroom observations does not feature prominently and more is needed.

First, while hierarchical observations are plausible for novice teachers being mentored by more experienced educators, the focus should shift to a more collaborative peer observation experience as teachers progress through their careers. Institutions should implement strategies that detach evaluations as a function of peer observation and develop trust, collegiality, and a shared vision. This chimes with Richards (1998), echoing the perspectives of Fanselow (1988) and Cosh (1999), who advocate for a more balanced devolution of power among respondents. He recommends that teachers view themselves as co-researchers in the context of peer observations (Richards, 1998). However, universities or groups of teachers embarking on classroom observations must proceed cautiously, as the perception that classroom observations equate to evaluation seems to be deeply embedded in people's minds.

Another practical challenge universities should consider when implementing classroom observations is scheduling conflicts, particularly when educators teach simultaneously and are prevented from visiting another class. However, this barrier should not be insurmountable as teachers or administrators can employ other methods of dialogic reflection mediated by collaboration. Mann and Walsh (2017) propose several tools such as ad hoc self-observation, online discussion forums, critical incident analysis, structured reflection and video and dialogic reflection (p. 225). These alternatives can enable practitioners to critically assess their pedagogy at times convenient for all involved.

Limitations

Despite the findings, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the sample size was limited to 54 respondents teaching at universities in Japan and is not representative of the entire university EFL industry in Japan. Future studies should include more teachers in tertiary education. Second, some questionnaire items were optional, leading to missing responses. Additionally, this study did not ascertain the specific motivations for observers' participation in classroom observations. These could have been conducted voluntarily, as an evaluation process or within the framework of a university-wide program. Further studies should clarify these underlying motivations.

Furthermore, certain terms used in the survey lacked precision. For example, the meanings of only two points on the Likert Scale were explained and all points should be clarified in future research. Also, the term 'Junior teacher' never defined the intended meaning of 'Junior' as the overall years of experience as a teacher, and could have been misinterpreted by respondents. Finally, this study did not account for variables such as respondents' age, levels of formal teacher training, range of institutions involved and how these institutions approach classroom observations. Subsequent research might consider these factors, as they are likely to influence the findings.

Conclusion

This study provides some insights into the prevalence of classroom observations and the lived experiences of EFL university practitioners in Japan. The results are consistent with previous commentary about the lack of engagement in classroom observations. However, these findings can inform universities' decision-making processes regarding integrating classroom observation into ongoing reflective practice initiatives, especially peer observation.

Focusing on the observer's role instead of the teacher being observed also takes a less common approach to a subject that has been studied more often. This will hopefully lead to more teachers realising the benefits and challenges of the practice for both parties involved. A broader understanding of the issues surrounding classroom observations could contribute to more positive perceptions of their potential to support professional development and engagement within the teaching community.

In summary, classroom observations as a mechanism for reflective practice appear to be underutilised and inconsistently applied within the Japanese EFL university context. While most respondents have observed another teacher's class, many have not engaged in such practices. Moreover, the frequency of these observation visits is notably low. To address these shortcomings, universities in Japan should consider implementing collaborative and dialogic reflection among peers that distribute power equally among instructors. Realising the potential benefits of classroom

observations, it may be necessary for institutions to provide sustained support and allocate time for a framework built on trust and collegiality. If these conditions are met, universities and their educators could create a more robust foundation for fostering reflective teaching practices.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

1. How long have you been teaching English at university level in Japan?
2. Have you ever observed another English teacher's class at a university in Japan?
3. How many times have you observed another English teacher's class at a university in Japan and who have you observed?

	Never observed	1-3 times	4-6 times	7-9 times	10 or more
Senior English Teacher					
Fellow English Teacher					
Junior English Teacher					

4. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not at all and 5 very useful, how useful was this for you in terms of professional development?

	1	2	3	4	5
Senior English Teacher					
Fellow English Teacher					
Junior English Teacher					

5. If you have been observed by a "Senior English teacher", please comment on how the experience was for you.
6. If you have been observed by a "Fellow English teacher", please comment on how the experience was for you.
7. If you have been observed by a "Junior English teacher", please comment on how the experience was for you.