

Leading Article

## Interdepartmental observation: Opening the classroom, opening dialogue

Susie Cowley-Haselden

University of Leicester

### ABSTRACT

This article details an interdepartmental observation programme set up between an academic department and the EAP teaching unit within one UK HE institution. While the initial impetus for the initiative was the exploration of how far normative ‘EFL’ teaching practices fostered NNS participation in learning (this certainly seemed to be the case), the more far-reaching result was to be the evolution of a dialogic community of practice. This would bring together subject specialists and EAP practitioners in an attempt to improve teaching and learning habits affecting their shared student body.

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*The sort of epistemological and intercultural agility needed by the ...  
pedagogue ...comes ... from the capacity to move outside the discipline  
because of a desire to engage a larger and more strongly contested  
knowledge world (McWilliam, 2008, p.268).*

The quality of the teaching and learning that students are engaged in (whether we are discussing international or home students if we wish to label them as such) is integral to the quality of their experience in any educational institution. It is my belief that a quality teaching and learning experience is formed from how much the student feels a part of that teaching and learning experience; central to this, is their level of participation. This paper will outline an interdepartmental observation initiative developed by the author where subject specialists and the author (an EAP practitioner) took part in informal observations across the two disciplines. The purpose of this initiative was primarily to explore how far practices rooted in EFL teacher training might be transferable to the subject seminar/lecture room to increase NNS participation in their learning. Initially this paper outlines the rationale for the interdepartmental observation programme and how it was implemented. The paper then explores the aftermath of the observations and the impact they have had on teacher training within one HE institution and, more importantly it transpires, how the observations have forged the beginnings of a cross-disciplinary dialogic community of practice.

### The rationale for the interdepartmental observation programme

The idea to implement an interdepartmental observation programme was the result of two catalysts. Firstly, comments from students across disciplines revealed their disappointment with a lack of participation in their seminars. This disappointment was palpable as the value students placed on participation was high. When asked what they valued most about the

teaching and learning they had experienced in their EAP classes, students had the following to say:

*I really like the way of participating in classes. Participation is more likely to be the most useful activity in class to learn, as it gives me the opportunity to communicate with other students and lecturers in terms of learning English. [Student 1]*

*The ... [department] gives more attention for participating in classes and less for lecturers to talk "teach" which is very good. [Student 2]*

While NNS' reticence to participate may be bound in linguistic under-confidence, in the case of one particular student, her lack of participation in her subject seminars was at variance with her competence and confidence with the English language. From my student's anecdotes, it seemed that her participation was inadvertently discouraged by her lecturer's lack of training in how to effectively teach NNS. In seminars she could not understand the idiomatic language used by the home students. It occurred to me that if the lecturer had been aware, as many trained EFL teachers are, that idiomatic language use erects an often insurmountable obstacle for NNS, then perhaps this lecturer could have reformulated and 'translated' what the home students were saying into a more accessible academic lexis, therefore *enabling* the NNS to participate. It seemed that if awareness of some of the basic practices inherent in ELT could be raised (grading language use for example) then this would go some way to improving students' often disappointing experiences of academia.

Seminar rooms and lecture theatres are being ever more populated by NNS. Consequently, those trained in teaching these types of student have much to offer the wider teaching community within institutions. McWilliam (2008) astutely observes that habits in teaching can serve us well, but they can also do pedagogues a great disservice (not to mention the students). For McWilliam, "teaching and learning habits ... are useful when the conditions in which they work are predictable and stable. They are deadly if and when the bottom falls out of the stable world in and for which we learn" (2008, p.263). The radical change in student demographics over recent years has rocked the stability of many long serving lecturers. Some adapt by trying to replicate an 'authentic' learning experience for their cohort:

*I think a lot of my colleagues often feel they have to replicate the 'sit back and be told' culture that exists in many South East Asian universities. This is often due to a bad experience in a class when a lecturer has tried to encourage interaction but with limited results. [Lecturer 3]*

However, this approach is directed at one particular demographic and can therefore be potentially exclusive. Adopting more 'EFL' inspired teaching practices (arguably simply 'good' teaching practices) could yield better results:

*I like how [the teacher] promotes 'learning by doing' – something that I also believe works well with international students (but requires a bit of work to convince them as they are often used to three hour straight lectures with little room for interaction with each other or the lecturer). [Lecturer 3]*

The interdepartmental observation initially focused on one particular department, not because students had identified any lack of inclusive teaching methods in this particular department, far from it, but because I am responsible for their ESP provision and the observation

programme could also act as a needs analysis to inform the syllabus. I decided I could take an extremely crude ethnographic approach to syllabus design in the vein of Ramani et al. (1988) by sitting in on some of the sessions with my students. This was the second catalyst for this initiative: it was important to garner a greater awareness of what occurred within the teaching and learning environment in the academic department the students were part of which was an intrinsic element in the meaningful design of ESP syllabi (see Benesch, 2001 for a fairly comprehensive history of approaches to needs analysis in ESP). However, it became clear, that this too was a two-way process:

*I enjoyed sitting in on the class, it was helpful to know how the classes are structured rather than have a vague sense of the ELTU classes 'happen' without knowing the nature of the content and modes of delivery. [Lecturer 1]*

### **The structure of the peer observations**

Initially the plan was to complete a reflective journal of thoughts and observations pre, during and post observing a session. However, although this would have yielded interesting insights into perceptions and assumptions as to what happens in the EAP classroom or the academic seminar, it was an untenable demand on time. The journal simply became a box to be completed as suited the observers. This was completed on specially provided laptops during the observation.

Most observations ended with an impromptu, unrecorded, post observation discussion. What was evident in these informal discussions was that, as has been observed in other studies, (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011, p.106) they centred around student learning rather than lesson content or teacher 'performance'. As Crafton and Kaiser observe, "authentic and sustainable communities of practice develop around concerns that matter to teachers" (2011, p.107). The subject specialists who took part were a mix of experienced teachers and those relatively new to teaching. All were dedicated to our students and keen to engage in dialogue about pedagogy. It is worth noting that the department in question has a postgraduate suite of programmes almost entirely populated by non-native speakers of English, predominantly Chinese females. Therefore all participants in this initiative were well aware that the changing demographics of the student body in UK HE meant that new teaching skills and dispositions were called for as we have to "rework ...[our] roles and identities" as teachers (Hargreaves, 2010, p.162).

It seemed that reworking roles to be inclusive of elements of EFL teaching might have a real impact on the level of student participation in subject seminars.

*Overall, I was impressed with how much was covered in the two hour session and the level of interaction. [Lecturer 1]*

*I got a lot out of this session in terms of seeing differences in how the students act in your seminars to what many of my colleagues report in their own (majority silence). [Lecturer 2]*

There is naturally a question of content to consider here. It might simply be that students are reluctant to participate in seminars due to a lack of confidence in commenting on the content and perhaps a notion of feeling inadvertently assessed by their subject specialist lecturers.

However, it should be noted that the EAP syllabus for this course in particular, is content driven and students often discuss texts used on their postgraduate programmes.

### **The impact of the interdepartmental observations**

In 2012, The Guardian published an article online in the light of a roundtable, hosted jointly by The Guardian and the HEA, asking whether teacher training for academics was effective in improving the quality of teaching and learning in UK higher education (Swain, 2012). It is of note that this debate is attributed (in the journalist's mind at least) to the fact that home students now pay considerable fees for their degrees and students are therefore concerned about the quality of the education they receive. It is doubtful that students did not have this concern previously, but the implication is that now they are financially invested in their education, they have a *right* to be judgmental (by this rationale international students have always had this right). There is then a real push within HE to deliver professional development to raise standards in the quality of teaching and learning. This should not be to the benefit of home students alone but, given the high numbers of international students on degree programmes, should benefit *all* learners in HE institutions.

One question asked of the subject specialists observing the EAP classes was whether they felt those teaching non-native speakers within a discipline would want to attend a workshop delivered by EAP tutors looking at how to maximise NNS interaction. All lecturers said they thought this would be the case. One, who had just completed the PG Certificate in Academic Practice in Higher Education at our institution, commented:

*There are examples of good practice demonstrated by ELTU tutors that could be used by academic members of staff and it is interesting to see how students react to the use of 'learning by doing' principles in the classroom. It would also give lecturers an insight into the specific language needs of their students and how the presentation of content should be tailored to address these. [Lecturer 3]*

Encouraged by these comments, I contacted the unit responsible for teacher training within my institution and attached the observation feedback I had received and asked whether they might be interested in having an EAP practitioner deliver a session on increasing NNS participation on the teacher training courses offered by the unit. They responded positively and since then I have delivered sessions, alongside a colleague, on maximising non-native speaker interaction on introductory courses to teaching in HE and on workshops introducing academics (both novice and experienced teachers) to teaching at my institution. While these sessions *are* beneficial, and participants can be keen to explore teaching practices that lead to greater inclusion of NNS, discussions often seem ephemeral and, pardon the pun, academic. This is not to say that the participants in these workshops are not willing to engage in the topic, it is simply that as they are on the cusp of their teaching career their student body is mostly an unknown quantity for them.

### **Dialogic community of practice**

An unintended outcome of the observation programme was the initiation of a 'dialogic community of practice' (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011) whereby EAP practitioners and subject specialists co-operate and share knowledge and understanding of *our* students, with the joint aim of improving the student experience within our classrooms, seminar rooms and lecture

theatres. “Participation in dialogic communities may be important for facilitating reconstructive reflection and critique necessary for change in classroom practices and norms” (Pourdavood & Fleener, 1997, p.51). Such collaboration is sustainable and any change is more profound (Crafton and Kaiser, 2001).

As a direct result of the observation programme activities have since taken place in collaboration; one example was the setting up of an *Academic Reading Circle* (Seburn, 2011) co-facilitated by this EAP practitioner and subject specialists. The idea of implementing such a scheme has been a direct result of feedback on one observation and subsequent discussions on how best to help our students. The author is also exploring new approaches to teaching EAP so it seems only natural to invite the subject specialists back into the EAP classroom for their valued input. It is invaluable to have support from respected colleagues who are pedagogically like-minded (albeit grounded in a different discipline), and this has only been possible through the comfort levels established from the observation programme. It is my hope that such initiatives will continue between our two departments. The next stage is to initiate similar programmes in other departments within our institution, bringing about further dialogic communities of practice – only then will teaching and learning habits be fit for purpose for our truly international student body.

#### CONTACT THE AUTHOR

[sch33@le.ac.uk](mailto:sch33@le.ac.uk)

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