

Making Space for Autonomy in Language Learning

Papers from the 14th Nordic Conference on Developing
Learner Autonomy in Language Learning and Teaching

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Peer Observation: Observe and be Observed as Another Enrichment of Learner Autonomy

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The observation document that we are presenting to the 14th Nordic Workshop on Learner Autonomy is the result of several years of practice in teacher observation and peer observation.

From the beginning it was an open document that has been enriched from the practice and the suggestions made by the observers and the observed teachers. It was very important that the observation document be: negotiated, accepted by the participants, open to changes, decided on by the parties and ALWAYS with a constructive desire to seek alternatives to the improvable aspects of the observation made. The observer was NEVER the blind judge who rendered a verdict, but quite the contrary; s/he put her/himself in the position of giving suggestions, expressing doubts, instead of giving recipes (see “Some important aspects / features to take into account” at the beginning of the document). We hope that the document presented here will be as useful for the reader as it has been for us.

To observe and be observed can be a very interesting source of class information about how we and our colleagues put learner autonomy into practice in our classes. Why isn't it a popular instrument? Why are we afraid of using it? Is it simply because it doesn't belong to our professional culture, in other words, we are not used to listening to other colleagues' feedback about what we try to implement. The observed teacher may think, “What is the observer going to say?”. The observer may think, “Will the teacher observed accept my opinions about the observation made?” These typical questions are part of our initial fears. In this presentation, using a questionnaire, we will share an experience with teachers who dealt with peer observation successfully.

In short, it is absolutely necessary to:

- Demystify observation.
- Lower our initial barriers by creating a psychological net: face initial fears positively by choosing the right person to work with,

establishing rules, using an effective and negotiated observation instrument, avoiding opinions without evidence, etc.

- Use assessment instruments: feedback after the observation and teacher's self-assessment.

Thanks to Leni Dam and Lienhard Legenhausen for suggesting the presentation of this experience in this workshop.

Observation Document

“We get ahead not celebrating our successes but overcoming our mistakes.” (Chinese proverb)

“Observation is never a precision instrument.”

“Observation is a puzzle where each piece needs to fit in with the rest.”

“We see things not as they are, but as we are.”

“Observation is sharing, the observer and the person observed reflecting together to look for possible alternatives to the difficulties found. It never means to pass judgement.”

“Why don't we look at difficulties as challenges we need to try to overcome?”

Who to Work With? Some Important Aspects/ Features to Take into Account

- We suggest working with a teacher who is open to improvement in their classroom work.
- It is important to make clear from the very beginning that the observer and the teacher observed are at the same level. Avoid the role of the typical inspector/supervisor.
- It is better to suggest, ask questions, express doubts... more than give recipes, judge, etc.
- In order to increase trust between the observer and the teacher observed, it is always better not to choose many aspects in the first observations, even better, the simplest. There will be time to increase the amount and difficulty of them gradually.
- Try to look for continuous balance among: must, want, can and know how to do something. The teacher as an active interpreter of the curriculum.
- Take into account that mutual observation is not compulsory in our teaching system.
- It is essential to set up pre- and post-observation meeting times (Action Research).
- The post-observation meeting for feedback must take place right after the observation or as soon as possible.

Codes Used for General Observation with Emphasis on Learner Autonomy

Three possible codes to use for the observation:

1. Degrees of learner autonomy (0, 1, 2, 3)
2. Observer's impressions on the aspects observed:

1. Improvable	↑	+
2. Adequate	↑ ↑	++
3. Very adequate	↑ ↑ ↑	+++
4. Excellent	↑ ↑ ↑ ↑	++++
? I don't think I have seen it		

3. Yes, No?

1. Before the observation: Preparation for the observation

	Code	Comments / remarks
<p>1.1. Negotiation between the observer and the teacher to be observed about the aspects to observe.</p>		<p>Decide who is/are going to be observed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher 2. Individual learner(s)/ mediator(s) 3. Small group of learners/ mediators 4. Whole group of learners + mediators 5. The teacher and the whole group of learners
<p>1.2. Checking the planning for the session before observation*</p> <p>*The teacher to be observed must avoid planning especially for the session that is going to be observed. Check official curriculum if necessary.</p> <p>Questions to take into account.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the activities you used/will use to do Initial Assessment*1? • Do the tasks, activities and exercises planned cover the content of the subject (concepts, procedures and attitudes)? • Have the planned activities taken into account the 75%/25% balance of new and previous contents? (Meaningful learning, Ausubel & Novak) • Do these activities take into account the way the learners work or other learning experiences they have had? (Group dynamics, the role of 		

<p>mediators within each group, use of media, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the teacher follow TBL or project work as a structure of the planning? • Where does the observed session fit into the structure of a Unit of Work? • Does the teacher have in mind LA when planning his/her classes? • Did the teacher take into consideration the weaknesses and the strengths of his/her learners, especially related to LA? (Initial Assessment*1) • How is the session I am going to observe related to the Initial Assessment? • Is the session embedded in your annual planning*2? If not, why? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. <p>*1 Initial Assessment... (context + learning), 75%, 25% (3 types of contents: concepts, procedures and attitudes). It affects both the teacher and the learners, because both the learners and the teacher have previous learning/teaching experiences.</p> <p>*2 Annual planning should be open to changes. Check official curriculum if necessary.</p>		
<p>1.3. Informing the learners about the session to be observed.</p> <p>Before the observation starts, introduce yourself to the learners and give them an “understandable” reason for being there, e.g., I am here to observe this session because your teacher and I are working in a project together. S/he is going to observe me as well.</p>		

2. Topic (Before and during the session)

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the topic used in the session meaningful for the year plan?* <p>*The teacher to be observed must avoid planning especially for the session that is going to be observed. Check official curriculum if necessary.</p>		

3. Objectives (What for) (Before and during observation)

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the objectives for the session? Are the objectives planned coherent and cohesive*¹ with a larger planning? (One week, two weeks, etc. assuming that the teacher is working with a TBL, Project Work, etc.) Are they clearly observable in the tasks, activities or exercises? Are the verbs used in the objectives assessable? Do the assessment instruments and criteria reflect the outcome of the objectives? Is the session planned in a cohesive and coherent way in relation to the Initial Assessment? Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. <p>*¹ Cohesion: It is said that something is cohesive when the elements are related, e.g., when the previous tasks or activities the students did are related to the ones planned for this session. Coherence: Something done logically, adequate to the level, moment or time of the year, phase where the learners ARE.</p>		

4. Content (what) (before and during observation)

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<p>4.1. Concepts, procedures and attitudes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the teacher connected the new contents (-) with the previous ones (+)? (Meaningful learning, Ausubel & Novak). (Input+1, cognitive imbalance) • Is the quantity of contents presented, practised or produced in the session appropriate? • Are the contents (concepts, procedures and attitudes) of the session well defined? • Is there a proportional balance between concepts, procedures and attitudes? • Can we see the selection, sequencing and organization of contents? • Is there enough practice and production of content on the students' parts? • Are the chosen procedures appropriate to develop the concepts? • Are the procedures observed algorithmic? (Guided) • Are the procedures observed heuristic? (Little guided/free) • Do the attitudes benefit the development of concepts and procedures? (Emotional management of the classroom) • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		

<p>4.2. Skills Receptive: Listening+ Reading + Audiovisual Reception; Productive: Speaking + Writing; Interactive: Spoken Interaction + Written Interactive; Mediation (CEFRL)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were the skills coherently used and sequenced according to the demands of the tasks, activities and exercises? • Was the skills sequence changed during the session because of the needs arising during the process? • Did the sequence of the skills benefit the learning process? • Is there emphasis on fluency? • Is there special emphasis on the interactive and mediation skills? Or communicative competence? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>4.3. Mediation To mediate is to be a bridge between the transmitter and the receiver of the message to facilitate communication. It could be a person or media. Mediation must be trained.</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the role of the mediator introduced/activated in this session? • Can we see mediators in the groups? • Did the teacher allow time for the mediators to do their job? (Instead of explaining again) • Who chose the mediators? • Have they accepted the role of mediator voluntarily or through a suggestion from the teacher? • Do mediators receive any compensation for this job? • Have the mediators been trained appropriately to do their job (e.g., use 		

<p>of synonyms, simplification of messages, periphrasis, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the teacher got in mind what s/he wants from the mediators? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
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5. Language in the session

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<p>5.1. Instructions / classroom language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could the students understand the teacher's instructions/classroom language? • Were the instructions/classroom language clear, precise and effective? (Comprehensible input) • What did the teacher do to check if the instructions/classroom language were understood? • Did the teacher show interest in making him/herself understood? (Comprehensible input) • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>5.2. Speaker's language (teacher and learners)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it audible and clear? • Appropriate speed and rhythm? • Attractive enough to catch the listeners' attention? • Was the use of L1 instead of the L2 justified? • Did the teacher use different strategies to avoid the use of L1? • Does the teacher promote the use of L2 by the learners? (Negotiation) 		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What language do learners use when working in groups? • Does the teacher promote the use of different strategies by the learners to avoid their use of L1? (Key competence: Learning to learn.) • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
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6. Methodology (How)

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<p>6.1. Competences (CEFRL) Use the terminology of competences as developed in your own country/school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the competences been taken into account in the planning, development and assessment of the session? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.2. Multiple intelligences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the Multiple Intelligences been taken into account in the planning, development and assessment of the session? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.3. Teaching strategies (Used by the teacher or learners acting as mediators.) Teacher centred: 1. Without learner's practice 2. With learner's practice: inductive or deductive. Deductive: from theory to practice. Inductive: from practice to theory. Learner-centred: through discovery. 1. Fully/totally guided by the teacher.</p>		

<p>2. Quite guided by the teacher. 3. Little guided by the teacher 4. Not guided by the teacher/free.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.4. Learning strategies (R. Oxford)</p> <p>1. Memory, 2. Cognitive, 3. Compensation, 4. Metacognitive, 5. Affective, 6. Social.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies or kinds of strategies have been used by the learners during the session? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.5. Roles of teachers and learners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the session been teacher-centred or learner-centred? In what proportion? • Does the teacher promote the active roles of the learners in relation to the development of the tasks, activities or exercises? • Does the teacher implement a learner training project to promote LA? • Do learners have opportunities to activate problem solving? • Do learners put into practice a protocol for problem solving? (Definition of a problem + looking for alternatives + put alternatives in order + put them into practice + assess them.) • Are the roles of the teacher coherent with the types of tasks, activities or exercises? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		

6.6. Treatment of mistakes

(S. P. Corder, J. Edge, CEFRL: Pre-systemic: Error; Systemic: mistake; Post-systemic: slip)

The correction of mistakes can be done by the teacher or by the learners.

- Does the teacher differentiate between learners' errors, mistakes and slips?
- Is only the teacher doing the correction of mistakes and slips?
- Are mistakes and slips considered by both the teacher and the learners as a positive part of the teaching and learning processes?
- What does the teacher do to avoid learners' errors?
- Can we observe learners doing self-correction? And co-correction?
- Do learners help other learners in the correction of mistakes or slips?
- Has the teacher trained the learners to correct themselves and help others in the correction of mistakes or slips?
- Can we observe a variety of techniques/strategies in the correction of mistakes?
- Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations.

<p>6.7. Timing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the timing planned for the tasks, activities and exercises been adequate? • Can we see that the learners have enough time to carry out the tasks, activities and exercises? • Is there enough time planned for carrying out task work? • Was the number of tasks, activities or exercises correctly planned for the time available? • Did the teacher pace the tasks, activities or exercises according to the level and age group of his/her learners? • Teacher talking time versus student talking time: are these coherent and cohesive? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.8. Resources (human, materials or technical)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the use of these resources help the learners reach their objectives? • Were useful resources used during the session? • Were the learners & teacher taken into account as human resources? • If video has been used, have the learners' attention spans been taken into account? • Has the video been divided into smaller parts to keep the learners' attention? • Have the activities for each part helped the learners understand the content? • Has the active participation of the learners in the presentation of the video been fostered? • Does the teacher train learners in the use of different resources (human, 		

<p>materials and technical)? (Learning to learn)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.9. Grouping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was group work observed? (Cooperative work) • How are the learners grouped? • What didactic/methodological reasons does the teacher give for this way of forming groups? • Were the learners grouped suitably to carry out the planned tasks, activities and exercises? • If the tasks require learner interaction, was this facilitated? Did the teacher enable group work? • Can we distinguish the mediators in each group when observing them? • Can the learners hear each other when someone asks a question, gives an opinion, or answers something that has been asked? • Does the teacher have some technique for repetition of something a learner has said so that the rest of the class can understand it? • Did the teacher position him/herself appropriately within the space available? • Was the learning space suitable for the grouping used? • Is the teacher conscious of the benefits & drawbacks of group work? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.10. Tasks, activities and exercises* *Differences among tasks, activities and exercises (CEFRL)</p>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the tasks, activities and exercises for the session well planned according to the structure of planning chosen? (TBL, project work, etc.) • Are they adequate for the level of the learners at this time of the school year (phase)? • Is there a coherent and cohesive progression of the tasks, activities and exercises developed during the session or in relation to the whole planning? • Can we distinguish the Final Tasks (TBL) or Project from the enabling activities and exercises? • Do tasks, activities and exercises facilitate learners' successes? (Pedagogy for success) • Is the teacher conscious of the advantages of using TBL or Project Work when planning and developing the session? (Question for before and after the observation) • Did the teacher use any strategy/technique to check the instructions given as necessary to develop the tasks, activities and exercises? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
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<p>6.11. Space management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is space management adequate for the development of the tasks, activities and exercises? • Does the position of the teacher facilitate the development of the tasks, activities and exercises? • Does the position of the learners facilitate the development of the tasks, activities and exercises? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		
<p>6.12. Unexpected circumstances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the teacher deal with the unexpected circumstances arising during the session? • Are there any class rules established for daily coexistence? (Social harmony?) • Who established the class rules? • Were the class rules negotiated between the teacher and learners beforehand? • Have the class rules been imposed by the teacher or school? • Does the teacher keep the class rules during the session? • Does the teacher deal with the learners' positive or negative behaviours adequately? • Does the teacher involve the learners in the analysis, consequences and alternatives to solve behavioural problems appearing during the session? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		

<p>6.13. Emotional management of the classroom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the relationship between teacher and learners. • Describe the relationships between the learners. • Are there signs of mutual respect and cordiality among learners? And between the teacher and the learners? • Are there signs of empathy among all members of the group? (Teacher and learners, among learners) • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. <p>“A language is firstly felt and secondly learnt” (Vera, 2000)</p>		
<p>6.14 Diversity management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there an adequate treatment of the diversity of learners? Is there an evident sign of it? • Is there any project on diversity in the school? • Is the dependency of some learners in relation to others observable during the development of tasks, activities or exercises? • Are there any mediators in the groups? Do they help the less skilled learners? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		

7. Assessment (what for, what and how) (before and during)

Questions to take into account	Code	Comments / remarks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the objectives of the tasks, activities and exercises been achieved? • Were the assessment instruments adequate to assess the tasks, activities and exercises? • Has the teacher checked that the objectives have been achieved? • Are the assessment instruments observable? • Has the teacher used a variety of assessment instruments? • Are there assessment instruments for both the process and product? • Has the teacher used at least 3 assessment instruments to validate the assessment? (Triangulation of instruments) • Does the teacher take note of the development of the tasks, activities or exercises to reflect on them later? (Possible changes during the development of work planned according to circumstances) • Is the teacher conscious of the difference between evaluation, assessment and marking? • Is there evidence of LA in any of the aspects observed? Mark with X and add comments in observations. 		

Annexes

1. Observation feedback / report

Date:

<p>General comments on the observation done:</p> <p>Positive aspects observed:</p>
<p>Questions, comments and suggestions on the improvable aspects observed:</p>
<p>Agreement between the observer and the teacher observed on the aspects to be focused on in future observations:</p>

2. Teacher's self-assessment after the observation

How did I feel about the whole experience of being observed?
What were some positive aspects of the whole experience?
Which aspects do I consider improvable after the session and post-observation meeting? (Make a list)
Out of the list made of improvable aspects, I am going to take the following aspects into consideration for the next planning:
Any reflections / suggestions for the centre, rest of the teachers, etc.

3. Phases and degrees of learner autonomy: In order to focus our attention on the development of Learner Autonomy. (Concepts presented in the 7th Nordic Conference and Workshop on Autonomous Language Learning, Helsinki, September 2000)

3.1. Phases of autonomy

A phase is defined as a unit of time, e.g., two months. It means a total or partial change of any of the curricular elements, sub-elements or processes. The teacher or the learners, or both, decide to start a new phase (or step) in which, according to the evolution of the course, the objectives, contents, methodology or assessment are totally or partially changed.

3.2. Degrees of learner autonomy

1. The learner(s) is/are totally dependent on the teacher or classmates. The students do what the teacher says. **TOTALLY GUIDED/CONTROLLED**
2. The teacher develops tasks/activities which are quite controlled. **QUITE GUIDED/ CONTROLLED.**
3. The teacher controls the task/activities partially. There is a certain margin for students to develop their autonomy. The learner needs some help from time to time from the teacher or classmates. **GUIDED/CONTROLLED.**
4. The learner(s) rarely need(s) any help from the teacher or classmates. The task/activities are completely or almost completely free from the teacher or classmates' control. The students exhibit the maximum amount of autonomy expected at this stage. **LITTLE GUIDED/CONTROL FREE.**

Proposal for phases:

- O August, September
- I October, November, December
- II January, February, March
- III April, May, June

YEAR 18/19				YEAR 19/20				YEAR 20/21				YEAR 21/22			
O	I	II	III	O	I	II	III	O	I	II	III	O	I	II	III

Each O means: we must take into account the learner autonomy developed during the previous year.

Teachers foresee/plan the degree of learner autonomy they want/can reach during the school year. This is going to be for him/her degree.

3.3. Raw observation (note taking) during the observation. The observation document can be filled in after the observation.

Feel free to download and use the PDF version of this chapter:
<https://www.candlinandmynard.com/peerobservation.html>

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