



## Critical friendship as a means for teacher development

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to demonstrate the effectiveness of critical friendship as a key element for teacher development. Throughout peer observation between two colleagues (Esther and Liz), non-judgemental feedback and transcription of interviews during training sessions, we will talk about our experience for improving our teaching practice at the University of Chiapas, UNACH.

### **1. Rationale for the study**

Nowadays there are many administrative demands as English teachers at the University of Chiapas, a lot of teachers meetings, POA, PIFIs, tutoring, teaching, and counselling, among many other responsibilities which make us feel tired and stressful in the training room since less time is dedicated to teaching. Although both of us are experienced teachers, we had been feeling exhausted.

We thought that our stress was affecting our teaching since we retook transmission models in our classes Liz having problems with her tone of voice, discipline and controlling time and Esther was having problems running on activities and controlling activities for students. We talked about our teaching problems and agreed to observe three classes each one on specific aspects for mutual development as well as providing feedback in a critical context having the role of friends.

The main aims of this study were as follows:

- To help each other to reflect on our teaching practice to improve it.
- To give and receive formative feedback having the role of a friend



- To improve our observations skills
- To find out the effectiveness of critical friendship as a means for teacher development
- To encourage teachers to experience the usefulness of critical friendship for their teacher development.

In the following section we will summarize what authors have said and investigated about this study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### Observation

Observation has been considered as a threatening teaching activity for some teachers because it tends to be more evaluative and judgemental than developmental. According to Malderez (2003:179) “observation includes hearing as well as using other senses to collect information. The acts of perceiving, interpreting, assessing and reacting.” It is a helpful technique to understand and improve education that is why “classroom observations form part of any teacher training programme, whether initial training or in service training”. Williams (1989:85)

There are many reasons for observing classes. However, we believe that the main one must be for teachers’ professional growth and development. As Wanjryb (1992:1) has put it: “being in the classroom as an observer opens up a range of experiences and processes which can become part of the raw material of a teacher’s professional growth” Unfortunately Allwright (1988:44) argues that “observation was recognized as a problem in teacher training work, where for decades it had been taken for granted that teachers on teaching practice should be visited by supervisors who would later evaluate their supervisees” Some supervisors, who have not been trained to observe classes, make teachers feel bad because their feedback is judgemental.

We agreed with Rees (1997:90) who comments that “teacher observation is flawed because it operates on the assumptions that schools and classrooms are effective learning environments, depending for their success being properly managed”. Our teaching experience has taught us that effective classes are



unpredictable because there are many factors which can cause a class being ineffective.

Regarding this comment Rees also (1997:92) says that:

“There is not single set of skills, attitudes, interests, and abilities that all good teachers have and that all poor teachers lack. Effective teaching means different things to different students at different times, and research that has sought to discover one set of characteristics for effective teachers has doomed itself to failure”

Both teachers and students are unique that is why when we play the role of observers in the classroom we cannot measure teachers' skills with the same rule. As human beings we are highly emotional and we tend to demonstrate unconsciously or consciously our feelings, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and skills in the classroom. Being observed by an expert or by the principal is stressful because although we planned our class in advanced there are always unexpected problems during the lesson. Fortunately, Wang & Seth (1998) point out that nowadays teachers can decide what they want to do throughout the classroom observation process.

The role of observers should change because we cannot change teachers' personalities. Wajnryb (1992:11) argues that “in the place of the more traditional role of ‘helper’ and ‘recipient’, we are seeking a role relationship that is collaborative and consultative. The teacher is considered a co-investigator or co-explorer in the language classroom”. Both teachers and observers can work collaboratively to learn each other. Regarding to this, Menges (1985:181) comments: “Collaborative work probably should include opportunities for faculty to learn how to teach more effectively, to practice new teaching techniques and approaches, to get regular feedback on the classroom performance, and to receive coaching from colleagues”

We believe that peer observation is helpful if there is a constructive critique on the teachers' behaviour which they want to improve (Wajnryb, 1992) since teachers are the only ones who can develop if they want to. We agree with Edge



(1992:4) who comments: “I do not need someone who wants to change me and make me more like the way they think I ought to be. I need someone who will help me see myself clearly.” Similarly, Race (2001:139) suggests “when you have been observed, treat it as free consultancy. Isn’t it wonderful to have a colleague or a friend who finds time to engage in an educational conversation with me?”

### **Critical Friendship**

Critical friendship has proved to be a fruitful element for formative feedback and teacher development. This study is based on a critical friendship between two teachers through a 25- hour course given to Non- Qualified English teachers at the Language School, Tuxtla at the University of Chiapas. According to Farrell (2001:368) “critical friendship contributed to the mutual development of two colleagues.” Similarly Hatton and Smith (1995, cited in Farrell, 2001:369) say that the purpose of it is “to engage with another person in a way which encourages talking with, questioning, and even confronting, the trusted other, in order to examine planning for teaching, implementation, and its evaluation.” We believe that this approach is helpful because we can share our experiences, techniques, feelings or fears without feeling threatened by an evaluation or a destructive comment. We want to improve not only as teachers but also as persons.

### **2.3 Feedback**

Feedback plays a vital role in the process of peer observation because the observer takes the role of a friend who makes the teacher plan, teach, reflect and evaluate her/his teaching. According to Race (2001:32) “feedback [is] as a fundamental process underpinning successful learning” However, we need to be careful and tactful to provide it because we can hurt teachers’ feelings. In the following chart, I will summarize some Race’s principles for providing feedback which can be useful for any observer.



PRINCIPLE	COMMENTS
<b>When you have observed someone else teach, always give positive feedback first</b>	Help to put the colleague you are observing at ease by giving the good news first (and indeed making sure there is always some good news)
<b>Try to give three positives for every one 'could do better'</b>	If people are given too much adverse comment, they may lose track of which are the most important parts of the agenda that they need to address.
<b>Take the attitude that all feedback is potentially useful.</b>	Feedback is an important part of everyday learning.
<b>Be prepared to receive positive feedback</b>	In many cultures, there is a sense of embarrassment when receiving praise. This leads to people to shrug it off and to fail to really take on board the value of finding out more about what is regarded as successful.
<b>Get practising for receiving negative feedback</b>	Avoid the temptations to become hostile, or to justify your position, or to make excuses for things that were found lacking.

(Race, 2001:139)

As we have commented, feedback is a key element not only for learning and teaching but also for teacher development since we are the only ones who can develop ourselves through a collaborative work called: critical friendship.

### 3. Methodology

Our research hypothesis was the following: Critical friendship is an effective strategy for teacher development. In order to confirm it, we decided to review literature and research related to this issue.

The methodology used was through a qualitative research in which we used observation, recorded lessons, diaries, recorded conversations, and transcriptions as instruments of this study. We decided to divide the study in three parts: pre-talks, observations, post-talks. In the pre-talks we told the observer what we wanted to pay close attention and then keeping data on a worksheet during the classes. After that, the post-talk was given in order to check improvement. According to Wang & Seth (1998:209) "the most important thing about the pre classroom observation session is that the teachers get a clear idea about what was going to happen during and after the observation, and thus feel more secure."

We chose a group of non-qualified English teachers because both Esther and I were going to work together in an induction course. Esther was observed in three different lessons for running tasks and for controlling activities and Liz was



also observed working with that group for tone of voice, time and discipline problems.

We designed observation sheets to collect data and we recorded post-talks so that we could transcribe the interviews. Each one had a personal diary to write our reflections before, during and after the lesson and we included some thinking questions: *if you had the opportunity to teach the lesson again, what would you do different? What did you like or dislike about your class? Why?* We believe that thinking questions are guidelines for reflection. As Howard and Wright (1999:70) say “the thinking question is a training tool we use to switch course participants into reflective (i.e. trainer) mode from doing (i.e. trainee) mode.”

In the following section we are going to explain our findings and the conclusions of this study.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Peer Observation

We will briefly analyse the data for each instrument. We designed two observation sheets, one of them was focused on how Esther set up an activity and how she handled it with the group. See the chart below:

#### Observations form for Esther’s class

COMMENTS	
Set up an activity	Esther started by recalling information from the previous session. She prepared them for today’s session and asked students to make trios. Then she presented the activity and check understanding so students went on with it.
Run on the activity	While students were working on the activity she was monitoring and giving help when necessary. She also encouraged a couple of students to get involved in the activity (they were talking about a movie). She checked the time and reminded students they had 5 more minutes to finish.
Close the activity	Students presented their findings voluntarily. Both parties (teacher and students) summarize the findings and she made some extra comments before moving on to another issue. Students had problems understanding the meaning of “intelligibility” and “environmental clues” It was important to write these concepts on the board (she did it but they were lost on the board because there was a lot of information on it) and clarify the meaning before going on with the session.



Consolidate the activity	There was no consolidation of the activity. Esther just made a couple of last comments and moved on to the next step of her plan for today's session. I noticed students were a bit frustrated because the transition from one activity to the next part of the lesson was roughed and a bit unexpected. Esther certainly checked students' findings and gave positive feedback but failed to give a follow up activity to reinforce important concepts and present opportunities to consolidate students' knowledge. She did not ensure the successful attainment of today's lesson aims. She did not promote deep learning so students were at the descriptive level of learning. Students just recalled, remembered and recognized concepts and information but it was important to ask students to reflect on and transfer these new concepts into new learning experiences. Students did not have the opportunity to evaluate the value of particular concepts and theories in order to form their own opinion. The value of observing a friend in action is at the reflecting stage in which the critical friend, as Wang and Seth (1998:207) comment, acts as a "warm and human mirror [who] helps the teacher gain a clearer view of what actually happened during the observed lesson."
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According to Wajnryb (1992:99) "A key time in the lesson is the transition period between one activity and another..." Esther wanted to be observed if she could consolidate a task that is why Liz was going to observe the transition from the activity until she could consolidate it.

On the other hand, Liz wanted to be observed in three specific aspects, her tone of voice in the training room, how she handled time and if she encouraged discipline problems in the classroom because of her personality or her tone of voice. See the chart below:

**Observation form for Liz' class**

COMMENTS	
Low voice	Today you missed to write today's agenda. I think participant expected to have it in the board as in previous sessions. You needed to let participants know the issues you planned to cover in today's session. Your voice is tender and this creates a nice atmosphere in the classroom. One thing I noticed is that at certain period in the session you lowered your voice. It is not that we did not hear you at the back but it demanded some effort from the participants. Of course this was also because of the air conditioning – there was a constant noise coming from it. So you needed to speak up. Sometimes when we speak in front of a group we are unaware of how audible we are.
Time for activities	Even though you set the time limit for each activity some of them took longer than necessary. This caused you to finish today's session a bit late than usual. A five-hour session could be very demanding for participants. This did not affect participants' enthusiasm – they were interested and working hard. It was also important to give participants a break so they had the chance to refresh.
Discipline problems	You and participants created a relaxed atmosphere and established a good relationship. Students felt free to participate at all times. Neither your personality nor the volume of your voice encouraged discipline problems. After participant gave their comments you thanked them and used their comments to exemplify some important issues related to the session.



Both Esther and Liz used the same observation sheets during the three visits so that they could notice if there were any improvement after the first two post-talks.

## 4.2 Critical Friendship

We will summarize feedback from three sessions using the following headings: positive, 'could do better' and personal reflections from diary:

LIZ' FEEDBACK	
Positive feedback:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b>It was interesting</b> the way you started the session (recalling information). This helped you to introduce the new activity and to set participants in context.</li><li>- You gave <b>clear instruction and check it</b> by asking some questions. This is always very important.</li><li>- You were monitoring through the whole activity and <b>giving support</b> when needed. You were <b>not too intrusive</b> so students did not feel threatened.</li><li>- Setting time limit is very important. You announced participants they had 5 more minutes and they did their best to finish the activity on time. You <b>managed the time well</b>.</li><li>- Participants voluntarily participated because you encouraged them to do it thus they <b>felt relaxed and confident</b> to do so.</li><li>- You made <b>participants feel</b> their <b>comments were valuable</b>.</li></ul>
Could do better:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b>I think it is important</b> to move from one activity to the other smoothly. It is also important to make the link and join the two activities as if they were just one divided into different steps. Therefore participants felt they were jumping from one thing to another without making any sense to them.</li><li>- One thing that <b>I would like to steel</b> from you is the frequent use of the board. <b>I think you need</b> to make some <b>improvements</b> in the organization and layout of the board, though. It was too crowded and there was information that could have been erased. You could have also divided the board in different section to avoid crowdedness.</li><li>- <b>Although</b> you summarize the most important issues and concepts at the end of the activity, <b>it is</b> always <b>important</b> to help participants make sense and grasp meaning of what the activity was about. Participants need to relate previous knowledge to the new one and to relate the theory to everyday experiences. I believe participants simply associated what they did in the activity unreflectively.</li></ul>
Personal Reflection (diary)	<p>Some time ago I had the feeling I was doing something 'wrong' when giving my students activities in the classroom but I was not sure what it was. It seemed I did not achieve the aim(s) of the activity. I had the feeling that something did not make sense in my students' mind therefore it seemed meaningless to them. It was a gift having Liz observing my class and the process of setting up, running, closing and consolidating activities. It was a gift because I am pretty sure she was not going to judge me and spread my 'dark' side to the whole school!! I needed someone to tell me what things I need to improve in order to become a better teacher. I really appreciated my critical friend's feedback because she made me reflect on my everyday teaching. She led me to 'discover' the things I needed to improve and how I can better</p>



	<p>these areas. One thing I came across (with my friend's help) was that I did not promote deep learning in my participants so the information drawn from the activities were meaningless to them. Theory was associated unreflectively. It was kind of 'what the teacher wants to provide it'. Now, I know that I need to provide participants with opportunities to transfer the new knowledge to the old one and help them internalize the information – making sense or abstracting meaning from the things done in the classroom. An issue I was not aware of and my critical friend helped me to notice drew my attention to was the use of the board. I tend to write a lot on the board but not in an organized way, so I write here and there and then the board looks crowded and untidy. So I have to be more careful with it. I need to divide the board in sections and erase information as soon as it is not needed.</p>
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<b>ESTHER'S FEEDBACK</b>	
Positive Feedback:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– You always <b>encouraged</b> people to participate</li> <li>– <b>It was really interesting</b> the way you moved participants around the classroom. They got to talk to different participants and share their ideas and feelings with different ones.</li> <li>– <b>You made people feel comfortable</b> and wanting to participate: you didn't pressure participants and you didn't expose them, so they feel like participating.</li> <li>– After participant's comments you thanked them.</li> <li>– You also share your own experiences and that created a warm atmosphere. The instructor (you) and the participants at the same level.</li> <li>– When we talked about reliability and validity, you gave them an exercise that made the concepts clearer.</li> <li>– Used different equipment which was <b>good</b>.</li> <li>– <b>There was a really good</b> balance between theory and practice.</li> <li>– Sharing your own realia (portfolio) <b>motivated participants</b></li> <li>– Inviting visitors to share their experience using those tasks was <b>really good</b>, it encouraged participants to continue asking and wanted to continue in the course.</li> <li>– Participants were eager to know more.</li> </ul>
Could do better:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Keep the agenda of every session displayed to see through the session</li> <li>– Keep the time on different tasks you asked participants to do. <b>I think a couple</b> of them took longer than needed.</li> <li>– <b>Even though</b> today's session was interesting and definitely not boring, <b>it's important to have a break at some point</b>.</li> <li>– After experiencing what learning is, <b>I think</b> I'll be nice to present some different definitions of learning, <b>but as you said depends on the 'theory we choose'</b></li> </ul>
Personal Reflection (diary):	<p>My observer's feedback was very useful to reflect on my own teaching practice and to realize if I had achieved my aims stated for the course. As Knights (in Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1994:85) argues "in the learning situation, reflection is most profound when it is done aloud with the aware attention of another person." Besides, I felt confidence because she took the role as a friend asking me how I felt, if I wanted to ask anything to her. Although she was going to observe three weaknesses, her feedback helped to consider other aspects for the coming classes. As Reed and Bergemann (1992:6) say</p>



“teaching experiences are the bridge between the worlds of theory and practice.” Only in the training room we can cross that bridge and reflect on how effective they are.

We can notice that the critical friend (Esther) used expressions during the post-talks such as: **It was really interesting ... good, motivated, and encouraged** which has positive meaning or connotation. As Race (2001: 139) states “always gives positive feedback first... we are all much likely to take on board the ‘could do better’s’ if we have received the positive statements first. Her feedback was really valuable for my personal and professional development. Although she did not notice any problems of voice and discipline, she observed other aspects such as agenda displayed and explanations of concepts. The negative feedback is marked with expressions like **I think... even though, but...it’s important...** These expressions are like suggestions to reflect on for future classes if I want to change my teaching practice. Her feedback was developmental and non-judgmental.

## 5. Conclusions

After using the critical friendship approach we could conclude that this approach is an effective strategy for teacher development because both observer and teacher work collaboratively to improve each other. It is necessary that they trust each other having the role of friends and considering Race’s principles about feedback. The expressions or words that we choose to provide feedback can open or close doors. Therefore, we need to gain skills in observing and drawing out feedback. If the observer takes the role of a friend, he or she will care for the teacher’s growth rather than just evaluating his or her performance and giving a verdict: innocent or guilty.



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