

Formal Classroom Observations: Factors That Affect Their Success

Zeba Zaidi¹

¹ English Language Institute , King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Zeba Zaidi English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, P. O. Box 80200, Jeddah, 21589, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: zzaidi@kau.edu.sa

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Abstract

Formal class room observation is a very delicate topic in any educational institution. It involves a series of emotions and sentiments that come with the package. In this paper, the researcher will attempt to analyze the factors that affect the process in a relatively significant manner and thereby contribute greatly to the success or failure of the whole process. The researcher will also attempt to explore the various aspects of the process at two tertiary level educational institutions and how they can be controlled in order to maintain the purpose of the process as developmental and constructive rather than a critical, judgmental and/or negative outlook, which eventually defeats the whole idea of classroom observation for performance feedback and growth. The data was collected at two renowned English Language Institutes (ELIs) in the city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia through an online survey comprising of ten questions including one open-ended question. After analyzing the gathered data, conclusions were formulated and certain suggestive measures were proposed that can benefit the observers to look at the observation process in a better light. It will also help them accomplish the objectives of the process in a more prolific manner and thereby, contribute in achieving a more conscious and thorough professional development of the faculty on the whole.

Keywords: formal observation, factors, critical, development, feedback, constructive, objectives, measures

1. Introduction

1.1 The Issue with Formal Classroom Observation

The mere name of 'Formal Classroom Observation' brings apprehension in the air and several concerns are bound to follow. The whole idea charges the environment with hesitations and worry. It generates a feeling of uneasiness and restlessness in the minds with many questions following through. It creates the unusual combination of a very common yet quite heavy feeling that everyone involved in the observation process is completely aware of, and have to take into stride, all through the duration of the process. Sometimes this anxiety reaps surprisingly positive results and actually pushes the instructor off the cliff, to attain his/her optimum best, although on several occasions it results in a taxing and challenging experience to people on both sides.

It's important for us to identify the presence of various factors that affect the outcome of a Formal classroom observation. In the context of second-language learning classroom it becomes increasingly important to address, because of the fact that the second language teachers mainly come from diverse backgrounds. It is extremely important to make a deliberate attempt to address these factors and discipline them in order to make the process beneficial for all the stake holders. However, fretful the whole process of observation gets, the good news is, that with a careful, balanced and a professional stance, most of the factors are tamable and issues controllable to a great extent. There will be aspects that can still affect applicability of the suggestive measures but we can certainly set up a great model to develop on these grounds.

1.2 Our Focus

In my paper, here I would like to focus on few key areas where the classroom observers, conducting the Formal classroom observations can work upon, to enhance the complete experience of the lesson observation, both for the observer and the person being observed and thereby, evaluated. It is critical to notice at this stage that the process of lesson observation is on one hand, an experience for the observed instructor to identify his/her key strengths and weaknesses in teaching; and on the other hand, is a great, enriching experience for the observer. They both undergo a growth process through this experience and thereby develop professionally in their own forte. It will also be vital here for the observers to analyze the importance of these ideas and the levels of

practicality in their own situations. The results of these ideas can well be affected by certain extrinsic factors as well, that are beyond the control of both the parties involved. We will discuss these factors in details later in the discussion.

1.3 Analysis

The experience I've had conducting over 200 formal classroom observations at the ELI Womens' Colleges at KAU, in the past six years, has led me to shortlist all the various purposes of the formal observations and the factors that play an active role, in this section. Beginning our analysis on the process in a staged manner, the basic purposes to conduct a formal classroom observation in any educational institution can be listed as following:

For the Employer

- To measure the level of growth in the instructor since his/her last classroom observation
- To receive a score for the periodic administrative evaluation to decide about any prospective appraisals
- To verify any reportedly major issue in teaching

For the Observed Instructor

- To identify the strength and weaknesses in his/her own teaching methods
- To recognize his/her optimum level of performance in classroom
- To address any practical issues in teaching and receive a second opinion on them from an experienced professional

For the Observer

- To quantify the progress against the planned development goals in professional terms
- To receive a constructive insight on the lesson, on certain devised and unified parameters
- To objectively evaluate the teaching skills on a set of standard criteria

1.4 Grouping the Factors

The factors that affect the observation process directly and indirectly can be classified into two broad categories (Saginer, 2008):

1.4.1 Extrinsic Factors

- 1). Setting: Formal or Informal
- 2). Level: Actual level of students
- 3). Parameters/Criteria for Evaluation and their validity

1.4.2 Intrinsic Factors

- 1). Training: Level of training of classroom observer
- 2). Experience: Adequacy of experience of classroom observer
- 3). Understanding: Observer and Observed instructor's perception of observation process
- 4). Aptitude & Attitude: Observed instructor's personality
- 5). Motivation: To perform at optimum best
- 6). Comprehension level of Evaluation Criteria by the observer: To achieve accuracy
- 7). Personal Views: Personal point of view of observer for a successful lesson

The extrinsic or external factors are basically the aspects that are external and mostly cannot be amended or worked upon, in order to improve or change the results. While the intrinsic or internal factors are inherent and they can be further studied in order to improve/vary the results and thereby increase the level of success of the process.

Now, if we take a second look at the intrinsic factors listed above, we'll notice that the majority of them can be controlled to make the process of formal observation as accurate and constructive as possible.

2. Respondent Demographics

In order to analyze the perspective of the instructors observed formally, a survey was developed starting with the exploration of prominent factors that play an active role in the successful implementation of the observation

process. The survey was made available to the faculties of the two English Language institutes, one at King Abdul Aziz University and the other at the University of Jeddah, both in Jeddah city, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A strong number of 90 participants participated in the survey to help us gather our results that will form the basis of our conclusion.

2.1 Participant Awareness

It is extremely vital to notice the number of participants who were aware of both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors involved in the observation process that they had been subjected to. Majority of the participants held a definite opinion about the analyzed factors they had experienced in their own Formal classroom observations. A more detailed review will be provided in the section 'Results' below.

2.2 About Participants

The participants involved in responding to the faculty survey that formed our analyzed data, are English language instructors teaching Saudi students at the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at the Womens' Colleges of the English Language Institutes (ELIs) at the two renowned universities in the city of Jeddah; namely King Abdul Aziz University and the University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

In order to analyze the overall perception of the instructors that have been subjected to the process of Formal classroom observation, a survey including 10 questions was designed and floated across to the faculties of the ELI at King Abdul Aziz University and the University of Jeddah. The first nine questions of the survey were multiple choice questions where the instructors were asked to agree or disagree to the proposed idea by selecting either a 'Yes' or 'No' among the choices. They were also free to choose 'Not sure' if they were not able to make up their minds.

The questions in the survey were developed by starting with the items that look into the validity of the observation process identified as the following:

- Usefulness in professional development
- Clarity of purpose
- Opportunity to demonstrate teaching skills
- Level of effectiveness
- Set of observation criteria used

The Survey Monkey tool (www.surveymonkey.com) was used to generate the survey and distribute it among the ELI faculty members at both universities.

2.3.1 Response

We aimed at gathering at least a hundred responses from the floated survey, although only a total of ninety responses were received from the English language instructors across the two institutes.

2.3.2 Survey

The survey used as the basis of our analysis, was kept completely anonymous, in order to ensure complete confidentiality of the responses for all questions. The first nine questions looked at the quantum of several possible factors that play an implicit role in the process of observations. The last open-ended question collected participants' responses of any other factors they find actively involved in classroom observation. The last open ended question provided an opportunity to the participants to list all credible factors in their view that can be added to the analysis.

2.3.3 Research Design

The research was purposefully kept anonymous in order to keep it truly impartial and to maintain its nature, completely unbiased from any external influence.

3. Results

The results of the quantitative portion of the questionnaire are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. The quantitative portion of the questionnaire

S. No.		YES	NO	Not Sure
1.	Do you agree that Formal classroom observations are useful for the professional development of the faculty in any educational organization?	57%	23%	20%
2.	Are you clear about the purposes of conducting Formal classroom observations by the observation unit in your organization?	68%	13%	19%
3.	Do you agree that the Formal classroom observation provides an opportunity to the observed instructor in order to demonstrate his/her teaching skills?	62%	26%	12%
4.	Do you agree that the Formal classroom observations causes anxiety in the instructor that can affect his/her teaching negatively?	80%	8%	12%
5.	Do you agree that the Formal classroom observations is an effective tool to measure the professional development in an instructor, over a period of time?	38%	34%	28%
6.	Do you agree that the observation criteria used in your organization covers all the necessary areas of teaching in ESL context?	44%	27%	29%
7.	Do you agree that including more informal observations before the formal one, will reduce the anxiety in observed instructor?	29%	49%	22%
8.	Do you agree that the formal classroom observation pushes the instructor to perform at her optimum best in his/her teaching skills?	52%	28%	20%
9.	Do you agree that the training of the Classroom observer is the most important factor that affects the way he/she evaluates a situation during the formal observation?	72%	12%	16%

3.1 Detailed Analysis of the Survey Data

A total of 90 responses were received from the ELI language instructors for the shared Faculty Survey.

The large majority (80%) of the instructors that responded, believed that the formal classroom observations causes undue anxiety in the observed instructor, that can affect the teaching negatively, while only a negligible number of 8% of instructors expressed that there was no negative effect.

A large majority of 68% of instructors responded that they were clear and sure about the various purposes of the formal classroom observations although they had responded in the previous question that it causes undue anxiety. Only a small number of instructors, 13% expressed they weren't clear about the purposes.

More than half the people who responded, about 57%, expressed that they find the formal class observations very useful for the professional development of the faculty while only about 23% disagreed with it.

Among the respondents, more than 62% of the participants were confident that the formal observation process provides a commendable opportunity for the instructors, to demonstrate their teaching skills in the most favorable manner.

Almost the same number of participants, about 52%, were of the opinion that this process actually pushes the instructors to perform at their optimum best and thus helps them identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

While analyzing the various factors, that effect the observation process, according to the instructors' perspective, several interesting aspects were noted. While almost 38% instructors felt that the formal observation process is an effective tool, in order to measure the professional growth of instructors, an almost equal number of participants 34% differed in their opinion, while a considerable number of instructors were not sure about the choice.

As far as the factors are concerned, a whopping majority of 72% were sure that the training of the classroom observer was one of the most important factors that decides the successfulness of the formal observation process, while only 12% differed in their opinion.

When enquired about the credibility of the observation criteria used in their organization, for conducting the

formal observations, only 44% instructors agreed that the criteria cover all the necessary areas of teaching in the EFL context, while 27% voted against it and 29% were not sure of the choice to make.

Out of the total participants almost one half, about 49% instructors did not agree to idea of including more informal observations before the formal one in order to reduce the anxiety in the instructor. A total of about a quarter of the total participants, 29% instructors wished to have more informal observations and 22% instructors weren't sure about their decision.

3.2 Open-ended Question Results

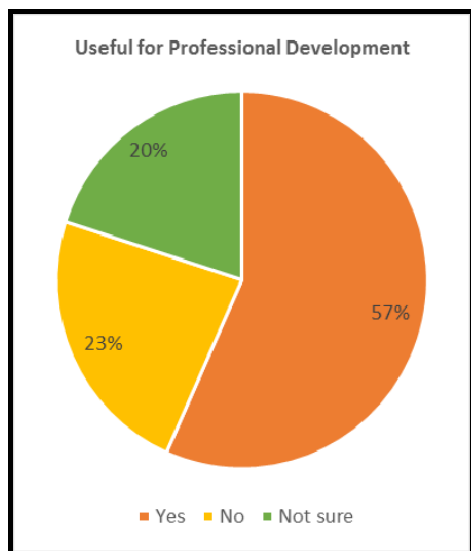
The last open-ended question included in the Survey aimed to invite participants to suggest any other additional factors that play an estimable role in the level of success attained by the formal observation process, several ideas were put forth. Table 2 will list some of these factors enlisted by the participants:

Table 2. Additional Factors enlisted by the participants

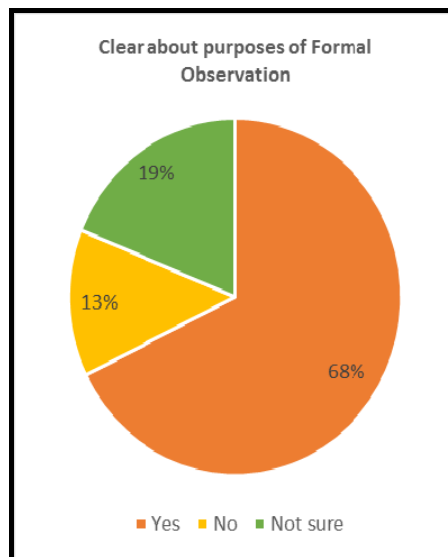
1.	Student participation
2.	Availabilities of necessary facilities
3.	Level of student motivation
4.	Academic level of students
5.	Duration of observation
6.	Level of confidentiality in the observation process
7.	Qualification and experience of the observer, CELTA training
8.	Preference to a teaching style by the observer
9.	The observed teacher's mood
10.	Preparation of the teacher
11.	Preparedness of the learners
12.	Having an evaluative grade in the Formal observation
13.	Technical issues during the observation
14.	Personality of the observer

3.3 Statistics of the Survey Data

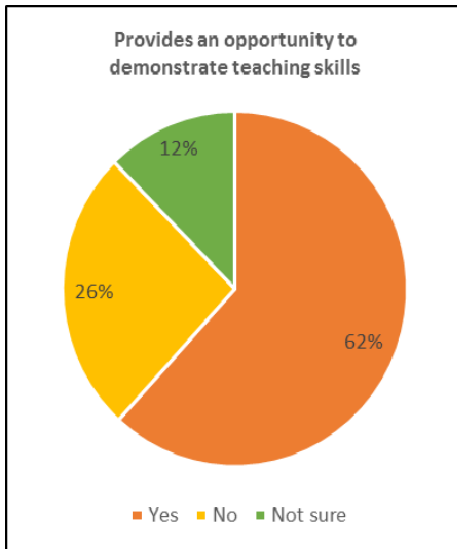
The pie-charts below depict the data in the Table 2 above denoting the responses of the faculty survey:



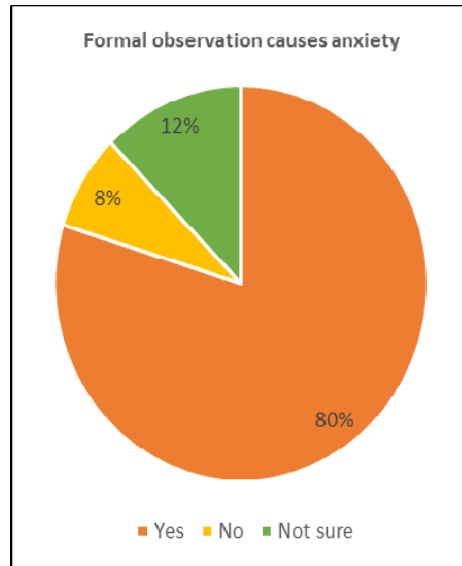
Question 1



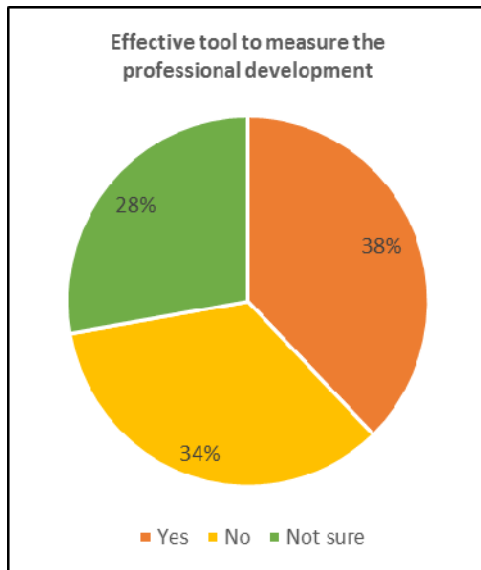
Question 2



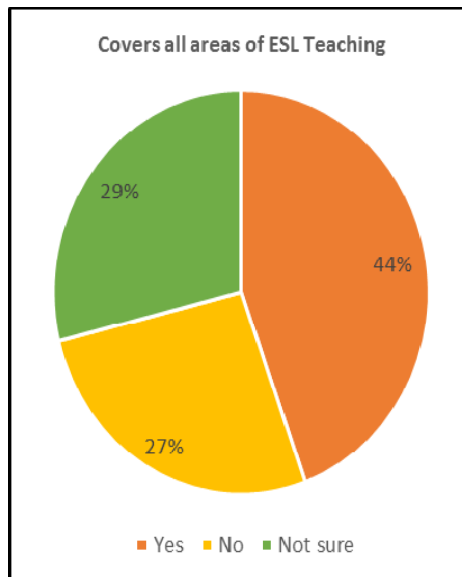
Question 3



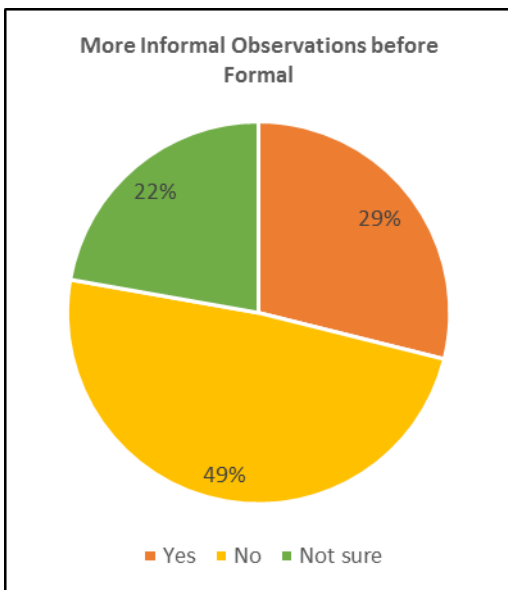
Question 4



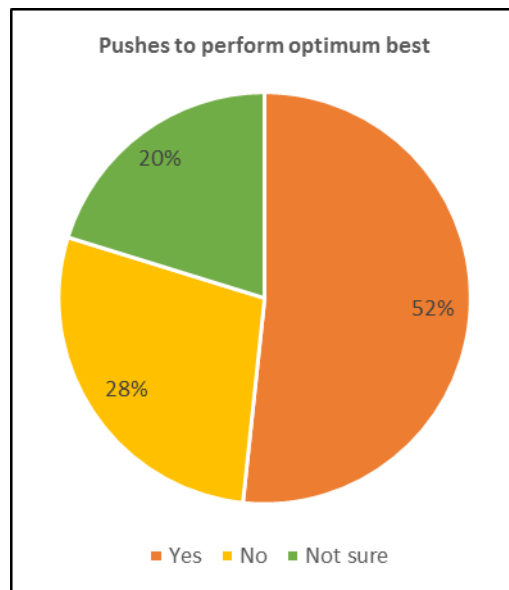
Question 5



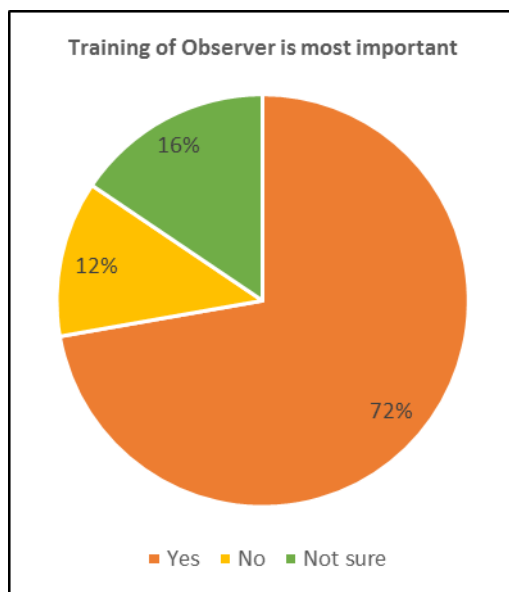
Question 6



Question 7



Question 8



Question 9

4. Discussion

As was enunciated in the results we received from the survey, the majority of the instructors felt that the process of formal classroom observations are, although useful for the overall professional development and enhancement of the teaching skills of the faculty, they definitely causes undue anxiety with the majority of instructors. The instructors were keen on mentioning the presence of strong apprehensions that led to a negative effect on their performances, at times, even when felt that they were clear about the set standards of observation criteria. The majority of the participant instructors opined that the process of formal classroom observations, in general, provides a great opportunity to the instructors to demonstrate and showcase their teaching skills but the anxiety factor has a major role to play and eventually there are cases when the instructors are not able to perform at their best.

The fact that the instructors considered the formal classroom observations as an effective tool to measure the professional growth of instructors, was countered by an almost equal number of people who felt otherwise. Again, this hints at the presence of anxiety in a substantial amount and the role it plays in practical instances where the instructor could not perform well and was disappointed in the due course (Antonetti & Garver, 2015).

A clear majority also pointed out that the preparation and training of the classroom observer has a key role to play in the minimization of the negative outlook with respect to the process and thereby reducing the anxiety, during the course of the formal classroom observation.

When inquired about using the informal kind of classroom observations in order to acclimatize the instructor with the process before she goes through the formal one, almost half of the total participants did not agree to the suggestion. Almost a quarter of the total participants wanted to have more informal and the rest were not sure if they should have them or not. Again, this response can well be deduced to the presence of apprehension and disliking towards the idea of classroom observation where a clear majority does not want any more observations.

It is noteworthy here that the most, out of the large majority of instructors, who thought that formal observations causes anxiety among instructors, also responded that the 'Training of the classroom observer' is the most important factor that can affect the outcome of the observation procedure. Thereby, the statistics affirm the idea that with proper training and efficient planning by the observer before observations will definitely raise the level of achievement in a classroom observation (Moss & Brookhart, 2015).

The presence of several other factors that affect the process of classroom observations was also brought into focus by a considerable number of survey participants. Level of student participation, facilities available, student motivation, actual level of students, duration of observation, preference to a certain teaching style by the observer, preparation of the teacher, qualification and personality of the observer and so forth, were also remarked as possible factors manipulating the results of the formal class observation.

4.1 Suggestive Measures

The following suggestive measures can be applied to varied degrees of requirement, in order to train the observer to control the factors that were shortlisted in the above-mentioned points:

- 1) Understanding: A better collective study of the formal setting of classroom observation conducted by the experienced and relatively new observer can lead to a more prepared and considerate observer that can handle the process much more confidently and accurately. A thorough understanding of the observation procedure is inclusive of the collective shared goal of the observation team to achieve an accurate observation record, through a clear vision of all the different elements that build up the classroom observation procedure (Goodwin & Hubbell, 2013).
- 2) Analysis: Breaking down the parameters of evaluation in finer detail and then applying them to a planned lesson practically, will enable the observer to experience the implementation of the criteria before doing the same in an actual observation. A detailed study of the observation criteria and a clear understanding is vital for an observer to be able to execute it during the observation process (Antonetti & Garver, 2015).
- 3) Mentoring: Regular mentoring and support to the new observer will help him/her understand the various aspects of class observation that are not usually visible at the surface. This can be provided by either a senior observer who has relatable experience in the same unit.
- 4) Troubleshooting: A strong support system that can provide a second reliable opinion to the various transitory issues that can pop-up during the formal class observation is very important for the new observer. They will be more self-assured about their decisions once the observer knows that they have an experienced person to rely upon.
- 5) Follow-Through: Regular flow of communication in both written and in-person between the unit supervisor/head and the observers, is the key to the success of the observation process. Setting reasonable and achievable goals for observers, and providing all the necessary content to help them accomplish on their own is vital (Saginor, 2008). Periodic formal and casual meetings, emails, responding to communication are the various tools that help generate a sense of belief and buoyancy in the process that naturally invite better effort and achievement in the due course.
- 6) Recording: A quick, detailed, and thorough record of the observations during the lesson is the most important element to make the observation successful. This record is the only document on which the feedback, reporting and the suggestive measures lined out, rest upon. This record, even if they are free running notes and/or quick diagrams of whiteboard, seating arrangement and other aspects, will form the basis of the documented evidence in the formal report (Dean, 2012).
- 7) Timing: In order to document as many points of concern as possible and list them on paper, it is also vital that a good timing of recording the points, is aimed at. The vital areas, as defined by the observation parameters should always be kept handy, and all positives and negatives noted down, in light of these parameters in order to

be as accurate as possible (Antonetti & Garver, 2015). Taking pictures of the presentation, whiteboard, student work, wall posts and other productive work is also a good idea, in order to keep the record as comprehensive as possible and complement the memory of the observer.

8) Work organization: Usually, the classroom observers have several other responsibilities at hand, in the organization. In order to be successful in the commitment, they have made in conducting the formal classroom observations, it is imperative that they apply good organizational skills in arranging and preparing for the task. It is also vital that they think ahead of any problems, anticipates them and prepares for them well in advance. Proper planning of the classroom observation schedule, using various tools to organize the information required, and getting all the requirements ready, is very important too (Gordon, Johnson, Supervision, & Development, 2002).

5. Summary

Henceforth, we conclude that although the whole idea of formal classroom observations is a sensitive issue that diffuses a noticeable amount of apprehension and turbulence in the teaching domain, approaching the concept with a thorough and careful handling and positive conviction, it can very well be controlled and disciplined in order to make it beneficial for everyone involved.

We all recognize that throughout the course of our teaching experiences, we improve, enhance and grow through several means. We are also aware that we are committed towards providing the best possible learning experience to our learners, by means of our teaching and therefore, we keep evolving our teaching skills in order to become better teachers. In light of that, we should consciously acknowledge the value of classroom observations and an authentic and accurate feedback following it. Once we take a note of this willfully, it will be an easier path ahead towards an overall honest professional advancement in our teaching skills.

We ought to remember that once certain standard parameters are laid down in clear terms and proper planning and preparation are brought about, the observations and reflective feedback sessions can be made to work as an effective way to track and measure our graphs of growth. If it is important for the instructors who are going to be formally observed, to emphatically understand the keen purpose of them being observed, it is equally vital for the observers on the other hand, to be profoundly clear, considerate, accurate and objective about their recordings. We have all been there and done that but what is important is what we have learned from our experiences that can add value to our future. Proper and purposeful planning, done in an orderly manner is vital for the observation process to be successful and beneficial and to keep this in mind at all times, is imperative for all the parties involved.

It is significant for the observers to allow the instructors the space they deserve, to creatively implement their teaching skills and measure their lesson from the perspective of learner achievement on the whole. Being objective to the specific observation is imperative, so that the observers continue to be fair-minded, unbiased and accurate while recording the level of achievement of a lesson.

On the whole, the success of a classroom observation is a collaborative team effort that has to be collectively achieved by the learner, the teacher and the observer. The purpose of the observation process will only be achieved if we aim for it in its true sense. The eventual success of the whole concept of observing a lesson and providing an honest feedback and encouraging self-reflection, can only be achieved if it is aimed truly by all those involved in the entire learning process. The learner aims at achieving the lesson objectives that the teacher has strived to communicate, the teacher aims at making it beneficial for the students to attend the planned lesson and achieve the objectives of the lesson he/she has delivered while the observer aims at the comprehensive achievement of the objectives by the students, an effective delivery of the planned lesson by the teacher that demonstrates her teaching skills systematically and recording all the vital points of strength and areas of concern, as precisely accurate as possible, weighed upon the standard set of criteria by the organization.

It is hoped that the listed set of measures and perspective towards the process, will be able to add some value to the concept of classroom observations, thereby enabling the lesson observers an enhanced control. It is certain, that with careful preparation and a positive outlook, most of the variable factors can be disciplined to achieve greater success towards overall development.

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Appendix A

The link to the data collection survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RV3ZXQQ>

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