

3 The Characteristics of Post-Lesson Discussions

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Oman, English language teachers are supported by Senior English Teachers (SETs) in their schools and a key strategy for support is classroom observation and post-lesson discussion (PLD). The aim of this study is to investigate the characteristics of post-lesson discussions carried out by different Omani SETs. As a supervisor part of my role is to support SETs and thus understanding the characteristics of the PLDs of my senior teachers will allow me to support them more effectively.

2 POST-LESSON DISCUSSIONS

Here I will discuss some literature on approaches to PLDs, the structure of the PLD and some characteristics of effective PLDs.

2.1 Approaches to Post-Lesson Discussion

Freeman (1990) identified three approaches to observing in-service teachers. These are:

1. The directive approach, where the supervisor's role is to direct teachers to better ways of teaching and to model good teaching behaviors.
2. The alternative supervision approach, in which a variety of alternatives are suggested by the supervisor to the teacher.
3. The non-directive approach, in which the teacher is given the chance to evaluate their behaviour; the supervisor listens to what the teacher says and restates this to check they (the supervisor) have understood.

Acheson & Gall (1992) placed the direct and indirect behaviors of a supervisor on a continuum as follows:

Accept and use feelings	Give encouragement, praise	Use teachers' ideas	Ask questions	Lecture	Give directions	Criticize
Indirect				Direct		

Gebhard (1990) added three more approaches to Freeman's list and these are:

4. The collaborative approach, according to which the supervisor and the teacher work together to address a problem in teaching.
5. Creative supervision, an approach where the supervisor uses a combination of supervisory behaviors from different models or applies various techniques like peer supervision.
6. Self exploration supervision, by which both the teacher and the supervisor develop professionally when they gain an awareness of their behavior through exploration.

One of my goals in this study is to find out whether the above models can be used to describe the approach SETs follow when conducting PLDs.

2.2 The Structure of Post-Lesson Discussions

My focus in this study is specifically on the post-lesson discussion phase of the supervisory process. Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall (1998) mentioned six elements of the post-lesson discussion that promote professional development: discussion of feelings, review of learning outcomes, discussion of classroom management, review of teaching behaviour, focus for the next coaching cycle, and summary. Caruso & Fawcett (1999) add that certain elements are common to all supervisory conferences: preparing, climate building, purpose setting, guiding, closing and analyzing.

According to the guidelines of the Ministry of Education in Oman, the SET should start the PLD by getting the teacher to reflect on their lesson (e.g. asking questions such as Was it successful? Why? What part went well and what didn't? How could it be improved?). The discussion proceeds through the lesson chronologically and the teacher is given the chance to comment on the lesson (this is also seen as an opportunity for the teacher to practise their English). However, the supervisor should pick out the most important points and discuss them thoroughly. Finally the teacher should summarize the main points of the discussion (ELCD, 1999)

The approach recommended by the Ministry of Education in Oman reflects the collaborative and non-directive approaches to supervision described above

2.3 Effective Post-Lesson Discussions

A number of desirable features of PLDs are identified in the literature. McHany

& Impey, (1992) suggest that supervisors can conduct the conference successfully if they have valid data and the skill of questioning, which is a critical means of analysis and understanding for both observers and observees. The observer should be specific and should alternate between positive points and what needs improvement. The observer should ask the teacher questions to help them reflect on teaching. Blasé & Blasé (1995, in Bailey, 2006) analyzed conferences and found that successful ones are those which the participants reported as non-threatening and growth-oriented. Acheson & Gall (1992) also suggested some techniques for providing useful feedback to teachers, such as eliciting the teacher's opinions and feelings.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

The overall research question for this study was 'What are the characteristics of the post-lesson discussions [PLDs] held by Senior English Teachers [SETs]? To address this question a number of sub-questions were studied:

- What types of questions are asked by SETs?
- How long do the discussions take?
- What is the teacher's input and what is the SET's input in each PLD?
- What supervision approaches are used by SETs to conduct the PLD?
- What is the structure of the PLD from the point of view of SETs?
- What makes the PLD successful from the point of view of SETs?

3.2 Participants

In my role as a supervisor I work with nine SETs. I invited all nine to participate in this study and four agreed to take part. Each of these SETs also obtained the permission of one teacher they were working with to participate in this study. Thus altogether the participants for this study were four pairs of SETs and English teachers; three pairs worked in Basic Education Cycle 1 schools (Grades 1-4) and the other pair worked in a Cycle 2 school (Grades 5-12).

3.3 Data Collection

This study follows the naturalistic approach as it aims to examine, with minimal intervention, the nature of the discussions that take place in schools between teachers and SETs following the observation of a lesson taught by the teacher. Data were collected through observations, recordings of PLDs, and interviews.

3.3.1 Observations

Prior to the each of the four PLDs analyzed here, the SET observed a lesson taught by the teacher. I attended each lesson too and made notes about it. This information allowed me to make sense of the recording of the PLD I subsequently obtained.

3.3.2 Recorded PLDs

After the lesson, the SET sat with the teacher to conduct the PLD. To minimize intrusiveness, I did not attend the PLD, but the SET (with the teacher's permission) recorded the discussion for me using a digital voice recorder. I had piloted this procedure twice to check the quality of the recordings I would obtain and to ensure that the data I would get would allow me to address my research questions. The piloting reassured me on both these issues and there were no subsequent problems with obtaining good quality recordings of PLDs. I used transcription software called Voice Walker to transcribe the recorded PLDs soon after they were conducted. This preliminary analysis allowed me to generate interview questions for use with the SETs.

3.3.3 Interviews

Since I was interested in raising issues and discussing them with SETs, the interviews used in this study were semi structured (see Nunan, 1992 for a discussion of interviewing strategies). I asked the SETs about their approach to the PLD and the reasons for it. The interviews with the SETs also allowed me to clarify any points I was unclear about from listening to the recordings of their PLDs. I recorded the interviews as this allowed me to concentrate more upon the responses of the interviewee; as Burton & Bartlett (2005) note, recording can make the interview more relaxed because the researcher can interact more freely with the respondent. Burton & Bartlett (2005) also note, however, that some respondents may not wish to be taped, even if promised anonymity, and this is what happened with one of the SETs in this study. In her case, I asked her to submit written answers to the interview questions and she did.

3.4 Data Analysis

Several frameworks for categorizing the talk in PLDs were found in the literature. Al-Abri (2006) used a framework that consists of four main headings: self reflection, praise, starting and ending strategies, and talking time. Herbert & Tankersley (1993) divided supervisor verbalizations into soliciting information and providing information. In a microanalysis of post-lesson discussion discourse Wajnryb (1994, in Bailey, 2006) found a pattern in which observers used mitigation devices to soften criticism. The piloting phase gave me the chance to try to explore how I might use these categories. As I analyzed my data I considered different frameworks, for example initially focusing on the topics covered and then choosing to focus more on the functions of the supervisors' discourse. During the analysis of the PLDs, I continuously compared the categorizations that exist in the literature to the data I collected and formulated an analytical framework that reflected my data. The analysis of the PLDs was also supported by insight from the interviews, where the SETs explained their approach to discussing lessons with teachers.

3.5 Ethics

The research participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. I sent a text

message to all SETs I worked with explaining the research and asking for volunteers. Consent forms were then given to candidates who agreed to participate. To provide anonymity (see Denscombe, 2002), I did not use participants' real names in reporting the study and referred to them as SET1, SET2, TR1, TR2 and so on.

4 FINDINGS

The analysis of data gathered from both the interviews and the PLDs gave a clear answer to the research questions. I will discuss the findings from the PLDs first then the interviews.

4.1 Analysis of Post-Lesson Discussions

4.1.1 Characteristics of PLDs

Table 1 summarizes some features of the four PLDs I analyzed – how many questions each SET asked, the length of the PLD, and the number of words spoken by the SET and teacher respectively.

Table 1: Features of PLDs

Features	PLD1	PLD2	PLD3	PLD4	Total
Number of SET questions	17	9	7	8	41
Length (min:sec)	26:26	17:06	17:14	9:34	69.8
Number of words - SET	1,215 (69.4%)	1,082 (50.9%)	696 (46.2%)	450 (52.4%)	3443 (55.2%)
Number of words - teacher	538 (30.6%)	1,040 (49.1%)	812 (53.8%)	409 (47.6%)	2799 (44.8%)

The number of questions ranged between seven and 17 and the overall average was just over ten. The longest discussion took just over 26 minutes and the shortest discussion took less than 10 minutes. While Teacher 1 spoke less than half the words spoken by her SET, the distribution of talk in the other three PLDs was more balanced. On average SETs spoke 861 words compared to 699 for the teachers.

When I raised this issue during the interviews, SETs 1, 2 and 3 said that the teachers usually do not say much during the PLD. For example, SET2 said

I push them to talk. Some of them they say, you know how it went more than me. But I like them to initiate the speech. But mostly yes, they don't say much but I ask them many questions just to get as much as possible. And they need to be pushed to talk by either asking them many questions or by saying positive things regarding the lesson.

SET3 said that she discusses the observed lessons differently according to the teacher.

This year it's ok. But before I had teachers who are not I don't know, maybe they don't want to discuss the lesson and go through the discussion.... So really I found it difficult to start the discussion with her.

When I asked how she encouraged them to talk, she continued:

Starting by thanking her at the beginning of the discussion. 'you did very well' , reinforce the teacher and go with her through many steps not directly...By thanking her and encouraging her. And by not saying the negative points...the teacher has the ideas, she knew about the lesson but I don't know why she doesn't want to talk about the lesson but when I give her the good points and encourage her, I feel this helps her to talk.

When I went through the transcript of SET1, I found that she was interpreting or paraphrasing most of what the teacher said. For example:

You mean that you didn't like to ask them to open their class books because you know that they will play with their pencils or start writing the answers so you can't attract their attention. You wanted them to focus only on what you are doing on board.

SET1 explained that with this particular teacher "This is the usual case because she lacks the language. Her level is low in language".

4.1.2 SETs' Questions

All of the SETs used different types of questions. Table 2 shows some examples of the questions asked by the SETs during the discussion

Table 2: SETs' questions

	Questions	Purposes
Wh- questions	1. What were your strengths in this lesson?	1. Self-evaluation of strengths
	2. Why do you ask them to stand up to say this for the pupil who answer correctly?	2. Ask for rationale
Do / Is questions	3. Do you like to comment about anything we discussed?	3. Encourage talk
	4. Do you think it (group work) is useful for your classes?	4. Investigate belief
	5. Do you have any other reasons for doing that or just for the exam?	5. Elicit justification
	6. Is there any other way you may use instead of this one?	6. Elicit alternative
Other questions	7. Then you asked them to do some writing?	7. Prompt talk
	8. I would like you to say the names of the shapes.	8. Check language competence

As Table 1 shows, Wh-. questions were used mainly for self assessment, prompting suggestions and asking for a rationale. Do/Is questions were used to elicit justifications or alternatives, investigate beliefs, and encourage talk. Other questions were used to prompt talk or to check teacher competence. Questions asked for the purpose of self evaluation were used more commonly than the other

questions. The following table shows the frequency of the different purposes:

Table 3: Purposes of SETs' questions

Purposes	Number of Questions in PLDs
Self evaluation	19
Justification	5
Encourage talk	5
Check teacher competence	3
Elicit Rationale	2
Elicit alternatives	2
Other	5
Total	41

4.1.3 Input by SETs and Teachers during PLDs

I discussed SETs' questions above; here I will focus on the other contributions they made during the PLD, together with those of the teacher. I summarize this analysis in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: SETs' input during PLDs

Functions	Frequencies				Examples
	SET1	SET2	SET 3	SET4	
Suggesting	4	8	3	9	I think better if you have written the question on the board and give them time to practise saying the question.
Complimenting/ thanking	12	4/0	10/ 9	5/1	...it is really a good idea that you used new picture drawn by you. Thank you for using our school techniques and materials.
Supporting by paraphrasing	21	13	9	0	You mean that you didn't like to ask them to open their class books because you know that they will play with their pencils or start writing the answers so you can't attract their attention.
Describing T or S actions	13	4	0	2	then when you finished eliciting the order of the sentences you asked them about the poster after eliciting the answers.
Discussing st., behaviour or motivation	3	0	4	0	...using this reinforcement technique and it helped the pupil to participate during the lesson and also the pupils who answer correctly feel confident. I noticed this.
Comparing tr. performance with SET's.	1	0	0	0	...actually I use this also when I have listening but a bit different...
Discussing classroom management	1	1	1	1	...you also activated the evaluation chart, good ... and also you took care of the weak pupils.

Most of the SET input, as shown above, consisted of complimenting, suggesting and paraphrasing. Two of the four PLDs did not include anything about the students' performance, motivation, behavior, or competence. The teachers' input during PLDs is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Teachers' input during PLDs

Topic	Frequencies				Examples
	T1	T 2	T 3	T4	
Reflections, opinions, feelings	10	3	10	9	I think that. Materials, poster, flex. Because if I use too much, I think my students cannot understand you know. Everything [at the] same time makes them confused I think.
Language	3	4	0	0	The correct is: how many...?
Classroom management	6	3	1	0	must control. To be ready. If I said do this and that for children I think will be confused.
St. behaviour, performance, motivation.	2	10	5	0	There are many ways to encourage my students. It easy thing because anyone bring anything for this child, he feel happy.
Future plans	0	2	0	1	Revising what we did today. And get some students to say the paragraphs....

Table 5 shows that teachers 2, 3 and 4 reflected at several stages during their PLD, while teachers 1 and 3 talked a lot about their students.

4.1.4 SETs' Supervisory Approach

Overall, the supervisory approach used by the SETs in the discussions was indirect and collaborative. The SETs asked questions, praised the teacher and discussed feelings and these are the features of the indirect approach as described by Acheson & Gall (1992). Although SETs spoke more than teachers in the PLDs, most of their speech was to suggest, to describe, to compliment or to support but not to evaluate or to lecture.

SET4 used a more direct approach with her teacher. She directly criticized this teacher twice. Once was for how she conducted a game and how she should have conducted it:

You activated the group leader, your language is an excellent language and also your instruction is clear. Ok , umm, but I want to add one point that in the missing game I want from you to let them first look at the flash cards".

Before providing this direct advice, though, the SET tried to encourage the teacher to think about the game by asking her "Did you miss any step in the lesson?". The teacher said no and the SET provided direct advice on what she should have done.

4.2 Interviews with SETs

The interviews with the SETs provided insight into their perspectives on three aspects of the PLDs.

4.2.1 Starting the PLD with Reflection

I noted that all SETs started the PLDs in the way recommended by the Ministry – they asked the teacher to reflect on the lesson. I asked the SETs about this in the interviews. All SETs think that starting with reflection is a good idea for several reasons. First, they can check if teachers are aware of what took place in the lesson. Second, teachers can express their feelings about the different steps and events during the lesson. Third, SETs wanted to see if the teacher is able to identify any problems in the lesson. As one SET explained, reflection at the start is useful “Just to check that they are aware of what happened in their lesson. And how do they feel, are they happy about it. Give them the chance to talk about the lesson before I start.”

4.2.2 The Structure of the PLD

In the interview, the SETs explained that they normally started PLDs by eliciting reflection. Then they move step by step with the teacher, giving details about the lesson and then (the SETs) asking questions and providing comments (positive or negative) when necessary. SET1, though, said that she does not provide her comments until the teacher finishes going through the stages of the lesson. SET2 said she sometimes leaves the points to be improved to the end. Both SET1 and SET2 said they conclude the PLD by giving the teacher the chance to consider if they will adapt or modify her lesson plan for the future according to the discussion. SET3 said she usually concludes the PLD by eliciting a summary of the main points discussed.

When I asked SET2 why she preferred to leave the negative points to the end she said:

Because it is a negative point and I don't want to say it at the beginning to not make her depressed even if it is a small point. I am not saying that correction is not important but I don't want to put it at the beginning because I said her lesson was good and she did well. She tried even when she started her lesson with a piece of paper containing the definition. At least she searched, she did something...I usually leave the negative points to the end, not to discourage my teachers not because it is not important.

4.2.3 Effective PLDs

I also asked the SETs what their views were about the characteristics of an effective PLD. SET1 and SET3 think that they can say it was successful when they observe the teacher again and see that she carried out the suggestions provided. For example SET1 explained:

Because she accepted everything I mentioned and the discussion went well, I can say it was ok. But I can't say it was successful until I observe her again and check that she carried out my suggestions.

SET2 said that a PLD is successful when “we covered most of the points that I noticed in the class: reflection, realia, stages of the lesson”. In other words, for this SET a successful PLD was one where she managed to cover the different steps in the process (perhaps as recommended in the Ministry guidelines) and to discuss key aspects of the lesson.

5 DISCUSSION

SETs asked Wh- and Do/is questions for different purposes. Wh- questions were mainly used to help teachers reflect on and evaluate their performance. Do/is questions were asked to elicit justifications, alternatives, encourage talk and to criticize indirectly. Al-Sinani (2007) reported similar findings – the SETs in her study also commonly used Wh- and yes/no questions during the PLDs.

The results also showed that much of the SET input functioned as compliments or support. This I think was to encourage teachers to talk more as SETs explained in the interviews and to smoothen the delivery of the negative points. Al-Abri (2006:36) interviewed supervisors regarding PLDs and reported that they felt that “praising and appreciating the teachers’ performance, especially the good ones, enhances and strengthens the relationship between the supervisor and the teacher”.

Teachers were given time and guidance to reflect on their lessons, which is one important element in all PLDs. Two SETs spoke more words than their teachers but the other two SETs uttered fewer. Al-Abri (2006) analysed four PLDs in the Omani context and found that teachers’ utterances ranged from 299 to 946 words, whereas supervisors’ talk ranged between 716 and 1,714 words. He found that only one supervisor provided enough time for her teacher to talk at great length while the others did not. It is obvious from the data collected here that the teachers do not talk much during the discussion. The reason, as the SETs mentioned, could be because of their limited English or their attitude.

During the interviews, SETs expressed positive attitudes towards giving their teachers time to reflect, and they were aware of the aims of reflection. The structure of the discussions differed from one SET to another and the SETs did not necessarily follow the same structure with all teachers all the time. All PLDs, however, included climate setting, a reflection phase and a review of teaching behaviour. One of the four PLDs recorded included a summary at the end and two SETs mentioned that they discuss future plans with their teachers during PLDs. Thus the SETs actually are not following a specific approach for structuring the discussions of the PLD. Different elements of the PLD mentioned by Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall (1998) and Caruso & Fawcett (1999) do exist in those discussions but not systematically.

When asked about the features of a successful discussions, SETs replied that they consider the discussion to be successful if their teachers carry out the suggestions made. They did not comment on the teacher being able to think critically and to identify their shortcomings as successful features although in three of the PLDs teachers were able to identify more than one of their shortcomings during their lessons. A major aim of the PLD is to encourage teachers to think critically and find solutions. Stoller, (1996) described a good discussion as one where supervisor talk is minimized, teachers are given enough time to reflect and comment, the questions raised are not threatening and in which good teaching practices are praised and good ideas and opinions are reinforced. McHaney & Impey (1992) listed several guidelines for good conferencing such as, focusing on student behavior, using a problem solving approach, asking questions, listening, giving a rationale for directive comments, alternating positive and critical comments, and ending on a

positive one. In the PLDs studied here, these characteristics were in evidence only to a certain extent.

5.1 Limitations

The small scale nature of this study does not allow the results here to be generalized and continued study of PLDs in a range of other contexts in Oman is required, with larger groups of participants. It would have also been valuable here to obtain teachers' perspectives on the PLD by interviewing them too rather than just the SETs. I must also acknowledge that the SETs in this study were individuals who were accountable to me and this working relationship may have influenced the ways in which they responded to some of my interview questions.

6 CONCLUSION

This study investigated the PLDs conducted by Senior English teachers. The aim was to find out the characteristics of PLDs by analyzing the talk in them. The analysis of four recorded PLDs showed overall that the SETs talked more than the teachers in the PLDs. The study also showed that there were several common elements in the approach adopted by SETs in conducting PLDs (e.g. they tended to start by encouraging teachers to reflect on the lesson); however, it was not possible to identify one particular supervisory approach which the SETs here followed; in some ways they were directive but in others more collaborative. Overall, they aimed to minimize direct criticism of the teachers during PLDs. In terms of the views the SETs held about successful PLDs, it is important to note that the development of critical or reflective ability was not mentioned; rather, the SETs seemed to assess the success of a PLD by how well the teacher responded in subsequent lessons to the advice provided by the SET. This approach may not be conducive to the development in teachers of reflective skills and is clearly an issue which merits further study.

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