Teacher Supervision

Moving Towards an Interactive Approach

By Fredricka L. Stoller

One of the greatest challenges of program management is teacher supervision. Whether we are program directors, teacher trainers, curriculum specialists, or inspectors, our supervisory responsibilities are rarely appreciated by the teachers we work with. In fact, most teachers react defensively and hostilely towards supervision even though it is a standard part to most programs. Teachers often view supervision as a threat and become anxious when interacting with their supervisors. These adversarial attitudes often stem from traditional supervisor-supervisee relationships and the unsystematic and subjective nature of traditional classroom visits that are usually unannounced, supervisor-centered, authoritarian, directive, and judgmental. Whether we supervise teachers for the purposes of retention, review, dismissal, promotion, reward, or reprimand, our efforts need not be viewed as negative or unproductive.

Freeman (1982) and Gebhard (1984) outline a number of approaches to language teacher supervision; some are reminiscent of the more traditional models referred to above while others break the traditional mold, moving away from an authoritarian orientation. Freeman introduces three approaches to teacher observation/supervision: 1) the *supervisory approach* (with the supervisor as the authority figure), 2) the *alternatives approach* (with the supervisor as a provider of alternative perspectives), and 3) the *non-directive approach* (with the supervisor as "understander"). Gebhard expands upon Freeman's ideas and introduces five models: 1) *directive supervision* (with a supervisor who directs and evaluates teaching), 2) *alternative supervision* (with a supervisor and supervisee who share the responsibility for generating alternatives), 3) *collaborative supervision* (with a supervisor who works with but does not direct supervisees), 4) *non-directive supervision* (with a non-judgmental supervisor who listens to and restates supervisees' ideas), and 5) *creative supervision* (with a supervisor who makes use of a combination of approaches). Each model typifies a distinct approach to supervision, with different supervisor/supervisee expectations, relationships, and anticipated outcomes. Whatever approach we endorse, supervision is always challenging. One of the greatest challenges we face is how to turn negative attitudes towards supervision around so that teachers (and our programs) can reap the rewards and benefits—in the form of professional development and improved instruction.

In many English language teaching settings, we can counter the negative attitudes that teachers have towards supervision by adopting an approach which is more interactive than directive, more democratic than authoritarian, more teacher-centered than supervisor-centered, more concrete than vague, more objective than subjective, and more focused than unsystematic. Although each one of our teaching settings is distinct, we need a model of supervision that lends itself towards more productive supervisor/supervisee interactions and outcomes. Approaches that are characterized by honest dialog and constructive feedback will lead to professional growth and result in positive supervisor/supervisee experiences and outcomes.

Clinical supervision is one non-traditional approach that meets the criteria specified above. An examination of this approach (see Acheson and Gall 1992) reveals that the use of clinical supervision techniques can radically change supervisor/supervisee relationships, resulting in less stress and anxiety—on the part of both the supervisor and teacher—and a more positive teacher response to supervision.

In this article, I shall define clinical supervision and outline those techniques associated with it that I have found most useful when supervising ESL/EFL teachers. I am hoping that the detail provided here will give readers tools that they can adapt to their own supervisory contexts.

Clinical supervision: A definition

Clinical supervision has as its goal "the professional development of teachers, with an emphasis on improving teachers' classroom performance" (Acheson and Gall 1992:1). It is designed to engage the supervisor and teacher in a supportive and interactive process that 1) provides objective feedback on instruction; 2) diagnoses and solves instructional problems; 3) assists teachers in developing strategies to promote learning, motivate students, and manage the classroom; and 4) helps teachers develop a positive attitude towards continuous professional development. Clinical supervision can be used to evaluate teachers for promotion, retention, and dismissal as well.

The clinical supervision approach involves three basic steps. The *planning conference* sets the stage for effective clinical supervision. It involves a meeting between the supervisor and supervisee during which they agree on the focus of the forthcoming classroom visit and a method for collecting data for later analysis. The second step involves a *classroom observation* during which the supervisor observes a lesson systematically and non-judgmentally, collecting data related to the objectives agreed upon during the planning conference. The third and final step involves the *feedback conference* during which the supervisor meets with the teacher to analyze the data collected during the classroom visit. In their most basic form, the data provide a mirror-like reflection of classroom activities "so that teachers can see what they are actually doing while teaching" (Acheson and Gall 1992:12). The supervisor and supervisee interpret the data from the teacher's perspective with an eye towards diagnosing and solving instructional problems. Throughout the three-stage process, both supervisor and supervisee work together, initially to agree upon the major focus of the classroom visit and later to analyze the classroom observation data to identify successful classroom practices and remedy less successful ones.

The planning conference

The first stage of clinical supervision involves a planning conference during which the supervisor and teacher set an agenda for the forthcoming classroom visit. The goal of the planning conference is to identify and define an area of genuine concern that the teacher would like to understand better or improve; this topic then becomes the focus of the subsequent visit. In my experiences with clinical supervision, I have found that planning conference discussions often center on at least one of these seven issues: *classroom management, classroom interaction, affective factors, use of resources, teaching techniques, methodology,* and/or *acquisition.* (See figure 1 for more specific examples of teacher concerns.)

If it is assumed—as it should be—that there is always some aspect of teaching which can be improved or altered to enhance a particular classroom or instructional setting, both inexperienced and experienced teachers will benefit from this dialog by targeting some aspect of their teaching for investigation. By specifying an area for investigation, the teacher helps to mold the subsequent class observation and is more likely to explore solutions and/or alternatives to targeted teaching practices during the feedback conference.

If lack of time and/or distance between the supervisor and teacher make a face-to-face meeting impossible, a similar exchange of information can occur over the phone or by mail. What is important is that supervisors allow teachers to take an active role in setting the agenda for the classroom visit that will follow the planning conference. Whether planning the classroom visit face-to-face or long distance, I find it useful to end the planning conference by formulating, jointly with the supervisee, one or two specific, nontrivial questions to serve as the focus of the observation and subsequent feedback conference.

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Clinical supervision is designed to engage the supervisor and the teacher in a supportive and interactive process.

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General areas of teacher concern	Specific examples of concern
Classroom management	Organization; lesson cohesion; pacing of activities; digressions; transitions from activity to activity; pair/group/class work; exploitation of unexpected or unplanned classroom occurrences
Classroom interaction	Teacher-student interaction; student-student interaction; student participation; amount of teacher talk
Affective factors	Student/teacher attitudes; perceived relevance of lesson; confidence building; student attentiveness; classroom atmosphere; student risk taking; teacher encouragement and feedback
Use of resources	Blackboard presentations; handouts; textbooks; equipment (e.g., overhead projectors, tape recorders)
Teaching techniques	Giving instructions; error correction; wait-time; eliciting language; providing feedback; asking questions; creating information gaps
Methodology	Teaching of reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, functions; teaching of communicative competencies; fluency versus accuracy; incorporation of culture; introduction, practice, review, and evaluation of language
Acquisition	

FIGURE 1.
AREAS OF CONCERN OFTEN VOICED BY TEACHERS DURING PLANNING CONFERENCE

Most recently I have used the following focus questions.

1. How clear are my directions?

2. What kinds of questions do I direct to students?

3. Do I give all students equal attention?

4. What is the distribution of student talk/teacher talk in class? How much student participation is there?

5. What kinds of verbal and non-verbal feedback do I give students? To whom do I direct these different types of feedback?

6. How often do students direct their comments to classmates, and how often do they direct them to the teacher?

7. How well do I use the blackboard?

8. How well do I answer students' questions? Are my answers more complex than the questions require?

9. Is my pacing too fast or too slow for the majority of students in the class?

10. How well am I implementing the curriculum?

11. How well do I handle unanticipated classroom events?

Once the focus of the upcoming classroom visit is established, the teacher and supervisor agree upon a date and time for the class observation as well as a preferred method for data collection (see figure 2). Making these decisions jointly eliminates much of the stress and anxiety associated with traditional classroom visits and creates a situation in which teachers are more responsive.

Data collection technique	Brief description of technique
Selective Verbatim	Word for word written record of what is said in select "verbal events," determined by focus of observation questions
Seating Chart Observation Records	Record of patterns of teacher-student interaction, verbal flow, student and/or teacher movement, and at-task behaviors using a seating chart
Wide-Lens Techniques	Record of a large number of teaching phenomena using notes taken during classroom observation or a video/audiotape recording of the class being observed

FIGURE 2.
DATA COLLECTION
APPROACHES FOR
CLASSROOM
OBSERVATION

While some teacher supervisors have suggested that the selectivity of clinical supervision might limit the teacher's perspective, potential problems can be circumvented by a skillful supervisor who focuses "the teacher's attention on a few aspects of teaching, yet relates these aspects to the total context in which the behaviors" occur (Acheson and Gall 1992:112).

Classroom observation

The second stage of clinical supervision involves a classroom visit by the supervisor, with agreed-upon questions and data-collection techniques in hand. I have found three data collection techniques, presented in Acheson and Gall (1992), particularly effective: *Selective Verbatim, Seating Chart Observation Records,* and *Wide-Lens Techniques.*

One of the keys to successful clinical supervision is selecting the data-collection technique that best complements the focus of the classroom observation. When these techniques are described in more detail below, it will become evident that each technique lends itself to the observation of different types of classroom behavior. (See Appendix for a listing of focus questions and corresponding data collection techniques.)

Selective verbatim. The teaching/learning environment is greatly influenced by how teachers and students interact verbally and non-verbally. As a result, teachers often identify interaction patterns as a classroom behavior they want to understand better. An analysis of verbal communication patterns can help teachers understand the

dynamics of their classrooms as well as the effectiveness of their instruction. The selective verbatim data-collection technique involves word by word transcription of *select* verbal events that highlight classroom verbal interactions (e.g., question-asking behavior, teacher feedback, the language used to structure/organize the class, classroom management statements, instructions, etc.).

The selective verbatim technique requires the supervisor to accurately record interaction patterns. If a teacher is interested in the types of questions s/he poses, the supervisor would write down all the questions asked during the class. Later during the feedback conference, the supervisor and teacher can analyze the questions for level of cognitive complexity, type of language used, types of questions asked, amount of information requested, number of questions asked at the same time, need for rephrasing or repetition, etc. If the teacher is interested in the clarity and conciseness of his/her instructions, the supervisor would write down, word for word, the teacher's instructions. Subsequent analysis would help the teacher see the type of language used, the logic and complexity of the instructions, the number of tasks required at a given time, the need for restatement or paraphrase, etc. If the teacher would like to understand better the types of verbal feedback s/he gives to students, the supervisor would write down all instances of feedback—as well as the immediately preceding student remark or action that prompted the feedback. Later, transcripts can be reviewed for the amount, variety, nature, and specificity of

feedback provided. In addition, an analysis of these data can help the teacher judge the effects of positive and negative feedback on student motivation, on-task activity, and self-esteem.

Selective verbatim transcripts provide an objective, nonjudgmental record of a teacher's verbal behavior. The transcripts hold up a "verbal mirror" (Acheson and Gall 1992:112) of select verbal behaviors to be viewed and reviewed by the supervisor and teacher later during the feedback conference.

The selective verbatim technique simply requires a pen and paper. The only difficulty associated with this data-collection technique relates to the speed with which the supervisor must record data. If the class goes too fast to record all instances of the targeted verbal behavior, the supervisor should indicate gaps in the transcripts (e.g., a line or an arrow) because it is better to record fewer verbal statements word for word than to paraphrase actual utterances. Paraphrased data simply do not provide the "verbal mirror" needed for meaningful analysis.

Seating chart observation records. While selective verbatim techniques focus on verbal behaviors, seating chart observation records document non-verbal patterns of interaction including direction of verbal flow, amount of participation, teacher/student movement, and at-task behaviors. Seating chart records provide objective and easy-to-interpret data that will later allow the teacher to analyze the students' level of attentiveness and participation, students' at-task behaviors, the teacher's distribution of time and attention among students, the teacher's movement patterns, the teacher's eye contact with different students, etc.

With a seating chart as a starting point—one which identifies each student and relevant characteristics (e.g., gender)—the supervisor/observer can record classroom behaviors, like those listed below, at regular time intervals with arrows, lines, tally marks, check marks, or other symbols:

1. student-teacher interactions, recipients of verbal communication, and/or non-verbal recognition (indicated with tally marks)

2. direction of verbal flow, who is talking to whom (indicated with arrows)

3. instances of teacher praise and/or criticism (indicated with tally marks)

4. instances of student initiation (indicated with tally marks)

5. teacher/student movement patterns (indicated with arrows)

6. on-task behaviors: at task, stalling, out of seat, off-topic (indicated with symbols representing each type of behavior)

7. types of tasks students are engaged in—reading, writing, problem solving, collaborating (indicated with symbols representing each type of task)

Seating chart records reveal a range of classroom behaviors that are difficult to monitor on one's own. They may reveal that a teacher has "location biases," paying more attention to students on the left side of the room or in the front of the room than to students in other locations. They might show that the teacher favors certain students by, for example, calling on men more often than women, giving more feedback to boys than girls, praising smart students more often than average students, paying attention to ethnic majority students more than ethnic minority students, etc. Seating chart records can also reveal teacher biases in movement patterns and students' movement patterns during tasks. Teachers may discover that they always remain on one side of the room or move in a distracting way (e.g., with their backs towards their students). Seating chart records can also indicate if students are doing what they are supposed to be doing, whether it be reading, writing, answering questions, problem solving, and/or working cooperatively.

Effective seating chart observations simply require that the supervisor sit where s/he can see all students in the classroom and that observations be recorded at regular time intervals (e.g., every five minutes). When done systematically and thoroughly, the supervisor can condense important aspects of classroom behavior on a single sheet of paper. One of the greatest benefits of this technique is that it allows the teacher and supervisor to spotlight specific teacher behaviors and/or certain students in class while observing what the class is doing as a whole.

Wide-lens techniques. While selective verbatim and seating chart observation records techniques allow teacher and supervisor to focus on select teaching behaviors, wide-lens techniques provide descriptive data about a large number of teacher/student behaviors in the form of written notes, videotapes, or audiotapes. Wide-lens techniques make few prior assumptions about what is

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important or effective in teaching; thus, they represent a good starting point for supervising teachers who are defensive or not yet ready to select particular teaching behaviors for improvement. After reviewing wide-lens data, teachers are often ready to focus on more specific behaviors in future observation sessions.

Wide-lens techniques are quite versatile and flexible. Think of the options the supervisor has, for example, when videotaping a class.[1] With a so-called "wider" lens, the supervisor can tape many classroom behaviors, focusing perhaps on the class as a whole or groups of students; with a narrower lens, the supervisor can tape more selectively, focusing on just the teacher, a single student, or one side of the room. The same can be accomplished with wide-lens notes. The supervisor can keep running documentation on a wide range of classroom activities/behaviors or s/he can focus on aspects of the classroom that catch his/her eye as particularly interesting or revealing about classroom dynamics, teaching effectiveness, or instructional practices.

Feedback conference

The third and final step of the process involves a follow-up conference that is interactive, supportive, and collaborative. If the planning conference has identified one or two areas of genuine concern, and if the observational data are accurate and objective, the teacher should find the feedback conference informative, instructive, and useful.

Ideally, the feedback conference should take place fairly soon after the class observation so that both teacher and supervisor can decipher data and recall the class as a whole. During the conference, the supervisor and teacher should analyze the data collected during the class observation, focusing on answers to the target questions established for the visit. The goal is to guide the teacher in the analysis, interpretation, and modification of instructional practices based on objective data. Unlike more traditional supervision approaches that oblige the supervisor to declare a verdict on a teacher's effectiveness, with clinical supervision, the data itself provides the evidence and revelations. By means

of a non-judgmental analysis of data, with both the teacher and supervisor contributing to the discussion, teaching/ learning phenomena can be described, analyzed, and evaluated. Together, the supervisor and teacher do the following:

1. Analyze the data cooperatively.
2. Reach agreement on what is actually happening.
3. Interpret the data, considering causes and consequences of actions.
4. Reach decisions about future actions by considering alternative approaches.

Failure in this stage of clinical supervision is often the fault of judgmental supervisors who push teachers into defensive responses— so typical of traditional, evaluative approaches. To be most effective, supervisors need to set aside enough time to allow teachers to come to their own conclusions about the data and explore alternatives in a non-threatening dialog. I try to keep the following in mind when engaged in feedback conferences with teachers:

1. Supervisors often tell teachers to minimize teacher talk in order to maximize student participation/language use. Similarly, when supervising teachers, we need to listen more and talk less so that teachers can be active participants in the supervision process.

2. Supervisors must give teachers enough time to reflect and comment on the data. We must resist the temptation to impose our own judgments at the very start of the feedback session.

3. Supervisors should ask non-threatening questions that will guide teachers in the evaluation of their teaching and help them to clarify their thoughts. We can pose questions such as these: What practices would you repeat if you were to teach this class again? What would you change if you were to teach this class again? If you were a student, what would you want to change?

4. Supervisors should praise effective teaching practices that teachers point out when analyzing the data.

5. Supervisors should reinforce teachers' good ideas. We can acknowledge that we are listening and that we value teachers' opinions and feelings by paraphrasing their thoughts and/or building upon them.

6. Supervisors must be willing to ignore some very obvious classroom problems if the teacher has come up with solutions for other

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1. A videotape of a class that is longer than 30 minutes is unnecessarily long. A 30-minute video has more than enough data to analyze.

problems that s/he has discovered. It is impossible to solve all classroom problems after one visit.

7. Supervisors must recognize the inherent tension that exists between supervision and evaluation and the potential conflicts that can arise between teacher and supervisor. A high level of trust is needed so that teachers willingly entertain alternatives.

8. Supervisors must give teachers credit for being able to help themselves. As guides, we can nurture true professional development and improved teaching.

9. Supervisors must be open to alternative solutions. Teachers may come up with alternatives that we had never considered. We must acknowledge the fact that there is no one single answer for instructional dilemmas.

10. Supervisors can help teachers contextualize findings and relate them to the larger teaching/learning context so that oversimplified conclusions are not drawn from the data.

Conclusion

Teacher supervision is one of the most challenging areas of program management. The most notable challenge has to do with that fact that our efforts are rarely appreciated by the teachers we serve; teachers feel intimidated and threatened by the entire supervisory process in part because the models of supervision that we have inherited are authoritarian and directive. To complicate matters, some of us work in instructional settings where supervisors are expected to act in a top-down fashion to be considered qualified and competent (see Wallace 1991).

The benefits of a clinical supervision approach are many and varied. Most notably, clinical supervision gives us the opportunity to be more interactive than directive, more democratic than authoritarian, more teacher-centered than supervisor-centered, more concrete than vague, more objective than subjective, and more focused than unsystematic. When we adopt clinical supervision, we endorse: 1) face-to-face interaction between the supervisor and supervisee; 2) the active involvement of the teacher in the three-stage supervision process; and 3) the use of real classroom data for analysis. Through such an approach, we can provide objective feedback on instruction, diagnose and solve instructional problems, assist teachers in developing strategies to promote more effective instruction, and help teachers develop a positive attitude towards continuous professional development.

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Focus questions formulated during the planning conference	Data-collection technique that complements focus question
How clear are my directions?	Selective verbatim: Record teacher's directions word for word
What kinds of questions do I direct to students?	Selective verbatim: Record teacher's questions word for word
Do I give all students equal attention?	Seating chart observation record: Indicate who the teacher speaks to and acknowledges (verbally and non-verbally) with tally marks
What is the distribution of student talk/teacher talk in class? How much student participation is there?	Seating chart observation record: Indicate, in frequent time intervals, who is talking with check marks or tally marks.
What kinds of verbal and non-verbal feedback do I give students? To whom do I direct these different types of feedback?	Selective verbatim: Record instances of verbal feedback word for word. Describe nonverbal feedback, as well as the immediately preceding student remark or action that prompted the feedback. Seating chart observation record: Keep track of students who receive verbal feedback and non-verbal feedback with different symbols.
How often do students direct their comments to classmates and how often do they direct them to the teacher?	Seating chart observation record: Record, with arrows, who is talking to whom during class.
How well do I use the blackboard?	Selective verbatim: Record items written on the blackboard in the way in which they are written on the blackboard.
How well do I answer student's questions? Are my answers more complex than the questions merit?	Selective verbatim: Record student's questions and teacher's answers.
Is my pacing too fast or too slow for the majority of students in the class?	Seating chart observation record: At frequent time intervals, indicate students who seem to keep up with the pace, students who are bored because the pace is too slow, and students who cannot keep up with the fast pace with different symbols.
How well am I implementing the curriculum?	Wide-lens notes, video, or audiotape
How well do I do with unanticipated classroom events?	Wide-lens notes, video, or audiotape