

Learning from Classroom Observations



Introduction

Classroom observations have been carried out in secondary schools across Sierra Leone to support teachers' professional development. School Support Officers attended lessons and followed up with individual, targeted feedback to support teachers in improving their practice. In this paper, we will discuss findings from the classroom observations carried out between 2018 and 2021.

Background

The UK aid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme has supported Sierra Leone's secondary school teachers to develop their classroom practice through different mechanisms since 2018, including:

- Professional development opportunities
- Regular planning and development meetings with Heads of Department
- Provision of Lesson Plan Manuals for Mathematics and English

To understand the impact of these activities and to assess how teachers are implementing their learning, over 70,000 classroom observations were carried out between 2018-2021 by 220 School Support Officers observing more than 7,000 teachers.

School Support Officers were given training to observe and assess classroom practice against a set of criteria related to use of Lesson Plan Manuals and five priority Continuing Professional Development categories:

1. Use of positive language
2. Organising pupils in different ways
3. Use of inclusion
4. Assessing learning
5. Providing pupil feedback

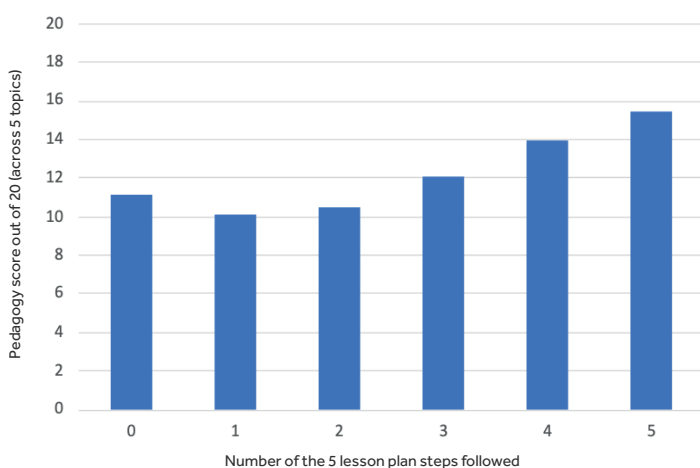
Teachers were scored from 0 - 4 on each category and a total pedagogy score was calculated to give a total out of 20. A higher score reflected a higher level of proficiency. Observers then made suggestions for strategies to improve practice in the form of 'two stars and a wish': two things teachers were doing well and one area for improvement.

Lesson Plan Manuals have transformed the way teachers teach

Prior to the observations, teachers had been given Lesson Plan Manuals to guide them through the delivery of core subject content and support them to use effective pedagogy, including independent practice and group work. The Lesson Plan Manuals were supported by pupil handbooks which contain extra exercises for pupils to work through independently.

Teachers who followed the Lesson Plan Manuals were most successful in improving their teaching techniques¹ (see Figure 1). A few who scored low (0 or 1) on the use of Lesson Plan Manuals were still rated highly for effective pedagogy, suggesting that not all teachers need them to teach well.

Figure 1: Average pedagogy scores by number of Lesson Plan Manual steps followed



Collecting data

School Support Officers were given tablets loaded with Tangerine software so they could methodically record observations from the classroom. Data could be analysed to give individual performance feedback to teachers on their strengths and areas for improvement. It was also published on a dashboard to enable district and national comparison of teachers' strengths and areas for development. This data can support future planning for teacher training and development.

Long term impact

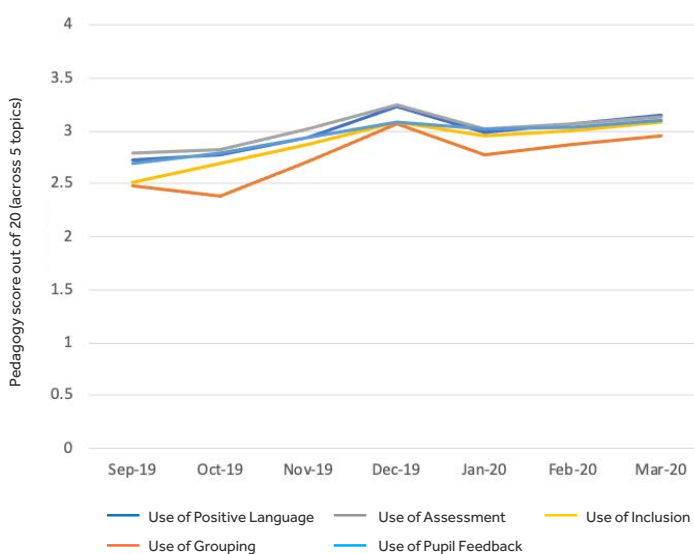
Classroom observations have provided such useful feedback that they continue to be used as part of ongoing Continuing Professional Development in schools. Principals and School Quality Assurance Officers are now using the lesson observation system so that they can ensure teachers' practice continues to improve.

Key findings

1. Pedagogy has improved throughout the country

Over the period of the study, School Support Officer observations showed that **74% of teachers demonstrated improvements in pedagogy**² and that **average scores were improving each month across all aspects of the priority Continuing Professional Development topics**³ (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Average pedagogy scores across five core Continuing Professional Development topics



2. The same topics emerge as strengths each year

Feedback was delivered to teachers using the 'stars and wishes' method, wherein 'stars' refer to areas of good practice. The most popular areas of feedback are shown in word clouds, which offer a visual representation by using bigger text to reflect the more commonly used words.

The word clouds in Figure 3 show the top 50 'stars' - words given to teachers as part of their feedback for each year of the study. They show that teachers were doing consistently well in demonstrating positive language, understanding, participation and content knowledge, which reflects the emphasis of the Lesson Plan Manuals and the importance given to these areas during training. Guided practice was also a prominent star in 2018 and 2019. However, it is important to ensure that future training adds depth to the understanding of pedagogy and approaches to learning, so that more varied and precise practices are identified as 'stars' of teaching practice.

¹ Tangerine data pedagogy (2020)

² Leh Wi Lan pedagogy report (2020)

³ Leh Wi Lan pedagogy report (2020)

Figure 3: Word cloud showing the top 'stars' words from 2018 – 2021

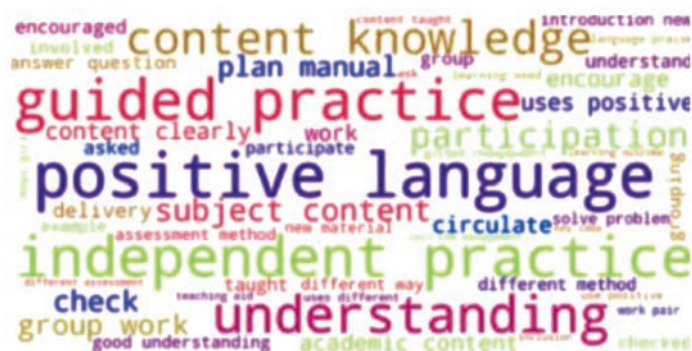
Top 50 STAR words of 2018



Top 50 STAR words of 2019



Top 50 STAR words of 2020



Top 50 STAR words of 2021



In Figure 3, it can be seen that independent practice appears as a 'star' area of teaching from 2019, which coincides with the introduction of pupil handbooks. This remains a 'star' practice throughout the subsequent years, suggesting that teachers are starting to use the pupil handbooks to enable independent practice. However, comments from School Support Officers in their observation feedback, suggest that teachers need to use the pupil handbooks more effectively, which reflects the difference in the teachers.

The data shows that School Support Officers recognise that teachers are attempting independent practice and giving them credit for that, but also understand that there is still work to be done for teachers to ensure that students are getting enough practice to develop their core competencies.

3. Time management is an area of development for many teachers

Within the 'stars and wishes' feedback method, 'wishes' indicate areas of teaching practice that require further development. The phrases frequency diagram in Figure 4 shows that the most common feedback to teachers, across all the years was that they needed to use teaching aids. It is also common for time management issues to be reflected in the feedback in the following ways: increase speed of transitioning; needs to manage time; spend correct time; and allocate time to steps.

Figure 4: Frequency chart showing phrases used in 'wishes' feedback

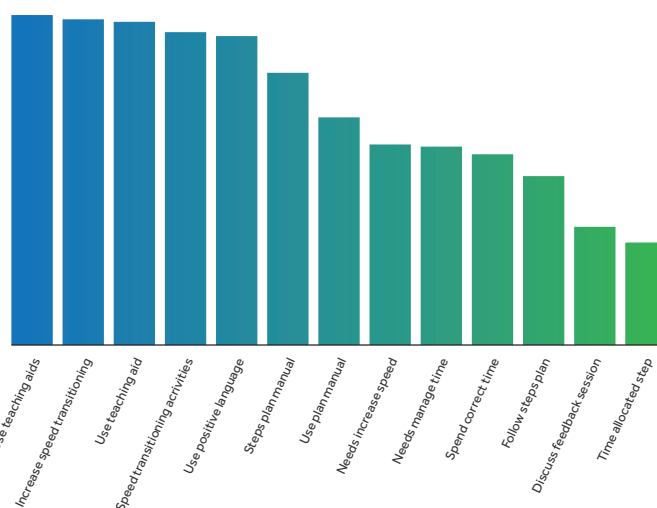


Figure 5 shows the most common 'wishes' feedback in each year of the study. It shows a slight change in emphasis across the time period: whilst the use of teaching aid and Lesson Plan Manuals (referred to as 'plan manual') remain a priority, the phrase 'time management' becomes prominent in 2020. In 2021, the phrase is far smaller, which could suggest that time management improved in 2021, School Support Officers had a more nuanced understanding of time management, or it became less of a priority for School Support Officers to feedback on this area.

Figure 5: Word cloud showing the top 'wishes' words from 2018 – 2021

Top 50 WISH words of 2018



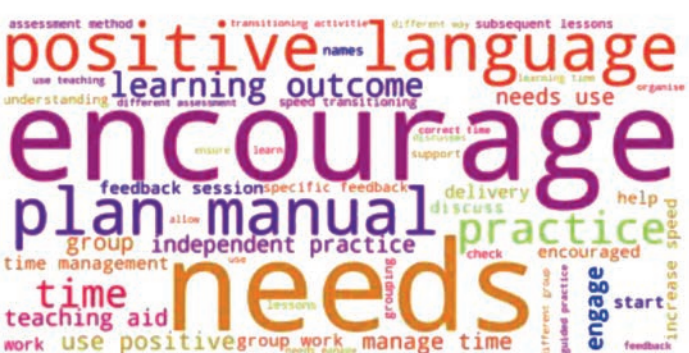
Top 50 WISH words of 2019



Top 50 WISH words of 2020



Top 50 WISH words of 2021



The Lesson Observation Analysis Report (July 2020) also found that there were concerns related to teachers missing parts of the lesson, being behind in teaching the syllabus or improving professionalism (e.g. not using mobile phones during lessons).

4. Areas of strength and development vary between regions

Sometimes we can see regional variations, with different areas identified as a strength or in need of development, as discussed in the Lesson Observation Analysis report (p11):

“In some districts, such as Falaba and Moyamba, the use of the Lesson Plan Manuals was by far the pedagogical skill that improved the most respectively... However, in other districts, such as Bonthe and Kono, this skill accounted for just 15% of the sample. Grouping was the main skill improved in Bonthe (35% of teachers) and Inclusion in Kono (36% of teachers)...

The variations may be related to the teachers' existing competence in the skill area or perhaps the School Support Officers own confidence or competence in the skill which may affect the attention they place upon it in observations, coaching and mentoring.”

This highlights the need for a professional development system for teachers that is targeted according to needs as well as the importance of deepening the understanding of the School Support Officers who are carrying out the lesson observations.

5. The relationship between the School Support Officer and teachers is important

A major influence for change seems to be the quality of the relationship between the School Support Officer and the teachers under observation, as this impacts on their ability to act as, and be seen as, a critical friend. Building positive relationships meant that professional growth took place in a supportive environment, enabling many teachers to accept feedback and work to change their practice.

6. Teachers need support to address feedback

Many teachers were able to transform wishes into stars, but some were unable to make improvements over multiple observations . This could be influenced by external factors (such as personal issues, coping with a high workload, high levels of pupil absenteeism etc), which put pressure on teachers, raising their stress levels and affecting their ability to teach effectively.

It may also demonstrate a lack of understanding by the teacher and/or the School Support Officer of how to improve. More follow up is needed to gain understanding of these situations whilst continued development for observers will deepen their understanding of practice and enable them to better support teachers.

Key recommendations

The classroom observation system can support the professional growth of teachers and their ability to use Lesson Plan Manuals when combined with local subject leadership and mentoring. The following recommendations will enhance its impact:

1. Develop the competency of observers and leadership

Observation is a tool for development, therefore the quality of interaction between the teacher and the observer is important to create a clear understanding of the steps needed to work towards being an effective teacher. It is vital to support School Quality Assurance Officers and senior school leaders, including Principals and Heads of Department, to carry out regular lesson observations and act as critical friends to teachers, so that:

- A positive culture of growth and learning becomes part of the system
- Lesson Plan Manuals are at the heart of change
- Teachers feel supported to accept and act on feedback and work hard to change their practice.
- Teachers are allowed time and support to develop
- Classrooms are recognised as dynamic so observations over time give a better picture of teacher performance

2. Review and refine observation criteria

With more nuanced observation criteria, it is possible to deepen the understanding of effective practice throughout the system, so that observers can support the growth of higher-level skills and make precise and insightful comments for improvement. For example, focusing on teacher responsiveness to pupil needs and assessment as a tool to improve inclusion and differentiation.

Observation data can also identify the most competent teachers, so observers can offer support to develop higher order skills (e.g. moving from using Lesson Plan Manuals as a script to using them to guide structure).

3. Communicate and reinforce the messages in the Teacher Code of Conduct

Teacher professionalism was identified as requiring development, suggesting a need to reiterate the Teacher Code of Conduct. However, it is also important to consider how system factors such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials and issues with remuneration and registration can negatively affect teachers' performance. Addressing these issues may enable teachers to better focus on teaching.

4. Regularly review observation data to monitor progress

Looking at collected data from lesson observations each term to monitor progress will provide the following benefits:

- Identify the teachers in need a higher level of support
- Track policy implementation
- Highlight areas of strength and weakness for strategic planning
- Encourage teachers to see professional growth as a strength, through positive communication

5. Extend the observation system into primary schools

To further support teacher growth, it is recommended that classroom observations are also carried out at primary level. This will ensure that all teachers are following a consistent system with common expectations and standards of performance.