This paper describes ‘mentor development’, a means of collaborative professional development through peer observation that was initiated by the author with 18 peers, all native English speaker EFL teachers at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan. It shows how such a programme allows teachers to learn from one another through classroom observations and peer mentoring, where observers practise teacher-educator skills by taking on the role of ‘mentor’ in post-observation conferences. A third colleague attends the post-observation conference with the aim of helping both the mentor and observed teacher reflect on and learn from their interaction during the conference, and to explore the implications these discoveries may have for effective teaching and mentoring.

Peer observation is a powerful means by which language teachers can become aware of a broad range of possibilities for conducting classes effectively. While many language teaching professionals will already have experienced peer observation in their training, a recent review of the state-of-the-art in ELT professional development indicates that the practice continues beyond graduate school as an important component of such undertakings as lesson study, team teaching, and peer coaching (Mann 2005). Of these three, peer coaching makes perhaps the greatest use of peer observation as colleagues visit one another’s classrooms to help refine practices, gather information related to persistent problems, or get and give feedback on the implementation of new teaching methods (Benedetti 1997).

A great deal of the literature on peer coaching, and teacher observation in general, focuses on the post-observation conversation, going to great lengths to warn participants of the risks involved with providing evaluative feedback (Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan 2001; Richards and Farrell 2005). In ‘An etiquette for nonsupervisory observation of L2 classrooms’, Murphy (1992: 225) includes the statement that ‘even well-intentioned feedback to classroom teachers often misfires’. For peer coaching, Showers and Joyce (1996: 15) therefore state that it is ‘necessary and important to omit verbal feedback as a coaching component’. Sheal (1989: 93) notes that feedback issues extend to ‘official’ observations by supervisors and administrators as well, for much observation ‘... is unsystematic and subjective. Administrators and teachers generally have not been trained in
observation... Consequently they tend to use themselves as a standard, and they observe impressionistically’.

Still, many of these same writers concede that teachers typically ask their observers for feedback, and Cosh (1999) notes that teachers are unlikely to get the full reflective value of being observed if they do not receive any comments. Therefore, it seems unrealistic to expect participants in peer observation to refrain from sharing their opinions on what they have seen. If, on the contrary, the opportunity to exchange insights is embraced as a chance to develop skill and experience with feedback, participants can gain heightened awareness of the power of their positive and negative comments, finding optimal ways to offer guidance that inspires rather than disheartens. This article describes mentor development, an approach to peer observation that taps into teachers’ ability to teach themselves, as well as their potential to be valuable resources to one another, by providing frameworks through which colleagues can work together to train themselves in the best practices of observation and mentoring.

**Mentor development**

The inspiration for mentor development came from a desire to help teachers enhance their skills and potentially make a transition to teacher training by providing opportunities for colleagues to practise training techniques with, and on, one another. The first participants began by taking part in a number of reading discussions on teacher observation literature, coming to consensus on ground rules for visits to peers’ classrooms and the conferences that follow. In ensuing years these reading discussions have been replaced by workshops that give participants hands-on experience with various observation and conferencing techniques recommended by the literature. Once the participants have had some exposure to the key issues involved in peer observation, they are divided into groups of three to begin the actual process.

First, the colleagues meet in pairs to make the necessary preparations for a series of three classroom visits, in which Teacher A observes Teacher B, B observes C, and C observes A (Figure 1).
After this set of classroom visits has been completed, all three colleagues come together for a post-observation conference that takes place in three two-part stages, with each of the participants playing a different role at each stage (Table 1). Each stage focuses on a different classroom observation, with the teacher and classroom observer (’mentor’) discussing predetermined areas of interest regarding the execution of the lesson while the third party silently listens in as the conference observer. At the end of the discussion, this third party develops teacher training skills by guiding the other two teachers through a conference review in which they reflect and share their perspectives on the post-observation conference, identifying those mentoring behaviours that promoted reflection as well as those that had the potential to have negative consequences (Table 2). Through this debriefing process, all parties gain deeper understanding of the challenges involved with giving feedback and develop greater self-awareness with regard to their own skill at sharing and receiving it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First stage</th>
<th>Second stage</th>
<th>Third stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Third party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>Third party</td>
<td>Mentor</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

At the start of each new stage, a different classroom observation becomes the focus, and all participants change roles accordingly. In this fashion, the three stages of mentor development afford every participant experience giving and receiving feedback at the levels of teacher, mentor, and even as a mentor educator (’third party’). The cyclical nature of the process and the focus on reflection can lead to great insight, with additional self-awareness and sensitivity resulting from the fact that every feedback giver will have a recent or impending experience in the ‘hot seat’ to consider.

**Ground rules for peer observation**

The execution of the pre-observation and observation stages of mentor development closely resemble other typical practices of peer observation. Key principles include the following:

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles during post-observation conference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three-stage sequence of post-observation conference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 0:00– 20:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The pre-observation conference

1 The observed teacher should set the agenda, determining what the goals of the observation are (Mann 2005). The more specific the observed teacher can be, the more the mentor is likely to provide useful information (Sheal op. cit.).

2 The mentor can gain valuable insight and promote better preparation prior to the observation by asking such questions as:
   - What are the goals of this lesson?
   - How does this material fit with previous learning?
   - What problems might be anticipated? (Zuck 1984).

3 The more time that is invested in this meeting, the more likely the mentor and teacher are to have a fruitful post-observation discussion. As a frame of reference, Richards and Lockhart (1991) state that in their work with peer coaching, the meetings typically last no more than an hour.

During the observation

1 The observer is often an invasive presence in the classroom. It is up to the observer to take whatever measures possible to minimize the potential ill-effects of the visit (Master 1983).

2 The teacher can put the students at ease by telling them that the observer is not there to watch them but rather to help the teacher develop more skills.

3 At the end, the observer should thank the teacher for the opportunity to visit, but should not make any substantive comments about the class. Comments of that nature can provoke premature discussion and circumvent the teacher’s own reflection process.

The post-observation conference

Once each teacher has observed one other, the three come together for the post-observation conference, where each participant takes a turn as a mentor holding a conference with the observed teacher while a third party watches and prepares for the conference review. The following section outlines best practices of mentor development post-observation conferences, by supporting ideas from relevant literature with data collected from teachers from the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand who chose to participate in the mentor development programme at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), an EFL-focused university in Chiba, Japan. The participants had between 2 and 14 years of classroom teaching experience and all hold Masters degrees. At the time of the data collection, the length of their participation in the mentor development programme ranged from one semester to two years or more. Data were collected in two forms:

1 anonymous responses given by 16 of the 18 participants to a short online survey;

2 excerpts from personal teaching portfolios and journals that were volunteered by six participants.
A few technical points were clarified in the survey data. For one thing, it is important to schedule the post-observation conference shortly after the classroom observations. For those nine participants who held their conferences within a week of the observations, only two reported difficulties sharing feedback as a result of delay, while four others reported that the delay was actually helpful for organizing notes and fostering reflection. On the other hand, four of the seven who put off their conference for a week or more found the delay problematic.

To make sure that everyone gets equal attention and practice at the conference, time allotments for each part of the discussion can be agreed upon at the outset. KUIS participants settled on 20 minutes for each mentor–teacher discussion and ten minutes for each third party-guided conference review, with a full session thus taking 90 minutes in total. While many of the teachers initially expressed doubt that the sessions should be so long, survey responses show that 75 per cent of the participants ultimately found this amount of time was either ‘adequate’ or even ‘too short’.

Zuck (op. cit.: 340) states that it is not advisable for a mentor to begin a post-observation conference by telling a teacher that a class was good or bad because it ‘denies the teacher’s role as self-evaluator and gets the discussion off to a bad start’. In order for any conclusions to be internalized by the teacher, the work of the mentor and teacher needs to be fully collaborative. The mentor ‘will need to listen to the concerns of the teacher and signal this to the teacher’ (Randall and Thornton 2005: 87). Indeed, for most cases, it is the teacher who is uniquely capable of accounting for why things went the way they did (Nunan 1996).

If the teacher is given a large degree of control over the direction that the conversation takes, the door will be open for the teacher to ‘own’ the discoveries that are made. KUIS participants reported a variety of techniques for making this happen. A mentor may begin by inviting the teacher to share his/her own perspective on the lesson, perhaps by talking through the lesson from beginning to end. Typically, the result of this start is that ‘the points that the observer planned to raise are brought up first by the teacher’. Another reported approach was to encourage reflection on the positive aspects of the class:

I knew if I launched into ‘So tell me about your lesson’, she would outline negatives only . . . I decided to start with a question for her to find one of the positives of her lesson. This was commented on by the other group members, as they said it set the tone for the peer observation feedback.

As the conversation proceeds, a mentor’s sensitivity can create a safe atmosphere:

Throughout the interview, I wanted to make sure I phrased questions that didn’t ask ‘why?’ as they can often sound like one is asking the other to justify their rationale for an activity or so on.

Allowing the teacher control over the direction of the conversation may at times mean that certain issues remain overlooked, but this should not be taken as an indication that the process is a failure, for it must be remembered that participants in mentor development are peers voluntarily
engaging in collaborative professional development. Mentors should resist the urge to stamp out any and all imperfect teaching behaviours, for this approach will only put a teacher on the defensive and demoralize. Nor does this mean that participants should contain themselves to positive feedback, for then ‘the whole exercise becomes a pointless act of mutual back-patting’ (Cosh op. cit.: 24). On this point, some KUIS teachers agreed, saying ‘You don’t just want positive feedback—you do it for the negative feedback’ and ‘It can be frustrating for a teacher who wants some honest feedback to hear that everything was “great”’.

Generally speaking, it is when the teacher’s need to be heard and understood is satisfied that the path is best laid for the teacher to comfortably invite feedback. At that point, the mentor can make appropriate substantive comments within the context of what the teacher has already shared, ideally keeping in mind Gottesman’s (2000: 8) advice that feedback should be

... specific in nature, about items the teacher can control, ... descriptive rather than evaluative, tactful, well-timed, checked for clarity and simplicity, dealing with behaviours rather than personalities (of either teacher or students), ... and well organized.

Criteria such as these can also be useful to guide the participants’ discussion in the following conference review, when the third party shifts the focus to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the feedback given.

The conference review:

... enables us (all in turn) to explore the extremely important aspect of how we provide feedback that is affirming, non-threatening, and, at the same time, effective. Asking a colleague into the ‘sacred space’ of our classroom is a potentially threatening proposition, as is soliciting feedback. It is therefore important that we monitor ourselves (both givers and receivers of feedback) so that we are getting feedback that we want without needing to have a crying session afterwards. (Survey response)

The inclusion of a conference review guided by a third party allows for exploration of the way teachers talk to one another and the sort of feedback they view as acceptable, and how this varies across cultures. Collaboration between two colleagues alone would of course be simpler in many ways, but survey responses showed that

- 69 per cent of the participants would not have preferred to work in a pair
- 75 per cent felt that they had benefited from taking the role of third party
- 81 per cent felt that they had benefited from having a third party present when they were giving and/or receiving feedback about teaching.

The third party faces a challenging but rewarding dance, having to both lead and demonstrate a discussion on good mentoring behaviours—proverbially ‘walking the walk’ while ‘talking the talk’. Although third parties have little or no time to prepare for the discussion immediately following the mentor–teacher conference, they may have the most dynamic material to work with of all, having the opportunity to generate instantaneous reflection on a mentoring situation witnessed from point blank. One simple way to begin
is to follow the template of a typical mentor–teacher discussion by putting
the observee in control of the discussion, having the mentor talk through
his/her perspective of how each stage of the conference went. Throughout
this post-conference discussion, the third party should ask probing
questions to promote deeper reflection, making sure that the conversation
does not dry up at a superficial level. For instance, the mentor may be asked
how the conference did or did not go according to plan and how things
might be handled differently if they come up again in the future.

At times, the observed teacher’s presence can complicate the dynamics of
the discussion, making it difficult for the mentor to be completely open
about challenges that arose. This can be especially troublesome for mentors
who tend to make long lists of faulty teaching behaviours to ‘correct’. 
Mentors who instead concentrate on helping others to reflect and come to
conclusions for themselves will likely have more fulfilling post-conference
discussions, as they can more candidly explore the successes and failures of
the various techniques employed. Though the presence of the observed
teacher may still lend an air of artificiality to the proceedings at times,
a touch of awkwardness is not necessarily a bad thing, as it can heighten the
senses, making everyone more keenly aware of how well the impact of their
words matches their intentions. When the time feels right, the observed
teacher can also be brought into the conversation to provide the perspective
of what it was like to be mentored in this instance and how the mentor’s
intended messages were received. It can be instructive to consider whether
the teacher felt the mentor’s language came across as neutral or
judgemental, how much of the mentor’s feedback fell into the areas the
teacher had previously requested, and how the mentor made the teacher feel
safe to reflect candidly on the lesson and come to conclusions for himself/
herself.

The third party’s lack of prior information about the observed class can
facilitate complete focus on teacher training issues such as the mentor’s
techniques for setting the tone and creating a safe environment, asking
questions effectively and helping the teacher reflect, and responding
appropriately to what the teacher shares. Still, a bit of context can be of great
help. Just as a pre-observation conference can lay the groundwork for a good
post-observation discussion, the mentor and third party can benefit from
a conversation prior to the conference as well. In this meeting, the mentor
can make choices about what sort of feedback would be desirable from the
third party. A mentor may tell the third party that he/she plans to use
a particular style of mentoring or that he/she wants to talk as little as
possible during the discussion (much like a teacher of a student-centred
class may choose to do) or simply to avoid closed questions, and thus the
third party will be invited to comment on the mentor’s success in these particular areas. The mentor may even choose to share a ‘conference
plan’ (the mentoring equivalent of a lesson plan) with the third party to
further guide the observation of the conference.

At the end of the conference review, the mentor and observed teacher should
take a moment to share reflections on the mentor educator’s work as well,
closing the circle and taking full advantage of opportunities to increase
awareness of the way feedback is given and received. This process is not fully
completed until a second cycle is carried out in the opposite direction, so everyone can once again have the experience of the shoe being on the other foot. In other words, instead of Teacher A visiting Teacher B, this time Teacher A will visit Teacher C, B will visit A, and C will visit B (Figure 2), and this will once again be followed by a round of post-observation conferences and conference reviews. Scheduling can be tricky; working in these trios for two full cycles of observation and conference typically occupied KU1S participants for as long as a semester or more. After that point, the group members can decide whether to disperse into new groups to gain further experience with new colleagues in different classrooms or to repeat the process with the same partners so as to reap the benefits of the increased level of trust that will have developed over the course of the two rounds of observation and conference.

**FIGURE 2**  
The second cycle of observations

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**Future directions**

There is much that could be learnt from additional research into mentor development in practice, particularly from a conversation analysis of post-observation conferences to see exactly what sort of feedback tends to be shared, in what manner, and the effects various techniques tend to have. It would also be valuable to have concrete information about the adaptations that groups make as they tailor the model to their own needs and interests. Recordings are now being collected, and it is hoped that additional research can be shared in the future.

In the meantime, some ideas for adapting the practices outlined in this article to meet various teaching circumstances and interests may be of use. In cases where it is not possible to find three colleagues to collaborate, pairs of teachers can work together and do the ‘policing’ for themselves. A video camera can serve as a substitute for the third party, and the pair can later watch the video (together or apart) to observe and reflect on their performances as mentors. An additional layer of reflection and feedback can
be brought into the process if the participants write journals on the experience, which they can then exchange and respond to, and a distant third party can even participate asynchronously if the tape and journals are shared electronically. A completely different option practised by some KUIS participants was to diminish the focus on the feedback and instead turn the post-observation conference into a sort of collective brainstorming session on solutions to typical classroom problems. In this approach, the participation of a third party in the conversation is welcome but not absolutely essential.

Teachers are notoriously busy people, so the idea of setting aside 90 minutes for a post-observation conference may be unrealistic for some. Some teachers at KUIS dealt with this problem by instead having short sessions after each observation, perhaps over lunch. Others simply agreed to tighter time limits, squeezing the whole process into 45 minutes or an hour. Another approach is to make the third-party conference review an optional step that is only taken when the participants feel there is a need.

The multilayered practices of mentor development can lead to a variety of rewards. Insofar as it is a form of collaborative professional development, it brings peers together to talk shop and tap into one another’s experience, breaking down barriers and giving novice teachers a chance to learn from the pros, and vice versa. The peer observation component adds the opportunity for participants to become more self-aware as they recognize their own behaviours in the practices undertaken by the observed teacher. At times, these observations can lead to renewed enthusiasm for teaching: peers may get new ideas for things to try out, or they may take comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone in facing certain challenges. Students ultimately stand to benefit from mentor development as their teachers find fresh approaches to instruction and improve their skill at delivering feedback. And for those interested in making a career transition into teacher education, mentor development provides practical hands-on experience and training.

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References


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