



# Narrative self-observation: a new framework for teacher professional development and identity research

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## ABSTRACT

Building on prior scholarship into narrative inquiry and autoethnography, this article proposes an original continuous professional development framework – narrative self-observation (NSO) – that has the potential to enhance teacher reflection and identity awareness through the peer-mediated ‘storying’ of a self-observed lesson. After conceptualising NSO, describing the framework and outlining the constructs and premises underpinning it, we report on a trial implementation of NSO with three tertiary-level English language teachers. Qualitative data collected from collaborator meetings, teacher-written ‘lesson stories’ and interviews were analysed inductively. The findings indicate that NSO is an impactful and practicable research tool for teachers, with the potential to provide greater freedom to experiment, opportunities for practical learning, critical reflection and identity inquiry than live observation. We argue that this framework is consistent with current good practice models for both individual and institutional professional development programmes and recommend further research on NSO to assess its wider utility.

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Lesson observation;  
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## Introduction

This article introduces and investigates a new tool for teacher professional development: narrative self-observation (NSO). This tool integrates features of narrative inquiry, unseen observation and autoethnography to offer a self-inquiry framework for conducting supported self-observation in the classroom with the potential to support and enhance teacher reflection, teacher autonomy and teacher identity awareness. As has been previously observed (e.g. Lasagabaster and Sierra 2011; O’Leary 2017), in many contexts worldwide, teacher lesson observation has become more an act of summative performance monitoring and evaluation than a formative tool for learning and development. NSO offers an alternative teacher-led framework through which a teacher can identify a puzzle, challenge or interest to investigate through a narrative (written or spoken) that is developed with the support of

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a collaborator who does not observe the lesson directly. Making use of both context-appropriate, self-identified tools for narrative documentation and several collaborator meetings, the teacher interprets, reflects upon and makes sense of the lesson and their own identity and continuing professional development (CPD) through the process of 'storying' (Barkhuizen 2017).

The structure of this article is as follows: It begins by conceptualising this new tool (NSO), situating it in the literature on 'unseen' observation, autoethnography and storying/narrative inquiry. It then presents the proposed framework itself, also outlining the premises underpinning the design chosen. Following this, we report on a proof-of-concept study into NSO involving three English teachers who aimed to explore their experiences, potential learning, and identity development through participation in individual NSO cycles. We then discuss the findings and explore potential implications and limitations.

## **Theoretical foundations of the NSO framework**

We begin by introducing the three theoretical elements that we brought together deductively to develop the NSO framework: unseen observation, autoethnography and 'storying'. Our discussion of these elements mirrors our own experiential inquiry into potential ways of combining the practically grounded, formatively valuable process of lesson observation with the cognitively complex and personal processes involved in critical self-inquiry and developmental transformation, recognising both identity and reflective practice as central components in contemporary professional development (e.g. Korthagen 2017); our understandings of these two key constructs within NSO are discussed after the framework itself is introduced, below.

### ***Unseen observation***

As classroom-based teacher educators, we have long shared a strong interest in lesson observation and its influence on practice (e.g. Kamali 2020). With this in mind, we have found recent discussion of unseen observation (a type of self-observation) insightful. Unseen observation originates in the field of language teacher education (e.g. Quirke 1996) and is further developed theoretically by O'Leary (e.g. O'Leary 2022).<sup>1</sup> Unlike some forms of self-observation, which generally involve participants (video) recording their lessons for subsequent review (e.g. Mercado and Baecher 2014), unseen observation retains the basic interpersonal framework for standard lesson observations. It involves the teacher and collaborator (rather than 'observer'; emphasising parity) interacting before and after the lesson (e.g. sharing lesson plan, post-lesson conference). Yet, instead of the collaborator observing the lesson, the teacher is trusted to self-observe the lesson, in part through the collection of appropriate data (e.g. reflective notes, student feedback) prior to written reflection, a post-lesson meeting and 'feed forward action points' (O'Leary 2022, 7). O'Leary argues convincingly that by transferring primary responsibility for observing the lesson to the teacher, unseen observation serves as a more effective tool for 'formative', rather than 'summative', observations (3) in which the confrontational, high-stakes, monitoring and evaluation role of observation is avoided. O'Leary argues that the teacher is encouraged to be honest with themselves, to reflect more deeply on their

self-observations, and identify action points that, he argues, are more likely to be taken forward because they are the product of a more sincere, introspective, reflective process.

We found these arguments powerful and convincing, and felt that the unseen observation procedure was potentially compatible with two further elements that seem to be important, particularly in teacher identity development research – autoethnography and storying (see Ghanbar et al. 2024).

### ***Autoethnography***

Teacher autoethnography has recently emerged as valuable in research on teacher education (e.g. Kamali et al. 2024; Nguyen and Qi 2024) thanks to its ability to offer unique insights into identity formation that traditional observation methods may neglect (Yazan 2024). Often conducted by teachers (e.g. Fallas-Escobar 2023) or teacher educators (e.g. Kamali 2023) as a form of self-inquiry, autoethnography typically investigates one's lived experiences, identity and positionality situated within their sociopolitical environment (Yazan 2024). Evidence suggests it helps teachers align their teaching practices with their core beliefs and values, leading to more meaningful engagement in the classroom, greater empowerment and potentially greater resilience and adaptability to respond to challenges in the educational environment (e.g. Buchanan 2015; Zembylas 2003).

As teacher educators, we began to envisage ways in which bringing together unseen observation and autoethnography could better facilitate teacher inquiry and reflective practice on a wider range of issues important to both teacher and collaborator understanding, such as considerations of context, learners, personal and professional journeys, and identity development. The common thread, we felt, was the narrative element implicit in both.

### ***Storying and narrative inquiry***

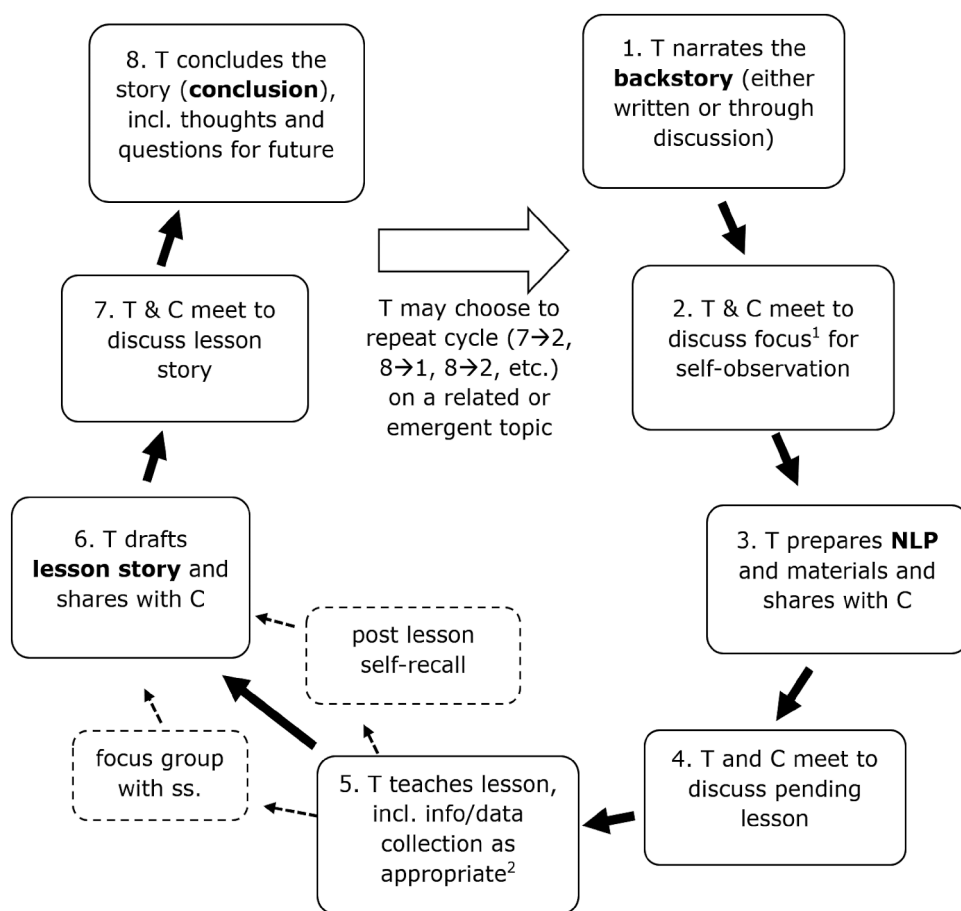
The realisation of humans as 'story telling animal[s]' (King 2003) has underlined the profound role of narrative in shaping human cognition, identity, and cultural evolution. Fletcher (2023) argues that narrative cognition (what he calls 'storythinking') may constitute an important, neglected means to develop and convey meanings when compared to the logically-oriented thinking that has dominated Western theory for thousands of years. The importance of stories in teacher experiential learning was first highlighted by Connelly and Clandinin's (e.g. 1990) groundbreaking narrative inquiry research into the development of personal practical knowledge. It has been built on by subsequent scholarship on aspects of 'storying' as a tool for both research and professional development. As Barkhuizen (2016, 2017) observes, teachers learn through stories, both the stories they tell and the stories they hear. Thus, we felt that introducing a clear narrative element into the self-observation process might enable teachers to reflect more deeply, not only on the lesson event, but also on the beliefs, personality and identity that have helped shape it.

### **The narrative self-observation framework**

Against the above background, we aimed to conceptualise a practical tool for teacher development that integrates the overlapping benefits of unseen observation,

autoethnography and narrative (self-)inquiry. We wanted our framework to be practically useful; thus, issues of time, clarity, and complexity were important. We envisaged a narrative process that would build on O’Leary’s (2022) model, would feel intuitive – inspiring even – for teachers to engage in (Connelly and Clandinin 1990), yet would involve sufficient opportunities for both introspection and intersubjectivity (O’Leary 2022) to enable both learning and greater self-awareness to emerge as outcomes. We chose to call the procedure ‘narrative self-observation’, feeling this was a transparent and appropriate descriptor for the procedure.

The NSO framework is summarised in Figure 1 and described below; additional guidelines for use are provided in the supplementary materials for this article.



**Figure 1.** The narrative self-observation cycle. T: teacher; C: collaborator; SS: students; NLP: narrative lesson plan 1. Focus for observation should be chosen by T, but may also involve suggestions from C or themes that emerge from the discussion. It may involve a change of some sort, but always under the T’s control. 2. Info/data collection will depend both on T’s preferences and institutional regulations. Two examples are given: post-lesson self-recall (e.g., through audio recording) and focus group discussion with selected students.

NSO involves eight stages and is potentially cyclical inasmuch as the outcomes of one self-observation may feed into a subsequent one (either immediately or after some time), both developmentally and narratively (the story may continue). While we primarily envisage written narration, audio- and video-narration are also possible. Meetings may be face-to-face or online.

NSO begins with the teacher narrating a 'backstory' to the observation to provide the collaborator with sufficient understanding of who they are as a teacher (a self-portrait of sorts) and who the class is as a community of individuals with a shared history; specific individuals may be discussed as key characters within the story.

In the second stage, the teacher and collaborator meet, both to discuss the backstory and to identify a self-observation focus; the discussion should be exploratory and curious, aiming to identify a puzzle, challenge or interest related to the backstory that the teacher is interested in exploring through the observation.

In the third stage, the teacher narrates and shares their lesson plan and materials with the collaborator. While a 'traditional' tabular pro forma can be used, our experimentation with a narrative lesson plan (Anderson and Kamali 2025), in which the teacher discusses the intended contents and participants in the lesson in honest, exploratory, continuous prose (see Doyle and Holm 1998), have proven useful to teachers conducting NSO (see below) and consistent with the wider narrative focus involved. And while it is likely to be a written document, colleagues have also experimented with audio-recorded plans.

This lesson plan inspires a second meeting (Stage 4) in which the collaborator and teacher discuss further the chosen focus, predict various outcomes (rather than a delimited set of 'objectives') and means for collecting information or data to assist self-observation. This may include audio recording the lesson (with appropriate permissions), analysis of student work, live notes (audio or written), student feedback, immediate post-lesson recall or other means.

In stage 5, the teacher teaches the lesson and collects relevant information to help them make sense of what happened, especially concerning the agreed focus. Immediate, post-lesson self-recall (audio, video or written) may be particularly useful as a personal, introspective tool, with no expectation that this is shared in full with the collaborator.

After a day or two, the teacher draws upon the information collected and their recollection of the lesson to draft the next stage to their narrative – the 'lesson story' – and share it with the collaborator (stage 6). This narrative may be chronological or topical, but it would be expected to involve the chosen observation focus in some way. It may present key moments from the lesson, the self-recall or other information sources.

In stage 7, after sharing their lesson story with the collaborator, the two parties meet for a third time to explore the lesson relative to the focus and the teacher's narration of it. Both parties may be interested in asking questions as they try to draw connections between these elements, all the time remaining aware that it is the teacher's narrated self-observation (rather than the lesson as taught) that remains the focus, serving as a means to surface and explore the teacher's underlying interests, values and identity development. This conversation may conclude with a 'stepping back' in which the two parties reflect on what they have (both) learnt, any deeper realisations and the possibility of a future NSO cycle with a related, or alternative, focus.

In the final stage, the teacher concludes their lesson story, including their thoughts for the future. At this point, the teacher may elect to add to, change or delete aspects of their lesson story, bringing in the collaborator's perspective, reflections on learning, or further observations on lessons taught since then.

We propose NSO as a cycle that bears similarities to both experiential learning or action research cycles (e.g. Kolb 1984), but with only a light emphasis on data collection to ensure it remains accessible and feasible to working practitioners. Like all such cycles, it may lead into a second NSO cycle, in which the teacher investigates a related theme, one that emerges from the current cycle, or chooses a different focus. It may also be useful to follow NSO with live observation to provide an etic perspective on the issues in question.

### ***Identity development, reflection and learning in NSO***

Within the NSO framework, 'teacher identity' is viewed as a narrated, dialogical, and context-sensitive configuration of self that teachers narrate about themselves, synthesised from three perspectives: from the first perspective, the teacher is both practitioner and researcher, positioning their identity as an accountable, situated narrative of professional becoming that is anchored in lived experience and self-generated data (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2021). From the second, identity is internally empowered by decoupling evaluation from observation, which enables the exploration of oneself without supervisory gazes (see Nazari 2025, for N-identity). Finally, teacher identity is constructed as teachers assemble shifting 'I-/we-positions' across artefacts and conversations (Arvaja 2023). Stories and narratives, as the artefact employed here, provide opportunities for teachers to shape and reshape who they are by positioning themselves in relation to others, institutions, and broader discourses (Barkhuizen 2016).

Within the framework 'teacher reflection' is seen as a key mechanism in teacher learning, defined, following Anderson (Anderson 2020b, 480), as 'conscious, experientially informed thought, at times involving aspects of evaluation, criticality, and problem-solving and leading to insight, increased awareness, and/or new understanding'. It is facilitated through the combination of intrapersonal narration (e.g. through written or audio-recorded artefacts) and collaborative intersubjectivity provided by NSO.

Consistent with these understandings of identity and reflection, the following premises underpin the theory of learning within the NSO framework:

- (1) Teachers learn by telling their past, present, and future stories to themselves and to others, who can also learn from interacting with them (e.g. Connelly and Clandinin 1990). By reflecting on relevant aspects of their personal history, describing the lesson event as a narrative, and discussing these with a colleague, they are potentially able to uncover the rich insights that intersubjectivity can afford (O'Leary 2022).
- (2) The teacher is trusted to narrate the lesson, choose the focus, lead the discussion and decide what information to collect. It is, therefore, a self-directed procedure, emphasising honest introspection and reflection (O'Leary 2022).
- (3) Since the lesson is self-narrated from the teacher's perspective, it draws upon, interacts with, and potentially modifies the teacher's Personal Practical Knowledge;

the tacit knowledge that teachers acquire through their experiences and interactions with students, colleagues, and their broader communities of practice (Clandinin 2019; Golombek 1998).

- (4) NSO engages teachers in the metacognitive task of stepping back to appraise their own practice, which stimulates self-monitoring and self-evaluation (Özcan and Gerçek 2018), encouraging a more active and self-reliant role in one's own learning.
- (5) As a critical friend, the collaborator makes NSO a social, interactive and egalitarian process, with the chance to learn from another's observations and intersubjectivity while avoiding the more confrontational relationship typical of high-stakes 'summative observation' (O'Leary 2022).
- (6) Because it involves a systematic approach to inquiry (albeit informal) and shareable artefacts (e.g. the story itself), NSO can be considered a type of teacher research (Anderson 2026; Janssen et al., 2023) that can offer useful insights, both to one's self and to wider audiences.
- (7) These same narrative artefacts constitute a record that we can revisit in the future, both to gain insights into how we have changed, and to recall and interact with prior 'selves' as part of a wider identity development narrative – one's career story (Kamali 2024).
- (8) Through the above procedure, NSO encourages more sincere discussion and promotes empathic understanding; putting aside one's personal frame of reference and evaluating others' experiences from their perspective (Geertz 1979).

## The study

In order to better understand the potential impact and feasibility of NSO as theorised above, we conducted a proof-of-concept study involving three teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL), each of whom underwent a single NSO cycle. The research questions (RQs) investigated were:

- (1) In what ways did engaging with the NSO process impact on the participant teachers, considering practical, developmental, reflective and affective perspectives?
- (2) What insights were afforded into the practical implementation of NSO as a procedure for use in continuing professional development and teacher appraisal procedures?

As is typical of a proof-of-concept study, our inquiry was guided by a pragmatist orientation, seeking to adopt the research tools and methods that best enable us to answer these research questions (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2011). As such, we made use of a combination of triangulated qualitative data collection tools in a 'multimethod qualitative study'; a design in which the research questions are answered using multiple qualitative data collection procedures or research methods (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2003, 712). While the NSO framework was itself developed primarily deductively (i.e. moving from theory to practice), to best answer the research questions, we chose to adopt an inductive approach to data

analysis and interpretation to ensure full and rich understanding of the participants' perspectives, voices and concerns (Thomas 2006).

### **Context and participants**

The study was conducted within the school of languages of a Turkish University in Istanbul. Three participant teachers were purposively sampled, identified as committed practitioners with varying backgrounds and experience levels who would provide rich data and useful feedback on the NSO process. It is important to declare that the first author operated as line manager to all three. They were invited to participate, fully aware that the project was experimental and that, if they agreed, the first author would assume the collaborator role for their NSOs. They were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and offered the alternative to undergo a more traditional, live observation (i.e. with the collaborator observing the lesson while taught) instead. All three chose NSO and provided fully informed consent to participate, aware of their right to withdraw at any point if so desired, following ethical approval provided by the same university. All three participants were fully qualified EFL teachers (see Table 1; pseudonyms are used throughout). Only one of the three was Turkish and two had experience working in other countries.

It is here acknowledged that the nature of this relationship will inevitably have influenced their experience of, and feedback upon, the NSO process, particularly concerning the extent to which they may have felt willing and able to offer critical feedback on the process (see Limitations below). Nonetheless, we felt that the prior rapport that the first author had with them, as well as his knowledge of their teaching and backgrounds would offer vital insights into the impact of NSO for this proof-of-concept study. This relationship would help us not only to understand their experiences and feedback, but also to attend fully to their personal and developmental needs under the ethical purview and guidelines of the institution itself, which were followed at all times.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Four types of data were analysed as follows, all with participant prior awareness and relevant consent:

**Table 1.** Teacher participant details.

	Mina	Hande	Ahmed
Experience (years)	13	3	12
NSO class details	General English	General English	English for academic purposes
NSO focus(es) agreed with collaborator	Engaging learners, time management	Giving feedback to learners	Deviation from the lesson plan
Lesson modality	Face-to-face	Face-to-face	Online
Information/data collection means	Journaling	Audio recording	Video recording, journaling

*Note.* Specific personal details (e.g. teachers' nationalities and backgrounds) are omitted to preserve anonymity.

- (1) The participant teachers' written NSO 'stories'.
- (2) The participant teachers' NSO meetings with the collaborator, conducted online and recorded.
- (3) Semi-structured interviews led by the second author upon completion of the NSO process. A generic interview protocol was adapted to each participant's focus and story to elicit:
  - (a) their opinions on their own NSO experience and learning;
  - (b) their critical evaluation of the benefits and limitations of NSO itself when compared to live observations;
  - (c) its practicability as a CPD activity;
  - (d) any other concerns or comments they felt were relevant.
- (4) The collaborator (first author) was interviewed by the second author on his reflections about taking on this role in the NSO process.

In order to provide an *etic* perspective on the data collected, initial data analysis was carried out primarily by the second author, using the framework of General Inductive Analysis, following Thomas's (2006) guidelines. This approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the RQs (necessitating inductive analysis) and its evaluative aims (necessitating transparent and defensible conclusions). The specific stages conducted were:

- (1) Initial reading and loose coding (thematic and *in vivo*) of all data sources;
- (2) Identification of relevant themes emerging from data sources vis-à-vis the RQs;
- (3) Using these themes, data sources were re-read and codes were added to or amended, alongside the development of a coding book (the first author was consulted here);
- (4) Themes were then brought together in a master theme table structured as per the RQs, along with *in vivo* extracts of relevance to enable rapid retrieval and comparison;
- (5) Using the master theme table, potential relationships among themes were identified and, if appropriate, grouped to develop an initial 'model' or thematic 'framework' (Thomas 2006) (the first author was involved from this stage onwards);
- (6) Findings were then organised for presentation, as below, according to the RQs.

Figure 2 presents a summarised version of the coding framework that emerged and evolved during this procedure, extracted from the master theme table (which also includes *in vivo* quotes). This then facilitated comparison with live observation, from which the model presented in Figure 3 was derived (see below).

The final stage of data analysis involved careful participant consultation and validation. Each participant was consulted twice: firstly, to offer feedback on the validity of our interpretation of their personal data relative to the themes identified and the research questions; and secondly, to read and feedback on the pre-submission version of the findings below to see how their NSO was contextualised and discussed alongside that of their peers. At both stages all three participants felt that their experiences and opinions were well represented. Only one minor change to wording was requested and made.

## Findings

The findings are presented here in order of the two RQs. We adopt the teachers' chosen phrase 'traditional observation' (TO) to refer to the live observations conducted by line managers that all had become accustomed to in their prior experience and that they frequently contrasted with NSO.

### Impact of NSO

Analysis of data from the teachers relevant to the first RQ resulted in the following themes in two broad areas (*Authenticity of practice* and *Impact on self*), as summarised in Figure 2.

#### *NSO felt more valid and relevant to practice than traditional observation*

Beginning with the practical domain, all three teachers agreed that, when compared with TO, NSO seemed to be more valid and relevant to their day-to-day practice. TOs were characterised as stressful events that involved a high degree of artificiality, in which teachers were 'over-planning' (Ahmed) and then teaching safe, 'product-oriented', 'robotic' (Mina) lessons that rarely reflected their normal teaching practices. As a result, TOs solicited feedback that was largely irrelevant and less valued by the teacher:

When it is traditional observation, as a teacher, I myself personally try to go with the safe side, not to risk anything. (Mina, Interview)

#### Authenticity of practice

- **NSO feels more authentic as practice than TO:** One continues to teach normally. Therefore, can investigate real issues.
- **Negative impacts of TO:** Stress, performativity, artificiality, outcomes-orientation.
- **Greater freedom to experiment** led to risk taking (often links to confidence, empowerment, autonomy).
- **Concrete insights provided by NSO lead to sustainability** (often links to impact on self; confidence, etc.).

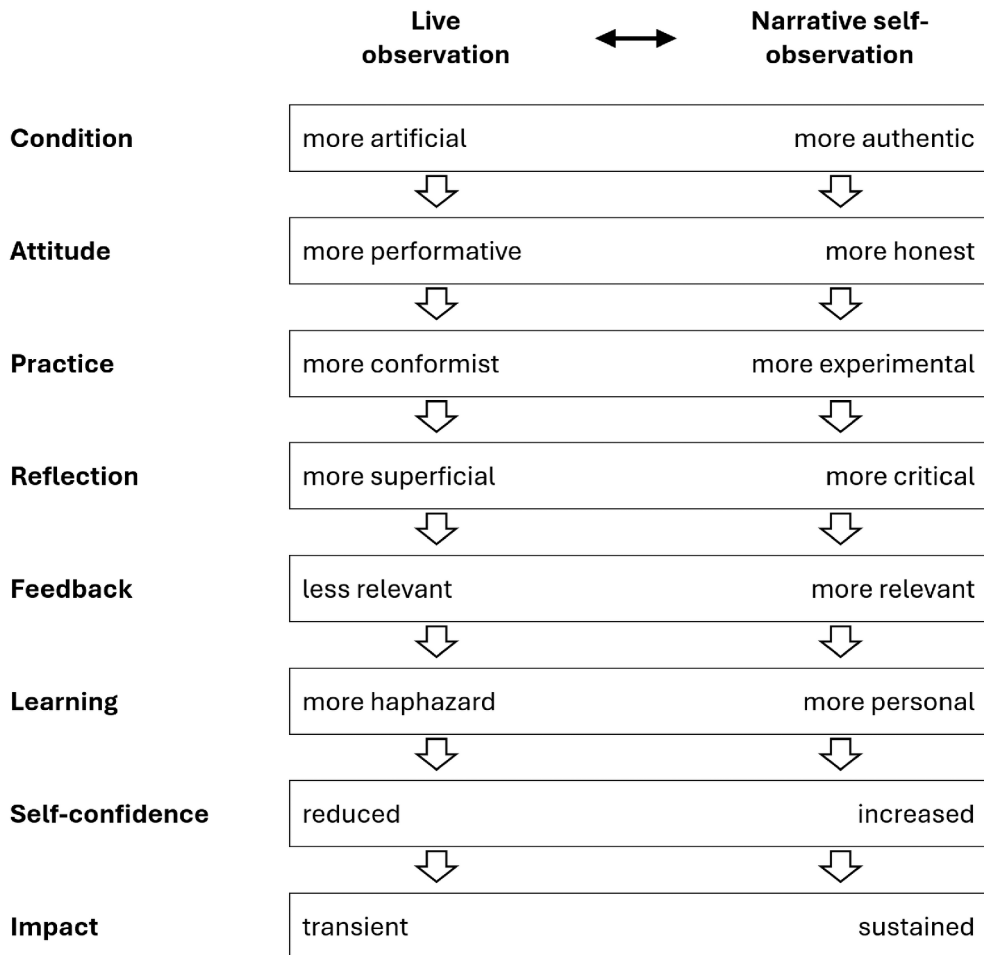
#### Impact on self

- **Honesty with self:** Own beliefs, stories, lack of knowledge; no point lying to one's self.
- **Reflection was deeper** as a result of greater honesty (with self) and authenticity (of practice).
- **Confidence, empowerment and autonomy increased;** being in charge of one's own learning (often links to impact on self).

#### Practicability

- **Easy to implement,** time-wise, workload-wise and clarity, although more sentence prompts may be useful.
- **Collaborator feedback possible and practicable:** Collaborator still has 3 'appointments' – same as TO (2 discussions and 1 observation).
- **Developmental impact** (often links to impact on self).
- **Future use recommendations:**
  - Needs to be done **regularly alongside TO**, not instead of it.
  - More **detailed guidelines** will improve/support future use.
  - **Collaborator** needs to be appropriately experienced and skilled.

Figure 2. The thematic framework that emerged during coding.



**Figure 3.** A comparison of live observation and narrative self-observation.

I don't value, when I get the feedback, I don't tend to read it. It's like a phobia seeing it.  
(Ahmed, Interview)

In contrast, they discussed NSO as being a more authentic process: 'honest' (Hande), 'healthier' (Ahmed), in which 'I did exactly what I do for the other lessons' (Mina, Interview). All three agreed that they experienced much less stress during NSO:

I am more comfortable in self-observation because traditional observations, I don't know. Last time, for example, was very demotivating for me. (Hande, Meeting 3)

**Teachers felt greater freedom and willingness to experiment.** A key difference between NSO and TO reported by the teachers was that during NSO they experienced 'more freedom' (Hande, interview) during the observation process. Not only did they lead the discussion on the choice of observation focus, but they also chose whether and how much to experiment or take risks in the lesson. With this

agency, all three reported experimenting more during their NSO than they would in a TO: 'I could see how much I digressed or left topics sometimes' (Ahmed, Interview). They were aware not only that no-one would immediately evaluate observed shortcomings, but also that their experienced collaborator was ready to support them in the event of difficulties, which occurred for two of the three teachers, likely as a direct result of the risks they were willing to take:

... the advantage of having this NSO observation is that the teacher has more chance to learn from trial and error, like going with a plan to see if it works or not. (Mina, Interview)

### ***Concrete insights were learnt that can be taken forward***

As one of the teachers observed, through NSO, 'you get to find gaps in your own skills and how can you improve those gaps' (Ahmed, interview). In all cases, there was clear evidence in their post-lesson meetings or stories of their identifying clear learning points to take forward and work with further in the future:

Collaborator: What is the most important ... lesson you've learned from this narrative?

Mina: I think the most important thing that I learned was ... that I'm not going to jeopardise my lesson plan because of a last minute decision ... We make such decisions, but maybe I need to think things through more before making the decision in a rush. And that's the most important thing I learned because I do it a lot in many of my lessons. (Mina, Meeting 3)

If I could meet the earlier version of myself at the very beginning of this project, I would have told myself that there is great value in deviation. I mentioned earlier the idea of planned deviation. It sounds a bit counterintuitive – how can you plan for deviation? But I think when planning a class, you can highlight or mark where great opportunities for deviation could arise. (Ahmed, Story)

As someone who had reported being particularly depressed after negative TO experiences, Hande was particularly impressed at the insights that audio recording her lesson provided, enabling her to '[find] solid proof for myself' that she could both experiment with in future, and use to 'defend' her teaching, as she put it in interview. This was corroborated by her story:

Self-observation ... offered current and relevant feedback. I could go back and review particular instances from my classes and do real-time analysis, which would provide more accurate and useful insights. (Hande, Story)

### ***Honesty to self***

Because NSO essentially forced them to confront their own beliefs, experiences and knowledge, all three teachers felt that it forced them to be honest with themselves:

... when you reflect on yourself, you're only lying to yourself if you are going to lie. And it wouldn't make sense as it's intimate. You're writing your own personal reflection that no one's going to see apart from a friend who will help you reflect. (Ahmed, Interview)

I was always thinking, like, can I really be honest with myself and can I really listen to my lecture, my lesson and, how to say, am I ready to do this? Et cetera. So it was not easy for one day and then I just did it because I had to do it and I felt good as well. (Hande, Interview)

Both Mina and Hande reported that the increased self-awareness that resulted enabled them to engage in 'constructive self-criticism' (Hande, see below) and promoted greater honesty with their collaborator. Ahmed observed that the 'self-reflection' that resulted 'forces you to set and achieve your own targets' (Story). Both Mina and Hande seemed to find this confronting of self transformative at times. For example, Hande reported that she found herself being more honest about her teaching when discussing it with her friends who worked in other schools, also observing, '... it affected me and my personality, my honesty, they were all related with my concerns and everything' (Hande, Interview).

### ***Teacher reflection during NSO was deep and meaningful***

Largely as a result of the above factors (especially greater honesty to self, authenticity of practice and willingness to experiment), there was clear evidence from both their stories and their collaborator meetings that all three teachers engaged critically and extensively with their own assumptions, beliefs and prior knowledge. While reflection had long been central to Ahmed's teaching, he nonetheless found NSO a suitable tool for stimulating such reflection. In the case of Mina and Hande there was encouraging evidence of what Mina called the 'profound impact' of self-reflection and journaling during NSO. Hande observed that she was 'able to gain deeper personal insights that an outside observer may have missed' (Story). Both found the opportunity to begin the process with a backstory helped them to be honest with themselves and their collaborator, to reflect upon who they were, where they had come from and where they were going:

This experience has been an eye-opener for me. It has allowed me to realise the power of systematic self-observation and how useful it can be alongside traditional observation. It has also made it possible for me to understand the power of looking back at my journey as an English teacher, how I started, where I am now and where I can go in the future. This vision becomes much clearer by documenting it. (Mina, Story)

On several occasions in their post-lesson meetings, through critical self-evaluation, the teachers made links between their prior beliefs, their decision making in class and their practices or knowledge base in ways that are likely to inform their future practice usefully:

... at the end of every meeting and at the end of writings, I went back to my notes and I said, okay, I used this. Did it work? Well, yeah. Would I make any changes? Maybe I would do, I would apply this one. Would it work? Maybe. Okay, so this is what I understand actually from this constructive self-criticism. (Hande, Interview)

### ***Teachers experienced greater confidence and empowerment during the NSO process***

Primarily because the teachers felt that they were in charge of their own inquiry during NSO, all reported feeling greater power over a process that all had previously discussed as being disempowering (i.e. TO). This power was linked directly by all three to a greater sense of self-confidence in their ability to solve their own problems and build autonomy as a result:

I think when it is narrative observation the teacher has more power definitely. You feel more powerful because you are like in charge of the class. And the self confidence is more. (Mina, Interview)

Ahmed, who already had a firm belief in the uniqueness of his dyslexia as a positive attribute, found the confidence to bring it up in class with his learners during his NSO lesson. He deviated from his lesson plan to share this with them as a means to empower them to confront their own personal challenges. There was even direct evidence of Hande's increased confidence in her understanding of feedback (her self-observation focus) in her post-lesson meeting, when compared to meetings before the lesson, as demonstrated in her confident responses to several probing collaborator prompts:

Collaborator: I'm wondering why you needed more time on content feedback.

Hande: Because most of the parts of the lesson was about the language, target language, which was reported speech and especially one student, he affected the class as well. He had problems with that structure and he always finds it difficult, according to what he said. (Hande, Meeting 3)

### ***Practicability of NSO***

Analysis of data from the teachers relevant to the second RQ resulted in themes covering implementation practicalities, developmental impact and recommendations from participants.

#### ***The NSO process was logical and relatively easy to implement***

The three teachers reported that the NSO procedure was generally 'smooth and convenient' (Hande) and 'guidance was clear' (Ahmed). The time commitments and workload for teachers and collaborator generally seemed to be similar to TOs. While teachers complete more writing than they would for a TO, this writing was generally seen to be natural and useful and therefore not onerous. Hande found the informal writing style that she adopted in her story less inhibitive than more formal writing, and, as discussed above, the teachers appreciated the opportunity to share their backstory with the collaborator.

All three meetings were found to be 'necessary', 'useful' and 'quite easy'. 'We just talk', as Hande observed (Interview). This was supported by evidence from the meetings themselves. For example, during Ahmed's pre-lesson meeting, the collaborator was able to remind him of his chosen observation focus (deviation from the lesson plan), as this was (understandably) not apparent in the lesson plan itself. Despite not directly observing the NSO lessons, it was notable that the collaborator was able to provide useful feedback afterwards on decisions made during the NSO lesson and discuss future NSO focuses with all three teachers.

***NSO has potential for long-term developmental impact.*** All three teachers felt NSO may play a useful role in long-term teacher development, both individually and programmatically, as NSO cycles can be repeated, stories can be developed, returned to and built upon. Hande observed, 'I was able to customise my professional development' (Story) and saw its potential for longer term impact if applied regularly. While Ahmed felt that he needed several NSO cycles for significant change to occur, he clearly wanted to continue with it. After experiencing several challenges in her NSO lesson as a result of her risk

taking, Mina was able to step back to recognise that ‘how you develop as a teacher’ was more important than ‘the result of your class’ (Mina, Interview).

All three also felt that NSO would be useful for other teachers; Ahmed was considering using some of the elements in his role as pre-faculty coordinator and Mina provided a clear rationale for how it may help novice teachers, discussing how she would have benefitted from the NSO process in her early career to help build ‘stronger foundations’ for her own practice.

### ***Critical reflections and suggestions for future use of NSO***

All three teachers and the collaborator agreed that NSO should be used alongside TO, rather than replacing it; all felt that *both* were necessary. Both Mina and Hande recognised that, despite the stress they caused, TOs had several advantages over NSOs, including the ability of an in-class observer to spot potential issues or opportunities beyond a chosen focus (Mina) and the learning that resulted from writing an outcomes-oriented lesson plan (Hande).

Based on his experiences from living and working in several countries worldwide, Ahmed cautioned that the kind of reflection that NSO requires may be a ‘Western concept’ that ‘requires mature teachers who genuinely want to improve’ (Story). Nevertheless, it is notable that Hande and Mina both took to NSO reflection readily, despite never having previously had opportunities for reflective writing. Ahmed also suggested that for NSO to be integrated fully into teacher professional development programmes, ‘management needs to understand the value of it, then they should assign time for teachers to do this’ (Ahmed, Interview).

Despite finding our original guidance notes useful, two teachers suggested additional guidance would be beneficial, including more questions to scaffold story writing stages (Mina), clearer suggestions for data collection (Mina) and more sentence prompts/narrative frames to help teachers with the writing (Ahmed).

### ***Contrasting the impacts of NSO and live observation***

The findings presented here suggest a number of important differences in tendencies between the two observation processes (i.e. ‘traditional’ live observations and NSO). These tendencies are shown in [Figure 3](#), presented as poles on a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, to recognise variation. They are presented in experiential sequence to indicate that each may be causative of those that follow, with impacts (positive or negative) potentially being cumulative.

In the example of traditional observation, the artificial condition resulting from the combination of the observer effect and the stressful nature of the event causes teachers to adopt a more performative attitude in which they overplan and then teach a safe, conformist lesson that may have little validity for their day-to-day practice. As a result, they may engage in superficial or ‘display reflection’ (Anderson 2020a), receive feedback that is largely irrelevant and undervalued as a result. The likelihood of useful learning occurring is lower, teacher self-efficacy and autonomy are reduced and the resultant impact is more likely to be transient.

In contrast, the more authentic conditions of NSO lead to teachers adopting a more honest attitude towards the process. As a result, they are willing to engage in

experimental (e.g. risk-taking, spontaneous) practices that are likely to yield useful insights. The reflection (both written and dialogic) that results is therefore deeper, infused with self-criticality and creates opportunities for more relevant feedback from the collaborator. Any learning that results is therefore more relevant to a teacher's personality and identity; their sense of self-efficacy is likely to increase and the impact to be sustained.

### **Limitations of the study**

Several important limitations of this proof-of-concept study should be acknowledged. Firstly, as mentioned above, the relationship between the first author and the participants may have influenced data collected in a number of ways, increasing their willingness to cooperate and complete the NSO cycle, and potentially augmenting their perceived impact of, and positiveness towards, NSO. They may also have felt pressure not to be too critical of the process. Secondly, participants' impressions of TO were based on their recollections of prior experiences, rather than from directly collected data, and may be influenced by recall effects or specific negative experiences caused, for example, by the observer behaviour, rather than the observation process itself. Thirdly, participants were purposively sampled as committed practitioners; less dedicated teachers may be less willing to commit the time and attention required to facilitate useful learning. Finally, the study was conducted on a small scale within a Turkish context (albeit with participants of three different nationalities), which limits the generalisability of the findings. The implications of these limitations are further discussed below.

### **Discussion**

This proof-of-concept study explores NSO as an innovative framework for CPD, one that draws upon unseen observation, autoethnography and narrative inquiry to offer an alternative to 'traditional' live observation. This new tool uniquely employs narratives to delve into the past, present, and future stories of the teachers, prioritising the consideration of teachers' identity and personality. It is thereby potentially able to ensure a more personalised and effective approach to professional growth (Barkhuizen 2016), providing, of course, it is used appropriately, electively, and critically; at least until further evidence of its utility and impact becomes available.

It is important to acknowledge that the aims and potential utility of NSO are somewhat different from those of TO, which we see NSO offering an alternative to, rather than replacement for. As respondents above indicated, the two processes are likely to be complimentary, each with different strengths and weaknesses. As noted by O'Leary (2022), TO is frequently used as a tool for quality evaluation and performance management rather than for professional development. Yet TO will also continue to be useful for the professional development, both of less experienced teachers (e.g. during early career and pre-service mentoring) and those experiencing difficulties or challenges that an experienced observer may be able to help with (see Freeman's 'Supervisory' and 'Alternatives' approaches to observation; Freeman 1982). Nonetheless, our study indicates that NSO is a potentially useful alternative to TO that offers a primarily *emic*, teacher-led vehicle for teacher development and research, rather than an *etic* one for teacher appraisal. Like other forms of self-observation, we found it encouraged meaningful

reflection, increased self-awareness and honest self-evaluation (e.g. Mercado and Baecher 2014; O'Leary 2022). This emic perspective is augmented by its autoethnographic design, which enables NSO to access data that TO cannot capture, not only data concerning the teacher's personal world and concerns but also regarding the broader ethnographic landscape of the observation (Yazan 2024).

NSO shares with unseen observation an emphasis on the need for a collaborator as a mediator for the emic reflective processes involved. The collaborator plays a pivotal role in guiding the observation process, assisting the teacher in selecting focal points, critically engaging with the self-observation report, and proposing actionable solutions. Such collaboration is usually seen as optional in video self-observation (Mercado and Baecher 2014). While O'Leary (2022) suggests two collaborator meetings within the unseen observation cycle, we found three such meetings to be important to NSO. While the addition of a third meeting increases time obligations for teacher and observer, given that one of these meetings is brief (Meeting 2 took approximately 20 minutes) and no live observation is required (unlike TO), we consider this to be a manageable and useful addition. Both our data and O'Leary's (2022) discussion of the collaborator role indicate that collaborators need to be experienced, knowledgeable individuals with good interpersonal skills. As such, the comparative merits of having peers and line managers as collaborators requires further investigation. It may be the case, for example, that peer support may transform the process somewhat into one of dialogic comparison of beliefs and interests, rather than focusing on the peer-mediated exploration of issues emerging from the lesson itself relative to a specific teacher's own identity and development.

We consider the narrative dimension of NSO to be an important addition to the unseen observation process through the inclusion of a backstory, narrative lesson planning, the lesson story itself and the conclusion. The findings presented above indicate that all of these contributed usefully to the teacher's ability to situate, examine and reflect upon their practices more deeply and more sustainably (i.e. the ethnographic component) than might otherwise be the case without this narrative accompaniment that essentially constitutes the core teacher research vehicle of NSO. In their discussion of narrative (self-)inquiry research as a vehicle for teacher professional development, Johnson and Golombek (2002) note that 'inquiry into experience enables teachers to act with foresight. It gives them increasing control over their thoughts and actions; grants their experiences enriched, deepened meaning; and enables them to be more thoughtful and mindful of their work' (6–7). Our study supports this, suggesting that the increased self-awareness and improved metacognition that occur during narrative inquiry can be achieved through a relatively straightforward (compared to some forms of teacher research), and practically focused lesson observation cycle that teachers can potentially build upon in future NSO cycles. However, because no observer is present during the NSO lesson itself, there is always a concurrent danger that it could serve to reinforce teacher personal biases, rather than surfacing these for examination and critique. Further, if imposed on teachers, like any vehicle for facilitating teacher reflection, there is a danger it could lead to 'display reflection' (Anderson 2020a), rather than the deeper examination of one's beliefs and values that narrative inquiry is able to facilitate.

In addition, we would like to suggest that the collaborator, by acting as both mediator and reader of the story, also becomes a co-researcher of sorts. They are simultaneously able to learn from and develop their relationship with the teacher, understanding much

more about them than they could through TO or unseen observation. Particularly, if the collaborator is a line manager, teacher educator or mentor, such understanding may become important beyond the observation process in informing them about the needs, challenges and opportunities – both external (e.g. practices) and internal (e.g. beliefs, values, self-awareness) – experienced by teachers they work with. This has obvious, important implications for professional development programs within both institutions and wider systems (see Fullan 2015; Korthagen 2017).

Researchers have long been aware that for professional development to be effective it must go beyond engaging the teacher solely in the relationship between theory and practice (i.e. a focus on *praxis* is necessary but not sufficient). For meaningful change, professional development must encourage teachers to surface, examine and critically evaluate their underlying beliefs and assumptions about teaching (see e.g. Fullan 2015), something that scholars have argued may be best achieved through engagement in ‘critical reflection’ (e.g. Farrell 2022). In his recent proposal for what he calls teacher ‘professional development 3.0’ Korthagen (2017) goes further, to suggest that to maximise teacher learning, teacher reflection must penetrate to the core qualities that define both who we are as teachers and the ‘mission’ that motivates and sustains us. He argues that a third element, the ‘person’, needs to be added to the theory-practice framework and that this can only be realised when teachers work towards ‘coherence between [their] core qualities, ideals, sense of identity, beliefs, competencies, behaviour and the characteristics of the environment’ (Korthagen 2017, 397). Both the theoretical justification for NSO presented earlier and the findings presented above indicate that NSO is able to put the person of the teacher more firmly at the centre of the lesson observation procedure than TO. Our findings suggest that the three teachers engaged in ‘core reflection’ on a number of ‘core qualities’ as listed by Korthagen (e.g. creativity, decisiveness, spontaneity, flexibility; 396) relative to their immediate contexts of practice. Korthagen also points out the ‘need for learning in those responsible for teacher education programmes’ (391) if they are to be effective in their own work (also see Fullan 2015). As discussed above, we feel that NSO creates such co-learning opportunities for collaborators working alongside teachers, through both the meetings and their story reading, thereby validating NSO as an appropriate tool for Korthagen’s (2017) professional development 3.0.

## Conclusion

This study has introduced, conceptualised and trialled NSO; an innovative framework for professional development that empowers teachers to investigate their practices, beliefs, identity, personality and agency. It is also possible that it may serve as a useful gateway to teacher research, one that is less intimidating and more familiar to many practitioners than, say, action research.

With the above discussed limitations and caveats in mind, the findings reported here are promising, indicating that the NSO framework is deserving of further use, research and adaptation. We therefore encourage teacher educators to trial the use of NSO in their own contexts, perhaps as a supplement to traditional observation,

either as recommended in the framework itself, or with adaptations, and to share their experiences (see Supplementary Materials for further guidance). We call on researchers to conduct larger scale studies to evaluate the effectiveness of NSO with larger cohorts of teachers, including of different subjects and over longer periods of time. There is a need for direct comparisons with TO and also for attempts to evaluate its actual impact (rather than self-reported) on practices, and, ultimately, on teacher effectiveness, self-efficacy and well-being. Future studies should also prioritise more independent evaluation of its impact than was possible in this study. As such, we offer NSO as a work-in-progress, a tool for critical trial and experimentation that may serve as a useful counterpart to traditional, live lesson observation in a range of teacher education contexts worldwide.

## Note

1. Both Quirke (1996) and O’Leary (2022) cite Rinvolucrí (1988) as the originator of unseen observation, however, Rinvolucrí’s article does not discuss it; it may originate in his earlier work (Phil Quirke, pers. comm., 13 November 2024).

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