

UPGRADING TEACHING EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This work is about observation as a learning tool. It is about being an observer in the language learning classroom and learning from the observation of classroom processes. Being in the classroom as an observer opens up a range of experiences and processes which can become part of the raw material of a teacher's professional growth. This book is designed to show teachers; how to use these experiences to learn more about their own teaching. It aims, therefore to make observation in the classroom a learning experience. This is done by providing a bank of tasks which guides teachers through the process of observing, reflecting and drawing conclusions.

Key words: *observation, experience, teaching, method, approach*

Observation is a multi-faceted tool for learning. The experience of observing comprises more than the time actually spent in the classroom. It also includes preparation for the period in- the classroom and follow-up from the time spent there. The preparation can include the selection of a focus and purpose and a method of data collection, as well as collaboration with others involved. The follow-up includes analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data and experiences acquired in the classroom, and reflection on the whole experience.

It is important to say at this point that observation is a skill that can be learned and can improve with practice. It is often assumed, somewhat naively, that the ability to learn through observing classroom events is fairly intuitive. In fact, while few would deny the role of intuition in the preparation of teachers, the ability to see with acuity, to select, identify and priorities among a myriad of co-occurring experiences is something that can be guided, practiced, learned and improved. It is a major aim of this book to encourage these types of learning processes among beginning and practicing teachers.

Repeated reference refers observation as a method of data collection and a process involving representations and recordings in which reality is depicted. Techniques of observation are not themselves new: they have been used in scientific research for studying the behavior of men and animals. Anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists were concerned primarily with describing 'observable behaviors and activities' with the 'systematic recording in objective terms of behavior in the process of occurring' and describing these in their entirety from beginning to end.

One could treat observation as a familiar and natural phenomenon that does not need any definition. Observation in the language classroom is treated either as a research procedure for in -service professional development or as a learning tool for pre-service teachers.

There is always the possibility of error in the observation process. Some of these errors frequently occur when making judgements and primarily concern language behaviour:

- a) error of central tendency
- b) error of leniency or generosity
- c) primacy or recency effect
- d) halo effect
- e) logical error

A first error occurs in using a rating scale. The effect 'central tendency' in a series of judgments about objectivity of quantifiable stimuli, when the large stimuli are underestimated and the small ones overestimated.

An error of leniency or generosity could arise in making favorable verbal judgments using personality scales. Fassinacht clarifies that in the personality scales a number of questions relating to one particular personality trait are drawn together and the answers to these questions are given in the form of 'yes', 'no', 'sometimes', 'often' which might not reflect objective reality.

A third error occurs as a result of the order in which perceptual events happen. The problem is that in behavior testing the first impression could have a distorting effect on later data collection and thus lead to errors. Diary keeping, events that are embarrassing or painful when they occur 'often lose their sting after weeks of reflection'.

A fourth error, halo effect, when the evaluator 'has the tendency when judging a personality trait to be influenced by a general impression or a salient characteristic'.

Logical errors or error of theory reveals due to the theoretical assumptions of the observer. It is now widely accepted that observation is always 'theory-laden'. For a teacher at the beginning of their career, there are some general issues that the teacher would need to observe and identify. The focus would be on general pedagogic knowledge, which includes issues such as classroom management, differentiation and instructional strategies.

Classroom observation can often help expose teachers to new methods of teaching that might not have occurred to them beforehand. It may be threatening to be subject to peer observation since teachers might feel territorial and defensive in their classroom and protective of their resources and ideas. However, when it is done in a considerate and respectful fashion, observation can be beneficial for both the observing teacher and the teacher being observed. Below are some benefits of observation in the classroom .

Benefits for the observer...

- Observe new techniques, strategies, ideas and resources
- Gain insight into one's own strategies and techniques
- Observe student reactions from a different perspective
- Help create a professional learning community with the best interests of the students in mind
- Personal Professional Development and growth

Benefits for the observed...

- Chance to see class through someone else' eyes
- Chance to re-evaluate the classroom from a different perspective
- Chance to receive input (suggestions, ideas, resources) from a colleague
- Creation of a professional learning community with the best interests of the students in mind
- Personal Professional Development and growth

Best practices involves the sharing of resources, techniques and strategies. Allowing another teacher into one's classroom allows for sharing between both of them; it also allows for self-reflection by all involved. Teachers are responsible for their own growth and development, and observation is an excellent alternative to the traditional Professional Development seminars.

An observer faces the dilemma in choosing systematic or ethnographic approaches. The main problem of ethnographical approach lies in its very nature – it is so broad that it demands a highly trained observer to do a competent and reliable observation. 'An untrained observer may be overwhelmed by the complexity of what goes on and not be able to focus on important events in the classroom'. Pre-specified coding systems in systematic observation are exclusively concerned with 'what can be categorized or measured'. Thus they may distort or ignore the qualitative features which they claim to investigate. At the same time limiting the attention of the

observer can help improve reliability. Reliability and validity are the most important criteria for assuring the quality of the data collection procedures. The criterion of reliability provides information on whether the data collection procedure is 'consistent and accurate'. The researchers suspect that observers may unintentionally impose their own biases and impressions on the observed situation. The ethnographic approach the following types:

- a) inter-rater reliability (to examine to which different observers agree on the data collected from the observation);
- b) test-retest reliability (to check stability of data collection over time);
- c) regrinding (to repeat the data collection and compare both results);
- d) parallel form (to examine to which extent two versions of the same data collection procedure are really collecting the same data)

To assure reliability different methodologists suggest involving at least two observers to carry a 'sequential analysis' or to achieve 'inter-observer agreement'. The idea of the former procedure is to carry out the analysis concurrently with data collection in the sense that 'one may 'step back' from the data, so as to reflect on their possible meaning'. Thus further subsequent data gathering will direct the observer either to abandon or pursue the original hypothesis. Using systematic schemes with pre-specified categories they refine, or 'index' the definitions and categories of observation by 'applying in a consistent manner the procedures for data selection, collection, grouping, inclusion, exclusion etc.'.

Types and evidences of validity.

- a) evidence on content validity which demonstrates appropriateness of data collection against the content to be measured;
- b) criterion validity which provides an indication as to whether the instrument can be measured against some other criterion and compared with the previous results (concurrent validity), and whether the procedure is capable of foretelling certain behavior (predictive validity);
- c) construct validity which examines whether the data collection procedure is a good representation of and consistent with current theories underlying the variable being measured.

Another term to the content validity and suggests 'treatment validity' which relates to the process component of process-product study and demonstrates that the treatment was in fact implemented and that it was identifiable different from whatever it was being compared with.

An observation task is a focused activity to work on while observing a lesson in progress. It focuses on one or a small number of aspects of teaching or learning and requires the observer to collect data or information from the actual lesson, such as the language a teacher uses or observers may watch different lessons for the same reason, or in the case of a videoed or demonstration lesson, many observers may be involved simultaneously. The data collected may later be collated for purposes of analysis and interpretation.

Using an observation task helps the observer in two important ways:

1. It limits the scope of what one is observing and allows one to focus on one or two particular aspects, such as listening only to a certain type of question, or charting one student's concentration for a ten-minute time span, or recording non-verbal signals.
2. It provides a convenient means of collecting data that frees the observer from forming an opinion or making an on-the-spot evaluation during the lesson. The judgmental and interpretive side comes later, after the lesson, and will be based on the complete data that has been collected.

The classroom observation tasks constitute a representative sample if they reflect all the aspects of the original document. At the same time they should be treated as guidance so not every aspect of observation might occur at the lesson. The blank can emerge due to the teaching approach or inattention of an observer. The latter version can lead to wrong assumptions and destroy accuracy of data presentation. That is why a supervisor should consider every case objectively.

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