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An investigation into the effect of classroom observation on teaching methodology

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the significance of "classroom observation" in assessing teaching procedure and to suggest appropriate ways for planning and carrying out the classroom observation in such a way that desirable results can be achieved in terms of developing the teachers and using their capabilities effectively. This study was conducted over a week of visits to an Iranian institute. The observer worked with three peer observers who used the same checklist to record their observations. The participants in both classes were adults and were in Pre-intermediate level. The finding of this research indicated that the teachers learned much about how to teach by observing their qualified peers and the experiences helped them improve their self- awareness and become a more reflective teacher.

Keywords: Classroom management; classroom observation

1. Introduction

Although there are several types of observational procedures that have been used to examine effective teaching (e.g., charts, rating scales, checklists, and narrative descriptions), the most widely used procedure or research method has been systematic classroom observation based on interactive coding systems (Martinez, 2011). These interactive coding systems allow the observer to record nearly everything that students and teachers do during a given time interval. They are very objective and typically do not require

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the observer to make any high judgments about the behaviors they observe in the classroom. Some of the more commonly used observation instruments are the Brophy-Good Dyadic Interaction System, Stallings Observation System, and the Classroom Observation Schedule. Some of the major strengths of using classroom observation allow educators to do the following: To permit researchers to study the processes of education in naturalistic setting, to provide more detailed and precise evidence than other data sources, to stimulate change and verify that the change occurred and to provide a coherent, well-substantiated knowledge base about effective instruction. Classroom observation is an increasingly common method for assessing teaching. For a teacher to be observed, an observation can provide useful feedback that might not be revealed by other assessment methods (Center for Instructional Development and Research, 1998).

The process of observation and evaluation require a very high degree of professional ethics and objectivity. Effective peer observation requires training in observational and analytical skills. The process of peer observation involves faculty peers who review an instructor's performance through classroom observation and examination of instructional materials including course design. Peer observation can produce the following evidence: Comments on the relationship between instructor acts and student behaviors, comparison with methods peers consider to be good, specific suggestions for instructors to improve teaching and dialogue with peer about teaching strategies and best practices. The major strengths of peer observations are: peers are familiar with college goals, priorities, values, faculty problems, peer observation helps faculty upgrade their own profession, peer observers can be chosen from instructor's content area and both the observer and the observed may learn some new teaching strategies and open a dialogue about teaching and learning.

The problem to be answered in the present study was to determine the significance of "classroom observation" in assessing teaching procedure. Major goals of classroom observation are preparing beginning teachers with enough skills and knowledge to improve their teaching continuously through analysis and reflection, seeing the various interpersonal interactions between the teacher and those interactions occurring among students in the classroom and improving teachers' classroom instruction based on feedback from individual classroom or school (Good, 1988). An observer should write down everything he or she sees and hears. He or she should become aware that his or her prior experiences, personal style, and personal world view and biases will not be reflected in his or her perceptions. He or she should try to step back and observe again with an almost "empty" mind, that is, empty of his or her prejudgments. Of course, this may be difficult for the observer. The observer should develop a system for the observations by the followings: The observer should focus one day's observation on the class as a whole. He or she might want to record every interaction between the teacher and the class. The observer should do this a number of times later on other days to capture how the tone is set at the beginning of class. The observer should focus on the nonverbal behavior of the teacher. He or she should also focus on specific student activities while holding back the tendency to problem solve how he or she would deal with such behaviors (Joyce, Hersh, and McKibbin, 1983). In conducting classroom observations the following steps are required: the preobservation discussion, the-class visit, after-the-class visit, the postobservation discussion. (GSI Teaching and Resource Center 1991).

The Preobservation Discussion: The pre-observation discussion between the teacher and the observer helps to alleviate anxiety and provides the observer with information about how the section is going and what the teacher would like to accomplish on the day of the visit. It also enables the teacher to identify areas that he or she would like feedback on.

The-Class Visit: The teacher had better informed his or her students that the university or institute has a policy that teachers should be observed in the classroom and receive feedback on their teaching, so the observer should be introduced to the class. The observer should sit in the back or to the side and should not interrupt the flow of the class. The observer should list beginning activities observed, briefly list, analyze, and discuss various room arrangements seen, identify all areas of environments which require

pupils to learn/use specific procedures, make a list of procedures that the master teacher will use with pupils, list master teacher's rules for student behavior (in addition to procedures), list positive consequences and rein forces used, list negative consequences and rein forces used, note how teacher's behavioral expectations/ rules are presented, record how teachers deal with inappropriate behavior, record how teachers reinforce appropriate behavior.

After-the-Class Visit: The observer should review the notes he or she took during the class and consider what went well and what areas might need improvement. In reviewing his or her notes, the observer should also consider how the teacher has done in the areas that the teacher has requested feedback on.

The post-observation Discussion: The post-observation discussion should be a dialogue about how the class went. The problem to be answered in the present study was to determine the significance of "classroom observation" in assessing teaching procedure and to suggest appropriate ways for planning and carrying out the classroom observation in such a way that desirable results can be achieved in terms of developing the teachers and using their capabilities effectively. Some of the major strengths of using classroom observation allow educators to do the following: First, permit the researchers to study the processes of education in naturalistic settings; second, provide more detailed and precise evidence than other data sources; and third, stimulate change and verify that the change occurred; fourth, provide a coherent, well-substantiated knowledge base about effective instruction (Waxman, Hersh C. 1995).

2. Review of the literature

The research on preparation of teachers proves that it is an integrated activity in the process of which language teachers are taught to teach (Freeman, 1989; Kagan, 1992; Kennedy, 1993; Strevens, 1974; Swan, 1993; Wallace, 1991). This, of course, is not a new idea. The process has long been viewed as "a highly complex activity which requires knowledge, understanding, practice and experience before it can be carried out in a fully professional and effective manner" (Strevens, 1974, p.26).

Teachers are different personalities and being involved in the learning/teaching process, they are given the chance to be individuals. The teacher as a personality with his or her own beliefs, experiences and values can be seen as the humane dimension that goes beyond the traditional views (Farrell, 2007; Freeman & Johnson, 1998).This dimension can be of extreme importance when considering teacher education as an interactive process in which many individuals take part (Kerry & Mayes, 1995; Maynard & Furlong, 1995). The underlying assumption is that the process of teaching practice has two basic educating strategies: training and development (Freeman, 1989). Both of these strategies are seen as essential parts of preparing student teachers for their job. At the same time, the underlying assumption is that observation is a powerful tool which gives participants opportunities to gather data and gain insights into the classroom (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Wajnryb, 1992). Many of the reviews and summaries of the classroom observation research, such as that of Walberg (1991), have consistently found that a number of classroom behaviors significantly relate to students' academic achievement.

Several aspects of classroom instruction such as conducting daily reviews, presenting new material, conducting guided practice, providing feedback and correctives, conducting independent practice, and conducting weekly and monthly reviews have been found to be significantly related to students' academic achievement. In other words, research using systematic classroom observation has provided us with a substantial knowledge base that has helped us understand effective teaching. Observations are usually preceded and followed by discussions; therefore, when integrated in the broader context of teaching practice, classroom observations are perceived to play a significant role in teacher formation. There is

also observation for assessment; indeed, this was the traditional, and often the only reason for observing teachers and classrooms (Gebhard, 1999; Sheal, 1989; Wajnryb, 1992; Williams, 1989).

According to Willams, classroom observations should be "developmental rather than judgemental" (1989, p.85) in the sense that they offer opportunities for teachers to improve their awareness, abilities to interact and evaluate their own teaching behaviors' (Maingay, 1988; Williams, 1989). There is no doubt that the classroom is a place where many processes of learning and teaching occur. In this respect, it is extremely relevant to consider what to observe and how to observe it (Wajnryb, 1992). What the teacher does and what really happens in the foreign language classroom are what is usually observed. However, apart from the teacher and his or her contribution to the situation, the learners and their contribution need to be described (Allright, 1988). Furthermore, in order to observe the classroom and what goes on in it for the purpose of continued learning and exploration, it is essential to capture the events of the classroom as accurately and objectively as possible and not only to make a record of impressions (Allright, 1988; Wajnryb, 1992). In this respect observation can be more global or more focused. The importance of observation procedures in addition to coding schemes has been emphasized in recent research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

Observation sheets can provide meaningful tasks and offer an opportunity to collect focused data for reflection on the area of concern (Wajnryb, 1992; Wallace, 1991). They help the observer to perceive the happenings in a systematic way in order to understand and analyse them (Wajnryb, 1992); therefore, they are appropriate to utilize in order to observe the classroom and what goes on in it for the purpose of continued learning and exploration. Wajnryb claims that the process of recording the events of the classroom for further reference is "a multi-faceted tool for learning" (Wajnryb, 1992, p.1), Allwright sees observation as "the essential key to provide relevant feedback" and "a means of a more trainee-centred approach to teacher training" (Allwright, 1988, p.57). As learning to teach is a recycling process as well as a decision-making process, a great deal of reflection is needed in order to ensure effective training and development (Wallace, 1991). As a wide range of processes take place in the language learning classroom, reflection on these is impossible without the process of observation, therefore, it is particularly relevant to bear in mind that recalling and analyzing data can be considered essential for facilitating the reflective process (Wajnryb, 1992).

Observation and discussions after the lesson offer student teachers an opportunity to become aware of how issues are related and interact. This allows them to develop particular skills and techniques, as well as leading them towards professional improvement and experience. Thus, observation can be seen as an important means for developing as a teacher.

One of the major challenges in education is ensure that all students are prepared for today's more technologically advanced world. This means that all students should have access and use of technology in schools. Unfortunately, there have been several conceptual articles, personal accounts, studies, and reviews of research that have found that technology is not equitably distributed in schools and across all types of students. While there are several sources or factors that may account for the inequitable access and use of technology, there are two individual characteristics of students, sex and ethnicity, that appear to be prevalent attributes of these differences. More specifically, there is evidence that some students are likely to become victims of differential access to technology based upon their sex and ethnicity. (Owens & Waxman, 1988). Several educators have found that the use of technology in the schools widens the achievement gaps between African American, Hispanic, and white students (Apple, 1988, 1991; Cummins & Sayers, 1990; Hativa, 1988; Johnson & Maddux, 1991; Kirby, Oescher, Smith Gratto, & Wilson, 1990; Kirby & Styron, 1994; Sutton, 1991). Elementary and secondary students from higher-income families, for example, have been found to use computers in school and in their homes more frequently than students from lower-income families (Cole & Griffin, 1987; Jacobs, 1988). African American and Hispanic students in urban schools have also been found to have less access to computers than white students

(Office of Technology Assessment, 1988; Picciano, 1991; Picciano & Kinsler, 1991; Piller, 1992). Most of these studies, however, have been either: (a) relatively small-scale studies comparing one urban district to a suburban district or (b) studies that have examined technology use in general. In addition to problems associated with computer access and use, studies have found that there are inequities related to how computers are used across school settings.

Urban schools with predominantly African American and Hispanic students, for example, have been found to typically use computers for tutorial and rote drill-and-practice programs, while suburban schools with students from higher-income families have been generally been found to use computers for problem solving and programming (Cole & Griffin, 1987; Office of Technology Assessment, 1988; Sutton, 1991). This "software tracking" or differentiation of how technology is used has serious implications for student learning because drill-and-practice software typically emphasizes basic skills or lower-levels of learning, while the use of computer programming and problem solving software focuses on higher-level thinking (Picciano, 1994; Simmons, 1987). Another important issue that needs to be addressed related to technology use in schools is the equity of opportunity for male and female students. Several articles, studies, and reviews of research have found that female students report using technology significantly less than males in science and mathematics classes (Collis, Kass, & Kieren, 1989; Linn. 1985; Sanders, 1989; Selby & Ryba, 1993). Furthermore, there are studies that have found sex inequities favoring males during classroom instruction related to technology (Koontz, 1991). Several other research studies have reported similar differences between secondary-school male and female students' use of technology (Arenz & Lee, 1990; Culley, 1988; Voogt, 1987). On the other hand, there is some recent evidence suggesting that sex-related differences in technology use do not exist. In an observational study of 1,315 middle-school students, for example, Huang and Waxman (1996) found that there were no significant differences between males and females on technology use in mathematics. Brophy and Good's 1974 review of the research found that consistent sex-related differences exist in the classroom in teachers' interaction patterns. Boys, for example, typically have been found to receive more praise and criticism in the classroom than girls. They also found that teachers have more behavioral, procedural and academic interactions with boys than girls. Boys have been found to ask more questions in the classrooms, and teachers have been found to ask boys more questions. Padron, Waxman and Huang (1997) observed student behavior differences between successful and less successful elementary school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. They found successful students spent significantly more time interacting with teachers for instructional purposes, whereas less successful students spent more time interacting with other students for social or personal purposes.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted over a week of visits to an Iranian institute in June 2011. All the participants were from this institute. The observer worked with three peer observers who were required to report their observations and ratings. The process helped calculate the inter-rater reliability, which determines the degree of agreement among raters. All observers opted for a model of observation checklist, namely, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing which was later adapted to the requirement of teaching English as a foreign language. The participants in both classes were adults and were in Pre-intermediate level but there were 6 students in class 1 and 17 students in class 2.

4. Results and Discussion

The following scale was designed as an observation tool to rate an individual instructor's teaching performance. It was intended to provide a diagnostic profile for teaching improvement.

E = Excellent   VG = Very Good   G = Good
NI = Needs Improvement   NA = Not Applicable

Table 1.Observations of the observers in the first class

CONTENT ORGANIZATION	Observer	First Peer Observer	Second Peer Observer	Third Peer Observer
Started and ended class on time	E	E	E	E
Presented overview of class	VG	VG	VG	VG
Presented key concepts	E	E	VG	E
Used relevant examples to explain major ideas	VG	G	VG	VG
QUESTIONING SKILLS				
Encouraged students' questions	E	E	E	VG
Listened carefully to students' questions	E	E	VG	E
Answered questions appropriately	E	E	E	E
Restated students' questions or comments as necessary	G	G	G	G
RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS				
Greeted students at the beginning of class	VG	VG	VG	VG
Responded appropriately to Students' puzzlement or boredom	VG	G	VG	VG
TEACHING METHODS				
Discussion	G	G	VG	G
Small-group activities	VG	VG	VG	G
Game	NA	NA	NA	NA
Use or integration of technology	NA	NA	NA	NA

The teacher started the first class which was very small and prepared for 6 students by explaining new vocabularies in a professional way. He involved every student in learning, encouraged them to look up vocabularies in their dictionaries and asked them to read the examples. He also tried to personalize the concepts through comparing different cultures and giving various examples. At the next step, he took the time to retell the story of the previous session. Therefore, he both reviewed the previous content and persuaded them to speak. But he interrupted them correcting their pronunciation more than he should, so students could not complete their speaking. Then they listened to CD and the teacher paused it to encourage them guessing what will happen next. He tried to provide chances for speaking and gave them feedback to self-correct. Fundamentally, the teacher attempted to provide chances for speaking and real communication but he was not successful because of more emphasis on pronunciation accuracy. In the second class, there were 17 adult students who were sitting in a semi-circle in order to communicate with each other and their teacher. The teacher started the class by asking: "What was the subject of last session?" She first explained the task indirectly, and then requested them to do it in pair-work. Therefore, students had adequate time to practice speaking. Students really communicated with each other since there was information gap between them. The teacher moved around and gave them feedback for self-correction or peer-correction. As it was observed in the first class, the teacher knew how to manage the class and finish it on time but in the second class, the teacher didn't know how to handle it. In the second class teacher had a laptop, downloading pictures of some celebrities and asked students to describe them but there was no game in the first class and the teacher did not use any technology.

Table 2.Observations of the observers in the second class

CONTENT ORGANIZATION	Observer	First Peer Observer	Second Peer Observer	Third Peer Observer
Started and ended class on time	NI	NI	NI	NI
Presented overview of class	G	G	G	G
Presented key concepts	G	G	VG	G
Used relevant examples to explain major ideas	G	G	G	G
QUESTIONING SKILLS				
Encouraged students' questions	VG	G	VG	VG
Listened carefully to students' questions	G	G	G	G
Answered questions appropriately	G	G	G	VG
Restated students' questions or comments as necessary	NI	NI	NI	NI
RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS				
Greeted students at the beginning of class	VG	G	VG	G
Responded appropriately to Students'puzzlement or boredom	VG	VG	VG	VG
TEACHING METHODS				
Discussion	E	VG	VG	E
Small-group activities	G	E	E	VG
Game	NI	NI	NI	NI
Use or integration of technology	E	E	E	E

After the assessment of the data, the estimated average rate of convergence was set at 82.14 percent that is close to 85 percent, a figure above which suggests high reliability.

5. Conclusion

The finding of this research indicated that classroom observations can be a guide for teachers so they can reflect on their own teaching practices, and those who are observing can learn from other, perhaps more successful educators about their methods. Classroom observations allow educators and administrators to improve not only classrooms, but schools as a whole. Observing another teacher's classroom and having your own class observed both have several educational purposes, including giving you the ability to describe instructional practices, evaluate inequities that exist for a specific student or group of students, and improve your own classroom instruction. Observers are not evaluators or intruders who come to assess how well a teacher teaches, but peers who come to learn from classroom events or to help make that specific classroom a better place. Also, classroom observation is "the bridge between the worlds of theory and practice" (Reed & Bergemann, 2001). On the one hand, observation can discover a great deal about how and why certain theories or methods work or do not work in a local context. There is no method that works equally well in all cases and it is in the classroom that methods and theories are formed and tested. To avoid misinterpretation, observers need training to be able to record data objectively and give feedback constructively. Similarly, teachers need training to apply the data to their own teaching. The benefits that teachers get, in this case, are a deeper understanding of theoretical knowledge and practical options for what, how, and to what extent to use that knowledge in their classroom. Observations are most effective when approached as collaboration meant to benefit all involved. For the one being observed, an observation can provide useful feedback that might not be revealed by other assessment methods. Before being observed, the teacher should be prepared to discuss with the observer goals for the class, what he or she plan to do in class that day and what he or she want the observer to pay attention. While being observed, the teacher should be introduced to the observer in

the class, explain the purpose of the observation and explain the observer's role to the students. After being observed, the teacher should be reconstructed what happened in class, think about goals for the class and the specific class session that was observed and ask for specific descriptions and constructive suggestions. If you are the observer, before observing clarify the purpose of the observation, meet with your colleague to discuss what will happen in class, describe what you'll be doing during the observation and schedule a meeting to discuss the observation. If you are the observer, during observing record Observations and participate in the class only if invited to do so. If you are the observer, after observing reconstruct what happened in class with the instructor, ask your colleague to describe what he or she would change and what was typical and atypical about the class. You should also listen to your colleague, describe rather than evaluate what you saw and offer constructive suggestions (Center for Instructional Development and Research, 1998).

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