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Teacher Observation for Development in a Greek Merchant Marine Academy

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Abstract

Teacher observation in the classroom is a way through which teachers can monitor and have a clearer reflection of their teaching practices. Observation aids in personal development and in changing one's perspective. It is also a way to collect input in the classroom and differentiate one's teaching practices. This paper is a description for a class observation session; it presents a case where two teachers in a Greek Merchant Marine Academy—an English teacher and a mechanical engineer—were engaged in classroom observation. More particularly, the engineer observed the English teacher in one of her classes. First, an observation schema was decided upon by the two teachers. The schema assessed the teaching material used as well as the teaching content and teacher-learner communication patterns. Findings showed strong and weak points in teaching like the small percentage of learner taking initiatives in communication and overall, helped in re-designing lessons and in revising teaching practices. This is a method that can lead to teacher development.

Keywords

Teacher Observation, Engineer, Teacher Development, Learner Reflection, Teaching Practices

1. Introduction

This paper aims at presenting and justifying a teacher observation session organized at a Merchant Marine Academy during a language teaching course.

2. Description of the Training Context

The observation of the language teaching session that will be analyzed in this paper was conducted in the Merchant Marine Academy of Crete, in the School

of Engineers. The observee is the English teacher and the observer is a peer teacherc—a mechanical engineer.

The training context is a class of marine engineers studying at the fourth semester of the academy. The reasons that led to the decision to conduct an observation were first the wish of the English teacher to monitor and have a clearer reflection of her teaching practices so as to try to develop and second, problems concerning student behavior that were noticed in class.

More specifically, the class contains thirty students, mostly twenty-five-year old men, who study to be merchant marine engineers students, mostly men, who study to be merchant marine engineers. Academy students follow six semesters of theoretical studies and travel for at least twelve months as apprentice engineers in merchant marine vessels. They join the academy during the first semester, then travel for six months and rejoin the academy for the second and third semesters. When the third semester is completed and they have passed a certain number of courses, they embark on their second apprentice voyage and return for the continuation of their studies during the fourth, fifth and sixth semesters. The class under discussion was formed in February 2017 when students returned from their second apprentice sea journey and rejoined school.

Since their arrival, the students had been uneasy and quite restless. They did not seem much interested in English because they considered it a secondary subject matter even though it is among the basic courses in the curriculum. While discussing with fellow teachers in the teachers' office, the English teacher decided to engage upon an observation session conducted by a peer—a mechanical engineer.

3. Observer and Purpose of Observation: Pre-Observation Stage

The reasons that led to the decision to make an observation were related to the fact that observation is considered to be a method diagnostic of classroom problems and because it can also serve teacher developmental purposes. In fact, Swan mentions in an article that observation aims at "personal development" and "the transformation of student teachers" perspective' (Swan, 1993: p. 243). Sometimes teachers realize that they need to change their practices when there is a problematic situation in class. Then they need to collect input, analyze it and reach certain conclusions. This is effectuated through observation. In this sense, observation can lead to teacher development. Wajnryb in *Contexts and purposes of classroom observation* mentions that ongoing teacher development is among observation's purposes and can be effectuated by a peer teacher observing a colleague (Wajnryb, 1992: p. 3).

Observation can be conducted either directly by having a colleague or supervisor observe one or more teaching sessions or indirectly by videotaping lessons and observing them afterwards (Bartels, 2005: p. 2).

In the case discussed here observation was conducted directly. The English

teacher designed an evaluation schema with the help of her peer (see Appendix). During their pre-observation discussion, the two colleagues talked mostly of what the observee wished the observer to notice. This was one way to help the English teacher in her "understanding of the effectiveness of educational practices" (Malderez, 2003: p. 179). Having this in mind, the two teachers jointly created the observation schema giving emphasis to the observee's needs.

4. Observation Tasks Used: While-Observation Stage

The observation took place during a forty-five minute teaching session. The observer peer teacher sat on a student desk at the back of the class and was silent. During observation, he either noted down or ticked and tallied on the observation schema (see Appendix).

The observation schema included at first information on the teaching materials used. This marine academy fourth semester class is assigned a reading coursebook entitled *Maritime English. Volume* 2 as well as a grammar book which is both prescribed by the school syllabus. During lessons the teacher has to use both those written sources. She may employ her own material as well but these two are also obligatory.

A second aspect observed by the peer was the lesson content and subject application. Since this is an ESP class, vocabulary plays a crucial role. Learners should mostly acquire naval vocabulary and, therefore, emphasis is given on lexical items and their use in context. Carter and McCarthy underline the importance of learning vocabulary. They mention that vocabulary teaching has been neglected by linguists and language teachers over the years. But, during the last sixty years, emphasis has been re-assigned to vocabulary learning (Carter, McCarthy, 2013: pp. 1-2). This is even more so in our case where specific language vocabulary has to be learnt.

Another aspect of the session that was observed was whether teaching was teacher or learner centered. In fact, nowadays we know more about learners and their needs and, as a consequence, more emphasis is given to communication in order to satisfy those needs (Weiner, 2002: p. 5).

The observation schema also included two sections on student communication and interaction patterns. Competent teachers are expected to be able to interpret their students' communication patterns which include verbal as well as non-verbal/ body language. Neil and Caswell mention the case of Mrs. Powerhouse, a skilled teacher who understands learners through their gestures and overall body language (Neil, Casswell, 2003: p. 8). Patterns of student interaction, with the teacher as well as among them, play an important part in classroom communication and influence learning as well (Hall & Walsh, 2002: pp. 186-203). The observation schema therefore included a section where the peer observer tallied the number of times where there was interaction either between the teacher and the whole class, or the teacher and individual students or groups of students or among students themselves.

Finally, there was a section devoted to student behavior. This influences not only the way that teaching sessions flow but also learning (Porter, 2007: p. 10). One feature mostly observed by our schema was student interruptions in class. Sometimes these interruptions were characterized as lesson participation signs conductive to learning and, at other times, resulted only in making noise and creating a chaotic atmosphere which caused most of the classroom management problems.

5. Feedback Meeting, Debriefing and Follow-Up: Post-Observation Stage

After the observation had taken place and the observer had completed the observation schema, there was a meeting arranged two days later between the English teacher observee and her peer observer. Findings were discussed and a number of conclusions were drawn.

First, concerning lesson content and subject application, it was found that the teacher used mostly the textbook as a source and gave emphasis to vocabulary teaching. The majority of times the vocabulary was taught within context since many items were found within reading comprehension texts or engineering manuals. Grammar was also focused on but on a smaller degree than vocabulary.

The lesson was mostly found to be teacher centered since the majority of learners did not actively participate in coursebook activities so the teacher had to dominate most of the lesson. In fact, the learners behaved as passive observers of the teacher and expected her to provide all the necessary information. Communication consisted mostly of teacher verbal language and instructions towards the students while the latter interacted mostly only with the teacher. They either answered questions asked by her or interrupted the flow of the lesson in order to make a comment about a topic covered or to offer synonymous words they knew.

Concerning the issue of most interest to the observee teacher during the composition of the observation schema—student behavior—it was found that learners interrupted the lesson mostly in order to make noise or to find an opportunity to talk with their peers. They did not seem to be much interested in the subject matter. Some claimed that they already knew all the terms owing to their experience of working in vessels. Others found the subject matter too difficult or, even uninteresting, since, as they said, they manage to communicate with foreign language speaking crews even if they do not speak English very well.

Finally, it was decided that what the sessions lacked were activities that would engage learners in more interaction. The mechanical engineer suggested the projection of videos describing, for example, internal combustion engines' operation. He mentioned the use of videos he found on the Internet very useful in class and suggested their use for language teaching as well since they are in English. The English teacher also suggested the creation of group work tasks based on the videos so as to engage learners in doing activities that they consider less

boring and more useful.

It was also decided that the observee teacher would modify her lesson and would design a new lesson which she would re-invite the mechanical engineer to re-observe—this time in another fourth semester class who would be unfamiliar with the observation procedure.

Using observation as a teaching input gathering method and as a means to teacher personal and professional development was discussed with fellow teachers as well, most of them considered it useful and thought about using it themselves. As Beaumont mentions (Beaumont et al., 2005: p. 110), "Schools are increasingly seeing the advantage of teachers watching each other as a tool for teacher development". Under this scope, many teachers could imitate this practice and, if not managing to develop, at least gather useful input on their teaching practices.

6. Conclusion

This assignment has attempted to make a "how-to" description of an English teaching session observation conducted by a peer teacher in a Merchant Marine Academy. The observation schema was presented and justified and tentative conclusions were drawn. Observation was found to be a useful methodology towards understanding one's own teaching practices and re-planning one's lessons so as to aid teacher self development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Lesson Observation Schedule

Tutor:	Observer:
Date:	Class:

1) Teaching Materials Used

Course book:

Grammar Book:

Other Sources:

2) Lesson Content and Subject Application

Focus on	Frequency of Practice				
Vocabulary items	1	2	3	4	5
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Grammar	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3) Classroom instruction

Teacher centered

Learner centered

4) Class Management

Entry/Exit

Organisation of Students

Organisation of Resources

Classroom Management

5) Student Communication

With Teacher	Number of tallies	Total
Verbal Language		
Non-Verbal/Body Language		
With fellow students		
Verbal Language		
Non-Verbal/Body Language		

6) Student Interaction

Pattern of Interaction	Number of tallies	Total
Teacher-whole class		
Teacher-groups of students		
Teacher-individual student		
Students-students		
Individual student-Individual student		
Individual student-Students		
Students Individual student		

7) Student Behaviour

	Number of tallies	Total
Student interruptions of Teacher		
Student interruptions of Students		
Student interruption related to classroom work		
Student interruption unrelated to classroom work		
Individual student making noise		
Student groups making noise		