

Discerning Reality: Lesson observation as research

Costas Gabrielatos
c.gabrielatos@lancaster.ac.uk
www.gabrielatos.com

Two problematic aspects of observation

The observation of lessons, a central aspect of teacher preparation and development, is a sensitive issue for both observers and observed, all the more so when the observations are carried out for the purpose of evaluation or assessment.

Observing lessons in order to make any type of evaluative comment poses two interrelated problems. The one concerns the quantity and quality of insights an observed lesson affords into the normal classroom practices, and consequently the abilities and professionalism, of the observed teacher. The other concerns the psychological effects of the observation on teachers, and the attendant influence on their preparation for, and behaviour during, the lesson.

Showcase and normal lessons

During my teacher preparation course I was warned against preparing showcase lessons, and was advised to teach as if the observer were not present. During my induction as a 'trainer'¹ I was advised to be on the lookout for observer-tailored lessons². In fact, I was encouraged, directly or indirectly, to somehow mark down lessons that looked too polished, and to be generous with no-frills, less-than-smooth lessons. I was not convinced then of the wisdom of this, and I remain unconvinced.

As a student, my reasoning was that those observations, stress-intensive though they were, gave me an incentive to expand my knowledge and skills, and helped me improve

the effectiveness of my teaching overall. As an observer, I have learned to accept showcase lessons as inevitable, and have realised that they can indeed help me draw valid conclusions.

Even when the observed teacher merely pays lip service to half-digested methodologies in the lesson plan, goes through the motions, or performs for the sake of the observer, an observation can still offer a host of helpful clues. After all, different teachers translate the same methodologies into practice, or execute the same motions (e.g. monitoring, feedback) in different ways according to their perception of them (e.g. Ulichny, 1996).

Sometimes the teacher may decide to play it safe, usually by using a trusted lesson plan, repeating a previously successful lesson, or by deciding to focus the lesson on what he/she feels comfortable with, rather than what the learners need. Such lessons, irritating as they may be, are anything but a waste of time; on the contrary, they are rich in clues. For example, they offer insights into what areas the teacher regards as safe. More importantly, they open a window to the teacher's attitude towards learning in general, and his/her own learning and development in particular.

When the lesson is unusually well-prepared and handled, if only for the sake of the observer, then the teacher has successfully taken another step forward in his/her development, particularly if he/she used unfamiliar procedures and materials. In this case, the observation has helped the teacher think harder while preparing as well as during the lesson itself, perhaps encouraging him/her to explore new territories. Above all, any deviation from the teacher's habits provides excellent food

for thought and ample material for the feedback discussion.

I find it perfectly normal, even desirable, that student-teachers try to present their best selves when they are assessed. I have grown to be sceptical when, before an observation, the student-teacher issues warnings along the lines of 'don't expect anything special, this will be just another lesson'. In both cases, the teacher's approach and decisions are good indicators of their perception of good teaching and their professionalism.

However, all aspects of an observation have to be viewed through the filter of the social and educational contexts the observed teacher operates in, because these greatly influence the teacher's psychological state.

Psychological impact

To understand the psychological effects on the observed teacher, we need to take into account the power relationships among the different parties involved. When the observation is carried out as part of a teacher preparation course, the participants are the observed teacher and the observer or examiner. When the observation is part of an ongoing in-house development programme, we usually need to add the head teacher or director of studies. For the purposes of this article we can treat learners as a constant, as one of the aims of observations is to establish how teachers cope with diverse groups.

We also have to consider the attitudes towards learning, development and authority of the people involved. It is the interaction of those attitudes and relationships that make or break an observation. Here is a list of preconceptions that, in different combinations, can lead to an observation becoming a traumatic experience, or an exercise in conformity.

- Learning is an input-output system.
- Learning has specific and uniform goals.
- Learning stops at the acquisition of a certificate of some description.
- There are specific ingredients that a good lesson absolutely must have.
- There are specific models for good lessons.
- Mistakes make you lose face and must be avoided.

- Anything new is either suspect, or an improvement on the old.
- Authority should be accommodated and appeased at all costs.

We may also need to consider the following possibilities:

- Teachers having received contradictory feedback, or conflicting recipes and lists of dos/don'ts from different trainers or observers.
- Teachers having had experience of observers who were more than happy to tick off (mental or actual) boxes next to perceived 'essential ingredients' of a lesson; that is, observers who could not tell the difference between actual teaching/learning procedures and going through the motions, or could not be bothered to try.
- Teachers being aware that the observer's negative comments may lead to their failing the lesson/course, or not being rehired the following year.

As a result, we may well be presented with the following teacher behaviours:

- Avoiding experimentation.
- Uncritically adopting what are perceived as tried-and-tested, correct, authority-approved procedures, or whatever teaching practices are in vogue at the time.
- Giving observers what they want, or what the teacher thinks they want.
- Going back to a default style of teaching when unobserved.

Since the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of teachers, observers, and directors of studies have not been formed in a vacuum, all observation-related problems are interconnected with problems at higher-level contexts (i.e. social and educational). For example, sometimes the true aim of observations is neither learning nor development. Student-teachers may attend courses with the sole aim of getting a teaching certificate, rather than actually learning to teach. In such cases they will tend to do the bare minimum and go through the (not infrequently prescribed) motions. Schools may organise seminars and observations merely for appearances' sake. In this case, teachers are unlikely to teach 'regular' lessons, that is, lessons that include elements of risk, exploration and experimentation.

Having said that, there are instances when

observed lessons are as close as possible to unobserved ones. It is when colleagues who value and trust each other agree to swap observations for their own development (e.g. Norrish, 1996). Unfortunately, as far as I know, observations conducted in such a non-threatening context are not the norm. Of course, peer observations are also carried out as part of teacher preparation courses or staff development programmes. Although stress levels may be lower in these cases, these observations are compulsory and, therefore, cannot be entirely stress-free (e.g. Cosh, 2004).

Does this mean that observations by an outsider are necessarily futile? I think not. Observers can find out quite a lot about teachers' strengths and limitations, as well as their perceptions and beliefs.

Lesson observation as research

I have come to regard lesson observations as pieces of social research: the researcher spends some time in the subject's environment and gathers information about the subject's behaviour, his/her interaction with other people, and his/her handling of various elements in his/her environment. In the ELT context this translates into: the observer spends some time in the teacher's classroom, and perhaps staffroom, and gathers information about the teaching procedures he/she employs, his/her interaction with learners, and perhaps colleagues and management, and his/her handling of teaching materials, teaching aides, class furniture etc.

Researchers know they cannot collect data on every single member of the target population, so they make do with samples. They also have to work around the limitations of their tools for data collection and analysis. To maximise the validity of conclusions, a triangulation of methods is used. Data are collected not only through observations, but also through interviews, questionnaires and relevant texts, and the results of the analysis of each type of data are compared and contrasted. In ELT, the observed lessons are a sample of a given teacher's teaching behaviour. To triangulate, the observers also examine the lesson plan³, and have a brief discussion with the teacher before the lesson, and a longer feedback discussion after the observation (e.g. Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2004), usually with reference to the lesson plan. For a

more detailed account of the relevance of different research paradigms for ELT see Bailey (1998).

One of the first things that researchers learn is that the very presence of the observer affects the behaviour of the observed (e.g. Labov, 1972: 209). Worse still, in ELT the observer cannot usually afford to invest time in order to 'blend in', as is the case of participant observation. With that in mind, we should not expect the teacher or the students to behave as if it is business as usual, because it is anything but. It is unrealistic to expect that we can observe a 'regular lesson', at least not without resorting to unethical techniques. If it is observed, the lesson is not regular.

Although the subject of the observation is the teacher, there are valuable data to be gleaned from the learners' behaviour. The observer can establish the extent and nature of learner involvement, and note indications of learning taking place. What is more, focusing on the learners provides clues to classroom habits which may not be directly observable. The learners' reactions to classroom procedures are powerful indicators of what they consider routine or novel, which, in turn, affords insights into the kind of procedures normally favoured by the teacher. Classroom dynamics can provide insights into the roles that teacher and learners normally assume, as well as their relationship, which offers still more clues about the teacher's actual methodology.

Obviously, the more observations of a particular teacher we conduct, the more detailed a picture we form. However, the observation itself cannot provide all the data we need. The information gathered during the lesson should be complemented by data from other sources, such as the lesson plan and the discussions with the teacher before and after the lesson. Observers are more likely to draw valid conclusions if they compare and contrast their experience of the lesson with the teacher's rationale for his/her planning and actions, as well as the teacher's awareness of, and comments on, the learners' behaviour.

Conclusion

ELT observers would be wise to treat observations as sample-collection procedures. A teacher's classroom practices are the composite of a multitude of elements relating to the teacher's

knowledge, skills and personality (see Gabriellatos, 2002). Observations and observer-teacher discussions cannot offer clues to every single element contributing to the teacher's behaviour. The observer's task is, essentially, to infer some of these elements based on the sample collected. The objective, then, is to develop, on the one hand, observation techniques which help the collection of appropriate data, and, on the other, tools for analysing and drawing conclusions.

Treating observations as research helps observers in many respects. It helps them become aware of the problems involved, accept them as inevitable, and work around them by developing appropriate methods of data collection and analysis. Such an approach puts available observational tasks (e.g. Wajnryb, 1992) in perspective, and potentially enhances the effectiveness of observation tools and procedures.

References

- Bailey, K.C. (1998, December). President's message: approaches to empirical research in TESOL. *TESOL Matters*, 8(6). Also online: www.tesol.org/assoc/prez/1998/pm9812.html
- Cosh, J. (2004, April). Watching me watching you - a reflective approach to peer observation. *Research News, The Newsletter of the IATEFL Research SIG*, 14, 8-13.
- Gabriellatos, C. (2002). The shape of the language teacher. In Pulverness, A. (Ed.) *IATEFL 2002: York Conference Selections* (pp. 75-78). Whitstable, Kent: IATEFL. Also online: <http://www.ihes.com/ttsig/resources/articles/31.doc>.
- Kurtoglu-Hooton, N. (2004, July). Post-observation feedback as an instigator of teacher learning and change. *IATEFL TTEd SIG E-Newsletter*, 2/2004, <http://www.ihes.com/ttsig/resources/e-newsletter/FeatureArticles.pdf>.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Norrish, J. (1996, March). Mind the gap: thoughts on self help and non-judgmental observation in the classroom. *TESL-EJ* 2(1), <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej05/a3.html>.
- Ulichny, P. (1996). What's in a methodology? In Freeman, D. & Richards, J. C. (Eds.) *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching*. (pp. 178-196). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wajnryb, R. (1992). *Classroom Observation Tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Footnotes)

¹ I am not comfortable with the terms *trainer* and *training*, as they imply that there is one right way to do something to which the trainer has privileged access. In the case of ELT in particular this is rather presumptuous.

² It seems that student-teachers quickly pinpointed each observer's methodological likes and dislikes, and planned their lessons accordingly. For the record, the problem was addressed by withholding the identity of the observer when the student-teachers were notified about the observation. What is pertinent to our discussion is not only the speed at which student-teachers could identify an observer's methodological orientation, but also, or perhaps mainly, the clear signals that observers sent, or the relatively small set of rigid criteria used.

³ By 'lesson plan' I do not necessarily mean a detailed document, nor a plan of action that should be followed to the letter, but a written indication that the teacher has thought in advance about the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of the lesson, and is ready to be flexible.