

## SEEING WHAT WE DO:

### OBSERVATION IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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#### Abstract

Two elements emerging from curriculum innovation at a national level in both Spain and the UK are quality assurance (accountability), and teacher development within schools. Both of these are linked in proposals for appraisal schemes, in which teachers' classroom performance is observed. On the one hand summative evaluation of teacher performance is necessary for management decisions to do with in-service training, accountability to ministries and parents, and on the other, formative evaluation is considered to be an essential on-going part of teachers' professional development. Whatever the reason for observation *by a third party*, the experience can be a daunting one for teachers who may not have been observed teaching since their student or probationary days when the bottom line was usually pass or fail and the tenor of the observation was often a deficit one.

For language teachers there is another consideration. There are at least two main reasons why teachers need to become expert observers within their own classrooms. The first is to do with changes in methods of teaching. The second is personal.

The move towards learner and learning centred approaches in language teaching has resulted in a richer mix of activity types and interaction patterns in the classroom that was the case in the past. Gone are the days when the teacher taught from the front, coordinating utterances, orchestrating drills, and so on. Today's teachers have to adopt varied roles according to the activity in hand, and, indeed, often find themselves changing roles during the same lesson. One of the results of this is increased anxiety that perhaps we cannot always "keep tabs" on what is happening in our classes: the bustle of activity may conceal much; how are we to learn to see? What if something is going

wrong? One of the ways in which teachers can prepare themselves for *being* (and, incidentally, for observing others in schools where there is peer appraisal) is to begin by observing their own practice.

Now, anyone who has observed teachers and pupils working together will know that the process of observation is highly complex. So many things are happening simultaneously that the inexperienced observer cannot see the wood from the trees, even if all they have to do is observe. For the teacher, grappling with the realities of the classroom, it is very difficult indeed to observe coolly and analyse what is going on. Yet, effective teachers must be able to do this if they are to develop their language courses coherently and take into account the strengths and weaknesses of their learners.

Any method of observation used by a practising teacher must, above all, be relatively undemanding in terms of the time it takes. A method that occupies all of the time that is needed for preparations, marking and school administration is obviously best left to researchers. What we need are methods that are relatively objective, provide insights and are easy to keep. Two main methods recommend themselves: diary studies and using simple observation schedules.

### Diary studies

A diary study is essentially a first person case study, where the diary writers investigate their own teaching. The process is simple and, once the habit has been established, easy to do, Bailey and Ochsner<sup>1</sup> outline the five steps that are involved:

1. The diarist provides an account of his or her own teaching history. This stage can be omitted if the results of the diary study are not for publication.
2. The diarist systematically records events, details and feelings about the current teaching experience in a confidential and candid diary over a period of time: for example, over a school term.
3. This stage deals with the revision of the diary for a public version, but again is not necessary for a private diary study.

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<sup>1</sup> Bailey, K.M. and Ochsner. 1983. «A methodological review of diary studies», in K. M. Bailey, M. H. Long and S. Peck (eds), *Second Language Acquisition Studies*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

4. At the end of the period, the diarist studies the diary entries looking for significant patterns and events; that is, what kinds of things recur, how salient are events?
  
5. The salient features are focused on and interpreted and ... used!

Teachers may find that they have one class where everything seems to work well: students are engaged, responsible and successful, while in another class they are uninterested, disruptive and unsuccessful. It is easy to dismiss the latter class as poor learners, socially disadvantaged or whatever. Keeping diaries of the two classes might, however, reveal subtle facts about the interaction between teachers and learners about which the teacher is unaware: the amount of time spent in preparation and follow-up might be different, the variety of activities might be different, less concern may have been paid to choice of materials, he/she may feel more tense and defensive with the difficult class and this may create more alienation and so on.

Diary studies are a useful way of recording factual records of lessons, and teachers' feeling about their work. They need not be time-consuming to keep up. My method is to keep a note pad by me and jot things down as I go along, sometimes in the lesson, but shortly afterwards.

However, in the case of the two classes above, the diary study might be supplemented by the use of focussed observation schedules.

### **Observation schedules**

These are simple check lists that enable teachers to take an objective look at one aspect of the classroom during a lesson. Some observation schedules are very complex and require the help of another person to do the recording. For the classroom-based teacher, what is required is a very simple schedule, or series of schedules that can be used during the lesson.

At its simplest a schedule would be a list of the activities the teacher had planned for the lesson, with a space for time at the side. This could be filled in as the lesson progressed, e.g.

	Time started	Time finished
Give back homework		
Pre-questions		
Watch video		
Post questions		
Groups: Task 1		

The teacher will then have an objective account of how long each phase of the lesson took, and will then be able to assess whether the time allocation is appropriate. Comparison between two classes might reveal differences in the time taken. The diary would record possible reasons for them.

Another type of observation sheet would look at interaction patterns in a particular group of students. The schedule is a sheet of paper with a circle drawn to represent each student in the small group. The teacher observes the group for a few minutes, putting a tick in the appropriate circle each time a learner speaks. This simple procedure can be very revealing: if one or two students dominate the group, why should this be? Is the task appropriate for a group, or would it be better done in pairs or individually? Would it be a good idea to ensure that all the students have a role: secretary, chairman, spokesperson and so on? Should those particular students work together or be split up? And the focus will also give the teacher time to notice the nature of the talk - is it Spanish or English? If Spanish, what steps are needed to refocus on English at some stage in the task?

Again, a simple schedule can list the functions of utterances learners make during group work:

1. Looking for a procedure    + +
2. Disagreeing about the task    + +
3. Talk about the task    + + + + + +
4. Irrelevant talk    + + + + + + + + + +
5. Talk about feelings, e.g. this is boring    + + + + +

The teacher ticks (+) after each utterance as above. It is difficult to be completely accurate in this, but it does not matter: a 75% success rate would be good enough. If the students spend a lot of time talking about what they have to do, then the teacher can look again at how she has given instructions. Are they clear? Do the learners need a demonstration? Did she wait for them all to listen or was she in a hurry to get on? If

there is a lot of irrelevant talk then we might re-examine the task itself: is it too easy, and therefore treated with contempt; or is it too difficult and learners give up on it? Is it uninteresting? Can it be done by one student alone while the others enjoy a bit of gossip?

Once teachers begin to use these schedules they will get ideas for further ones they can develop and use themselves, either alone or as a complement to a diary study.

In my experience as a teacher and teacher educator the use of diaries and observation schedules is of great value. Teachers become much more expert observers of whole class activity after using guided observation of small aspects of it, and more importantly, they develop the habit of seeking objective reasons for the success and failure of chosen procedures. Once awareness is raised in this way, it may not be necessary to keep the written records, although I find that it is useful to do so from time to time to refresh the objective view of the classroom. Most importantly of all, this kind of classroom based work gives an added dimension of professionalism to teachers, because the objective analysis of their own work creates both greater interest in the work and also an intellectual desire to find solutions. It is truly a means towards sustained teacher self-development. And this is the major reason for becoming expert observers. Furthermore, becoming an expert self-observer will also reduce anxiety about the dreaded observation for appraisal because we will be able to be objective about our own classroom decision-making and enter into a dialogue of equality with the appraiser.

And this brings us to the second reason why we need to become expert observers. On a personal, as well as a professional note, small scale classroom research of this kind may be invaluable. Michael Huberman<sup>2</sup> in his massive study of the professional life-cycle of teachers found that those teachers who invested in such small scale research and experiment - "tinkering" as he called it- looked back on their careers with greater satisfaction and pleasure than those who did not, who often regarded their past careers with bitterness. In fact, seeing what we do can also make what we do a pleasure.

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<sup>2</sup> Huberman, M. 1992. "Teacher Education and Instructional Mastery", in Hargreaves, A. and Fullen, JMG. (eds), *Understanding Teacher Development*. London: Cassell.