

OBSERVATION – AN ONGOING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

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Abstract

Introduction

The paper reviews a project carried out at the English Philology Department of Akaki Tsereteli State University (ATSU) aiming to find ways to use teacher observation more effectively as a tool for improving quality of English language teaching. The initial purpose was to identify problem areas that majority of teachers struggled with and possibly suggest ways of dealing with these challenges. However, the project developed into a cyclical process, an ongoing development opportunity.

Project description

The study consisted of several phases. At the exploratory stage teacher observation checklists were developed and piloted. Based on the results, the project team designed pre and post observation questionnaires and two different versions of observation checklists according to the aims of the lesson. The findings of 30 observations were discussed and generalized and three workshops were conducted. In the next cycle, the project developed into larger-scale teacher-driven peer-observation.

Results

The project had several tangible outcomes. These include observation checklists that are tailored to the specific environment and reflect the concepts that underlie the practice of teaching a foreign language in the modern world. It also led to designing materials for workshops that have been evaluated positively by the participants. Even more importantly, it has revealed the importance of peer observation as a tool for professional development for both parties involved. The study has also demonstrated the variety of ways in which observation can be used for professional growth.

Conclusion

Overall, the paper tries to present observation as a multifaceted phenomenon, as learning and teaching opportunity and as a way to promote team spirit in the teaching community.

Keywords: peer observation, teacher development, observation checklist

1. Introduction

Teaching has long been known as one of the most isolated professions (Lortie 1975) and with good reason. A teacher's autonomy can be a positive factor, but when the aim is success of an academic programme implemented by more than 30 teachers teaching various aspects of the English language, serious attention needs to be given to what happens in each individual classroom. This is the case with BA programme in English Language and Literature at Akaki Tsereteli University (ATSU).

English Philology Department that implements the programme is very aware of the fact that only excellent coordination in terms of course aims, teaching methodology and assessment systems will ensure that the programme allows the students to achieve desired outcomes.

To this end, course syllabi are discussed with colleagues and supervisors before they are adopted, the system of assessment is coordinated and monitored within the academic programme, student results are discussed

during regular department meetings. However, in spite of all these efforts it was felt that there was more variety in how the teaching was conducted in individual groups and specific courses than was beneficial for the programme overall.

Another issue that was and still remains of concern for the department has to do with methodology used in teaching English to the students of ATSU. The overall aim of language teaching at the university and especially within English Language and Literature programme lies in developing learners' communicative competence. Thus, the method used is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), at least this is what is hoped for. Although no research has been carried out that would focus on what methods are actually used in the teaching process, daily contact with the staff and student results have led us to doubt how effectively the main principles of CLT are being implemented. It is easy to understand why adopting CLT can be quite problematic in our setting if we take into consideration the clash of its principles and philosophy with the ones prevalent in traditional language teaching in Georgia. It would be safe to assume that a mixture of grammar-translation and audiolingual methods that was characteristic of English language teaching in the soviet period is still very much in evidence in the Georgian ELT context. Incompatibility between 'traditional' method and CLT is discussed in Nijaradze, Zviadadze (2017) in more detail. However, the main differences can be summarized as follows:

	Traditional method	Communicative Language Teaching
1.	Of the four language systems grammar and vocabulary are most essential.	All four systems are given equal attention with particular attention on language functions.
2.	Accuracy is of key importance.	Accuracy is important, but fluency is given priority.
3.	Focus is on how language is formed.	Focus is on what language is used for, its meaning.
4.	Language is taught through explaining grammar rules thoroughly and then practised using a variety of controlled exercises/drills.	Language is taught through involving learners in realistic communication i.e. communicative activities.
5.	Mother tongue is used a lot and believed to help understanding.	Mother tongue use is avoided if possible.
6.	Errors are corrected as soon as possible.	Errors are viewed as development opportunities and treated in accordance to the aim of the activity.
7.	Teacher is the source of knowledge, a model and an authority.	Teacher is a facilitator. Their aim is to help students construct their own knowledge.
8.	Learners who listen carefully and do all the exercises in the textbook will be successful.	Learners who are actively involved in their learning process and take initiative will be successful.

As is clear from this very brief and necessarily superficial summary, the contrast between the two approaches is dramatic. It is natural that switching to a completely new set of principles and even values cannot be easy for teachers as well as students, especially as it is linked with their beliefs, a notoriously inflexible area of our cognition. Thus, even experienced and best qualified teachers have understandable difficulties in adopting CLT for their classrooms and consequently, conforming to the philosophy of language teaching within the BA programme under discussion.

This was how an idea of creating a so called 'methodology team' was born. It aimed to use lesson observation to identify possible areas for improvement and introduce more uniformity into the teaching process.

2. Project Description

The project team was made up of 4 people, all with many years of experience in teaching as well as teacher training. At the first stage the methodology group started to work on designing an observation instrument that would be most suited to the context. The two key issues were:

- a) what features of lessons we needed to observe
- b) how to record the findings

The answer to the first question would depend on what exactly we hoped to find in the classrooms. As mentioned above a recommended teaching method is based on communicative approach and the academic programme gives priority to developing student independence and initiative alongside with purely language-related or philological competencies. Thus, it was decided that the observation checklist would include the following areas:

- a) teacher's use of L1/L2
- b) students' use of L1/L2
- c) interaction patterns: teacher-student vs. student-student
- d) class organization: whole class, pairwork or groupwork, individual
- e) error correction: teacher correction vs. peer correction

Overall, the initial checklist contained 12 questions in some form related to the above-mentioned areas.

Even more discussion was required to decide on the ways of recording the observed phenomena. Most observation instruments reviewed in the process (including the ones used at ATSU and by British Council Georgia) were either too open-ended or contained evaluative statements such as: "could improve, acceptable, excellent" or "more emphasis recommended, accomplished very well", etc. The methodology team felt that before any judgment could be passed on what was 'excellent' or 'recommended', we needed to record the facts as objectively as possible. This is why our descriptors looked as follows:

Activity	Never	A few times/ under 10 min.	Several times/ 10-30 minutes	Many times/ over 30 min.	Final Score (1-4)	Comment
Teacher uses L1						

Observers were asked to draw a line through the relevant boxes as they observed the occurrence or duration of a certain feature and only after the lesson a final score was entered into the table.

This initial observation instrument was piloted by all members of the team and the analysis of the results identified the following gaps:

1. Techniques and strategies that teachers were expected to use were significantly different depending on the overall aim of the lesson. They changed depending on whether it was a presentation of new material or working on previously introduced language items, often it also depended on which language system or skill the lesson mainly focused on. Our observation checklist did not allow us to take these aims into consideration.
2. The processes at various stages in the lesson could not be compared without clearer understanding of what purpose they served. For instance, students using L1 at the presentation stage when they tried to clarify some grammar points by contrasting them with their Georgian equivalents was felt to be qualitatively different from using L1 at the practice or production stage when they were expected to internalize the target form. In the same way, students use of L2 at the practice stage (controlled activity) was of a different value from their use of English at the production stage (communicative activity) as only the latter confirmed that learning had occurred.
3. Teachers often felt the need to comment on what had gone on during the lesson and we thought it useful to find a way of recording these comments.
4. There were overall impressions that observers had of the lesson, but that could not be included in the existing observation form as they referred to the process as a whole and could not really be quantified. These observations would require a separate form.
5. Some general post-observation comments made by the observers tended to be quite subjective. This was particularly evident while assessing how varied the activities were, or if the teacher managed to pace the lesson adequately or even how logical the sequence seemed.

Because the piloted observation form failed to provide all this information, the team felt it necessary to modify the existing one and design additional instruments.

- a) In order to find out what the teacher had planned the lesson for, a pre-lesson questionnaire was designed. At this stage the observer collected the information on students and course, main aim of the lesson and materials used (see appendix 1).
- b) Depending on whether the focus of the lesson was presenting and practicing or reinforcing previously presented material, slight modifications were introduced into the instruments (e.g. two additional questions referring specifically to presentations in the relevant form). A separate instrument was designed for classes where the aim was more knowledge-construction rather than skill-development. Here we would include literary theory sessions and linguistics seminars as these are also taught within the Bachelor's programme.
- c) The initial observation form was modified by making descriptive statements more specific. For example, the statement "Students use L2" was replaced by "Students use L2 in a controlled activity" and "Students use L2 in a communicative activity", etc. (see appendix 2)
- d) A second observation form was developed aiming to record information concerning the pace, variety and logical sequencing of the lesson (see appendix 3).
- e) A brief post-lesson questionnaire was also designed to find out if the teachers themselves felt the lesson had achieved its aim (see appendix 1).
- f) General evaluation checklist was designed to be filled in by the observer after the observation. It aimed to summarize general impressions of the lesson and allowed for more subjectivity on the observer's side than any of the other instruments (see appendix 4)

During the whole of the project period the team met regularly to discuss findings and trends that emerged after the observations. 30 observations were carried out in total. Results recorded in the instruments were measured against the aims stated by teachers and their comments. For instance, it was felt that a score of 3 on 'teacher talking to the whole class' was more understandable if the aim was presenting new material. In the same way, score of 1 (absence of) 'students' using L2 in a communicative activity" was a more serious issue at the lesson aiming to practise the material. Discussing the findings of observations in any detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the areas that we felt required improvement can be briefly summarized as follows:

- number and quality of communicative activities used in teaching;
- focus on pair and group work
- managing teacher talking time
- use of inductive presentation techniques
- techniques of error correction and peer correction

At the follow-up stage methodology team developed three workshops around these topics and conducted them for the staff working in the BA programme. This type of feedback was felt to be less threatening for the teachers and thus more productive than individual critical comments and recommendations. In fact, participants of the workshops have repeatedly commented that these sessions have helped them to become more aware of the areas they did not think were problematic before. It is noteworthy that working on observation instruments and the project as a whole has proved to be an educational experience for the members of the methodology team. We have had to clarify key methodological concepts for ourselves and our colleagues and even more importantly, look at our own practice in a different light. In fact, it can be claimed that the whole process encouraged us to reflect on our practices and was equally, if not more beneficial for the team members as it was for those observed.

The project has now moved to a new phase which we consider of key importance. The staff have been asked to peer observe preferably using the instruments the methodology team has developed. In fact, we will be trying to use what Grimm, Kaufman and Doty (2014) refer to as flipped peer observation. Teachers are selecting observers among their colleagues and possibly also identifying focus areas for study and analysis. Thus, it is a teacher-driven observation which places the "observed teacher as leader and primary learner in the observation process" (ibid) and will hopefully lead to teacher empowerment and improvement of their practice.

3. Conclusion

Although the initial small-scale project has been completed, it can be claimed that it is sustainable. It has developed into a cyclical process, an ongoing development opportunity for the staff of EPD of ATSU. The project had several tangible outcomes. These include observation checklists that are tailored to the specific environment and reflect the concepts that underlie the practice of teaching a foreign language in the modern world. It also led to designing materials for workshops that have been evaluated positively by the participants. Even more importantly, it has revealed the importance of peer observation as a tool for professional development for both parties involved. The study has also demonstrated the variety of ways in which observation can be used for professional growth. It has proved that observation is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is not simply a way of monitoring and controlling what teachers do in class, assessing how 'good' they are. It is rather a learning and teaching opportunity and a way to promote team spirit in the teaching community.

References

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Appendix 1

Teacher observation – pre and post-lesson questionnaire

Teacher –
Observer –

Date of observation		Time begin :	End :
Number of Students		Major/Faculty	
Observed class	Year	Subject	Level

Before the Lesson: Please tick the appropriate box(es)

1. **Do you have a lesson plan?**
 Yes No
2. **What is the main focus of your lesson?**
 presenting and practising new material
 reinforcing previously presented material
 engaging students in communicative activities
 practising skills
3. **On which skill(s) will you focus more during the lesson?**
 reading
 writing
 listening
 speaking
4. **What kind of materials do you use?**
 coursebooks
 supplementary materials
 realia
5. **If you only use the coursebook, specify the reason**
 no other teaching materials are available

- no English/American newspapers/magazines are available
- there is not enough time
- the students' level of language proficiency is not appropriate
- other (please specify) _____

After the lesson:

6. Do you think you have achieved your aim?

- Yes
- no
- partly

7. If your aim has not been achieved what do you think the reason is?

- physical conditions
- personal problems
- your students' reluctance to participate
- other (please specify) _____

Appendix 2

Teacher Observation Schedule (Presentation/Practice Lesson)

Activity	Never	A few times/ under 10 min.	Several times/ 10-30 minutes	Many times/ over 30 min.	Final Score (1-4)	Com ment
1. Teacher uses L1 for explanation and instructions						
2. Teacher uses L2 for explanation and instructions						
3. Teacher talks to the whole class						
4. Teacher uses simple, clear language (L2) to present the new material						
5. Teacher uses board/visual aids/examples/handouts in presentation						
6. Students use L1						
7. Students use L2 in a controlled act.						
8. Students use L2 in a communicative act.						
9. Students are involved in presentation (elicitation, giving examples, etc.)						
10. Teacher monitors small groups or pairs						
11. Teacher works with individuals						
12. Teacher asks questions to monitor student understanding						
13. Teacher praises students						
14. Teacher corrects errors						
15. Students correct each other's errors						

Appendix 3

	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4	Activity 5
Duration					
Brief Description					
Class organization					
Materials					

Appendix 4

Activity	Yes	Partly	No
1. Teacher presented overview/aim of the lesson			
2. The teacher related today's lesson to previous material			
3. The teacher summarized major points			
4. The teacher gave homework as a follow-up.			
5. The teacher maintained discipline/control in a supportive way			
6. The teacher captured interest of the learner			
7. The teacher showed mastery of the subject matter			
8. The teacher showed proficiency in the required language of instruction			
9. Teacher organizes material in a logical way			
10. Teacher gives clear instructions			

Summary Comments

1. What were the instructor's major strengths as demonstrated in the observation?
2. What suggestions do you have for improving the instructor's skills or methodology?