

Classroom observation and feedback

Asistarea la lecții și acordarea feedback-ului

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SUMMARY

Classroom observation is a didactic activity from which both the observer and the observed teacher are to win. The present article comments on and discusses the aims of observation, the stages of observation, the methodological recommendations of offering feedback and the need to introduce a system of classroom observation at institutional or even national level, which would contribute to improving the teaching/learning process.

Keywords: *classroom observation, aims and stages of observation, offering feedback, characteristics of feedback.*

REZUMAT

Asistarea la lecții este o activitate didactică din care atât observatorul, cât și profesorul care predă ora dată au de câștigat. Articolul de față comentează și pune în discuție scopurile asistării la lecție, etapele de observare, recomandările metodologice de acordare a feedback-ului, precum și necesitatea introducerii unui sistem de asistare la lecții, la nivel instituțional sau chiar național, care ar contribui la eficientizarea instruirii.

Cuvinte-cheie: *asistarea la lecții, scopurile și etapele asistării, acordarea feedback-ului, caracteristicile feedback-ului.*

Classroom observation is an activity that requires both skill and knowledge. Though recommended to all teachers, observation has not, unfortunately, become a must at university level in Moldovan educational institutions yet. In our context, classroom observation is mostly perceived as a way of criticism and of finding faults with the teaching of the person observed. However, it is a fact that classroom observation serves as an excellent mirror both for the observer and for the teacher who teaches the given class. The present article focuses on the purposes of observing, the stages of observing, the recommendations on what to observe and the way of offering feedback on the observed class.

Let us first consider the elements worth

viewing during observation, which include: the teacher, the students, their interaction, the dynamics, the visual aids and materials (Power Points, tables, charts, pictures, chalkboard, video, etc.), the classroom environment itself, methods and strategies used to teach, the activities, the rational use of time, etc. It is also true that each observer will focus his/her attention on several things during the observation process and will not be able to form a definite opinion only after observing one single class of the given teacher. First impressions are often deceitful. That is why in the case observation is done for the purpose of evaluating the given teacher's work, a series of classes have to be observed.

However experienced teachers may be,

they still have an uncomfortable feeling when they know that somebody is going to observe their classes. This is because the feedback consists very often of subjective data and on the observer's personal preferences. Unfortunately, in Moldova there do not exist publications on this important component of our teaching/learning process. Very little attention, or none at all, is paid to observation and feedback, though it is a requirement for evaluating once in five years the performance of any teacher, both at school and university level.

The researchers abroad describe and use more objective and reliable measures of systematic classroom observation. As it is mentioned in [4], several hundreds of different observational systems (e.g. charts, rating scales, checklists, narrative descriptions, etc.) have been developed and used in classrooms since the 1970s. The most effective ones are considered the interactive coding systems, which allows the observer to record nearly everything that students and teachers do during a class. The given interactive coding systems are very objective and do not require the observer to make inferences or judgments about the behaviors they observe in the classroom. The source mentions that some of the more commonly used observation instruments are the Brophy-Good Dyadic Interaction System, Stallings Observation System, and the Classroom Observation Schedule. They all have been widely used in research studies and in teacher development projects designed to improve classroom instruction [3]. Also, various classroom observation tools have been developed based on research of effective teaching practices and can be found in *Observational Research in U.S. Classrooms* [6].

The purpose of so many observational studies were designed to describe specific educational phenomena, such as: teaching practices, involvement of students during the class, the use of technology in the classroom, evaluation of programs and the degree of their implementation, inequitable treatment of students by the teacher depending on their

gender or ethnic belonging, socioeconomic background, etc.

In our Moldovan context, observation is done sporadically and is looked upon as a tool for criticism not for improvement of teaching practices. However, even the most experienced teachers need a valid and accurate feedback on their teaching in order to facilitate their professional growth, as very often, if not observed, they are not aware of the effectiveness of their teaching. Systematic observation is much more important for the young teachers in order to help them understand what their strengths and weaknesses are and consequently improve their classroom instruction from the very start. Through feedback, teachers can become aware of how their class functions and thus bring changes. Studies prove that teachers positively change their attitude and behaviors after receiving feedback from classroom observations [5]. I would like to mention that Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives [1] appeared based on classroom observation, which brought tremendous change not only in the American educational system but also in the educational systems of many countries, including Moldova.

Thus, classroom observation itself can serve as an important form of feedback for teachers interested in developing their own practice; it can also be an important dimension of evidence to include for teaching evaluations (administratively). However, a single observed class may not be representative, it may fail to capture a broad range of teaching skills, as well as the lessons observed by one evaluator, who may favour the teachers that have a teaching style similar to her/his own. Classroom observation should become active, informative, instructive, helpful, not just a form of 'watching' and criticizing.

The observer should not rate the observed activities as 'good' or 'bad' but give an objective value to everything that occurred during the lesson. From the very first moments of the process of observing, it should be clear to

the observer whether there is established a productive relationship between the teacher and the students, whether a supportive learning environment is offered to the learners, whether the class is planned and managed to achieve clear objectives.

The classroom observation process consists of several components: pre-observation discussion, data collection, data analysis, and feedback session.

During the pre-observation discussion, the observer has to clarify the following questions: Where in the course (syllabus) the teacher is with the taught material; what the objectives for the observed lesson are; what teaching methods the teachers is going to use; what student outcomes are expected for the observed class; special characteristics of the students (group). Some other very important things that the observer has to discuss with the observed teacher before the lesson begins are: where s/he should sit in the classroom; would the teacher want the observer to have eye contact with the learners/teacher; should the observer interfere in the process of classwork. Based on my experience as a mentor for the students-interns of English, they usually solicited my having eye contact with them and my interference (sometimes they could not remember a word; I might provide additional information, or I could just non-verbally approve of the teaching and encourage the student, etc.). If this is a highly experienced teacher, interference will not be welcome, even if the observer strongly disagrees with what is going on in the classroom.

Prior to observing it is usually required (but not practiced) that the teacher submit an outline of the class to be observer (lesson plan). This information will be helpful to the observer in understanding the focus of the class, the set instructional objectives, the strategies used to accomplish the objectives, and the expected student outcomes.

Data collection occurs during the observation itself. The observer has to take notes, which will be used during the analysis stage while

preparing for the feedback session. The observer has to consider the following: if the lesson was well organized and clearly presented; the level of student interest and participation; the quality of interpersonal relations between the teacher and the students; things that were particularly effective about the instruction; specific suggestions concerning how the instruction could be improved.

The feedback session should be scheduled soon after the observation. During it, a dialogue must be structured between the teacher and the observer about the teaching and learning. The information will be provided below.

Roger Bowers suggests HORACE paradigm, which is understood "as a prescribed path for the counsellor to follow in his interaction with those whom he advises" [2, p. 140]. Each letter of the famous name stands for one step in the procedure and namely: Hear and Observe, Record and Analyze, Consider and Evaluate. It can easily be applied to classroom observation as it provides a simple way to remember what the tasks of the observer are. During the Hear and Observe stage the observer has to focus on: How does the teacher open the class? What tone does this set? What interaction or relationship does the teacher establish with the students? How does this affect the learning environment or opportunities for learning? At what level and in what ways are the students engaged? How has the teacher prepared for the class? What tools are used to meet the objectives and does the teacher apply them effectively? Does the teacher follow the plan or is s/he able to adjust when something unexpected happens? What evidence shows that the students clearly understand the content and context for what is learned by the end of the class? How does the teacher close the class? What does the observed lesson tell the observer about the teacher's philosophy and educational goals of the institution in general?

Observing the above, the teacher is to make notes that will be later useful for giving feedback i.e. s/he is to Record and Analyse what has been heard and observed during the

class. There exist many templates for classroom observation to assist the observer in making notes depending on the main goal of observing. Here is a proposed observation sheet:

Lesson Observation Sheet

The observed teacher _____
 The observer _____
 Group, specialty, institution _____
 Discipline/Topic _____
 Date/Time _____
 Students' background (could be information on the age, composition, gender).
 Classroom environment (information on the equipment and visual aids).

Stage of the lesson	Procedure (teacher and student activity)	Comments, questions, alternatives

The observer could also make notes on the given below areas.

1. *The teacher's preparation for the lesson (lesson plan, objectives, visual aids).*
2. *Teacher's skillfulness (command of the language, techniques used, smooth transition from one stage of the lesson to another, coherence and cohesion).*
3. *Teacher's management of the lesson, teacher's voice, body language, teacher-student and student-student interaction, time management.*
4. *General conclusions and comments on the lesson.*

The next step in the observation process should be the observer's personal evaluative comments for each stage of the lesson and some other aspects of the lesson as a whole i.e. consider and evaluate. At the consider stage, the observer has to reflect on many factors that help explain the teacher's behavior during the class. These may be physical ones (time, resources, noise levels, size of the class) as well as interpersonal factors (student attitudes, the built up relationships, the effect of the observer's own presence, the system constraints (prescribed curriculum, methods of teaching).

Methodological literature suggests that the feedback session should also evolve according to a specific order. It shall include the following stages: 1. Feelings (How do you feel?), 2. Description (Let us go

through it), 3. Positive evaluation (What are you pleased with? What were the best bits?) 4. Room for improvement (Is there anything you did not do well? Why is that?) 4. Action-planning (In view of what you have said, what are you going to do next time?), 5. Support (How can I help?).

It is also important to allow the teacher to do the talking by asking several questions, for example: 1. In light of your instructional objectives, how do you think the class went? 2. Did the students learn what you wanted them to? How do you know? 3. Were the choices of teaching methods or strategies effective? How do you know? 5. Were the materials you used helpful? How do you know? 6. If you could teach this lesson over again to the same class: a. What would you do differently? Why? b. What would you do the same? Why? It is impor-

tant that the discussion does not impose the observed teacher to justify what and how he taught but to offer him the possibility to analyze what and how he taught.

Some characteristics of the feedback would be descriptive not evaluative, specific not general, constructive not threatening, alterable not unalterable, solicited not imposed, well-timed not poorly timed. However, while preparing for the feedback session, the observer is to pay attention to the language s/he is going to use during the session itself. In the case of descriptive feedback, the observer could instead of evaluating by saying "It is not good that you do not write on the board" use "It helps the students if they see what you are saying as well as hearing it". Instead of saying something general like "many students did not participate", the observer could say "students B and C were silent the whole class", thus making the comment more specific. In the case of constructive feedback, the observer could make a comment like "It would help if the students made notes of the lecture" instead of "students will never learn anything if they don't make notes", which would seem more like a threat. In the case of alterable feedback, the observer could make suggestions in an indirect way by saying "Try thinking (using)..., it usually helps". The solicited feedback is when the teacher her/himself asks for help "What do you think I should do...?". A well-timed feedback session should take place a few minutes after the lesson finishes not as soon as the bell rings, this will give the teacher some time to think about what and how went in class. Also important is that the feedback session takes place in an agreed-upon timeframe. It should be neither too long, nor too short.

One thing that I really disapprove of, when offering feedback, is to begin telling personal stories about how the observer

her/himself teaches and how successful s/he is. The teacher will expect to hear more recommendations on how to improve her/his teaching or praise, if everything went well.

Conclusions

In the light of the discussed above, I believe that the introduction of observational studies in Moldovan educational institutions would be extremely important. They might have various purposes: the study of instructional practices to identify instructional problems that teachers encounter at elementary, secondary and higher educational institutions; the study of time management (types of tasks, content of the tasks, checking homework, teacher-student interaction, interest in the learners' progress); the actual use of technology in the class; the evaluation of the programs and curricula in the Republic of Moldova at national level. The given studies could result in a positive outcome on how to make the teaching/learning process more effective. The examination of the collected data and the recommendations made might lead to a general improvement of the whole system of education in the country.

It is important that unified observation instruments be developed based on "standards" of pedagogy and used both at school and university level. Classroom observation should become a systematic method for measuring classroom performance of a teacher, for exchanging experiences and ideas on how to teach, for enriching oneself with various methods used by teachers, etc., while the feedback should become a valuable tool for learning from observation. It should be constructive, valid, truthful, and reliable. Through feedback, teachers become aware how their classroom functions and thus bring about the changes they desire.

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