

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION IN TEACHING PRACTICE

Yoqubjonova Diyora Uchqunovna

Tashkent State Technical University after named I.Karimov

Teacher at the department "Practical English"

Annotation: in this article we give general information about teacher student interaction, teachers' methodological principles in learning a foreign language, the components of the educational process.

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Observation plays a central role in practice teaching, both observation of your teaching by your cooperating teacher and supervisor, as well as your own observations of your cooperating teacher class. Other school staff may also wish to observe one of your classes from time to time, such as the principal, the vice principal, or a senior teacher, so you need to prepare well for every lesson in the event that someone asks to observe your teaching. You may also have opportunity to observe other teachers in your host school and to review video recordings of your own teaching and that of student teachers in your teaching practice seminars.

The purpose and nature of observation, however, differs according to who participates in the observation process. For example, in observing your cooperating teacher's class your focus will be on how the teacher teaches, on such things as how the teacher creates a positive atmosphere for learning, on the strategies and procedures used by the teacher in setting up activities, on the way the teacher gives instructions and explanation, and how he or she gives feedback to learners. As a novice teacher you will not be evaluating your cooperating teacher's teaching. When you are being observed by your cooperating teacher or supervisor, however, the focus will often be on how well you carried out different aspects of the lesson. In this chapter we deal with both kinds of observations.

Although it is an important component of teaching practice, the nature and limitations of observation need to be kept in mind. Teaching is a complex and dynamic activity, and during a lesson many things occur simultaneously, so it is not possible to observe all of them. Thirty students in a class may be responding to the lesson in many different ways. Some may be finding the lesson stimulating and may have a clear sense of what the purposes of activities are and how they are supposed to carry them out. Others may find some of the activities insufficiently challenging or motivating and may be paying minimal attention to the teacher or the lesson. And at the same time the teacher may be struggling mentally to maintain the flow of the lesson and may have realized that he or she set the lesson up in a nonproductive way. None of these aspects of the lesson are directly observable. And even if aspects of classroom behavior are observable such as the amount of talking students engage in when completing an activity you may not be able to tell whether this is an indication of confusion or of interest. For all these reasons information you or your cooperating teacher gain during an observation always needs to be clarified through conversation and discussion in order to understand the meaning of what you observed.

At the same time, the presence of an observer in the classroom sometimes influences the nature of the lesson, making the lesson untypical of the teacher's, usual style of teaching. As a student teacher you may "overprepare" for a visit by your supervisor or cooperating teacher in order to show yourself at your best. You may also feel tense knowing that the observer is not only there to assist you in developing your teaching skills, but also to evaluate how well you are doing. However, initially you may find the presence of your cooperating teacher or supervisor distracts you from being able to teach your best. If this is so you should discuss this with the observer both before and after an observation. Experienced teacher trainers are of course well aware of the influence their presence may have on a student teacher, but comments such as the following are not uncommon:

[was so scared the first time [was observed by my cooperating teacher because [knew she was evaluating me as a teacher. Sometimes [looked in her direction and saw her writing something down and [wondered what she was thinking and at those times' [lost a bit of my own flow of teaching. Anyway, [was glad when it was over - only, wanted to know what she thought of my teaching.

Jae Hee, Korea

Your practice-teaching assignment, will often begin with a series of observations of your cooperating teacher's class. These observations will give you a chance to familiarize yourself with such things as the course materials the teacher is using, the teaching methods and strategies the teacher uses, how he or she interacts with students, how the learners respond and interact with the teacher and among themselves, and the kinds of language they understand and produce. These observations will help you prepare yourself for some of issues and problems that you may have to face while teaching the class. You can see what methods and strategies the teacher employs and decide if you will be able to use these yourself when you come to teach the class. You will also learn more about the learners (e.g., their interests, motivations, and learning styles) and this will better prepare you for the time when you will take over teaching the class. As Gaies (1991) has pointed out, "What we see, when we observe teachers and learners in action, is not the mechanical application of methods and techniques, but rather a reflection of how teachers have interpreted these things".

If observation is to serve a useful purpose it needs to be carefully planned. The purpose of the observation is to collect information that you can later use during a follow-up discussion with the teacher. Before you observe your cooperating teacher's class you will normally have a pre-observation meeting to decide on the focus for your observation and the procedures you will use to record your observations. You may suggest aspects of the class you would like to learn more about; such as how the teacher makes use of group work or how he or she deals with classroom management. Your cooperating teacher will also suggest things to look for during an observation. Normally you should focus on only one or two aspects of the lesson since you cannot focus on too many things at the same time. Some aspects of a lesson are relatively easy to observe (such as the kinds of questions students ask), whereas others may not be observable and have to be inferred (such as the degree of interest students had in the topic of the lesson, decisions teachers made during a lesson, or problems that occurred that might not have been visible to an observer).

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