

# Classroom Observation as a Tool for Professional Growth

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## Classroom observations can be a valuable means of developing our teaching skills and benefiting learners.

Many teachers initially encounter classroom observation in the context of being assessed either as part of their training or as part of the recruitment procedure. They link being observed to being evaluated or criticized. As a result, they often feel resistant or reluctant to participate in classroom observations.

Observations, however, can be an important tool through which language teachers take action to improve the teaching and learning in their specific contexts (Wallace). This article is written to present several ideas to this end, and shows my belief that classroom observations can be professionally beneficial and enjoyable if they are clearly aimed, comprehensively prepared, and well procedured, with chances for feedback and reflection. In my discussion, then, I am not concerned with observation as a method of data collection in academic research, or as a way of assessing teachers' performances. In addition, since in most Vietnamese colleges and universities, audiotaping and videotaping are still luxuries, I focus on "real-time observations," in which the lesson is "observed and analyzed as the teaching/learning actually happens without using any electronic means of recalling the data" (Wallace, p. 106).

### Classroom Observation: What and Why?

First, the aims of classroom observation are to get more insights into what is happening in a specific classroom and to provide information for teachers to take action to improve their own teaching and their students' learning. Although classroom observations are mainly concerned with teaching (Wallace), we can never really separate teaching from learning and its context. The focuses of classroom observation are not only teaching and teachers, but also students, their learning, and the context in which they learn. Observers are not evaluators or intruders who come to assess how well a teacher teaches, but peers who come to learn from classroom events or to help make that specific classroom a better

place. Once those who observe and those who are observed are clear about this, a more positive attitude toward classroom observation can be formed.

Second, classroom observation is "the bridge between the worlds of theory and practice" (Reed and Bergemann, p. 6). On the one hand, observation can discover a great deal about how and why certain theories or methods work or do not work in a local context. There is no method that works equally well in all cases and it is in the classroom that methods and theories are formed and tested. On the other hand, collected information only makes sense if we can interpret it properly using our skills and knowledge (Reed and Bergemann, p. 7). The same event can be viewed and interpreted differently by different people with different perceptions, backgrounds, and teaching experiences. To avoid misinterpretation, observers need training to be able to record data objectively and give feedback constructively. Similarly, teachers need training to apply the data to their own teaching. The benefits that teachers get, in this case, are a deeper understanding of theoretical knowledge and practical options for what, how, and to what extent to use that knowledge in their classroom.

The interests and benefits of learners need to be respected in all steps of the observation process. Formal observation "is an unusual event." Observations need to be organized so that their interference in the learning process can be minimized, for two main reasons. First, most teachers "are not used to perform[ing their] craft in the presence of [their] peers" (Wallace, p. 104). Students are also likely to perform differently when watched by other teachers. This may make the whole learning situation unnatural and therefore distort the data the observer gathers. Second, learning and teaching under observation can be more stressful than usual. Imagine how you would feel as a learner if 5-7 teachers flocked into your classroom after the lesson had already started, scattered around the room, watched you closely, and took intensive notes. We observe to

improve our teaching and our students' learning, and there is no reason for us to disturb learning in the process.

In many Vietnamese colleges and universities, observations are often seen as "the teacher's business" and learners' role as observers is likely to be neglected. But learners are often learning more than what we intend to teach them. They are the most frequent classroom observers. They observe how their teachers teach and compare the effectiveness of different teaching styles and methods used by different teachers. They also observe how different students respond in class and select their own corresponding ways of behaving. If learners, especially adult learners, are trained and encouraged enough, they might give their teachers surprisingly useful feedback.

In addition, learners' knowledge and attitudes about what happens in the classroom are partly formed by their interpretations of their observations. For example, when learners, such as those from teacher training colleges, become teachers, their ways of teaching and of interacting with students are likely to have been shaped and affected by their student experiences.

## **Classroom Observation: How?**

Figure 1 (next page) describes a series of suggested steps by which a class observation might be conducted. It reflects what, in my view, should be done to make classroom observation more effective, reflective, and beneficial. The process is cyclic in that one observation often helps initiate another because the improvement of teaching and learning is a never-ending process.

### **(1) Initiation**

Most teachers think about what happens in their classroom or others' classrooms. An observation is initiated when a teacher has a specific question to answer about her own or her peers' teaching and wants to answer it by information collected through classroom observation. The questions are often about aspects of teaching practice, such as, "How can I give my instructions more effectively in English to a beginner class?" or "Does my lesson achieve the aims set in the plan?" The questions can also concern aspects of learning such as, "Why are my students reluctant to participate in group work during my lessons?" or learning environment, such as, "Does the existing seat arrangement in the classroom discourage

students from interacting in speaking activities?"

The teacher then has to make decisions on the following issues:

- Whether the question is best answered through observation.
- If yes, what kind of information is to be looked for.
- Whether the teacher observes or is observed.
- Who will be the one to observe her class, or whose class will she observe.
- What kind of preparation is needed to make the observations beneficial and effective for the involved parties.

Decisions on the first and second issues help define the objectives of the observation and their feasibility. Decisions on the other issues make sure that the observations are well-planned in terms of both knowledge and organization.

### **(2) Preparation**

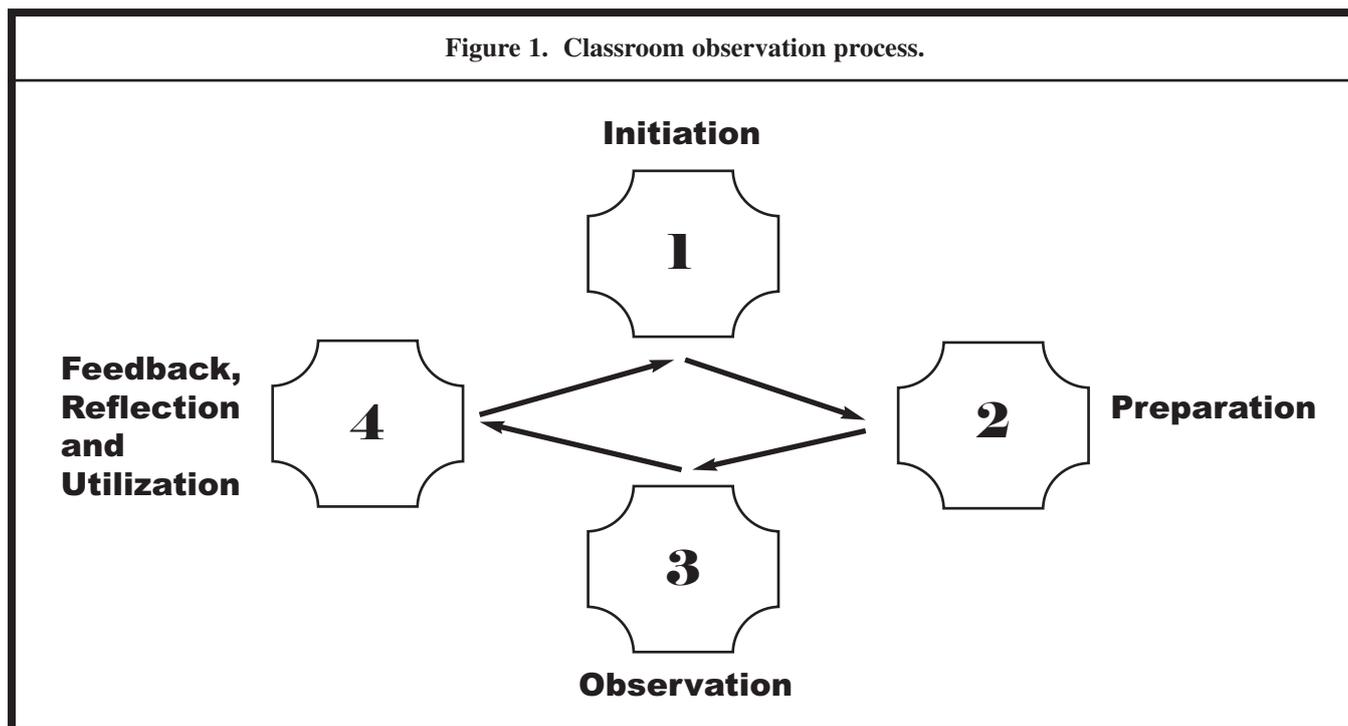
The next step is to prepare for the observations. The first items to prepare are knowledge and skills. As an observer, a teacher might need preparation in terms of data recording and observation skills. As a teacher, she might seek specific knowledge to understand more about the aspect of teaching she wants to focus on in the observations.

Then the teacher needs to communicate with involved persons about the objectives, procedures, times, places, and durations of the observations, as well as the method of recording information. In this step, the rights of the learners should be respected. Factors such as the number of observers, manner of observation, and observer's position and level of participation in class activities might all interfere with the learning process and therefore need to be taken into careful consideration.

### **(3) Observation**

Observation is a process of "selective watching" (Duckett, cited by Reed and Bergemann, p. 15). As an observation takes place, the observer records data relevant to the identified objectives, using the data recording method and techniques agreed upon between teacher and observer. The data-recording method and techniques are selected depending on what the observer and teacher are looking for and what they see as valid data. An anecdotal record form focuses on the situation and on who says or does what, while a checklist or structured observation form helps record more focused and

Figure 1. Classroom observation process.



specific information (see sample forms on pages 31-33). Sometimes, several data recording methods may be employed at the same time, provided that these methods are consistent with the guidelines already described.

Although an observer's comments are sometimes seen as qualitative data, I suggest that they be specific and well-evidenced rather than general and subjective. For example, if an observer notes, "The picture was too small," she should provide evidence such as, "Students in the back two rows could not see it."

#### **(4) Feedback, Reflection and Utilization**

It is this step which makes classroom observation a professional activity or a step in professional development. This is how action research is different from observation as assessment or as a data collection method in academic research. When observation is used for assessment, the collected data is then often used to make decisions or judgments on issues related to teaching practice or curriculum. In academic research, the data is often analyzed for generalizable findings. For our purposes, though, the utilization of the data ranges from getting more insights into a specific aspect of teaching or learning in a specific classroom to identifying specific actions to improve an aspect of teaching or evaluating the effects of that action. For instance, many pre-service teachers observe to get more field experience and to learn how to teach, whereas in the case study presented

below, a young teacher uses observations to make informed changes in her teaching.

In the whole process of observation, opportunities for feedback and discussion about the experience are very important. Through feedback sessions, an observer can understand more about what happened, how it happened, and why it happened; the teacher can reflect upon his teaching and students' learning by answering questions such as, "What did I do?", "Why did I do that?", "How did my students respond to that?", "What were the best things that happened?", "To what extent have I achieved my lesson objectives? Why? Were there any things I could have done better?" and "What would I do differently if I could do it again?" (Reed and Bergemann). The collected data will make more sense if the teacher and observers can clarify and explain to each other what, how, and why things happened. This is a way to avoid misleading conclusions made by either the teacher or the observers.

#### **A Case Study**

##### ***Anh's Project***

Anh is a young English teacher at Phu Tho Teacher Training College. She and two other colleagues were sent to a 12-week skill-based language teaching methodology course sponsored by the Vietnam-Australia Training (VAT) Project in Hanoi in early 2001. She was

trained and updated in terms of communicative language teaching methods and techniques, observation skills, and action research.

After the course, Anh returned to her teaching. When giving instructions for listening activities to a third-year English non-major class of 25 students using *Double Take* as the textbook, she found that students did not seem to understand her instructions even though she took “much time to explain and repeat” them. She decided to do an action research project on “using effective instructions in English to third-year English non-major students in listening activities” (Anh, p. 1).

Based on what she had learned about action research, she made a plan of how to proceed. The plan specified objectives, methodology, and procedure, in which real-time classroom observation was chosen as a major data collection instrument. She then discussed the plan with two of her colleagues, Hang and Hoa, who had been to the training course as well, and asked them to help as observers. Together, they decided how each observation should be done in order to minimize disruption to learning. Anh also briefed the students about her intentions and asked them to be additional observers. The students seemed to appreciate the plan and were willing to take on their role in the process.

To understand more about giving instruction as a teaching skill, Anh started to use ELT books to research strategies and steps in giving instructions. She also discussed the issue with her colleagues in the department and her trainers at the VAT Project.

To investigate her pre-identified problem, Anh designed a questionnaire for her students and an observation form for the observers (see pages 33-34). The purposes of the questionnaire were to confirm the problem, identify the causes, and identify instruction-giving strategies preferred by students. The observation form was to identify instruction-giving strategies used by the teacher, their effectiveness, and observers’ suggestions for how to improve them. The questionnaire and observation form were both translated into Vietnamese to ensure participants’ full comprehension.

In the first week of October, 2001, Anh had three of her 45-minute listening lessons to the above-mentioned class observed by Hang and Hoa. As each lesson proceeded, the observers took notes about her instructions for each of the activities, using the observation form. At the end of the lesson, the questionnaires were filled in by the students and collected for collation and analysis. After each lesson, a feedback session was held among the two observers and the teacher. In each session, they shared

notes, clarified points, and reflected together. They also collated the information collected from the questionnaires and compared it with the observers’ notes.

Here is what Anh discovered from her students and colleagues after the three observations: The majority of students partly understood (17, 15, and 16 students respectively) or did not understand the instructions (6, 6, and 4). Only a few students fully understood the instructions (2, 4, and 5). The reasons included:

- The teacher did not attract students’ attention when she started giving instructions.
- The instructions were unclear, lengthy, and complicated.
- The teacher did not model the activities.
- The teacher did not use visual aids such as written instructions on the blackboard or pictures to illustrate the instructions.
- The teacher did not check students’ comprehension of the instructions.

Together with her two colleagues, Anh decided to employ the following strategies when giving instructions:

- Attract students’ attention before giving instructions.
- Use visual aids such as written clues, pictures, or gestures to illustrate instructions when applicable.
- Use simple words and structures.
- Break complex instructions down into short and simple sentences.
- Demonstrate when applicable.
- Check students’ comprehension of the instructions.

As before, Anh planned and scheduled new lessons, finalized the observation form and questionnaire to be used, and communicated with the observers and students about the new plan and changes.

Anh tried out her improvement strategies in six 45-minute listening lessons to the same classes in the second half of October, 2001. To evaluate the effectiveness of the new strategies, a questionnaire was again filled in by students at the end of each lesson (the same questionnaire as on p. 34, except without part III). Anh also had these lessons observed by Hang and Hoa, using the observation form on p. 31. After each lesson, the teacher and observers discussed the effectiveness and appropriateness of strategies used during the lesson. They also planned what and how instructions for activities in the next lesson should be given. Data collected from the observed lessons showed: “Students increasingly understood the teacher’s instructions” (Anh, p. 8). In the final lesson, all the students understood Anh’s instructions (20 fully understood, 5 partly understood).

Through her reflections in this second round of observations, Anh identified a new aspect of

her teaching to be improved and started making a new action research plan.

### Discussion

In Anh's case, observations were used to identify a teaching problem and its causes and to evaluate potential solutions to that problem, simultaneously using two data recording tools—a student questionnaire and a structured note-taking form for observers.

Anh basically followed all the steps in Figure 1, which made her actions more effective and manageable. She actively involved both her colleagues and students in most steps of the process. The observations were prepared, organized, and done collaboratively. This process, in return, brought benefits to all the involved parties. Hang and Hoa learned more about how their colleague taught and how to solve a specific teaching problem. Anh improved her skill in giving instructions, heard from her colleagues about how she taught, and had chances to share reflections on her own teaching. The students received better instructions for class activities and a chance to voice their needs. Above all, together they developed a better attitude about and gained more experience with observation as a professional activity.

Anh respected her students and their needs and preferences. She made efforts to inform them about the process and had the observations done without disturbing their learning much. She also saw the potential of her students as observers and exploited that appropriately. The students no doubt appreciated her efforts and cooperated well.

### Conclusion

As a teacher, I have learned much about how to teach by observing my qualified peers. And by having my peers observe my own lessons, I have learned more about how I really teach. These experiences have helped me become a more self-aware and reflective teacher. Hopefully, you will find the same to be true in your own teaching. ■

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