

Classroom observation: some ethical implications

Roger Barnard lectures at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, where he is conducting a research project into ESL learners in mainstream classes in New Zealand Schools. This has involved observing classes, and has led him to consider the ethics of all kinds of classroom observation. This article should be required reading not only for all observers, but also for all school managers. (The article is based on Roger Barnard's presentation at the IATEFL Conference, Manchester, 1998.)

Introduction

EFL teachers are increasingly under scrutiny – for reasons of quality control, teacher development, and empirical research. Attention needs to be paid to the different perspectives of the various participants in order to ensure that access to classrooms is negotiated sensitively, and that information derived from observation is not abused.

Purposes of classroom observation

Quality control – performance appraisal

It is reasonable that school managers may wish to monitor the central activity of teachers – actually teaching in the classroom – as a means of assuring quality control. Thus they may wish to appraise classroom performance for purposes of promotion, probation and – increasingly – recruitment; for example, candidates for posts may be required to give demonstration lessons. Having direct knowledge of what goes on in the classroom enables managers to assure themselves – and (potential) clients – that the service they offer is what is actually provided. Having said that, it is also clear that what is observed in the classroom is at best an imperfect manifestation of underlying professional competence. Therefore, those seeking to appraise the classroom work of teachers should balance what they see with accurate information about the background knowledge, attitudes and skills of those they observe.

Teacher development

Many teacher-training courses require trainees to observe experienced and well-qualified teachers in the classroom in order to increase their awareness of current, and hopefully good, teaching practice. Such courses include the UCLES CELTA and Trinity College Cert. TESOL, as well as others such as the Diploma in Second Language Teaching at Waikato University. Many schools and institutions also encourage their teachers to undertake peer observation

Current Issues

with a view to sharing and enhancing collegial professional competence. Like those observing classrooms for performance appraisal, teachers following professional development programmes need to take into account the wider context than the simple manifestation of behaviour in the classroom – and this is usually emphasised by trainers and staff developers.

Research

Over the past thirty years, the importance of empirical classroom research has become generally acknowledged within the profession. Such research may achieve various ends: to illuminate specific situations, to identify problems and issues for further consideration, to answer specific questions or test hypotheses, and to assist in the development and generation of more effective theories of language learning and teaching. Typically, academic classroom research has a rather narrow focus – otherwise it would not be possible to deal with the matter in hand. Even so, classroom researchers are strongly advised to ‘triangulate’ their observational data with information derived from other sources.

Multi-purpose observation

The three purposes I have mentioned are, of course, sometimes combined. There is often a connection between observation for quality control and in-house teacher development, where a manager may devise a developmental strategy for an individual or a group based upon classroom observations. Observation in teacher training courses can merge into appraisal – as is the case in practical assessments for courses moderated or validated by Trinity College and UCLES. Mid-career teachers following courses – especially those in postgraduate programmes – often use data obtained via classroom observation in their academic papers; thus, much training has an empirical research orientation. Working from the other way round, action research projects not only have the goal of identifying and/or solving practical problems but also serve as vehicles for staff development.

Conflict of interest

Classroom observation has inherent implications for the conflict of interests because inferences about what happens in a classroom are unavoidably subjective. Observers will differ among themselves in their interpretations of classroom behaviour because of their varying experiences, attitudes and knowledge. The potential for such differences is even greater from the different perspectives of observer and observed: there is a tendency for the one to be critical and the other to be defensive. Both will tend to take up positions which, unless carefully monitored, may lead to conflict rather than consensus.

Conflicts of interest are particularly acute where professional roles merge because one observational purpose blends with another. In smaller institutions, one individual may be responsible for both management and staff development. In other cases, a manager may have been appointed from among the senior teaching staff, and now has to reconsider – perhaps reject – personal knowledge gained from observation of colleagues for staff development

purposes. Tutors on some training courses observe lessons both as mentors and, later perhaps, as assessors; they need to be aware of the implications of the shift. Those who complete training courses may be recruited to the school where, as student-teachers, they observed experienced practitioners; they will need to re-adjust their perceptions. Teachers who collaborate on action research projects will find particularly intriguing the complex relationships which develop, and rapidly change, both within the group and also with those of their colleagues who are outside the project.

As far as possible, the *primary* purpose of a particular observation, or series of observations, should be identified. And those involved – the participants – need to be assured that classroom observation is undertaken only for that purpose. There should be no hidden agenda, and the observations should also follow certain ethical guidelines.

The perspectives of the different participants

The ethical implications of classroom observation start with evaluating the perspectives of the key participants: the institutional management, observers, teachers and students. What are their expectations and assumptions? What are the relationships between them? In what ways might they welcome or resent observation? In what ways might they all benefit from observation?

The management

The managers are the first and the formal – though by no means the only – gatekeepers to the observational setting, and they have ultimate power of permission and veto regarding access to the classroom. Do managers perceive the staff they observe for quality control purposes as loyal employees, or trusted colleagues, or devious shirkers? Do they perceive observers who are not employed by the institution as valued consultants, or welcome guests, or tiresome gatecrashers? Do the observers see management as facilitative, or obstructive, or manipulative? Each of these – and other – categories of perception involves certain assumptions about reciprocal rights and obligations.

Secondly, the management of the host institution should arrange their own observations, and those of others, very carefully. There is a need to minimise disruption to the classes, and to avoid overloading teachers with a heavy schedule of observations at inappropriate times. Not every teacher in a school may be suitable for observation for teacher development purposes (UCLES and Trinity College have strict guidelines on this matter). This means that more experienced and more highly-qualified members of staff may be called upon more frequently than may be desirable. Likewise, observational research is likely to be time-consuming. If it is cross-sectional, the research will focus on a number of classes over a fairly short period; if longitudinal, then a few classrooms may be observed for much longer periods of time.

A third question to be addressed at this point is the extent to which the management derives benefit from classroom observation – other than for its

own purposes of quality control. There is a lot of time and effort, and a considerable degree of sensitivity, involved in planning a schedule of observations. Therefore those seeking this opportunity – observers, teacher developers, researchers – should consider what sort of reciprocal advantage it is possible to offer to the management.

The observers

Evidently, observers need to know what they are looking for when they enter a classroom. But how precise and how explicit has that purpose been made to the other participants? It is incumbent upon managers to establish, preferably by negotiation with their teachers, the criteria relevant to quality control. Teacher developers should discuss in detail with student observers and teachers what they should be looking for in the classroom. Researchers should formulate very precise research questions before entering classes and should present these, at least in broad terms, to the teachers.

Secondly, what should be the role of the observer in the classroom? The usual continuum is between the observer as participant and as non-participant. The latter is, as it were, a fly on the wall, sitting quietly and manifestly, but unobtrusively, collecting his or her data. At the other extreme is the fully participating observer, who has a role in the class (such as a second teacher, or a teacher aide) and whose recorded observations go unnoticed. The degree of the observer's active involvement should be agreed with the teacher before the observation begins.

Thirdly, how do the observers record their data? The usual choice is between those who write notes and those who audio-record or video-record the lesson, although some observers use both, and some – surprisingly perhaps – do neither. Any form of data collection may, unintentionally, be threatening. The audio or video tape recorder may be seen as overtly invasive, but an observer sitting at the back of the room writing notes may also be seen as threatening, although perhaps not as menacing as the observer who sits with arms folded and a fixed smile on his or her face. This issue, too, must be discussed with the teacher before any observation begins.

The teachers and learners

The classroom is a territory whose cultural boundaries have been defined and negotiated jointly, if perhaps implicitly, by the teacher and the learners. An outside observer is an intruder in this culture and – to a greater or lesser extent – the intrusion affects the psychological and social rapport between and among teacher and learners. The observer should take every step to reduce the disruption by being sensitive to the personal perspectives of all members of the classroom.

Although the observer probably has a specific reason for the choice of classrooms to be observed, it may be that neither teacher nor learners are sufficiently well-informed about this. The teacher is usually the most salient factor in the selection of classes to be observed: quite clearly this is the case for managerial observation. Likewise, in teacher development courses, the

experience and qualifications of the teacher are usually the main criteria for the selection of classes for observation. Researchers may have other criteria, according to their particular research questions, but their first point of reference is the teacher. Enough has been said above to indicate why it is important for teachers to be appropriately informed about the aims and processes of observation.

But mere information is not enough. Observers need to advise teachers of their intentions in a timely and sensitive manner in order to gain their willing participation. It is also important to take steps to make observation useful to both parties. For example, providing feedback to the teachers can be mutually beneficial. Indeed, it is essential for quality-control purposes, for otherwise the process is one-sided and quite unjust. Student-teachers will often find teachers and students very happy to discuss their observations. Because good classroom observation is a mirror of professional practice, experienced teachers will wish to reflect upon their own teaching and learning situation as seen through fresh eyes. Most classroom researchers will value the reflectivity involved in reviewing their interpretations with teachers and learners. Not only does this additional source of information provide an additional form of triangulation, but it more fully involves the teacher as co-researcher.

If it is necessary – and indeed it is – for teachers to be apprised of the purposes and foci of the observation, one may reasonably extend this necessary courtesy to the other primary participants – the learners. However, it is clear that too often the perspective of the learner is not taken into account by those planning and undertaking classroom observation. Neglect of the client's perceptions is not only ethically unacceptable, it is counter-productive to the market-oriented nature of much of our work in ELT. In many of the cultures from which our learners come, it is not normal practice for others to enter into a client-focused setting to watch what is going on. It is even more peculiar for observers to come into the room, sit in a corner scribbling or playing a tape-recorder, and then leave with barely a word of salutation.

The learners should be considered as active partners, rather than passive subjects, of the observational process. They should be advised of the purpose of the observation and the reason for the selection of their particular class. Ways should be found for them, like the teachers, to benefit from the process – perhaps by providing them too with useful, sensitive and timely feedback. Attention needs to be paid as to how the above issues are to be handled in the light of the linguistic and cultural diversity which is at the heart of language teaching. While this is far from easy, it is nevertheless necessary. Clearly, the classroom teacher plays a primary role in this matter, but a strategy could, and should, be developed collaboratively by the teacher, management and observers.

Conclusion

The ethical foundations of classroom observations are, therefore, founded upon two issues: firstly, the informed consent by the participants and agreed access to the classroom and, secondly, the appropriate use of information gained from observation.

Current Issues

It follows from the all points made above that participation in classroom observation must be voluntary. (A possible caveat to this is where managerial observation has been explicitly included in a teacher's contract; this, however, may be considered as voluntary – if somewhat loaded – participation.) Participants can only give their consent if they have been accurately informed about the purposes and methods of the observation both before observation begins and – if it is sustained – throughout an observation schedule. Accurate information should be given in writing to institutions, teachers and learners; likewise, their formal consent to allow access to their teaching and learning setting should be obtained in writing. Access, however, is not granted on a once-and-for-all basis; observers need to keep 'on side' with all participants throughout the observation period. Their participation is, and must remain, entirely voluntary – and they should feel free to withhold consent at any time without giving reason. Observers should not, therefore, give cause.

There are circumstances when it is not sufficient to address the issue of informed consent directly to the learners in class but to refer to their sponsors. The most obvious case is that of the parents or caregivers of young learners. It is entirely appropriate that the parents or caregivers of children need to be informed about the nature of any observation, and their consent sought. So too, of course, should the consent of their children: why should the young be treated as if they had no choice in the matter? Another case of sponsorship concerns the large number of EFL learners who are sponsored by institutions such as government agencies, large companies, or universities. These institutions pay for their people to study – not to be the subjects of observation and discussion by people they do not know and have no interest in. At the very least, corporate clients, as well as the students themselves, should be informed that classes may be observed for a variety of purposes. This should be done clearly enough for them to understand and, it may be hoped, consent. If this information is presented in a positive and attractive light, it should add to the reputation of the school as one that cares about quality control, professional development and educational research. Corporate clients may actually prefer to use schools with such concerns.

Information obtained from classroom observation must be sensitively handled. In the first place, the anonymity of all teachers and learners should be preserved. Managers as 'quality controllers' must have a very precise idea of who needs to know the personal details of those they have observed. Teacher developers should insist that student-teachers avoid using the names of classroom participants in all communication, both written and oral. This is as important in post-lesson analytical discussions among student-teachers as in written reports that they submit to their tutors. Classroom researchers are expected to use pseudonyms in any disseminated material derived from their investigations

A similar point concerns confidentiality. Observers should not divulge anything learned during observation outside the specific, and identified, channels of communication. Loose talk in offices, staffrooms, cafeterias and car-parks can be very harmful. It may be the reputation of a particular teacher which is traduced, or that of learners (individually or as a group), or indeed that of an entire school.

Fundamentally, ethics is about treating other people with the respect that one would wish for oneself. If observers of classrooms follow the suggestions made here, they should find that their work in the classrooms is not only more effective, but more appreciated.

Further reading

I would recommend the following publications for those interested in reading further in this area:

BALEAP (1989) *Code of Practice and Guidelines for Courses in English for Academic Purposes*. British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes

Norris, N. (1992) *Principles and Procedures for Programme Evaluation*, CARE, University of East Anglia

Tarone, E. (1980) 'Guidelines for Ethical Research in ESL'. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.14, No.3

Wajnryb, R. (1992) *Classroom Observation Tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. Cambridge University Press

White, R., Martin, M., Stimson, M. and Hodge, R. (1991) *Management in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press. (Chapter 3: Staff Development)

Copies of the ethical guidelines for observation as used at Waikato University are available from rbarnard@waikato.ac.nz.

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