

Observation in the Classroom

Zhu Ya-nan

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

Classroom observation is a means of doing research into what occurs in classrooms by systematically observing and keeping records of classroom events. Classroom observation plays very important role in teachers' evaluation and development. Summative and formative functions are the two main purposes that classroom observation serves. Three steps are involved in the classroom observation. Preparations are made before the observation. Various observational techniques or tools are used to collect data during the observation. Reflection and feedback are needed to improve classroom performance and competence.

Keywords: classroom observation, purpose, process

Introduction

Classroom observation has a very long tradition in the assessment and development of teaching and teachers in English education systems throughout the world (O'Leary, 2020). Observation is an important learning tool that observers can learn from the classroom observation processes and improve teachers' skills and knowledge (Gu, 2022; Wajnryb, 2015). It is commonly used in such contexts as pre-service and in-service teachers' training, new and experienced teachers' professional development and assessment (O'Leary, 2020). In other words, it is used to study and assess teaching, and measure and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of teaching. The data collected from classroom observations are generally supplementary to such other sources as administrative reviews, student evaluations or accomplishments, review of teaching materials, the teacher's own self-assessment, etc. But classroom observation, as an assessment method, provides the most direct data about the teaching performance (MacDonald, 2016). Several hundred classroom observation systems have been developed over the years, and these systems are generally classified as either unstructured or structured with a combination of approaches. The unstructured ones are thought to be flexible on the basis of the observer's personal constructs, while the structured methods are regarded objective on the basis of preset categories (Noguera, 2018).

The Purpose of Observation

Classroom observations can be conducted with the guidance of the national education policies. The purpose and nature of observation differs a lot in different contexts. It is determined by who participates in the observation process, and by the final goal or the objective of the observation. School administrators conduct classroom observations to evaluate or assess quality of teaching for retention and promotion decisions; for advisers and

Zhu Ya-nan, M.A., lecturer, School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China.

advisory teachers, observation is used to assess the teachers' performance and competence or to identify whether the teaching practice is good or not; pre-service teachers participate in the observation of expert teachers' instructional practices to develop their pedagogical content knowledge and classroom management strategies; classroom observation is an opportunity for volunteers like parents and governors to know what goes on in a school; observation is used as a method of data collection to do classroom research for teachers, educational psychologists, and so on. While classroom observations are conducted by a wide variety of observers, their objectives have something in common. Therefore, classroom observation has two main purposes. One is summative and another is formative. Summative observation is assessment-based for educational supervision. Formative observation is aimed at professional development and quality improvement (Gu, 2022; O'Leary, 2020; Ponticell et al., 2018; Richards & Farrell, 2011). The purposes discussed above are sometimes combined. For example, educational supervision is related to developmental strategies for the teacher being observed based on classroom observations. Some professional training is empirical research orientated. Action research projects aim to not only identify and/or solve practical problems, but also develop teaching practice (Barnard, 1998).

The Process of Classroom Observation

The complete process of classroom observation usually consists three steps: pre-observation preparation, classroom observation, and post-observation feedback and reflection (State of Victoria [Department of Education and Training], 2018).

Pre-observation Preparation

In the pre-observation stage, both the observer and the observee, the teacher being observed, need to make some preparations. A conversation or meeting before the classroom observation is needed to gain agreement on the specific focus of the observation. Areas of focus could be pedagogical approaches, curriculum structure, lesson planning, lesson objectives, assessment strategies, questioning to check student understanding and evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching practice, classroom management, materials and resources (State of Victoria [Department of Education and Training], 2018; Wajnryb, 2015). The focus is closely associated with the purpose of the observation, and decided on the basis of the observers' concerns and needs. For instance, the supervisors, administrators, and school leaders will put the focus on how well the observee carries out different parts of the lesson. The peer teachers' focus will be on things like how the teacher being observed creates a positive atmosphere for students learning, the way that class activities are being set up, and how instructions, explanations, and feedback are given to learners. But new teacher will not put focus on teaching evaluation (Richards & Farrell, 2011).

Classroom Observation

The second stage of observation is guided by the focus decided in the first step. In other words, the specific focus shapes what the observers will notice, record, or assess during the observation process. For classroom observations to lead to fruitful results, it is necessary to do observations in the moment in the classroom, and it is also necessary to use some form of documenting or recording what is observed. Classroom observation instruments or methods are "organized, objective systems for observing, coding, arranging, and analyzing" teaching and learning behaviors in the setting of the classroom (Martin, 1977, p. 43). With the observational

techniques the data can be reviewed and analyzed possibly and conveniently in the future. Meanwhile, the written and/or audio-visual documentation can be exact supporting details for the feedback (MacDonald, 2016).

The following are some observational instruments or methods, and recording tools that observers can make use during the actual observation of the classroom. According to Evertson and Green (2001, as cited in MacDonald, 2016), there are four general categorizations: category systems, descriptive systems, narrative systems, and technological records; each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Category systems include checklists, charts, and rating scales. Classroom observation checklists are lists of questions. They serve as reference to carry out classroom observations. The items or categories in the checklists involve specific behaviors of teachers and/or students to be tallied and/or ranked during the classroom observation by the observers. Observation checklists are often prepared or decided by the observer, the teacher being observed, or both of them. These observational category instruments are structured, pre-existing, predetermined, or readily-available, so the efficiency of recording procedures can be improved. Comparisons across classrooms can also be made reliably with high level of agreement among observers. But to context-specific variables, they are not flexible or responsive and cannot offer further explanations. Particularly, they do not give much insight into classroom interaction between teachers and students.

Descriptive systems are designed to observe target teaching and learning behaviors in the classroom. Sometimes, the descriptive systems also have ready-made items or categories, like the above mentioned category systems, in order to guide or focus the classroom observation process. But these systems are more open. The observers do not just tally or rank the teaching and learning behaviors. They also record descriptions of the classroom behaviors and their attention is paid to context-specific variables and the effects of context on the behaviors. The observation and recording made by this instrument is less efficient. But observers have chance to generate deeper analysis and understanding on the class observation.

Like the descriptive systems, narrative systems are also designed to produce written descriptions of teaching and learning behaviors or other phenomena in the classroom in a detailed way. The narrative systems do not use any preset or ready-made items or categories. Therefore, they are more open than the previous descriptive systems. Observers tend to record their observation or what is occurring in the classroom. So, this observational instrument will be labor and time intensive to collect data, but more appropriate for the observers to understand particular observation cases deeply and make some comparisons across cases.

The fourth tool is technological records. Traditionally, classroom observations were conducted in person. Technology is now being used regularly to make the observation process more accessible and effective. These systems gather actual footage of what is going on in the classroom, especially by video-recording or audio-recording of classroom performances. The data produced by technological records are clear, concrete, and inarguable evidence of the classroom performances. They can be watched and reviewed repeatedly by both the observers and observees. Since the recordings are raw data, evaluation and assessment of the data need to be done afterwards.

Post-observation Reflection and Feedback

During the classroom observation, a wide variety of evidence is gathered with the observational instruments. After the process of data collection, reflection and feedback is needed. This stage gives a chance to the observer

and observee to reflect and discuss on the teaching practice of the observation. The reflection can be guided by the following questions:

1. How did you feel the class went during the observation process?
2. How did you feel about the teaching during the class?
3. Did students accomplish the objectives as planned for this class?
4. Is there anything that worked well in class that typically impresses you? Is there anything that did not work well?
5. What were the teaching strengths?
6. What were the teaching problems or areas to be improved?
7. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

The teacher being observed is not passive recipient, and his/her growth is especially achieved through consistent self-reflection. Reflection is profound and critical “when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity” (Dewey, 1938).

The feedback can be verbal or written. The conversational or verbal and written feedback is most meaningful or valuable if it takes place on the same day or a few days within the classroom observation, as the teaching performance is still fresh in the minds of the observer and the teacher being observed. For the observer, the feedback is not about making judgement on the observation, but is factual, objective, and evidence-based analysis and offering suggestions for improvement (State of Victoria [Department of Education and Training], 2018). To the observee, feedback is the stimulus for his/her awareness about the importance of teaching practice on student learning outcomes. During the feedback, the observer can ask the observee some questions to either expand or explain his/her thinking and understanding, and discuss the focus for improvement.

Final Thoughts

Classroom observations are used to monitor the quality of teaching performance, identify ways to improve teaching practice, and reinforce the professional development of classroom teachers. Ultimately, the quality of students’ school learning and experience is improved. In other words, if done well, classroom observation is a developmental opportunity for both teachers and students. And it is an effective way to improve the quality of classroom teaching and teaching research, and an improvement strategy to enhance student learning.

What is observed most attentively is determined by the purpose of the observation. Therefore, both the observer and the teacher being observed need to be fully aware of the purpose of the observation and of any specific focus. It can be discussed informally or in a brief conversation or meeting in advance of the observation. A variety of tools or instruments can assist observers when conducting observation in the classroom. Checklists, charts, rating scales, narrative descriptions, etc., are the observational techniques that have proven to be effective ways of examining the class. Which instrument or system is most proper for the observation will largely depend on the observer’s purposes and targeted focus. The observation can make difference only if it is conducted systematically with specific focus. Classroom observation gives both the observer and the teacher being observed reflection opportunities for development. Teachers can make a dramatic improvement when they receive targeted feedback on their performance and enhance the teaching experience.

Although classroom observation is considered as a valuable tool for professional development and evaluation, it has some limitations. The observations can be influenced by individual observer's personal opinions or biases about instructional methods and prior experiences. So, the role of observer can be interfered, and he or she may draw immediate conclusions before taking the time to refer to the data gathered. On the other hand, some teachers being observed tend to feel nervous, anxious, restless, or stressful in front of the observers during the classroom observation process. Their teaching practice and performance can be affected by these negative feelings. Hence, the validity of the observations can be badly impacted. Classroom observation can indeed provide some valuable insights into what occurs in the classroom. However, it cannot show a complete or comprehensive picture of the observee's teaching and student learning. Meanwhile, if the teacher and students being observed inhibit or alter their practice to look more favorable, then the observer cannot get authentic results of the observation. So, the accuracy of the information or data gathered during the observation will be influenced. Besides, classroom observation can be an incredibly time-consuming process from preparing stage to feedback discussion, though observing and collecting data or information is obviously useful and necessary. Nevertheless, classroom observation is one of the effective tools for practitioner to make use to study and evaluate teaching, and finally improve student outcomes or performance by improving the instructional skills and ability of the teacher.

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