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INTER- ÉS MULTIDISZCIPLINÁRIS KUTATÁSOK A NYÍREGYHÁZI EGYETEMEN



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Ilona Huszti

OBSERVATION TASKS AS USED IN PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHER TRAINING

Abstract

The main aims of the present article include introducing briefly the compulsory module*Methodology* of *English Language Teaching (MELT)* within the English teacher training programme at the FerencRákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Berehove/Beregszász, Transcarpathia, Ukraine; describing in some detail the micro-teaching sessions that pre-service teachers have to do before starting their compulsory teaching practicum; presenting traditional and innovative observation tasks that can be used during micro-teaching in English teacher training programs to raise pre-service teachers' awareness of the crucial issues of the teaching profession; informing about the results of a small-scale survey on the benefits of Douglas's (2018) innovative observation tasks carried out among English major college students. Finally, the paper draws some useful pedagogical implications for English teacher training.

Absztrakt

Jelen cikk fő célkitűzései közé tartozik "Az angol nyelv oktatásának módszertana" című főiskolai alaptantárgy rövid ismertetése az angoltanárképzési programon belül a beregszászi II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskolán (Kárpátalja, Ukrajna); azon mikrotanítási foglalkozások részletes leírása, amelyeket az angol szakos diákoknak le kell vezetniük a kötelező tanítási gyakorlat megkezdése előtt; hagyományos és innovatív megfigyelési feladatok bemutatása, amelyek az angoltanárképzési programokban a mikrotanítás során felhasználhatók, hogy a diákokban tudatosítsák a tanári szakma döntő kérdéseit; tájékoztatás annak a felmérésnek az eredményeiről, amelyet angol szakos főiskolai hallgatók körében végeztünk, és amely a Douglas-féle (2018) innovatív megfigyelési feladatok előnyeire összpontosított. Végül a tanulmány néhány hasznos pedagógiai következtetést von le az angoltanárképzéssel kapcsolatban.

1. Introduction and background information

The Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education is a relatively new educational establishment in Ukraine, founded in 1996. It has been training English teachers since the very beginning of its existence. The training consists of two stages as both bachelor and master courses are offered. During the fifth and the seventh semesters (at the bachelor level) English major students have to do their compulsory teaching practicum. However, before this starts, students are expected to do the obligatory micro-teaching sessions within the framework of the academic discipline 'Methodology of English Language Teaching' in Semester 4. On the one hand, micro-teaching involves planning and conducting micro-lessons in an artificial context of the college classes when students teach their fellows. On the other hand, students make observations about how their fellows teach, solve observation tasks about the micro-lessons, and finally discuss the results of their observations with their tutor and fellow students in a follow-up group interview (c.f. Huszti 2018).

Observation is extremely useful because '*it is a multi-faceted tool for learning*' (Wajnryb, 1992: 1). Observers in tertiary education '*include trainee teachers who observe teachers, other trainees and trainers as an important part of their own initial training process. The main purpose for observation is teachers' professional growth and development*' (Wajnryb 1992: 2).

The main aim of the present article is to emphasize the usefulness and necessity of applying observation tasks in English teacher training in order for the trainees to become competent teachers. In what follows, both traditional and innovative observation tasks are presented to show their relevance for the purpose of training future English teachers who can think logically, plan their teaching and justify their decisions in the most appropriate way.

2. Traditional observation tasks

The task of the trainer in the tertiary educational context is 'to help the trainees understand the various processes involved in the teaching and learning of a language and the complex array of activities that occur in a language classroom' (Wajnryb 1992: 5). The trainer becomes a source of wisdom, teaching, and supportfor the trainee or mentee (Reh 2019). The trainer should always be supportive and encourage the trainee's professional growth, progress and development, but never give 'how to' types of advice to trainees, i.e. they should never be prescriptive about what and how the trainees must do in their teaching. It is best if the trainees deduce and conclude the best practices for themselves.

Why observe? 'Being an observer in the classroom [...] affords us the freedom to look at the lesson from a range of different perspectives outside that of the actual lesson plan of the teacher' (Wajnryb, 1992: 7). For the trainee teacher, thus freedom is particularly important. In a way, 'this stage in training is akin to the 'silent phase' of a beginning language learner who listens, looks, observers, considers, analyses, reflects, but, significantly is not required to produce' (Dulay, Burt, &Krashen, 1982 – in Wajnryb, 1992: 7). Observing good practice enables students to look purposefully, in order to further develop their knowledge, their skills and appropriate professional attitudes towards the situation being observed.

Richards (1998) also believes that observation provides opportunities for critical reflection on one's own teaching. In Farrell's view (2016), the use of reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences.

A trainee teacher with the freedom (i.e. lack of pressure to perform) to observe teaching is allowed time and space to become familiar with the culture of the class-room – its agenda of customs, rituals, expectations, patterns and moves – before having to try on any active aspects of the teacher's role (Wajnryb 1991 – cited in Wajnryb 1992: 7).

Developing the skill of observing serves a dual purpose: '*it helps teachers gain* a better understanding of their own teaching, while at the same time refines their ability to observe, analyse and interpret, an ability which can also be used to improve their own teaching' (Wajnryb, 1992: 7).

An observation task is a focused activity to work on while observing a lesson in progress. It focuses on one or a small number of aspects of teaching or learning and 'requires the observer to collect data or information from the actual lesson, such as the language a teacher uses when giving instructions or the patterns of interaction that emerge in a lesson' (Wajnryb 1992: 7).

Why use observation tasks? 1. They are widely used in teacher training 2. They train trainees to see (Wajnryb 1992) – especially useful with pre-service teachers as we can help guide what they should be paying attention to when concentrating on the teaching process, so we can narrow the scope. We are helping them notice aspects of teaching and students' reactions to the language learning process or acquisition.

In her guidelines to lesson observation, Somogyi-Tóth (2000) claims that it is a time-consuming activity to learn how to observe in an acceptable manner which also requires careful reflection, personal tact, and creativity. She states that an observer is a guest in the teacher's classroom, who is there thanks to the goodwill of the teacher one is observing. A guest's purpose for visiting is not to judge or criticize the classroom teacher or to offer suggestions, but simply to learn through observing. This should always be the main goal of any observer.

Douglas (2018) mentions a traditional approach suggesting a series of observation tasks being done in a couple of weeks. For Week 1 he offers the following task:

Instruction: Watch the lessons and make notes on the following points:

Rapport Teacher talk Instructions Monitoring Boardwork

The instruction for the observation task in Week 2 is the following: Watch the lessons and make notes by answering the questions below.

- What was the aim of the lesson? Was it achieved? If not, why not? it is not very easy to know only by watching whether the aim was achieved or not, so this is a bit problematic (Douglas, 2018).
- Did the lesson follow logical stages?
- Was there enough meaningful practice for the students?
- How much error correction was there? How was it done? Was it appropriate?

2.1. Problematic issues with traditional observational tasks:

Some authors (c.f. Wajnryb 1992; Tanner and Green 1998) highlight certain problems with traditional observation tasks revealing the following issues:

- Trainees donot complete them
- Only the strong traineesbenefit from them
- Traineessee the 'wrong' thing if they are not appropriately guided by the tutor or trainer what to focus on
- The tasks are not always relevant
- Trainees donot always link what they see to their teaching
- These tasks are judgemental rather than developmental (c.f.Tanner and Green 1998)

As a reaction to all these problematic issues of the traditional observation tasks, Douglas (2018) proposes a more modern approach and perception of an observation task, which is described in the following section.

3. New trend in observation tasks

Peer observation is an excellent way to break down barriers and begin conversations that lead to professional development. 'By peer observation, we mean the act of being openly and attentively present in another teacher's classroom, watching and listening to the classroominteraction primarily for reasons of professional growth (rather than supervision or evaluation)' (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001: 157).

Peer observation is more than 'simply an equal-power alternative to supervisory observation, since it can be as beneficial to the classroom observer as it is to the teacher, if not more so' (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001: 157).

White (2010) emphasizes the benefits of peer observation, i.e. the process during which peers observe each other teach. He mentions that this way teachers can learn from each other in a non-threatening environment. He underlines that teachers can share their ideas and suggestions openly and constructively to their mutual professional benefit when there is no judgemental outcome and there is an atmosphere of trust between the participants of the observation. During the microteaching sessions, pre-service teachers also have to perform peer observation when they observe their peers teaching micro-lessons and then discuss their strong and week sides.

Douglas (2018) comes up with innovative observation tasks that can be widely used in teacher training. Heintroduces a relatively new concept of reflective observation and encourages students to observe the process of teaching by trying to come up with alternative solutions to the main questions. Three observation tasks are presented below to illustrate his ideas.

Observation task 1: Giving instructions

In this task, the observers/pre-service teachers focus on the instructions giving routine of the teacher. The chart below must be filled in during the observation by the observer. It asks them to note down where the teacher stood when giving the instruction, how they attracted the learners' attention before uttering the instruction, what the exact wording of the instruction was, whether the teacher used any gestures to emphasize the meaning of the instruction, and whether they checked the students' understanding.

In addition, the observers' task is also to ponder on alternatives to the happenings observed during the lesson, as well as considering the pros and cons of the original happenings and the alternative ones. This extra task signals the novel, or innovative nature of the observation as it was not a common practice in traditional observations to think about possible alternatives to what the teacher was doing in the classroom.

	the teacher	alternatives	pros and cons
What's the teacher's position?			
How did they get the students' attention?			
Write exactly what was said			
Were gestures used?			
Did they check students' understanding?			

What makes a difference comparing this innovative task to the previous observation task types is that trainees are asked to think and reflect about what they have seen and also think about alternatives in terms of what was good or bad (pros and cons). They are also requested to evaluate what they have seen and what other things might have been done.

Observation task 2: Language clarification

Write down two different ways the teacher used to clarify the meaning of lexis. Think of an alternative way for each situation. What are the pros and cons of each?

Item 1: Item 2: Expanding thinking on what could be done with what you have seen.

Observation task 3: Visual aids

In this task, pre-service teachers are asked to concentrate on and observe the use of various visual aids in the English lesson. They describe the visual aid (i.e. what they see and observe) and think about possible changes to improve the use of the visual aid in the lesson. The principle here again is thinking about alternatives and what could be done with them.

Visual aid	Describe or copy it	Any useful changes?
Flashcards and pictures		
Handouts		
White board		
IWB		

Douglas (2018) calls attention to principles when designing the observation tasks depicted above:

- Involving critical thinking
- Thinking of alternatives
- Narrowing the focus
- Taking ideas from observations
- Evaluating and developing

It is of utmost importance fortrainees to learn to think and observe critically so that they could be able to perform actions on their own involving analysing, evaluating, synthesising, inferring, conjecturing, and justifying about the observed lesson. These are crucial skills that can be learnt by them via the guidance of effective observation tasks. When trainees have to think about alternatives to what they have viewed, then they do not simply record the observed classroom events mechanically, but at the same time evaluate and develop possible options to modify these events. In addition, narrowing the focus of the observation can help to analyse the classroom events in more detail. The main idea is to evaluate what we do in the classroom, reflect on it and decide how we can be developmental, develop from what we have concluded.

Douglas (2018) suggests some further ideas:

- A set of options trainees choose based on personal aims the trainee starts having some ownership on the observation tasks themselves and decides in what aspect they need to develop
- Trainees design and bring to supervised lesson planning their own observation tasks
- Trainees take a photo of the board as a more practical thing students always have their phones with them, so they could take a photo of the board for later analysis
- Trainees write an aim for each teaching stage

4. Findings of a small-scale survey at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education

4.1 The aim of research and the main research question

A small-scalesurvey was conducted during the classes of the course on the Methodology of English Language Teaching at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education in Berehove/Beregszász, Transcarpathian region, Ukraine, with the aim to find out how reflective observation tasks benefited English major college students while preparing for their compulsory teaching practicum. The main research question was formulated as follows: What are the essential priorities of reflective observation tasks (e.g. Douglas 2018) for the preservice teachers in the process of becoming competent English teachers?

4.2 Participants and research instruments

Twelve Year II English major college students – pre-service English teachers – participated in the surveyin spring, 2018.Students had to do micro-teaching as a compulsory part of the syllabus, i.e. plan and deliver a ten-minute long English lesson fragment. While a student was doing the micro-teaching, the others were asked to observe these mini lessons and take notes on them. Then a group interview was conducted with the participants where every student could express their own opinions about the micro-teaching sessions conducted by their fellow students.

This was not the student participants' first observation task as they had been doing classroom observations in the traditional sense on a regular basis. It meant that they had to observe a lesson as a whole paying attention to various aspects in general. However, when the survey was carried out, the participants were requested to select just one aspect of the mini-lesson and analyse that one. Such issues were chosen by the students as giving instructions by the teacher, teacher talk, rapport, monitoring, board work, etc.An innovative observation task suggested by Douglas (2018) was applied in the investigation where participants had to note down what they have exactly observed. The novel aspect in this task was included in the questions that the students had to find answers to. Thus, besides the traditional task of describing the observed mini-lesson, students had to find alternative solutions to the ones the teachers came up with. In addition, the students had to think of pros and cons of the techniques applied by the teacher, and their own suggestions as well.

After all the twelve mini-lessons were delivered, student teachers were asked to join in a group discussion about their observations, about the effectiveness, usefulness and relevance of the tasks. Finally, participants were asked to compare the traditional and the innovative methods of observation.

4.3 Discussion of research findings

4.3.1 Observation task

During the survey, Douglas' (2018) first observation task giving instructions in the classroom (c.f. Section 3 above) was used as a research tool. Research participants were given about fifteen minutes while and after the observation altogether to complete the task, i.e. answer the questions in it, suggest alternatives and think about their pros and cons. After the trainees completed the task, the trainer-researcher checked the answers in a whole-group interaction format. Trainees claimed that the experience of doing such an observation task was 'inspiring', 'encouraging', 'positive', and 'fun' for them. Most of them declared orally to have understood though the experience of this small-scale research that observing other teachers is a key part of professional development, and that it improves teachers' own self-awareness of their skills.

- Trainees were asked to collect the benefits of the observation task they had performed for the observer in a written form. Here is what they have come up with: Observing new techniques, strategies, ideas and resources
- Gaining insight into one's own strategies and techniques
- Observing student reactions from a different perspective
- Personal professional development and growth

Trainees were also requested to consider the benefits of the observation task they had performed for the observed. What is notable at this point is that this second list also contained the benefit of personal professional development and growth which item is believed by the trainees to be a common benefit for both the observer and the observed. Other useful and helpful effects for the observed in the trainees' viewpoint include:

- The chance to see the class through someone else's eyes
- The chance to re-evaluate classroom from a different perspective
- The chance to receive input from a colleague

4.3.2 Follow-up group interview

The twelve Year 2 English major students who delivered micro-teaching lesson fragments participated in the group interview, where the tutor of the methodology module providing the framework of the survey (i.e., author of the present article) played the part of the moderator of the discussion about the observation task with reflective elements. Questions focused on two major issues: how students felt about doing the task and what they believed the major benefit from the task was that they gained for their own professional development. The observer and the observed should meet soon after the observation. The focus should be on identifying the strengths of the teaching observed as well as the sharing of practical ideas as to how the teaching might be improved. Care needs to be taken to focus only on areas agreed in advance (White 2010).

Following the recommendations of Parrott (1995) on organizing the follow-up discussion session after the observation session proper, the research participants were first divided into three small groups of four. Initially, they discussed their observations and exchanged their experiences; then, showing curiosity in other groups' conclusions, the small groups were joined in a whole-class discussion or group interview. The atmosphere of the interview was relaxed, all the students pronounced their feelings, attitudes, beliefs and opinions about the issues tackled one by one. The interview was transcribed and later analysed qualitatively by searching for patterns to emerge among the participants' views. Attention was paid to clarifying and interpreting information that the participants obtained from their observation in order to learn more about how the teacher approaches his or her teaching.

All the participants were positive about the innovative observation method. They noted how refreshing this new task by Douglas (2018) was, compared to the traditional way of doing observations globally paying attention to several aspects of one issue at the same time. They characterised the novel method by such adjectives as 'more precise', 'more detailed', 'more focused', 'more serious', 'more thought-provoking', 'more demanding', and 'more challenging'. The participants of this small-scale investigation unanimously supported the idea that was formu-

lated by one of them, that by having done these observation tasks they have learnt how to reflect on their own teaching and what to do to perform even better when teaching.

5. Summary and pedagogical implications

The paper gives a brief overview of the requirements of micro-teaching done before the compulsory teaching practicum of English major students at the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education. It discusses the traditional and innovative observation tasks used at the micro-teaching sessions and emphasizes the benefits of the latter ones in the process of teacher training. The findings of the small-scale survey conducted among English major college students support the idea of applying innovative observation tasks (as described by Douglas, 2018), therefore their usage during micro-teaching with the goal of raising students' awareness is highly recommended. The positive student feedback on doing the innovative observation tasks has suggested a most promising and successful micro-teaching session, and later teaching practicum.

The pedagogical implications of the observation task completed by the participants of the small-scale survey suggest the acquisition via performing the observations of such reflective skills as the ability to conduct analysis and self-analysis of lessons and educational activities; the ability to carry out qualitative and adequate self-diagnosis and self-assessment; the ability to perform self-regulation and self-correction. These crucial skills will become integral components of the methodology module which offered the framework of the observation task, allowing students to develop, practise and improve them.

To sum up, it can be concluded that the results of the small-scale research about the essential priorities of reflective observation tasksfor the pre-service teachers in the process of becoming competent English teachers proved to be positive and encouraging, therefore stakeholders at the educational establishment where the survey was conducted who are empowered to introduce alterations into the curriculum will consider to do this and thus improve the quality of English teacher training in Transcarpathia.

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