

2005-11-01

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Recommended Citation

Sarobol, Nopporn (2005) "Learning from Classroom Observation: An Australian Experience," *PASAA*: Vol. 37, Article 7.

DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.PASAA.37.1.6

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol37/iss1/7>

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IDEA SHARING: LEARNING FROM CLASSROOM OBSERVATION: AN AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

This paper describes the learning experiences I gained while observing classrooms in an Australian setting. In this paper I first give the background and the context of the study, followed by the aim of the visit, focusing particularly on professional development. In addition to learning from the experiences of other teachers, I also see this as a good opportunity to gain some experiences necessary for carrying out action research I hope to subsequently pursue. Next, I describe the procedure for a classroom visit, including the preparations made before and after observation, as well as the process of observation itself. Furthermore, the paper covers the observer's role, including my perspective on the reflections of classroom observation. These discussions are illustrated through examples drawn from my observational data collected while in the classrooms. Finally, implications and a conclusion are given to teachers who wish to carry out similar methods of reflection.

Data were gathered over a four-week period while observing classes taught by different teachers at Victoria University. The data are from two sources. First, in-class notes made during my observation of lessons with each teacher. The second source is from a questionnaire which asked 24 students their opinions about studying the English language.

As previously mentioned, since my overall goal was to explore what was happening in the classroom as a means to promote my own professional development, the process of reflecting upon my experiences is to talk about teaching in general and to report on what I have learned from the process. Any criticism of personal teaching styles has been avoided.

The background and the context of the study

The Language Studies Department of Victoria University has various programs for students, both youth and adult. Students who need to improve their English language skills before they begin their mainstream studies can enter the program and are placed in English classes according to their levels of English skills. These students are immigrants who come from many countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Some of them have had few years of formal classes in school because of war or other problems in their countries, and almost all of them had no chance to speak or use the English language before moving to Australia. Most of them had lived in Australia for a short time. They also had little familiarity with the culture and norms of the Australian academic environment.

The process of classroom observation

For my observation, I followed the guideline provided by David Hopkins (1988) in *A teacher's guide to classroom research* called 'the three-phase observation cycle.' This process was developed as a method of supervising student teachers, but it is well suited for use in classroom research situations as well. The three essential phases of this classroom observation process are (1) a planning meeting, (2) the classroom observation itself, and (3) a feedback discussion, as shown in Figure 1 below.

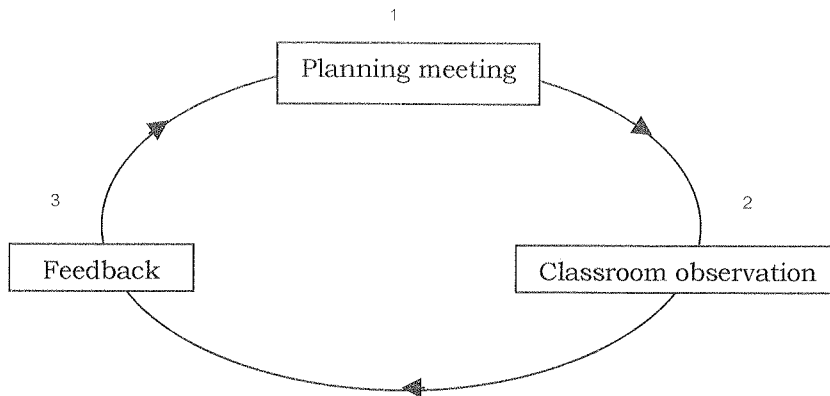


Figure 1: The three-phase observation cycle (Hopkins, 1988)

The planning meeting provides the observer and the teacher with an opportunity to reflect on the proposed lesson, and this leads to a mutual decision to collect observational data on an aspect of the teacher's classroom practice. During the classroom observation phase, the observer observes the teacher in the classroom and collects objective data on that aspect of the teaching or learning they agreed upon earlier. During the feedback discussion, the observer and teacher share the information gathered during the observation, decide on appropriate action, agree on a record of the discussion, and often plan another round of observation. It is important to realize that, to be effective, all three phases of the process need to be gone through systematically.

Foster (1996) provides us with similar ideas on the process of classroom observation:

The observations of the researchers into school life have also been conducted in rather different ways. Their methods have usually been planned and systematic, rather than haphazard and spontaneous as occurs in every day life. Often considerable thought and preparation is put into deciding what to observe, where to observe, and how to record observations. And, generally, close attention is paid to the consistency of observational techniques, and

to the systematic analysis of the data collected (p. viii).

These ideas suggest that there is a variety of strategies and purposes that can be pursued when visiting a class. The observers should think about the focus of their investigations, the issues they intend to study, and the techniques they decide to use. In order to enhance my own professional development, I reviewed several observation guidelines from various sources. The *Scholastic Red Principle Guide*, a Comprehensive Professional Development Program giving teachers support in raising student achievement in reading, provides interesting and easy to follow tips on how to observe a reading classroom. Following the *Guide's* instructions and adapting the procedures to my goals, my class observations proceeded along the following lines:

1. Before the visit

- Planning formal classroom visits to observe teachers applying teaching strategies
- Talking to the teacher about what the goals for the lesson would be
- Collecting copies of lesson materials the teachers would use such as handouts or any other written materials

2. During the visit

- Observing the lesson, making notes on teacher performance and student responses and behavior
- Recording examples of student participation in pair, group work, or whole class discussions

3. After the visit

- Meeting with the teacher to review the lesson goals and the outcomes
- Reflecting on what was observed, keeping in mind these points:

- Selecting the highlights of the lesson
- Discussing the teacher's approach to direct instruction
- Talking to the teacher and exchanged our views

The role of an observer

What should the role of an observer be? Actually, an observer can be a participant or non-participant. The former means that he or she has a role in the class such as a second teacher or a teacher's aide; the latter means the observer sits quietly, simply collecting data. However, the degree of the observer's active involvement should be agreed upon with the teacher before the observation begins (Barnard, 1998).

For the first week of my observation, I was a non-participant observer. I observed and recorded the data by writing detailed notes and did not intervene in the classroom activities. I did not audio-record or video-record the classes fearing that it might be seen as threatening by the students.

After the first week, I acted as a participant-observer in the classroom. With agreement from the teacher, I sometimes helped the teacher correct students' work or participate in pair work or group work activities in the classroom. Being a participant-observer, I could enter into conversation with students, and I had access to their written work and classroom activities. Thus, I had an opportunity to elicit information from them, which led me to understand more fully the students' classroom behavior, their attitudes, and their feelings.

Analysis of observational data

Keeping field notes is a way of reporting observations, reflections, and reactions to classroom problems. Field notes can be of a number of different types. They can be used to focus on a particular aspect of one's teaching or classroom behavior, to reflect general impressions of the classroom, to provide an ongoing description of an individual student that is amenable to

interpretation and use in a case study, or to record our development as teachers (Hopkins, 1988).

From observational records made during the classroom visit, I noted how teachers manage their classes. Classroom management can be classified into how teachers:

- promote interaction, both interaction between teachers and students and interaction among students themselves
- integrate English language skills in the classroom
- use the types and range of texts in the classroom
- use questioning techniques
- deal with inappropriate behavior
- encourage student participation
- respond to students' errors
- promote students' ability through materials in a self-access center

In the analysis of my observational data, I categorized what I had observed into different categories as follows.

Interaction in the classroom

One of the activities used in the class was pair work. While the students were discussing and talking to each other, the teacher walked around the classroom and talked to them. He continuously guided them with questions and checked their understanding the whole class period, as shown in Example 1.

Example 1

John asked his students to work with their partners and think what the idioms he wrote on the board meant and which ones they agreed with. While the students were discussing the idioms, John walked around the classroom. He talked to students in each pair, guided them by asking questions and encouraged the students to continue their discussions. I

noticed that some pairs who had no ideas to express tried to listen to their teacher while he was talking to other students; others raised their hands and asked for help. I saw that John tried hard to teach the students to think critically. However, he never revealed the meanings of the idioms to the students directly. Instead, he guided them with questions.

Integrating English language skills

The second area that I attended to during the observation was the smooth transition from one skill to another within the same topic in the lesson. Also, being able to transfer a skill vertically to higher-order, more complex tasks can be seen in the following example:

Example 2

John started his lesson by writing ten adjectives on the board. He told his students to brainstorm and think of possible synonyms. Next, he wrote the following instructions on the board:

- 1. Describe your father and mother.*
 - 1.1 What type of person is he/she?*
 - 1.2 Can you remember an example from the past to illustrate his/her character?*

John told his students to work in pairs to answer the questions he wrote on the board. Later, he told them to write sentences describing his or her father and mother by using the vocabulary he presented at the beginning of the class. After that, the students had to share their sentences with each other. Then he continued reading from a reading book. He used a questioning technique in his teaching and used the adjectives on the board to match the character in the story. He also gave an example of an incident in the story that described the character in the story. Thus, the teacher was integrating listening-speaking skills and writing- reading skills in one lesson.

Materials in the classroom

Apart from the materials that he used from the workbook, I found that the teacher also provided authentic materials with which the students could practice. The following example, illustrates how the teacher used an Australian newspaper to give students practice in reading during the lesson:

Example 3

*Today John gave his students an article entitled "Editorials are the voice of the paper"(from **The Age**, 22 April, 2004). He told them to read it together with him. While reading, he asked a lot of questions. If the students couldn't answer, he gave them two answers to choose, or guided them to focus on a suggested paragraph to find the answer. While discussing the article, sometimes John asked his students to read aloud as well. At the end of this period, he assigned his students to cut an editorial column from an Australian English newspaper and bring it to the class next time.*

Questioning techniques

From this classroom visit, I observed how the teacher used a lot of questions in the classroom. The majority of the questions required critical thinking or opinions. The questions were asked in sequence and new information was built on previous answers. The following conversation between the teacher and the students is an example:

Example 4

John: Normally, what happened when you were six years old?

Ss: Go to school.

John: What kind of school?

Ss: Primary school.

John: And what's next when you are 16?

Ss: Go to secondary school.

John: When you left school, what would you look for?

S1: Husband. (Everybody laughed.)

Ss: Job.

John: Yes, work.

Student's behavior

During this next classroom visit, I noticed how teachers dealt with classroom management. The following example shows how the teacher dealt with inappropriate behavior in class.

Example 5

Before John started the new lesson today, he reviewed the spelling of vocabulary the students learned yesterday. He asked them to fill in the missing letters in each word he wrote on the board. John tried to encourage them to write them down in their notebooks. However, Tommy, one of his students, did not write anything, but he told John that he could remember all the words. John said O.K, and when he finished reviewing the words, John told everybody to close their notebooks; he dictated the words again. Finally, Tommy discovered that he could not remember all the words because he made some mistakes.

Encouraging students and managing errors

From this observation, I saw that every teacher was similar in that all of them praised their students and kept giving them encouragement. However, in Examples 6 and 7, one can see how teachers in different classes corrected students' errors in different ways.

Example 6

In John's classroom, I found that he tried not to correct a student's mistake directly. He repeated what the students said first or encouraged the students by nodding his head. He listened carefully and respectfully to each response, whether the response was correct or incorrect. Then, he repeated what the students said first and suggested the right answer by asking questions instead, or asked other students to help.

Example 7

In Mary's classroom, most of the students were adults; therefore, the way Mary corrected her students' errors was different from other classes. The following are some of her expressions about correcting tenses.

I heard you say "I just finished" What do you have to insert?

Give me an example again.

Wait a minute. We had two actions, so what?

In addition, Mary corrected pronunciation all the time. She asked her students to repeat after her very often. Also, she never forgot to give them compliments.

Independent learning

The following is an example of how to encourage the students to improve their abilities through materials in a Self-Access Center (SAC):

Example 8

The last thing that John did in his class today was that he showed the Australian newspaper The Age to the classroom and said:

T: This is the page you should read every week. It is about "Letters and opinions." I recommend that you read a newspaper for 10 minutes a day. You can read it at the library or at the SAC for free. Take a look and read it. Every Monday, we are going to have an issue to discuss in the classroom. Make sure that you check a newspaper 5-10 mins. everyday.

Apart from The Age, he recommended other Australian newspapers, such as The Herald Sun and The Australian.

Analysis of questionnaire data

A questionnaire is a widely-used instrument to obtain information in observing classrooms. The purpose of using a questionnaire is to obtain facts, to assess an individual's feelings, attitudes or opinions, or to discover reasons for those attitudes, interests, abilities, and behavior. It is seen as quick, cheap, simple to develop and easy to distribute (Hook, 1983). The questionnaire I used in this study was designed for a limited group of 24 students

in the classroom that I visited to elicit information about students' demographic characteristic and their opinions on studying English.

Personal Information

Fill in the blank or answer the questions

Course you are studying:

.....

Age: Sex: Country you are from:

.....

How many years did you attend school in your country?

.....

How long have you lived in Australia?

.....

The reason why you study English:

.....

About English Language

Which of the following can improve your English language skills most?
Rank them in order from most to least.

..... Reading books/novels/newspapers

..... Watching news/ programs on TV/movies

..... Reviewing lessons and doing homework

..... Practicing e-learning program in a computer

..... Surfing the Internet and accessing English language websites

..... Going to English classes with a teacher teaching you

..... Self-studying at the Self Access Center

..... Going to a computer class

..... Going to a language lab

Your comments:

.....
.....

What English skills do you feel you need to improve the most?
Rank them in order from most to least.

..... Reading

..... Speaking

..... Writing

..... Listening

Your comments:

.....
.....

Thank you for your cooperation

The questionnaire was completed by 24 students from different courses. Of these, half were male, and the other half were female. Eleven of them were between 18 and 20 years old, four were 21 to 25 years old, and nine were older than 25 years old.

Table 1 below illustrates the learning activities preferred by the students who responded to the questionnaire.

Rank	Learning Activities
1	Going to English classes with a teacher teaching you
2	Watching news/ programs on TV/movies
3	Reading books/novels/newspapers
4	Reviewing lessons and doing homework
5	Practicing e-learning program in a computer

6	Surfing the Internet and accessing English language websites
7	Self-studying at the Self Access Center
8	Going to a computer class
9	Going to a language lab

Table 2 below lists the English skills that students felt they needed to improve.

Rank	English Language Skills
1	Speaking
2	Reading
3	Writing
4	Listening

I find the results shown in Tables 1 and 2 quite interesting. Table 1 indicates that most of the students in this group enjoy going to class and studying with their teacher most. This clearly reflects students' dependence on the teacher, the authority figure in class, and it is definitely worth being further explored as the current trend in ELT has placed more and more emphases on learner autonomy and independence from their teacher. Similarly, the fact that the English skill the students wanted to improve least was listening, whereas the skills they needed to improve most were speaking means that further investigation is called for. This is because it is generally believed that speaking and listening skills should be simultaneously developed and that one has a great influence on the development and proficiency of the other.

Implications for English teachers

As a result of my experience observing teachers in actually classroom practice, I feel that the benefits of a self-development approach are as follows:

- It is an effective way to improve my teaching as well as learning new techniques from others.
- Classroom observation helps me to distinguish my weaknesses from other teachers, which is sometimes difficult for me to discover by myself. I can learn more about how to be a thoughtful teacher who motivates and organizes classes well.
- I can benefit by adapting the observation tasks to suit my particular teaching situations. This means that the use of an observation task enables me to develop my own classroom self-observation skills.

I would suggest, therefore, that teachers should learn from other teachers' experiences. They should learn by looking at what experienced teachers do in the classroom. This should enable them to learn and improve themselves to a certain extent. However, after that, in order for true experiential learning to take place, teachers should co-teach with the observed teacher or teach in the observed teacher's class. In so doing, not only will they have a chance to learn from more 'able' others, but they will have an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching and 'grow' as a result of that as well.

In addition, the results of this study have implications for teacher practices in the language classroom. What I observed in the classrooms in Australia may be applied to Thai classrooms in terms of the procedures of teaching. Teachers might be able to transfer insights from an Australian setting to a Thai setting. On the other hand, there may also be cultural elements that cannot be transferred from Australian to Thai classroom settings, as I observed. Teachers should make their decision only after they try it. For instance, students might not be comfortable with teachers' direct feedback as they may not generally talk much with the teachers, which is different from the Australian setting in which

teacher-student interaction is a frequent occurrence. Lastly, it is recommended that, for teachers who are interested in extending their professional development, they should seek opportunities to benefit from this useful method of classroom observation. They may improve not only the skills of observing class, but also generate ideas about developing their own classroom practices.

Suggestions for further research

I had a chance to observe how teachers manage the classroom in Australian settings. The method of observation led me to reflect not only on what I have learned from other teachers, but also on what I do with my students in my classes back at home. Sitting at the back of other teachers' classes gave me some new ideas to re-examine many things I do with my students. The results of my study may prompt other studies to document how Thai teachers manage the class in a Thai context, or to record how Thai teachers differ in their teaching approaches in Thai classrooms.

In addition, the study points out the importance of assessing students' opinions on studying the English language. In order to understand Thai students' needs, survey research should be conducted to explore students' feelings of and attitudes towards classroom work and activities, or their motivation in studying English language. The findings of such research would help teachers manage their classrooms more effectively and better arrange the classroom and activities to more effectively satisfy student's needs.

Furthermore, qualitative studies or action research may be conducted utilizing classroom observation. In-depth interviews should be carried out to find out the underlying reasons for students' beliefs and preferences in learning English. By doing this, teachers would more clearly understand students and thus become more capable of managing the classroom to suit the student's individual preferences to ensure more successful language learning.

Conclusion

The concept of teacher development through classroom observation is new to many Thai teachers. Many teachers resent being observed because of fear of being evaluated by a fellow teacher or an outsider. However, if teachers change their attitudes and provide opportunities for self-development through classroom observation, this method can be a powerful and effective means of improving the quality of their teaching. Finally, if the process of this self-improvement approach is successful, these practices may become an integral part of effective classes, thus enhancing the learning experience of students.

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank all of the staff at the Department of Language Studies and School of Education of Victoria University for allowing her to conduct this study. Her gratitude goes to all of the teachers, especially those who granted permission for classroom observation, at Footscray-Nicholson Campus, St. Albans Campus, and City Flinders Lane Campus. In addition, she is grateful to Dr. Jill Sanguinetti and Peter Newnham from Victoria University for comments on the first draft of this paper. Many thanks also go to Mr. Edward B. Geerson of Thammasat University for comments and suggestions as well as his help in editing this paper.

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