
Book Review

"Classroom Observation Tasks" - A resource book for language teachers and trainers.
Ruth Wajnryb. Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. 145.

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"Classroom Observation Tasks" concentrates on observation as a learning tool, especially for use by practising teachers (although the book is aimed at trainees and trainers as well). The book supplies practical materials to help make observation a means of teacher learning and teacher development. The tasks serve to guide the teacher through the processes of observing, reflecting and drawing conclusions.

It is central to the book that observation is a skill which can be practised and sharpened, and it is not something that is purely intuitive.

The author explains that "Classroom Observation Tasks" is not concerned with the observation of teachers for assessment purposes, such as takes place in pre-service teacher training courses, or during periods of probation, or for employment-related matters. This type of observation is usually value-based, directive, externally imposed, and coloured by factors not necessarily related to learning. Therefore, it is not observation as a learning tool. Furthermore, this form of observation is already reasonably well documented, whereas observation as a learning tool is a more recent development in the literature of teacher preparation and education.

The author stresses that development occurs within the teacher as an individual within the classroom environment, and that the teacher does not develop by attending 'one-off sessions' given by 'experts.'

The author believes that observation is important because ordinarily the teacher is too involved in the lesson itself to observe closely the processes of learning and interaction in the classroom as they occur. Observation allows the observer to see things from a different angle, and allows the 'watcher' to observe, absorb and reflect without having any pressure to contribute towards what is going on.

The idea of the tasks is to allow the observer to concentrate on one or two aspects of the learning-teaching process only. This is because the total activity is extremely complex, and the observer cannot take it all in at once. The task may concentrate on 'the language of instruction', or 'patterns of interaction' etc. Thus, the tasks limit the scope of the observation. The tasks also mean that the observer simply collects data for later interpretation, and is not pressured into 'on-the-spot' conclusions.

The book contains a bank of 35 structured tasks grouped into seven areas of focus:

1. The learner
2. The language
3. The learning process
4. The lesson
5. The teaching skills and strategies
6. Classroom management
7. The materials and resources

Each task deals with a facet of central focus: for example, in 4 "The Lesson", some of the areas covered are types of activities in a lesson; changes of direction within a lesson; lesson signposting; ways of opening and closing a lesson, and negotiation in lesson breakdowns. The author points out that this categorisation of tasks into different focuses is not meant to suggest that different aspects of classroom behaviour are to be rigidly confined to one focus and nowhere else. Often, in fact, a particular aspect of the classroom might be approached from two (or more) different angles and therefore may fall into more than one focus area. It is also not expected that the tasks will be selected in the order in which they appear, but rather that the selection will be made on the basis of teachers' needs and concerns.

The book's strong point is the well-structured and easy to follow observation tasks. Once the teacher decides to allow a colleague to observe her class as a learning tool, the book is ready to help. Each task is so well-organised that the teacher can simply follow the instructions. At the beginning of each task, the teacher will find a brief 'backgrounds' statement about the particular facet of classroom behaviour that is to be focused on. This is followed by a statement of 'objective'. Here the teacher will find out what the purpose of the task is, and what end-result is intended. Then there is a section on 'procedure'. This consists of three phases: before the lesson, during the lesson and after the lesson. Typically, the instructions for the 'before the lesson' phase deal with some

preliminary activity such as reading through the lesson plan. In 'during the lesson' the task will require the observer to collect data and a grid or chart is provided to do this with ease. 'After the lesson' is the time for discussion, analysis and interpretation.

However, as a teacher, I think that we need to consider very carefully just what this observation implies. Allowing someone into the classroom to observe is a very sensitive matter. Some teachers may feel vulnerable or even threatened by observation. This means professional respect and mutual trust are essential. Therefore, the mutual observation may work best with teachers who already know each other well and who have already shared ideas on what should be happening in the classroom and why. It would be ideal if the idea of observation came from the teachers themselves and was not imposed from outside.

Another factor is that the observer herself will inevitably affect the classroom dynamics. Observers should take every care to minimise their intrusion and to allow for this factor when drawing conclusions from the data. The reaction of the students themselves should not be ignored and the presence of the observer may need to be explained - possibly by a 'white lie' - so that students do not think that they (or their teachers) are being assessed.

Furthermore, observers should remember that they are observing one lesson and that it would not be wise to make sweeping generalisations from such a small sample of data.

In conclusion, I found "Classroom Observation Tasks" stimulating and thought-provoking, and I believe that the tasks and associated ideas would have genuine practical value for teachers interested in examining what they are actually doing in the classroom. All teachers should be encouraged to use it.