

A Consideration of Reflective Teaching Through Classroom Observation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the notion of reflective teaching has come to prominence in many ESL/EFL teacher education and development programs (Farrell, 1998). There is a belief that 'trainee teachers should be encouraged to examine the aims and values of various traditions and methods, and reflect on their own teaching in the light of the experience and theoretical knowledge they have accumulated through professional reading and the teacher education programme' (Thorne & Qiang, 1996:254). One method of reflection at the disposal of teachers is classroom observation. Classroom observation is seen as a multi-faceted tool for learning (Wajnryb, 1992). Observation is useful to and valuable for all participants in the observational process. By this I mean, not only the observed teacher and student but also the observer may benefit and be developed in the observation process. This paper seeks to investigate in what ways classroom observation promotes reflective thinking through a focus on my report of the current classroom observation in the overseas teacher training course of Hammersmith and West London College.

The first consideration will start with a question: What is 'Reflection'? I shall then consider what it means to have a reflective point of view. By summarising my experience of classroom observation, I shall then attempt to grasp some of the characteristics of the reflective teacher. Next, issues connected with the course, reflective teaching and observation will be discussed. Finally, I will try to report my experienced benefits and my development through the current observation.

2. REFLECTION

The gulf between theory and practice is a common issue in any field of study. Despite the generation of scientific knowledge and the introduction of new theories and methodologies introduced, because teaching is a highly context specific matter, such theories and methods are not

always useful in explaining and solving actual teaching problems. In the classroom, teachers need to reflect on their own teaching and teaching methods and to modify them through a process of trial and error. The classroom is full of practical resources for teachers. For experienced or practising teachers, the perception may be that they are able to place their experience within a newly evolving theoretical framework. However, in reality, it tends to be the case that even such teachers prefer practically orientated teacher training courses. This gap in expectations with respect to teacher training programmes may be a crucial problem. As Wallace (1991) recounts, many practising teachers argue that the vast amount of research in the area of applied science has resulted in failure to solve the most intractable professional problems and that this situation has got worse over the last two decades. He regards the relationship between researchers and practitioners as mutual contempt and antipathy. "Researchers can be contemptuous of teachers because 'they never read'. Teachers can be antipathetic to researchers because the latter are seen as 'refugees from the classroom'."(Wallace, 1991:11) This separation of theory and practice is very problematic.

However, without any theoretical framework, on what basis can teachers learn how to assess themselves and to try and correct the problems they are having? Teaching practice needs to be underlined by theoretical frameworks or principles, and, without them, teaching behaviour tends to end up a fossilised ritual (Maingay, 1988). Theory therefore will play an important role in supporting and guiding teachers to ask questions about why they should teach in certain ways. To understand the reasons for going through certain steps in their lessons. A self-questioning attitude on the part of teachers will keep their instruction fresh and students can benefit from this. This self-questioning, underpinned by a theoretical framework, can be regarded as 'reflection'.

The term 'reflection' is now widely used in the literature on teacher education. It is used in different ways and informed by diverse theoretical frameworks (Calderhead, 1988, Moon & Boullon, 1997). One of the definitions of 'reflection' is 'being deliberately thoughtful and self-questioning about one's own actions, experience or attitudes' (Moon & Boullon, 1997:60). According to Farrell (1998:92), in teaching, 'reflection' is for teachers to subject 'their beliefs and practice of teaching to a critical analysis'. To facilitate their greater awareness and thoughtfulness through reflection can be one of the most important goals of teacher development. Some teachers, however, may feel reluctant or even resistant to taking part in reflective learning procedures, such as thinking about and analysing activities they have experienced or designed, which can be tiring

(Moon & Boullon). But, as findings from research on professional development suggest, to become more aware of their own practices and the beliefs that underpin them is a prerequisite for teacher development and reflective thinking (Moon & Boullon).

Moreover, reflective thinking will encourage adaptability and flexibility in teachers (Moon and Boullon). This may encourage them in facing the constant flux of classroom incidents. Although developing as a reflective practitioner may be difficult and time-consuming, it is an ideal worth struggling for. A reflective teacher may be perceived as a good teacher. In the next section, I shall discuss how to be reflective, that seems to be a domain in relation to the relationship between theory and practice.

3. CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Hopkins (1986) claims that observing language classrooms plays an important role in classroom research as well as in teachers' personal professional growth and school development as a whole. As far as development is concerned, classroom observation is effective as a means whereby the teacher or trainee can create new knowledge and understanding of their work (McDounough & McDounough, 1997). Classroom observation as an excellent tool for self-reflection was suggested by Norrish (1996). It is an opportunity for teachers to examine "their own practice through reflection, generate their own theory and thereby develop a quality of professional flexibility" (Norrish, 1996:2). In addition, observation will provide an opportunity to examine how the school is performing by reflecting on the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the school, including the staff, and to consider how these meet current and future expectations. Furthermore, Wallace (1991) points out that a strategy of fixed observation can provide a meta-language, which enables teachers to talk about their profession and classroom experiences in a more appropriate way. By using this type of inquiry, teachers could be encouraged to examine and express their own way of thinking.

So far the effectiveness of classroom observation has been outlined. Classroom observation seems to be full of resources for self-reflection and for the development of teachers as reflective practitioners. Given this, in the following sections, I shall try to investigate my development through a summary of my experience of observation.

4: SUMMARY OF OBSERVATION

4-1: THE COURSE DESIGN

The course I observed in Hammersmith & West London College was entitled Overseas Teachers Course. This course lasts six months and the aims of the course as stated on the programme given to each participant are as follows;

1. To develop students' language skills
2. To develop their understanding of the way languages are learnt and taught.

Although the aims and content of the course are to represent an attempt to respond to the needs of overseas teachers, this course mainly focuses on language development so that they can pass the Cambridge Examination in English for Language Teachers (CEELT). The syllabus therefore is structured as follows:

1. Monday CEELT exam practice
2. Tuesday Language & phonology
3. Wednesday Methodology
4. Thursday Methodology
5. Friday Teaching practice

As CEELT tests will measure ability in reading, writing, speaking and listening, the Monday class takes as its focus one of these four skills in turn using materials relevant to some aspect of English Language Teaching (ELT). It is clear that language development is one of the essential requirements of language teachers and this development will occur even when the focus is on methodology.

However, although this course can be regarded as a 'teacher development' course, it would be true to say that the course work is oriented both to teacher development and teacher or language training. It is 'development' oriented in the sense that it takes into account the extensive classroom experience that many of the participants ought to have, and conscious reflection on this experience, leading to personal professional growth, is an important element of the course. In fact, language and phonology classes cover a wide range of areas which fundamental to language and learning such as communication systems, language change and language analysis, important features to be considered when teaching structures, functions and lexis. Methodology classes also provide

essential aspects of current language teaching and learning theories, methodologies and practical techniques which seem to be useful in teaching.

On the other hand, this course is also 'training' oriented, in that it provides the participants with training, firstly, through actual teaching practice during Friday classes. On Fridays, trainees are divided into groups based on their first language; French, Spanish, Italian, Korean, Japanese and so on. Two of these groups practise teaching their first language to their classmates in turn. Even though they ought to be trained as teachers of English, it seems to be difficult for overseas student teachers to teach English using English. This difficulty may be considered in designing this course. However, it may also be the case that teaching their first language which they acquired through a natural process may be a different project than that of teaching English, which they learned in institutions. Yet, concrete experience of language teaching is an essential factor in teacher training programmes (Kolb, 1984). Moreover, observation is also available for some trainees to experience. Thus, in the Friday classroom, trainees have multiple opportunities to experience, each time from a different perspective; as observers, as students and as teachers. This programme seems to be based on Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (1984) which consists of four main experiences; concrete teaching experience, observations & reflections, formation of abstract concepts and generalisations and testing the implications of concepts in new situations. In this sense, this first aspect of training can also be regarded as a developmental aspect.

In fact, unfortunately, the second aspect of training in this course conveys a stronger impression than this experiential learning aspect. That is, to practice exam skills or language skills by learning a grammatical structure or by using a reading text in class. This training is important because it affects what exactly the CEELT exam is attempting to measure. The CEELT exam in fact seemed to be a strong instrumental motivation for participants to enrol in this course. A greater number of them attend this training than the experiential one, and their attitudes are more earnest for this second training. This tendency gave raise to my first assumption that these participants have a stronger motivation for the CEELT exam than for their development as teachers (Assumption 1). A practical question about this course came to my mind: Is it possible for these participating student teachers to balance these dual aspects of training? It is probable that the instrumental motivation of passing the CEELT exam will inhibit the motivation to teacher development which ought to be the original aim of this course. If so, the classroom situation will be seen as problematic, because there

will be an issue on the compatibility of course, trainers and trainees. There is the crucial question of what the rationale of this course is. I will discuss this issue in Section 5. My next focus will be on participants' perspectives on this course.

4-2: PARTICIPANTS

It is important to view participants' motivations and responses to the course in the light of their own stated needs and expectations. There were twenty-two participants from various backgrounds, nationalities, mother tongue and so on. Although this course was originally designed for people who have had some teaching experience, almost half of the actual participants did not have any experience in teaching. This lack of experience seems to be a crucial problem. It may affect the effectiveness of the course design and rationale. There is a clear gap between ideal and actual requirements for participants. This gap may raise a problem of inconsistency between the course design and the need and expectation of participants. A possible reason for this problematic situation will be discussed in Section 5.

The actual stated needs and motivation of participants were revealed through an interview after the course. The participants, mainly from East Asian countries, co-operated with my interview. Their stated reasons and motivations to participate in this course were various; to get a visa to stay in the UK as a student, to get some qualification which could be useful in getting a job in the future, to learn real authentic English somewhere with any purpose (more intensive than language schools) and so on. Although their main or original purposes were not solely to develop as teachers of English, most of them have some interest in teaching English to some extent and they have a adequate level of English. Except for the goal of getting a visa, participants have stronger instrumental motivation to learn English and to get the qualification rather than that to train and develop themselves as language teachers. This concurs with my first assumption in Section 4-1 (Assumption 1). This tendency may affect their attitude to the classroom. This will be brought to light by the interview in Section 4-4. Because of these participants' characteristics, hereafter I will refer to the participants as the students and to the trainers as the teachers. The following consideration will be about instructional styles.

4-3: INSTRUCTIONAL STYLES

There were two teachers with different instruction styles. In considering these instructional styles,

it seems that the intuitive-random vs the concrete-sequential classification of styles developed by Myers and McCaulley (1985 in Oxford et al., 1992) and Gregorc (1979 in Oxford et al., 1992) may be useful. Oxford et al. (1992) has applied this schema to the explanation of language learning styles. Here, I will try to apply this schema to instructional styles. Although the nature of learning and teaching is different, many researchers claim that the character of learning largely reflects that of instruction which learners previously experienced (see Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Skehan, 1998; Reid, 1995). Thus the classification of learning and teaching may be interrelated and can be interchangeable. In addition, even though researchers come up with a great definition or classification of learning styles or instruction styles, the descriptions of human behaviour, application and interaction of these strategies are very complicated and almost impossible to identify and classify clearly. However, in this paper, to have a stereotypical view is useful in the sense that it reveals how the stereotypical behaviours of teachers can be perceived by observers. It may, therefore, be reasonable to regard this view, the intuitive-random vs concrete-sequential classification of styles, as a starting point for exploration of the instruction styles of teachers.

The 'intuitive-random' style can be defined as an 'abstract, nonlinear, random-access mode which constantly tries to find the underlying language systems', whereas, a 'concrete-sequential' style may be viewed as a 'concrete, sequential, linear manner'(Oxford et al., 1992:443). For instance, the instructional style of Sean who teaches Tuesday, Thursday and Friday classes can be regarded as an intuitive-random style. His style is very interactive and in a sense very reflective. His classes don't follow any single pattern and always progress in a flexible manner. If interesting, discussions that veer off the assigned topic for the day are perfectly acceptable in his classroom. Cultural differences and students perspectives are positively evaluated. Moreover, students feel free to use guessing and predicting and have a lot of space to take part in discussions and interact not only with their teacher but also with each other. In this sense, it can be said that Sean's instructional style is 'learner-centred', which is a buzz-phrase in many SLA studies.

In contrast, the instructional style of John, who teaches Monday and Wednesday classes, can be regarded as a concrete-sequential style. His style is much more solid and sequenced one than that of Sean. He always prepares a lot of materials and activities for classes which requires students' involvement with reading, listening and writing. His classes are well controlled, for instance they start with a warmer and end with homework. Turn-taking happens every five minutes, while, in

Sean's class, it happens at more than ten-minute intervals. His instructional style is always in a so-called authoritarian manner and this seems to be typical of top-down and teacher-centred instruction, which has fallen out of favour in SLA studies. It is obvious that students have little space for interaction and collaboration. Moreover students are always tense and busy trying to catch up with the speed of activities in front of them. In this sense, John's class is somewhat mechanical.

These differences in instructional style largely reflect the difference in purpose of each day due to the syllabus structure of the course. Sean is in charge of the development of teaching part, while John is in charge of the training of skills for the exam. These two types of discipline seem to be different in nature. These differences may affect these teacher trainers' styles of instruction and create their distinctive features. Both of them are well-qualified teachers with sufficient knowledge, experience and skills. However, in terms of teacher-trainer as reflective practitioner, Sean who has a more flexible manner than John might be more reflective than John. Here, I made an assumption that students preferred the instructional style of Sean to that of John (Assumption 2).

Some explicit statements show a judgmental quality in this section. One purely selfish reason that I become judgmental is to focus on my own development as a teacher. The observation of this course has provided many insights into my views of language teaching and learning. As a non-British teacher within the British educational system, I am gently reminded how different my perspective is of the EFL classroom. Through the judgmental point of view on the instruction, I would attempt to perceive myself a good teaching or a best way of how to manage classrooms effectively considering the purpose of the course and students. Previous considerations in this paper imply that good teaching coincides with reflective teaching. For this purpose, the following section will focus on students' response in relation to their teachers' instructional styles. It is very interesting to examine the opinions and attitudes of students in reaction to these teachers with different instructional styles.

4-4: INTERVIEW

4-4-1: LIMITATION

One way of focusing on students' responses in relation to their teachers' instructional styles is to interview them. During my two week observation, I interviewed some of the students after class

several times. Since this course consists of students from various backgrounds, classroom context can be described as a multicultural and a multilingual one. According to Oxford (1990), culture and thought patterns are strongly linked and culture has a tremendous influence on learning style and strategies. This cultural affect on students' learning style may largely be reflected in their perspectives and attitudes in response to the instructional styles. Although this observation was conducted in a multicultural context, the students I was able to interview were mainly from East Asian countries; Japan, Korea and Taiwan. My point of view on students' response may be biased towards East Asian perspectives.

The characteristics of the learning styles of East Asian students tend to be described as 'more concrete-sequential, thus promoting rote memorisation or at least highly structured work and eschewing intuitive compensation strategies, and in two out of three cases was more analytic' (Oxford et al.,1992:450). According to Ellis(1989), when instructional style matches learners' learning style, learners learn more and feel satisfaction. Thus, I assumed that John's instruction which is concrete-sequential would be preferred by these students (Assumption 3).

4-4-2: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

The overall reactions of the students were very favourable to both teachers. However, in contrast to my second assumption (Assumption 2) in Section 4-3, students preferred John's instruction rather than Sean's. This tendency was clear to see in that a smaller number of students participated in Sean's class. The students' opinions of Sean's class include the difficulty of dealing with too specialised and difficult topics, reading lengthy articles and participating in discussions. As a result, students were reluctant and sometimes bored. In terms of the difficulty of participating in discussions, they claimed that, even though the teacher asked them to remember what they felt in reaction to the instruction when they were at school, it was very difficult to remember or imagine what it was like. Their lack of teaching experience may have limited their responses. In this sense, it can be said that Sean was not being reflective enough. He needs to be more aware of students' perspectives and adjust his instructional style to accommodate students' needs.

On the other hand, John's classes were very popular with students. This result concurs with my third assumption (Assumption 3 in Section 4-4-1) in terms of the compatibility between instructional and learning styles. Students said that they liked John's class because they are always

well organised and, because they felt satisfied, even though the contents were very difficult to understand. Considering that these students' motivation is largely instrumental, it is reasonable for them to assess their classroom experience in terms of how much they felt they had learned. John's instructional style met the students' expectations for this course.

In addition, they pointed out the change in the classroom atmosphere and the teachers' attitude toward classrooms. According to the opinions, since my observation started, the classroom atmosphere had got more lively than before, because everybody (both teachers and students) became more cheerful; the classrooms had become more organised and teachers had been more concerned to talk to individual students in their classrooms. Clear differences resulting from the existence of observers were mentioned. The students were happy about being observed. Given this, it can be said that classroom observation has a triple effect: it leads to self-reflection on the part of observers and the teachers observed and to students benefiting from their teachers' reflection. However, an issue relating to classroom observation may arise. That is, the observer needs to bear in mind that the observing classroom situation is out of touch with reality to some extent. To a greater or lesser extent, the existence of observers will change situations. It may be dangerous to have a stereotypical view of the classroom situation solely as a result of observation.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

5-1: ISSUES RELATING TO THE COURSE

In the sections considering course design (4-1) and the participants (4-2), issues of compatibility of aim among course, teachers and students arose. The major factor, which makes the situation of this course problematic, seems to be a financial matter. This factor can be a serious problem in any institutional management. As for this course, this problem results in the inconsistency of qualifications among students. That is, although the original or ideal requirement for participants includes teaching experience, most of the actual participants hardly satisfy this requirement. This inconsistency affects the effectiveness of the course and the quality of instruction, because they are designed on the major premise; the specific aim of the course and expected participants. The deficiency of participants' knowledge and experience will create a problematic situation for teachers and classroom management. Accordingly, a gulf between aims of the course, teachers and students will arise. This situation is clearly indicated in the students' attitude in response to Sean's instructional style.

In reality, for institutional or course management, a sufficient number of participants is needed. This seems to be one of the reasons why the course syllabus includes the CEELT exam practice. It is usually the case that exam practice is included as one of the course aims to attract people with instrumental motivation and increase the number of the participants. However, as for this course, this use of a practical element may make the aim of this course too wide and difficult to deal with effectively. In fact, it seems to be very difficult for teachers and students to deal with the wide range of areas in just a six month course with five days a week and with two hours each day. This course covers most of theories and methodology on language teaching and the four skills of English learning. This may create a gap between teachers' and students' expectations with respect to the lessons and this gap may result in the students' preference for a particular teaching style. Students with instrumental motivation for the exam who lack experience of teaching tend to prefer skills training for exam and concrete-sequential type of instruction and tend not to value the theoretical frameworks or the teacher development part of this course. The compatibility of the aims of the course, for both teacher and students, seems to be very problematic but to be an inevitable problem in any institution. It therefore needs to be carefully considered; to what extent should or can those aims be met? This answer may vary depending on a variety of factors, such as classroom contexts among teachers and students, as well as much larger issues of the planning of the course, place, time, staff, scale of the course and funding, number of participants and so on.

5-2: ISSUES RELATING TO REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Even though the extent of this incompatibility of aims is large, teachers have to be reflective in order to serve the needs of the greatest number of students. In this sense, it seems that the observed teachers have more scope left to be reflective. They may need to step back from their own position and critically analyse their own beliefs and practice of teaching in relation to the students' reactions. This may facilitate greater effectiveness in their instruction. But, teachers also work within institutional contexts which helps to define their practice.

In my opinion, there are some points to be considered. First, instructional materials need to be arranged or developed to suit to the students' level. The primary sources of their materials are specialised journals, which even experienced teachers tend to feel reluctant to read. Second, the amount of material should be smaller. Especially in John's class, because too much material is introduced, the lessons become very complex. To teach a smaller amount of material very

thoroughly, taking the students through all the steps of the lesson may be reasonable. Thirdly, with respect to Sean's class, because the students have little or no teaching experience to relate to theory, the immediate purpose of offering the training course could be to make students aware that realistic methodology choices do exist in order to help them start to bridge the enormous gap between theory and the language classroom. For students planning to teach on Friday, his support on theory and methodology may be useful. The discussions can be shorter and will get lively, if the topic is more general, such as how they felt on the video and about other things they noticed. These students need to make a meaningful connection between their abstract pedagogy lectures and their own personal experiences as language learners. In the methodology course, exploring and validating students' past and present experience as language learners may be effective.

These opinions, however, seem to be easy to come up with, if teachers can have an objective point of view. It is usually the case that teachers, being busy teaching and living their lives, rarely have an opportunity or the time to be objective and reflective. To have such an opportunity, teachers may need to promote observation or peer-observation in a non-formal and non-judgmental manner. This habitual awareness may help teachers avoid the danger of becoming fossilised and ritualised.

5-3: ISSUES RELATING TO OBSERVATION

During the process of observation, I came to realise several things. First, careful observation is not automatic. It needs to concentrate on one or some specific aspects in the classroom. There are a lot of aspects to be observed in the classroom. Each time, I had a different perspective. Therefore, secondly, it seems that observers need to keep their position clear. During my observation, several times, I was asked to take part in some activities. In participating, I was no longer in the same position to observe as previously. Observation is sequential and should not be interrupted. A third point is the need to develop observation skills. More frequent opportunities to practice observation may help to improve this technique. A fourth point is that observation needs to be less formal and non-judgmental so that observed teachers feel less resistance and less tension. In addition, each person's observations are slightly different, because each person focuses on different aspects of the lesson and notices different details. After observation, therefore, it is useful to exchange opinions so that observers can be aware of other aspects in a classroom.

6. CONCLUSION

So far I have considered 'Reflection' and 'reflective teaching' through my experience of classroom observation. I realise that there is a more or less inevitable gap between theory and practice, and between the ideal and the real; being reflective is not an easy task. A reasonable and realistic way for me to become a reflective practitioner seems to be to keep questioning my own teaching behaviour. There is no one characteristic of the reflective teacher which fits any context.

Here I would return to the prime purpose in summarising this observation. It was to investigate in what ways classroom observation promotes reflective thinking by focusing on my own development as a teacher. I felt from the beginning that every aspect of this observation should benefit the observers as well as the observed people. In fact, I have benefited more than I had expected. First, I was able to review in depth the methodologies and theories that I had taken for granted while I was a teacher. Second, this classroom observation provided me with a safe position from which to be critical, analytical and reflective on the merits and demerits of the immediate teaching behaviour. A third benefit is a heightened awareness of my own teaching beliefs and behaviour. Finally, this observation has provided many insights into my views of language teaching and learning. Through this summary, analysis, and reflection, I found that observation is a powerful way to explore not only methods, but the self as learner and as teacher.

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