

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL REFLECTION SKILLS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

РОЗВИТОК НАВИЧОК ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ РЕФЛЕКСІЇ У СПОСТЕРЕЖЕННІ ЗАНЯТЬ З АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

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The article deals with modern approaches to English classroom observation which plays a fundamental role in the improvement of teaching and learning a foreign language. Helping novice EFL teachers through the intricate process of observation during the students' teaching practice can be a challenging task. It should be properly organized as it is widely acknowledged as indispensable in preparing pre-service teachers for their future professional activity.

Observation of classroom performance is viewed from the 'cyclical model of lesson observation' which consists of three stages: the pre-observation meeting; observation of the lesson and post-observation discussion. The tasks for the observers are specified for each stage. The authors suggest using 'Your Smart Observation App' worked out by them to modernize the process of observation with technologies which can turn it into an inspiring and motivating students' professional learning opportunity. The App contains a number of templates for lesson observation designed according to the domains: 'Classroom Environment', 'Instruction', 'Self-Reflection' and 'Resources'. The notions of «general observation» and «focused observation» are distinguished for the observation stage. Examples of observation templates are suggested for evaluating the performance of student teachers. They have common basis for discussion at the post-observation stage and can help the students concentrate on some particular aspects of the lesson.

Special attention is paid to correlation between observation and the development of professional reflection skills in the post-observation discussion. Classroom observation ensures student teachers gain a better understanding of their teaching through self-reflection or reflection in small groups. Reflection skills may be highly beneficial for the students during the teaching practice as they are used for sharing their professional experience and participating in discussions. Classroom observation offers student teachers reflective opportunities for personal growth and continuous professional development.

Key words: pre-service teacher preparation, student teaching practice, observation, general observation, focused observation, reflection.

Стаття розглядає сучасні підходи до спостереження та аналізу занять з англійської мови, які відіграють важливу роль у покращенні викладання та навчання іноземної мови. Надання допомоги студентам-вчителям англійської мови у процесі спостереження під час педагогічної практики може бути непростим завданням і тому має бути належно організованим, оскільки вважається необхідним компонентом майбутньої професійної діяльності у переддипломній підготовці вчителів.

Спостереження заняття розглядається згідно з «циклічною моделлю спостереження», яка поєднує три етапи: зустріч перед спостереженням; саме спостереження заняття та обговорення після спостереження. Для кожного етапу визначені завдання для спостерігачів. Автори статті пропонують використання власної розробки цифрового додатку «Your Smart Observation App» для модернізації процесу спостереження з допомогою сучасних технологій, що має на меті мотивувати професійні навчальні можливості студентів. Цифровий додаток складається з таблиць для спостереження уроку, які були створені згідно з доменів: «Навчальне середовище», «Навчання», «Само-рефлексія» та «Ресурси». Розмежовуються поняття «загальний аналіз заняття» та «сфокусований аналіз заняття», які використовуються під час спостереження. Приводяться приклади таблиць для спостереження та оцінювання роботи студентів-вчителів. Вони є підґрунтям для проведення дискусії на етапі обговорення після спостереження та можуть допомогти студентам сконцентруватись на певних аспектах уроку.

Особлива увага приділяється взаємозв'язку між спостереженням та розвитком навичок професійної рефлексії на етапі обговорення після спостереження. Спостереження заняття дає можливість студентам-вчителям зрозуміти

краще їх викладання через само-рефлексію або рефлексію у невеликих групах. Роль навичок рефлексії особливо зростає під час педагогічної практики, оскільки вони використовуються для обміну професійним досвідом та участі у дискусіях. Спостереження заняття дає студентам-вчителям можливість розвивати рефлексію для особистого зростання та безперервного професійного розвитку.

Ключові слова: переддипломна підготовка вчителів, педагогічна практика студентів, спостереження, загальний аналіз заняття, сфокусований аналіз заняття, рефлексія.

Problem statement. The last decade has witnessed a shift of emphasis in teacher education from teacher training to teacher development which is viewed as a continuous process that begins with pre-service teacher preparation. Teacher preparation used to be associated with training the skills how to manage the classrooms, organize activities, plan lessons etc. Over the past two decades there has been a gradual change in the process of *learning to teach*. Teaching practice is no longer understood as merely putting theory into practice. It is seen as a learning opportunity in which student teachers engage in the process of thinking *what* and *how* they are doing. In this sense, teaching practice is becoming the process during which student teachers develop the core competences of a language teacher which include observation skills, reflection, critical thinking and decision-making.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The importance of classroom observation has been mentioned and dealt with by a number of researchers. Tenjon-Okwen sees classroom observation, on the one hand, as an efficient tool in learning to teach. On the other hand, observation is a skill to learn that both the students and the teachers need to acquire [6]. According to Wragg 'observation plays a fundamental role in the improvement of teaching and learning. It is a powerful way to inspire and motivate, encourage self-reflection and think more deeply about how the lessons were directly connected to the methodology' [9, p. 29]. Chick considers development of observation skills an excellent way of becoming more aware of options and possibilities which they help to measure the teacher's competence by providing direct evidence of what teachers *are able to do* [1]. Observation serves not only as a means for giving constructive feedback but also as a valuable instrument for understanding students' performance and progress in teaching and learning. Yet, its effectiveness relies heavily on the guidance and support provided to novice teachers during their training programs.

Unfortunately, observation training is often not paid appropriate attention to. It may result in the lack of skills in professional reflection and self-evaluation which further may reduce the ultimate benefit the student teachers should receive from the teaching practice experience.

The aim of the article. Our study is based on the hypothesis that student teaching can be enhanced by observing, reflecting and redesigning the English classes. The tasks of the article are: to suggest the ways of developing pre-service teachers lesson observation skills during the student's teaching practice; to demonstrate how technology can be used for observation which can turn it into an inspiring and motivating professional learning opportunity; to supply the students with a mechanism of reflection that can be used throughout their careers.

Presentation of the main material. Guiding novice EFL teachers through the intricate process of observation can be a challenging task. Traditionally, observation tends to be identified with assessment and is often regarded as a threatening or negative experience which results in a list of unconstructive criticisms. Tenjon-Okwen even thinks that 'some observers, often the teacher-trainers, take delight in dishing out observation data in devastating language – negative, judgemental feedback that only discourages the neophyte' [6, p. 31]. Consequently, it is a fact that some student teachers become anxious and nervous when observed which often produces a highly untypical performance.

Learning how to observe takes time. Classroom observation, if properly organized, is widely acknowledged as indispensable in preparing pre-service teachers for their future professional activity. What are some of the primary questions involved in the observation of student teachers?

- How can the information obtained from an observation be used?
- Is it possible to observe student teachers objectively? How?
- What are the responsibilities of the observer?
- How can we come up with observation that works more effectively?
- Can we develop an observation process to enhance professional development?

Observation as any other methodological process has its purpose. Pre-service training observation implies observation of the student teacher by an experienced school teacher (mentor) or a university methodologist during the teaching practice. Students are observed for training purposes trying out some of the procedures they themselves have observed or been told about and, as a result of this observation,

they will receive a fairly directive feedback that will tell them what they are doing right and what they are doing wrong. In a variety of ways, they will be guided towards more appropriate classroom behavior than they have displayed.

While dealing with the development of observation skills it is important to look at «*the cyclical model of lesson observation*» mentioned by a number of authors investigating observation [6; 7; 8; 9] referring to direct observation of classroom performance. The cycle consists of three stages: the pre-observation meeting; observation of lessons and post-observation discussion. We shall take these three stages into account.

Pre-observation meeting is needed to maximize the effectiveness of the observation and the student teachers' learning related to it. The length and nature of the discussion will depend on a number of factors such as: time available; the student teacher's needs; how much time has passed since the student teacher was last observed. We may suggest some pieces of advice for the pre-observation discussion:

1. Establish the focus of observation – it is necessary to take account of the student teachers' overall progress and level of confidence. In the first few weeks in school, for example, they tend to be consumed with concerns of discipline and control. It would, therefore, be unproductive to focus on other issues to the exclusion of their concerns.

2. Go through the plans for the lesson – in the early days the lesson may well have been jointly planned by the teacher and the student teachers: in the pre-lesson discussion teacher, therefore, will merely be checking that they are fully prepared for the lesson. Later, as the student teachers take responsibility for the planning of the lessons, they will need the teacher to look through the plans, outlining aims and how they are to be achieved.

3. Sort out the timing of the post-debriefing – the post-lesson debriefing should be carried out as soon after the observed lesson as is reasonably possible. Student teachers are always anxious to find out what their school mentor thinks of the lesson. Moreover, so much happens in an ordinary school day that the details of the lesson could become blurred in the mind. It is worth considering choosing a lesson because it is followed by a «free» period, break, or lunch time, to guarantee time for debriefing.

4. Decide how the observation is to be carried out – when deciding how to observe a lesson it is worth considering: the type of the lesson; the student teacher's level of confidence, self-awareness; needs of the pupils.

During the *observation stage* for the observer to get a clear idea of how the student teacher is progressing,

it is important to observe whole lessons rather than simply 'popping in to see how they're getting on'. What matters in observation is what the observer chooses to take notes of with a view to providing either written or oral feedback – or both – and then how this feedback is provided. The observer's notes may be typical of judgemental observation: they tell the student teacher what was good and what was not good, and inform him fairly firmly about what should and should not be done. Such notes are very useful for a student teacher in pre-service training. But an alternative and more preferable in developmental terms way of providing written feedback is to ask a student teacher to look more closely at what he did at that point in the lesson, and to consider *why* he did it, to give him an opportunity to realize the mistake himself.

The observer may also use special templates according to which she/he evaluates a student teacher. To make the process of observing much easier and more helpful 'Your Smart Observation App' has been worked out and presented at TESOL International Convention & Expo in 2024 in Florida (USA) by Devitska (Uzhhorod National University), Melnyk (Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University) and Datsko (Ivan Franko Lviv National University), participants of the project 'Professional Development and Exchange of Pre-Service English Language Teachers' [4].

The App is an educational tool designed to empower pre-service teachers with the skills necessary for their professional development. It aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a comprehensive platform for pre-service teachers to observe, analyse and reflect on a classroom experience. The app contains observation templates – forms or checklists with items that direct the attention and responses during the observation. The templates have been worked out according to the domains: 'Classroom Environment', 'Instruction', 'Self-Reflection' and 'Resources' suggested by Danielson in her book 'The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument' [3]. They allow pre-service teachers to concentrate on specific aspects of a lesson, fostering a deeper understanding and reflection on the areas they might have overlooked.

Such terms as «*general observation templates*» and «*focused observation templates*» come into attention. *General observation* can be successfully used in pre-service training while observing the whole lesson conducted by a student teacher, paying attention to several aspects and then making general comments. The evaluation points may give a good ground for discussion and reflection at the post observation stage. For example:

| No | Evaluation point | Weak | OK | Good | Comments |
|----|--|------|----|------|----------|
| 1 | Lead in to a lesson | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 2 | Timing for each stage | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 3 | Timing and pace within each stage | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 4 | Clear movement from one stage to the next | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 5 | Instructions in all stages | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 6 | Logical progression for the type of a lesson | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 7 | Blackboard work at appropriate time in different stages | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 8 | Balance and variety of activities | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 9 | Balance of teacher-students/ student-student interaction | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |
| 10 | Lead out | 1 2 | 3 | 4 5 | |

[4]

However, sometimes the *focused observation* is more preferable and more appropriate. This kind of observation is useful at any stage in a student teacher's training or qualified teacher's career. It is especially helpful when learning new skills or strategies as it is concerned with learning to use new concepts in thinking about what goes on in classrooms. By analysing in detail, the particular aspects of classroom teaching and learning, student teachers learn to use new concepts in thinking about classroom events and activities. After practice in applying these distinctions to other people's teaching they are able to apply them to their own practice. There can be any number of specific purposes for observation. For instance, classroom management, teacher talking time, the use of blackboard, etc. They 'help pre-service teachers understand what they need to see will help them develop their understanding of language-teaching pedagogy' [7, p. 29]. For example:

Focused observation templates have a number of advantages: they are objective, specific (limit the scope of what is observed), easy to overview, ready-made tools, they look at lessons systematically, have common basis for discussion at the post-observation stage, can help the students concentrate on and

USING THE BOARD

| Aspects to be considered | Your notes |
|--|------------|
| 1. Physical Was the board visible to all? Was the layout clear? (Did it appear overcrowded/disorganized?) | |
| 2. Was the new language highlighted effectively? How could it have been improved? | |
| 3. Was the boardwork complete? (e.g. no unfinished sentences) | |
| 4. Did the teacher use the board for: a) Clarifying points on the spot? b) Correction? (e.g. grammar) | |
| 5. Could any of the following have been appropriate? a) Display of visuals b) Prompts for practice c) Preparation | |
| 6. What did the students write down and take away? | |
| 7. Was the board overused or underused? | |

[4]

underestimate some particular aspect of the lesson facing up to something they have ignored, provide a meta-language, supply with convenient means of collecting data that frees the observer from forming an opinion or making an on-the-spot evaluation during the lesson.

Focused observation templates may have a number of disadvantages as well: they may be scary and open to misinterpretation, they may have a narrow vision, do not show the human element, do not indicate sequences of interaction, the actual language used in the interaction is lost; observation schedules can consist of a lengthy and comprehensive list of items which are difficult to rate in the real time of an actual lesson. Focused observation sheets should be combined with commentary at the post-observation stage. They can provide a student teacher with insights into what was happening at the lesson.

The *post observation discussion* should be conducted in a clear, planned and constructive way as soon as possible after the observed lesson and away from other people and possible interruptions. The feedback that observers give to student teachers after their lessons plays «a vital role in their early professional development» [5, p. 165]. Some researchers [7; 9] believe that positive feedback should be given to create a good climate for further discussion of the lesson and to give a student teacher a sense of accomplishment. Webb suggests adopting a *dialogue approach* which allows space for student teachers to reflect on their teaching, articulate and clarify their understanding of good teaching practice [8, p. 6]. It is a good idea to start by finding

out how the student teacher feels about the lesson; encourage to talk about the strengths of the teaching. A dialogue approach encourages the student teachers to participate in the talk. This, in turn, ensures that knowledge is co-constructed and developed by both the student and the observer.

The templates for the development of students' self-reflection skills can be found in 'Your Smart Observation App'[4]. Some of the questions are:

- What went well in this lesson? Why?
- What problems did I experience? Why?
- Was the lesson 'student-centered'? Should it have been?
- What could I have done differently?
- Was I well prepared? What could I have done differently?
- Were the students involved? Was I clear in my presentation? How was the pacing?

Chick thinks that giving students the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice in the post lesson feedback event 'will better prepare them in their short and long-term endeavour of learning how to teach'[1, p.298] and give them confidence that they are on their way to becoming good language teachers. Moreover, Webb states that students 'are less likely to feel threatened and will be more comfortable playing an active role in the discussion'.

[8, p. 7]. Classroom observation and reflection can also be used as the basis for redesigning the language lessons to develop student teachers and not simply as a means to judge them.

Conclusions. Thus, the process of observation and reflection is highly beneficial for the students during the teaching practice: it helps them share their teaching experience when faced with similar problems; it enables them to be involved in the discussions and arrive at suitable solutions; it encourages them to give constructive feedback to their peers. Observation is an essential training tool for providing constructive and formative feedback; a way to obtain information on students' performance and progress in teaching; a means to develop students' own role as a teacher and manner of teaching. Observation is a collaborative process. Both the person being observed and the observer have important roles before, during, and after the observation. Collaborating at each stage of the process can help put both participants at ease so that each benefits from the experience resulting in professional growth and development. Classroom observation is a skill that can be learned and improved with practice. It is through this process that student teachers not only 'see' and reflect on their teaching actions, but also go through the process themselves and learn by linking theory, reflection and practice.

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