

# SUPERVISING AND GUIDING POTENTIAL TEACHERS IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING

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***Abstract:** This paper addresses the issue of how professional guidance can best be offered by mentors to trainee teachers through classroom observation procedures during teaching practice in pre-service teacher education.*

***Key words:** pre-service teacher education, teacher training, classroom observation*

## **Introduction**

Classroom observation is a fundamental tool in pre-service teacher education, still it is mostly done in a disorganised and haphazard manner and, therefore, it cannot facilitate trainee development as much as it otherwise could. While surveying the results of his research, Mackay (1990) says that even university trainers do not share a common set of beliefs about good teaching and often they are unaware of what constitutes their own beliefs.

This paper describes the product of a series of five workshops designed to compile an observation instrument to be used for discussion during training and for observation during teaching practice. The instrument raises trainees' awareness of all the factors concerning effective teaching and this could ideally lead to better practice.

## **1. A glossary of key terms**

As in the literature on supervision there is a great variety of terms used to denote the parties involved in teacher education as well as the techniques and procedures employed during the supervisory process, I feel compelled to clarify the key terms and define them in a way they are used in the further sections.

*Observation schedule* is used as an alternative term for the classroom observation instrument compiled. *Students* are the children in primary/secondary school classes. The term *trainees* refers to university students in their final year of study who are on teaching practice in one of the university *pilot schools*. Trainees have no previous

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teaching experience, they are all pre-service teachers. By *support teacher or mentor* I mean the person who is qualified to facilitate, guide and finally assess trainees on teaching practice. By *trainers* I refer to members of staff at the university who are assigned the task of keeping contact with a particular pilot school. By *teaching practice* I refer to the period of formal teacher education which trainees spend in pilot schools. During this period trainees are responsible and therefore accountable for the teaching that takes place.

## **2. A brief summary of the context of teaching practice at the University of Pannonia**

Trainees do teaching practice in the final semester of their studies. They are expected to spend about 12 hours per week in the school observing support teacher's classes and teaching their own. Ideally, if institutional constraints allow, they teach approximately 30-40 lessons during the semester. One support teacher usually works with 2-4 trainees. Each trainee's teaching is regularly observed by a support teacher and peers. Feedback sessions are held after each lesson either on a one-to-one basis (trainee + support teacher) or together with peers.

Trainees' teaching is also observed by university trainers on two or three occasions: at least once at any stage before the final, so called, demonstration lesson and once during the demonstration lesson. Assessment is made by the support teacher and it is based on the whole semester's work. Trainers can have a say in the assessment of the final demonstration lesson but that counts only 30 percent towards the final grade.

## **3. The problems of teaching practice as identified through questionnaires**

To clearly identify the problems both trainees and support teachers are concerned with, a questionnaire was handed out to both parties. Most of the problems that were raised had, in fact, been anticipated by observant trainers. The results are summarised in the following list.

- Very often there is a discrepancy of ideas between what trainees, support teachers and trainers think effective teaching is. In other words trainees' perceptions of their own performance often differ markedly from those of the observer's.
- Trainers and support teachers hardly ever use any observation instrument when they observe trainees' classes, neither do they use any observation schedule to go by during feedback sessions. A common practice in observing a

lesson is to take field notes, i.e., write down stages of the lesson and some aspects of teacher behaviour as they occur in a chronological order, perhaps supplemented by some favourable or unfavourable remarks.

Rees (1981) describes the most salient drawbacks of this system. He asserts that it takes a lot of time – the observer may miss important class events while writing – and that the remarks tend to be more arbitrary than thoughtful. I may add to this that it does not help the trainee teacher to be involved in any kind of structured self- analysis either.

- There is a tendency on the part of support teachers to be directive during after-class feedback, sometimes without even realising this. In other words, they tend to consider themselves the only knowers of what constitutes good and effective teaching. As effective teaching is partly context dependent (Wragg, 1987) there may be an element of truth in it at the beginning of teaching practice (the support teacher knows better what works best with a particular group) but it is definitely not true for the whole of the supervisory period.

In my experience I have found that although trainees do want to know what support teachers think they have done well or badly this does not mean that they are totally blank minds themselves; they are equipped with a wide range of teaching techniques, which is part of their university training, and they have many years of experience as students. Acceptance by trainees of the directive supervision model (Freeman, 1990) would mean a total rejection of their immediate and more distant past.

- Judgements are based on subjective criteria, which vary from support teacher to support teacher and this indicates a lack of consistency.

Research proves (Sheal, 1989) that observers who do not use systematic observation tools tend to consider themselves as a standard. Consequently, they observe impressionistically, they give subjective feedback, which results in teachers reacting in various defensive ways. In such an atmosphere even useful feedback is often left unheard.

- As time goes by feedback sessions become less and less frequent for reasons of ideas petering out. Very often, the argument goes like: “I’ve already told the trainee what to do and how to do it. Now it’s his/her turn. I have nothing else to say.”

- There are no institutional guidelines accepted by all three parties concerning good supervisory practice, no standardised instrument to support trainee development.

#### **4. The purpose of the observation instrument**

In my attempt to remedy the problems delineated above I have constructed an observation instrument which reflects the views of all the three parties (trainee teachers, support teachers, university trainers) that are involved in the supervisory process. My aim with this three-party involvement was threefold:

- (1) To uncover attitudes that trainee teachers hold about learning and teaching which capitalize on their experience both as students and as teachers. Similarly, to elicit ideas from support teachers that bring opinions about good teaching to conscious awareness relying solely on their experience. Also, to create an opportunity for trainers to meaningfully interpret the current theories of language teaching/learning and raise awareness of the ways they can be applied in the context of teaching practice. As Bowers (1987) says, at a professional level, teachers are to be compared against the standards which are currently set by the profession at large and he warns against the danger of importing these standards from alien context. Therefore, I compiled the standards from the criteria the three parties believe constitute good teaching in our own context.
- (2) To construct an observation instrument whose principles and criteria are produced and therefore accepted and understood by all those who will be using it. Doing this I can get rid of the problem first raised by Swan (1993) viz, it is unfortunate that in most cases the constructors and the users of the observation schedule are different.
- (3) To eliminate significant differences between the individual views and establish an instrument which, as much as it is possible, enables participants to look at effective teaching more objectively. As a consequence of this an element of standardization across the board (including all support teachers and pilot schools) can be achieved.

The explicit primary focus of this elicited, accepted and standardized observation instrument is the facilitation and enhancement of trainee development and it can also function as an implicit means of potential support teacher development. Assuming the former, I believe that with the help of this instrument trainees will be able to develop a kind of ritual behaviour, which Maingay (1988) considers as an important

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part of initial training. Assuming the latter I believe that experienced teachers who have already ‘set into unquestioned ritual’ will realize the principles behind these rituals, which will eventually generate self-appraisal, therefore, - if necessary – changes in their teaching behaviour.

To achieve these goals we compiled a set of guiding questions for trainee and support teacher to think over before and after the lesson. The questions are to help and guide trainee to develop their awareness of teaching/ classroom/ students. Before the lesson they could help trainee with planning and after the lesson they provide the basis for self-evaluation and for feedback from support teacher. Williams (1989) expresses a similar view when she emphasises the role of self-exploration in in-service teacher training programmes. Freeman (1982) asserts that self-exploration through the process of reflection will lead to personal and professional development. Teacher development in conjunction with teacher training (acquisition of finite teaching skills and habits) are the two basic factors of pre-service teacher education.

## **5. Description of workshop activities**

Here I detail the strategies which were implemented in the project in an attempt to find solutions to the problem areas previously outlined.

### **5.1. Workshop One**

A three-hour long brainstorming session was held with trainee teachers who had done their teaching practice in the previous semester, to elicit what they understood by good /effective teaching. A similar session was conducted with support teachers and trainers. The purpose of this first series of workshops was to make a list of items under various category headings that might be included in an observation sheet.

Pennington (1990) says that the question of how to prepare good and effective language teachers resolves itself ultimately into the question of what the nature of effective teaching is. Support teachers, trainers and trainees agreed that the definition of effective teaching should be based on two important premises:

- (a) there should be as much learning taking place as possible;
- (b) students should be motivated by enjoying the process of learning.

We believe that the observation instrument should help to work towards the achievement of these two basic aims. We agree with Stones (1984) that the overall aim of teaching is effective learning and that student learning is extremely difficult to

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assess. We think, however, that effective learning, as much as it is due to teacher/teaching-dependent factors, can be observable therefore definable.

The three parties unanimously rejected views of teaching as pure ‘art’ in which the teaching acts cannot be described in rational, consistent terms therefore they cannot be developed. We all believe that principles of effective teaching can be established and the micro-skills that are related to these principles can be determined and agreed on (cf. Long and Crookes, 1986). Therefore, in our sessions we attempted to identify the principles of good instruction.

I must note, however, that we do not believe in ‘the sum of the parts always adds up to the whole’ approach. Good teaching has a particular feel to it which is hard to pin down. Nevertheless, we have to seek for ways which facilitate the processes of both training and development (see above). One way of setting about this could be an identification of objectifiable constituents of good instruction but, apparently it should not stop at this point.

### **5.2. Workshop Two**

During the next two sessions (one with trainees and one with support teachers and trainers) participants were invited to further break down the categories into related questions which all reflect a discrete and separately observable act of teaching. The purpose of this second series of workshops was to determine how the principles established in Workshop One would relate to individual teaching events. As Pennington (1990) says, after defining the general categories which contribute to the effectiveness of teaching, we should determine how these categories relate to acts of teaching in a particular language lesson.

### **5.3. Workshop Three**

This was the first time during the project that all the three parties had come together to compare and discuss their lists of questions. The questions were pooled and worded in a way that they reflected the parties’ perceptions of what might be the characteristics of good foreign language teaching. In other words, they all contain presuppositions about the nature of effective teaching and these presuppositions were agreed on by the three parties.

An observation instrument takes the results of these three workshops into account but, on the whole, it is the outcome of a several year-long training experience in which regular debates and discussions with both pre- and in-service teachers about

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good teaching have taken a decisive role. (Compare 'Classroom language' below with Némethné, 2006)

### ***The Main Areas To Be Observed***

(As identified by trainers, trainees and support teachers)

1. ATMOSPHERE/ DISCIPLINE
2. CLASSROOM LANGUAGE/ INSTRUCTIONS
3. EFFORT & ATTITUDE
4. ENJOYMENT/ INTEREST
5. ERROR CORRECTION
6. FEEDBACK
7. FLEXIBILITY
8. PACE
9. PLAN
10. QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES
11. SELF-ACCESS SKILLS
12. STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
13. TEACHERLY QUALITIES
14. TEACHING AIDS/ TEACHING MATERIALS
15. TEACHING TECHNIQUES
  - 15.1. PRESENTATION/ EXPLANATION
  - 15.2. PRACTICE
  - 15.3. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT/ ACTIVITIES
  - 15.4. ACTIVITY MANAGEMENT
16. VARIETY

## **6. Description of further workshops**

### ***6.1. Workshop Four***

To test how the observation instrument works we used a demo lesson we had videoed for the purpose. The participants (representatives from all three parties) were asked to identify both the strengths and the weaknesses of the lesson using the observation instrument. They all agreed on the strengths and 14 out of the 16 people present also agreed that the weaknesses were related to the following areas: *error correction, feedback, pace, planning, student involvement, teacherly qualities and variety*. Two people had *vocabulary teaching techniques* instead of *feedback*. Some discussion of

the identified areas followed, the result of which was a slight amendment of some of the questions on the observation sheets.

Two more videoed lessons were looked at and the results showed that, by using the instrument, it was possible to achieve a reasonable unanimity of opinions and therefore decrease the amount of subjectivity. Participants also expressed their satisfaction with having an instrument that claimed to map out effective teaching, thus offering guidelines to both trainees and support teachers to go by. They believed that the observation schedule did not confine thought, in fact, it did the opposite: the questions provide food for further thought and reconsideration since they are open to continuous amendment during use.

Participants agreed that our observation instrument was, in a way, a portrait which we had drawn ourselves therefore we should all identify ourselves with it.

## **6.2. Workshop Five**

In this workshop we agreed on the way the observation instrument should be integrated into the supervisory process. We decided to interpret the term *supervisory process* in a sense Gaies and Bowers (1990) used it, i.e. as a 'process by which teaching performance is systematically observed, analysed and evaluated.' It should be aimed at the needs of individual teachers, it should reduce the discrepancy between actual and ideal teaching behaviour and it should be an ongoing and spiral process. The word 'spiral' indicates the gradual development that should ideally take place.

The outcome of a lively discussion was a list of principles that we would like to see embodied before and during teaching practice. We came up with the following:

- The observation instrument should be a link between university training and the practicum. When trainees do their micro- and peer-teaching sessions in methodology classes at the university, they should gradually be familiarized with the principles and should be encouraged to amend the schedule according to the latest theories and according to their understanding of these theories. Feedback on their performance should be given to them on the basis of these principles.
- The observation instrument should be a means of development rather than that of threat

The areas should be neatly written up on cards and one set should be kept in every training room/ classroom so that they are available whenever needed. By the time trainees get to teaching practice, they have already encountered and, ideally,



amended the schedule therefore the long list should not be a threat to them (a concern raised -among others- by Bowers, 1987). Nevertheless, support teachers should make it clear to the trainees that the schedule is there to help them develop their own teaching and give them guidelines for reflection on any teaching observed (done either by support teachers, peers or themselves).

- The observation instrument should be a means of creating a trustful atmosphere

Before trainees start the actual teaching they should use the instrument for observing their support teachers. Each observation should have a limited focus i.e. a trainee should concentrate only on one area at a time. Given the fact that there are usually 2-4 trainees watching a support teacher's class, 2-4 areas can be handled at one go. Again, amendments can be made at any stage. The support teacher's lessons are then discussed in the light of the different areas observed. This stage of the supervisory process is extremely important for at least two reasons. Trainees realize that:

- (a) the way support teachers teach may not be perfect, which justifies their own possible imperfections and helps them to see the criteria of good teaching in terms of everyday realities;
- (b) support teacher's attitude to their own teaching is that of openness rather than secrecy and hush, which contributes to a more trustful atmosphere between the two parties (a claim first made by Rogers, 1951).

- The observation instrument should facilitate attention, focus and self-reflection

Before trainee does his/her first 'live' lesson, support teacher, trainee and peers agree that on the basis of the observation sheet they will identify the areas that they think are the strengths and weaknesses of the trainee. During feedback sessions they see if they can agree on the areas of strengths and weaknesses. Any disagreement is clarified and areas of future concern are established. The lesson can also be videoed and then looked at by trainee to facilitate a more objective view of self.

Chambers (1993) reports that within the current paradigm of training reflective practitioners (Wallace, 1991) many trainees feel uncomfortable with reflection and find it difficult to identify their own strengths and areas to which they need to pay attention. Fitzpatrick and Kerr (1993) describe different strategies (denial, making excuses, hypothesising, saying sorry, bargaining, silence and tears) trainees employ when they are asked about how they think their lesson went. Our trainees, however, asserted that the observation schedule could help them a great deal to give a straightforward answer to this question and as such it could enhance self-reflection.

From the second lesson on the trainee is observed only for one area at a time, which is always established as an outcome of the discussion between trainee and

support teacher. Decision about the given category to observe is made at the end of the previous feedback session.

- The observation instrument should facilitate the planning process

At the very beginning of the supervisory process it is the support teacher who tells the trainee what the content of the plan should be. Later, though, under ideal circumstances, the trainee should become independent in this respect. (cf. Freeman, 1982).

There should always be two lesson plans handled during a feedback session: the plan of the previous lesson and that of the lesson that follows. The former is analysed in the light of the actual implementation following the principles of the observation schedule. The support teacher then looks at the draft plan of the following lesson and offers alternatives as to the steps and teaching techniques but leaves decision making up to trainee's discretion. With the alternatives in mind, trainee leaves to prepare the plan of the following lesson. Also, the observation instrument offers a checklist for the trainee to use during preparation. Trainee gives full plan to support teacher before the given lesson but it is only after the lesson that the plan is analysed. Trainees are also asked to give reasons for their choice of teaching techniques.

- The observation instrument should be a mirror of changing beliefs and attitudes

Ideally, at the end of each teaching practice period, the representatives of all three parties should come together and agree, in the light of their experience, on the amendments to be made. Beliefs may also change as new technical and methodological advances take place. The questions should therefore be adapted and changed so that the observation schedule should not be static or terminal but should reflect the changing beliefs and attitudes of effective teaching. The review of questions should be done regularly to ensure that the observation instrument has a long term perspective.

## **7. Guidelines for supervision**

As an outcome of the five workshops we agreed that the supervisory process should have the following stages:

### ***7.1. Pre-supervision stage***

During university training trainees are familiarized with the principles of the observation instrument. Their micro-teaching is assessed on this basis. They are free to amend the checklist.

### ***7.2. Supervision stage***

- Relationship

Support teacher and trainee establish a relationship of respect and openness, which is reciprocal. Support teacher expresses their belief that the process of becoming a better teacher cannot flourish in an authoritarian atmosphere and that everyone has the potential to become a good teacher. Trainee, though, should respect support teacher opinion as it is the result of many years' teaching experience.

- Observation by trainees

Trainee observes support teacher's lessons and in post-lesson discussions they rely on the observation instrument.

- Observation by support teacher

- a, Pre-observation*

Trainee offers a draft plan for her/his first lesson. Support teacher offers alternative steps and techniques. They agree that both will try to identify strong and weak areas of trainee's teaching using the observation instrument as reference.

- b, Observation*

Support teacher (and also peers if possible) observes trainee's teaching using the observation schedule. Obviously, they cannot pay attention to every single question on the schedule, their preference is area-identification (see above).

- c, Post-observation/feedback*

The feedback session is not held right after the lesson. It is done later during the day to leave some time for trainee to reflect on classroom experience, to get rid of emotional surplus and clarify thoughts. Baker & Hamilton (1993) also emphasise the importance of this 'cooling-off' period because both trainee and support teacher should have some time to assimilate the events of the lesson and become more objective about trainee's performance.

Support teacher *listens* to trainee's general feelings about the lesson and *demonstrates understanding*. It is Curran (1978), among others, who advocates this 'understanding response' and we believe that this is applicable in our context as the first step of the feedback session.

Support teacher *stimulates identification* of strong and weak areas and *analyses performance* together with trainee. What is meant by 'performance analysis' here is very close to the way Turney (1982) used this term i.e. a focused reviewing of

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classroom events and their interpretation in the light of trainee's self-evaluation and support teacher's opinion. The observation instrument provides the guidelines for trainee's preceding reflection and support teacher's comments.

Trainee and support teacher *determine priorities* (areas that need more attention) and decide on the *focus* (one particular area) of the next observation. Drawing on the guidelines provided by the observation instrument they *work out strategies* for the possible *treatment* of the problem area. Usually, there are several areas that need attention but it is good to start with the one that is the least serious and the easiest to remedy.

This succession of '*problem - hypothesis - experiment*' is similar to what Gebhard (1990) calls 'collaborative supervision' with the rider that in our context it is the support teacher who directs this phase of the feedback session. As stated above, in pre-service training there is a need on trainees' part for support teacher giving certain directions to them. The cycle is then completed by returning back to the *pre-observation* stage (see above) when support teacher looks at draft plan and offers *alternatives*.

The following *observation* and *post-observation* stages, however, will already concentrate on one or (if trainee wishes) two agreed areas of concern by support teacher and trainee going through the same processes described above.

## **8. Evaluation and further tasks**

Support teachers, trainees and trainers expressed their satisfaction with the fact that they now had an observation schedule on hand that they could use both as a source of ideas and as a basis for reflection and feedback. Due to the way we had compiled the instrument their awareness of effective teaching was raised. The experience of getting to know one another's ideas and incorporating them into their own seemed to be intriguing for all the three parties.

Some trainers and support teachers expressed their disbelief in observers' ability to concentrate on so many principles during a single classroom observation event. After looking at the video and also some live lessons, though, they found the identification of good and problematic areas quite an easy task to perform. Although, initially, trainees and support teachers expressed some concern about the off-putting impact of such a long list of questions, they later realized that a proper introduction and handling of these questions would minimize their possible threatening effect. They very much valued the fact that the areas were well worked-out and could not be misunderstood.

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## 10. Conclusion

Sheal (1989) and also Kennedy (1993) assert that subjective classroom observations and meetings fail to improve teacher performance whereas a systematic and objective approach to observation can greatly enhance it. The procedure delineated in this paper focuses on the compilation of a classroom observation instrument as a way of facilitating objectivity and systematicity in teacher development.

The purpose of the observation instrument is to help trainees to define, practise and develop their competence as language teachers within the given framework of teaching practice. More specifically, I addressed the question of how an observation instrument could provide the basis for explicit trainee and implicit support teacher development and so far it has been voted successful. With the use of the instrument, feedback will no longer be disorganised or haphazard but a structured session in which trainees become more aware of how to improve their teaching.

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