

How to Observe a Foreign Language Classroom?



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Abstract

Generally, a classroom observation is perceived as a method to learn the teaching methodology and techniques from a senior teacher. It is also considered as a content for evaluation of new teachers. However, apart from these objectives, a classroom observation report can prove to be an effective way for peer feedback among teacher colleagues and also a tool to assess and measure the outcome of the teachers' training. The present paper discusses in detail various aspects to be observed in a foreign language classroom so that it proves effective for both, a trainee teacher, as well as in-service teacher. The author of the present paper is a faculty member for MA, Japanese in Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth and designs and implements the course in 'Teaching Methodology'.

Keywords: Foreign language classroom, observation report, TS assessment tool

Introduction

There has been ample study on the classroom observation in language classrooms. However, a foreign language classroom is different from a usual language classroom due to various factors that are different from second language. Because the foreign language students have lesser exposure to the target language outside the classroom, the teachers need to concentrate their efforts within the class hours, and so is the case for students. The aspects such as 'using a common language or students' first language for teaching', 'creating opportunities for the language usage' highlight the difference in the teacher's approach as well as bring about the difference in the outcome of the course.

A foreign language classroom observation can be done in various ways. It can be a real-time observation by juniors, colleagues and seniors or a recording of classroom proceedings and a careful observation later. In both the cases, taking notes is of high importance in order to comprehend the classroom dynamics.

Essentials for a Foreign Language Classroom Observation

The foreign language classroom observation has been mainly concerned with the Teacher Talk and the activities conducted in the class. Applied linguists and psychologists also discuss the observation of students, their response to Teacher Talk¹ through speech or action and their own spontaneous utterances and actions. Brown(2001), in his comprehensive book *Teaching by Principles*, recommends that ‘the teachers articulate their language, slow it down, use simpler vocabulary, and speak in grammar structures just above the student's level’(comprehensible input or ‘i+1’ as recommended in Natural Approach). Nunan (1989) proposes the following categories and a tally sheet for keeping a log of the ‘Teacher Talk’, which proves to be helpful while observing a foreign language classroom.

Table No. 1: Tally sheet for analyzing classroom interaction (Nunan 1989)

Teacher talk type	Tallies	Total
1. Teacher asks a display question		3
2. Teacher asks a referential question		4
3. Teacher explains a grammatical point		0
4. Teacher explains meaning of vocabulary item		0
5. Teacher explains functional point		0
6. Teacher explains point relating to the content (theme/topic) of the lesson		1
7. Teacher gives instructions/directions		6
8. Teacher praises		1
9. Teacher criticises		0
10. Learner asks a question		3
11. Learner answers question		4
12. Learner talks to another learner		
13. Period of silence or confusion		3

The present study referred to Okazaki (1990) for discussing Japanese classroom observation. Okazaki listed the following key elements for classroom observation.

1. Teaching skills

¹ **Teacher talk** includes everything that a teacher talks in a classroom.

- (1) Teacher Talk
- (2) Activities
- (3) Handling of questions and answers, Handling of questions
- (4) Nomination (timing and the way of calling a student)
- (5) Usage of blackboard
- (6) Dealing with students' errors
- (7) Gaze
- (8) Whether there is any consideration for diversity of students

2. The teacher's attitude

- (1) Degree of observation of students
- (2) Teacher's attitude towards own failure, dealing with own stumbling

3. Student observation

- (1) Interaction
- (2) Input
- (3) The students as a whole

Discussion on the Aspects Important for Classroom Observation

Deep knowledge of the subject is considered to be the first and foremost condition of an effective teacher and is always given importance in case of all subjects including foreign languages. Secondly, sufficient preparation of the lesson is a universal expectation from a teacher.

However, the present paper focuses on some other aspects which need due attention in a foreign language classroom.

1. Teaching Skills

Teaching skills include various criteria for observing a teacher in a classroom.

A. Teacher Talk

The first element for classroom observation is Teacher Talk. It is a crucial aspect of observing a classroom dynamics. The speed at which teacher talks influences the learning. It need not be too fast or too slow or loud. A natural speed with comprehensible vocabulary is considered to be ideal.

The teacher's talk performs many functions. To sum up various categories based on Bowers(1980) and Ramirez et.al (1986), the following list can be considered for noting the Teacher Talk.

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Responding | 7. Eliciting |
| 2. Sociating | 8. Explaining |
| 3. Organising | 9. Commanding |
| 4. Directing | 10. Questioning |
| 5. Presenting | 11. Modeling |
| 6. Evaluating | 12. Feedback |

All the above functions form the core of a foreign language classroom interaction. The teacher talk is characterised by many questions which are commonly divided into two categories. 1) Display question and 2) Referential question. Their characteristics are given further.

1. Display Questions can be called as ‘known information questions’. The teacher when asks such questions knows the answers and wants the students to display their understanding or knowledge of the subject. These questions are a kind of confirmation before proceeding to new content or higher level. E.g. in a beginners level class:
2.
 - a. T: What is there on the table? (pointing to the table in the classroom)
 - b. S: There is a pencil on the table.

The Display Questions are useful as they are clearly focused on the educational goals. They are framed very regularly in a classroom and are also found in textbook exercises in abundance. However, they may fail to initiate interest among students.

3. Referential questions can be called as ‘true information questions’. The teacher when asks such questions, he/she does not know the information and it is an attempt to know real information. E.g. in a beginners level class on Monday:

T: What did you do on weekend?
 S: I went on a picnic with my family.
 T: Oh, that is nice! How was it? / Where did you go? ...

As we can see, Referential questions raise the quality of the classroom interaction from the communication perspective. The conversation develops as the topic is of interest for the students and also creates meaning and purpose for answering the questions. It becomes a motivating factor and there is every possibility of increase in the amount of students’ speech.

Therefore, during the observation of a foreign language classroom, we need to pay attention to the categories of teacher talk as well as the type of questions asked by the teacher.

On the other hand, it is also important to evaluate whether there is there a clear response to students' answers and whether the response to students' questions suitable. (E.g. not spending too much time only on one student's question/ handling questions that drift away from lesson content etc.)

B. Difficulty Level of the Teacher Talk

The difficulty level of the vocabulary and grammar used by the teacher in a classroom determines the comfort of the students and influences the outcome of the teaching-learning process. The teacher is expected to make the transition from known content to new content smooth through interaction. The new learning items are introduced in a gradual manner, or in i+1 fashion as proposed by Natural Approach. Here, it is important whether the teacher takes help of another language as a medium, such as the student's first language. If yes, then it is critical to know whether such use is limited to explain only difficult grammatical concepts or vocabulary such as abstract nouns, or is used excessively. It should also be observed whether the content demanded as answer of the teacher-initiated question is appropriate for the current level of students.

The teacher is expected to adjust the pace depending on the response and reaction of the students and take pause when necessary. Such an adjustment is possible only if the teacher efficiently notes the students' facial expressions and gestures.

C. Use of materials

Effective use of blackboard, textbook, practice materials and audio-visual aids to facilitate understanding of the content and real life materials are expected. The use of Real life materials (e.g. newspapers, magazines, videos of news and their scripts, pamphlets etc. that are usually used by the native speakers of that language) brings a foreign language classroom closer to the target language environment. Effective use of blackboard for teaching scripts, drawing illustrations or explaining syntactical structures contributes to the success of the lesson. The writing on the blackboard should be error-free and easy to read. The use of blackboard should be appropriate (for assisting comprehension but not spoon feeding the students). Particularly in case of Japanese, the teacher may need to write the reading for difficult kanji.

Nonetheless, the gestures used for conveying the meaning as a complement of the teacher talk and text on blackboard must be observed too.

D. Careful selection of topics with which the students can relate

The topics selected for the activities should be of students' interest to keep up their motivation and ensure their participation. The students should be ready and prepared to listen to the teacher. This is particularly important because of the lack of exposure to the target (here, foreign) language culture and society. If the content and topics are very remotely related to the students, it will affect the students' participation. In case of difficult content, effort taken to assist students' understanding should be evident through repeating, rephrasing and summarizing etc.

2. Activities Conducted in the Classroom

The instructions for activities should be clear and thorough (E.g. if needed, with appropriate help of students' first language). The teacher should provide a model/ present an example before the students. Students' questions about activities need to be entertained and answered. There should be some opportunity for students' voluntary display of their role? (E.g. selection/ exclusion of certain elements in the activity or selection of content details). There should be a smooth transition from one activity to another without any strange pauses or confusion.

3. Communication Skills

A teacher as a communicator needs to maintain an appropriate voice quality and volume. Secondly, communicating openly and freely with the whole class becomes necessary without demonstrating a stiff manner or hiding behind a podium.

A teacher's communication skills are considered as a prerequisite of a foreign language classroom, where merely providing knowledge of the target language is not sufficient, but it is necessary to interact with the students and create opportunities for the language usage and performance.

The teacher while communicating has to call out names of the students. It is important to check whether the teacher calls out students in a sequence for a task or at random, does the teacher call students after asking questions as per her judgment or after seeing the raised hands of volunteering students. Making a shy or hesitant student talk is a result of the teacher's good communication skills.

Communication skills and teaching skills go hand in hand while addressing the students' errors. The errors if handled indirectly, the flow of students' communication is not affected. The errors should be corrected in such a way that students do not lose confidence. It becomes an important criteria in Indian scenario of large numbered classes that the teacher giving similar attention to all students (and is not just engrossed in lesson plan and blackboard), maintains an eye contact and no 'Blind Spots' are created.

4. Observation of the Students

Observing the students during the lesson is as important as observing the Teacher Talk. Particularly, in a foreign language classroom, one has to observe the nature of communication taking place through class activities. The interaction should be meaningful with a specific goal or task to be accomplished such as filling an Information Gap. Questions on vocabulary, syntax and teacher talk should be entertained and their wish for a specific content (of interest) for activities should be answered. Active participation and a high degree of interest of student should be evident in the classroom.

5. Attitude of the Teacher

The teacher's attitude determines the participation and motivation of the students. It becomes important to check whether the teacher encourages the students and giving them confidence. However, even for a class of adult students, a teacher's control on the class proceedings and time management is assumed in any teaching method. The teacher's attitude towards own failure and the way of dealing with own stumbling shows the maturity and experience of the teacher. A veteran teacher handles the failure positively and in constructive manner.

6. Key Elements Important for the Outcome of the Teaching-learning Process

Apart from the above-mentioned, there are some significant aspects which determine the outcome of the teaching learning process as a whole. They can be observed during the classroom time. The following aspects should also be included for a better observation of the classroom.

1. Organisation of the subject
2. Clear linking of the objectives, teaching contents and outcome, and sharing them with students
3. Preview, treatment and review of the learning goals
4. Realization of the educational goal (evaluation method for checking the achievement level of students for contents which are listed as educational goals)

The following criteria can be said to be critical for the outcome of education as a whole, irrespective of subject to be taught.

1. Assisting students to become independent
2. Initiating and encouraging critical thinking and analysis (through discussion and brainstorming)

Conclusion

The present paper has a discussion of various aspects to be considered while observing a foreign language classroom such as Teaching skills, Communication skills, Teacher Talk etc. The paper is an interim step towards developing a guideline or a format for a language classroom observation. As an application of the theory, a Classroom Observation Report Template is being developed with due weightage given to the inputs given by the author for specific needs of a Japanese language classroom. The report will guide the pre-service teachers in training. It will also serve as an assessment rubric for evaluation of their learning during the training. However, classrooms of other languages can also develop a report template based on the above discussion to suit their needs.

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