

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO CLASS OBSERVATION ACTIVITIES IN UPPER
SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN HUE AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THIRD AND FOURTH YEAR
STUDENTS' TEACHING PRACTICE**

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Abstract. Classroom observation is an effective tool for professional development (PD) in EFL environments. However, in order for this PD tool to be really effective, there should be more insights into theoretical and practical preparations for this classroom activity. The project was carried out to find out (a) teachers' perception about classroom observations; (b) the reality of class observation activities in some high schools in Hue, and (c) what third- and fourth- year students should do for their teaching practice. The subjects consist of 15 upper-secondary students and 37 teachers and 15 students from 5 upper-secondary schools in Hue. The research instruments are questionnaires, interview questions, and observing observers' activities sheets. Some main findings include: (1) Most teachers and students have realized the importance of class observation activities; (2) Class observation activities are carried out with different frequency in different high schools; (3) The post-observing stage (giving feedback) is carried out in different ways and need to be paid more attention. Some essential suggestions include (a) Teachers should learn more theory about and attend workshops on ways to take advantage of class observations; (b) Each time a class observation is made, it is suggested that the observer focus on one aspect of the lesson; (c) After making class observation, the experience should be collected and put into a portfolio as a good way to learn. These suggestions aim to improve the quality of class observation activities for upper-secondary teachers of English in general, and for third and fourth year students' teaching practice in particular.

1. Introduction

The career of teaching English requires a lot of effort if the teacher wishes to keep moving forward, to become the best teacher he can be. Scrivener (1994:195) claimed that: 'Ideas and enthusiasm that you started with may fade away as it becomes clear that you can't make every lesson perfect, and there are some days when you may have to struggle just to get through.' However, there are a great variety of ways that a teacher can choose to follow for better professional capability such as:

- Reading new ideas in magazines about EFL and try them out
- Participating in more conferences and workshops
- Discussing what you are doing with other teachers

Among the suggested ways for professional development, the one to be highlighted is making more class observations to learn experience from other teachers. As Wajnryb (1996) cited that being in the classroom as an observer opens up a range of experiences and processes which can become part of the raw materials of a teacher's professional growth. Furthermore, Scrivener (1994) strongly believes that observation of other teachers (or of other trainees on a course) is an excellent way of helping oneself to become more aware of options and possibilities.

In almost every education system in our country Vietnam, from primary, secondary to upper secondary schools, class observation activities have proved themselves to be actually meaningful and necessary. However, in some schools, this academic activity is not implemented in a satisfactory way due to a number of reasons.

Moreover, as far as I am concerned, the third and fourth year students in Hue University College of Foreign Languages, majoring in pedagogy usually have difficulties when implementing observations and teaching practice in some upper secondary schools in Hue.

Therefore, I conduct this research with the hope to have an overview of classroom observation activities in high schools in Hue and, more importantly, find out ways to help third and fourth year students make necessary preparations for their class observation activities as well as teaching practice in Upper secondary schools.

2. Background

2.1. What is 'Classroom Observation?'

According to Okwen (1996), classroom observation, or lesson observation, means sitting in a class and observing a teacher in action.

Wajnryb (1996) added that observation is a multi-faceted tool for learning. The experience of observing comprises more than the time actually spent in the classroom. It also includes preparation for the period in the classroom and follow-up from the time spent there. The preparation can include the selection of a focus and purpose and a method of data collection, as well as collaboration with others involved. The follow-up includes analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data and experience acquired in the classroom, and reflection on the whole experience.

Additionally, another author stated that classroom observation is the process in which the observer sits in on class sessions and records the instructor's and students' actions, interactions and performances. The length of observations varies but always

includes a predetermined recording method and specified objective. Besides that, teachers use the results of these observations to identify performance indicators and realize areas of improvement (Wills, 2011).

2.2. Common elements in classroom observation

- a purpose for the observation
- operational definitions of all the observed behaviors
- training procedures for observers
- a specific observational focus
- a setting
- a unit of time
- an observation schedule
- a method to record the data
- a method to process and analyze data (Waxman, 2012)

2.3. How to record the observation

Written account: by using this way, immediate and fresh account is available with an economic use of time. However, observer must take immediate decisions about what to record, so may be superficial or unreliable account, no chance of ‘action replay.’

Video cassette: this method gives the observer good visual and sound record which can be replayed several times, no pressure to make instant decisions, the focus can be on the teacher only or on individual or group of pupils. Also, the lesson can be discussed with participants. However, the observer should notice the effects on the class of the presence of the camera.

Sound cassette: It is noticeable that good sound record can be replayed several times for discussion and analysis. Also, the observer’s comments can be recorded simultaneously on twin-track tape. Besides that, it allows the lesson to be transcribed by audio typist. The drawbacks of this method are loss of important visual cues such as facial expressions, gestures, body language, movements. Apart from that, it can be difficult to identify individual children who speak in the lesson.

Transcript: this method enables really detailed analysis at leisure, permits analysis by many people not necessarily in the same place, as text can be distributed easily. However, we cannot avoid the loss of important visual and sound cues such as tone of voice, volume of noise, emphasis. In addition, the cost in time and money can be high to have lessons transcribed (Wragg, 1994).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the research consisted of those involved in questionnaires, class observations and informal interviews.

The first group consisted of 37 EFL teachers who are in charge of various 10th grade and 11th grade classes at 5 upper-secondary schools in Hue: Nguyen Hue, Quoc Hoc, Hai Ba Trung, Gia Hoi and Phan Dang Luu.

The second group comprised 15 upper-secondary students whose age range from 16 to 18. They were chosen randomly from many classes of grades 10 and 11.

3.2. Data collection methods

The data presented in this project are collected by such methods as surveys, interviews and ‘observing the observers’ activities through the instruments of questionnaires for the teachers, interview questions for the students, and observing the observers’ activities sheets for the teachers who make class observations. Concerning the observing the observers’ activities, the researchers themselves mean to observe and take notes of all the activities done by observers through pre-, while-, and post-observation sessions.

3.3. Research questions

- What are teachers’ perceptions about the class observation activity?
- How are class observation activities done in some high schools in Hue?
- What should third- and fourth-year students prepare for their teaching practice?

3.4. Findings and discussion

3.4.1. Questionnaire data analysis

Importance of class observation

According to the survey, 10% of the teachers agreed that class observation activities are important. Especially, for 90% of the teachers, class observation activities are very important in professional development. Besides, none of the teachers denied the importance of class observation activities.

Difficulties when making class observations

On being asked about the difficulties when making class observations, a majority of teachers (95%) agreed that ‘both the teacher and the students are so well-prepared before the lesson being observed; hence, the results are not the real ones’.

Besides that, 30% of the teachers claimed that their difficulty is ‘not all the teachers and the students are willing to be observed, so they are not enthusiastic in teaching and learning sometimes’.

What to do after making class observations

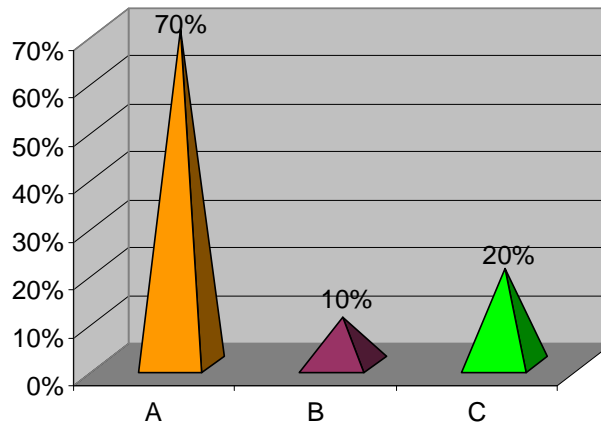


Chart 1. *Question: After making class observations. What do you usually do in order to better your colleagues' teaching as well as yours?*

- A. *Giving personal feedback to the colleague whose class you have observed.*
- B. *Writing down on your notebook the experience you have drawn and just keep it for yourself.*
- C. *Just giving feedback to that colleague when being asked to do.*

As can be seen from the chart, while a larger amount of teachers (70%) chose to ‘give personal feedback to the colleague whose class they have observed’, still there are 20% of them who chose ‘just to give feedback to that colleague when being asked to do’. There are 10% of them who preferred to ‘write down on their notebooks the experience they have drawn and just keep for themselves’. From these figures, it is revealed that not all teachers have the same awareness about the importance of the feedback stage. Also, this significant stage of classroom observations is not carried out as seriously and effectively as it should be at some schools. However, the situation still gives us a sense of optimism when the number of teachers who pay enough attention to the feedback stage always far outweighs that of the teachers who are likely to ignore this important stage.

What should be done to better class observation activities?

To most of the investigated teachers (85%), it is necessary to ‘co-operate with other high schools in order to make more class observations’. The number for ‘paying more attention to giving and receiving feedbacks after class observation activities’ was 50% while the number of those whose suggestion was ‘increasing the number of class

observation activities within the staff' accounted for 45%. Above all, it is with great surprise when only 6 teachers (30%) suggested to 'make more class observations at random.'

Shortcomings of the 3rd and 4th year students when carrying out their teaching practice at high schools

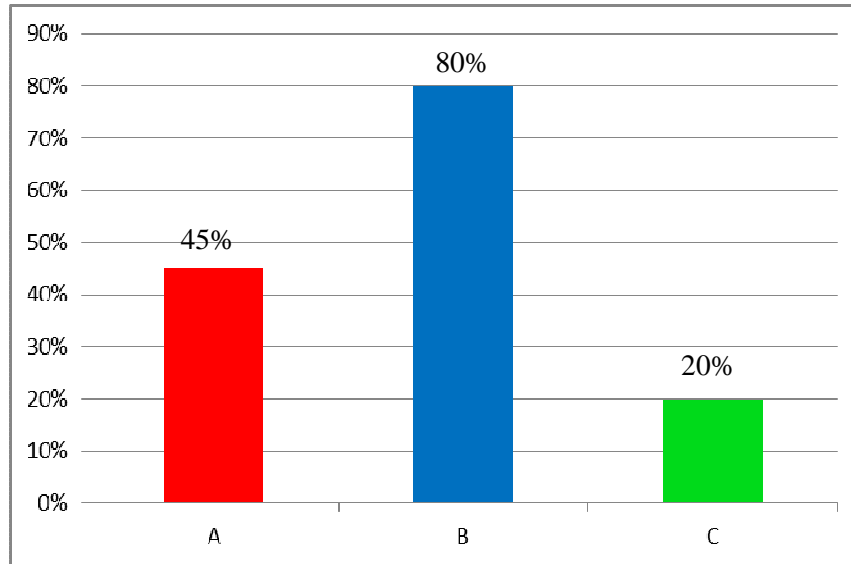


Chart 2. Question: What are some shortcomings of the 3rd year students coming to your school to make observations last year?

- A. Not having enough language competence to make class observations.
- B. Not having enough observation methods.
- C. Not having enough observation sheets.

From the chart above, it is indicated that the lack of methods for making class observations was the weakest point of the third year students. Besides that, the short of language competence and observation sheet designing method also contributed to the inefficiency of the class observation activities of them.

How can 3rd and 4th year students better their observation activities as well as teaching practice at high schools?

It is undeniable that making class observations to classes with experienced teachers is obviously beneficial to both third and fourth year students, that is why up to 95% of teachers agreed with this idea. In addition, it is important that fourth year students should make more careful lesson plans (95%), third year students should have more teaching practice with 'real' students at college (75%) and being supplied with more class observation methods (35%).

3.4.2. Interview data analysis

Students' preference between a normal and an observed period

According to the interviews 73% of the students preferred an observed period. The main reason for this was 'there are much more pictures and illustrations than in a normal period' (100%), 'the lesson is prepared and taught more carefully' (72%), and 'the teacher looks much more pleasant when teaching' (54%). On the other hand, the rest 26% of the students who preferred a normal period had their own reasons such as 'the teacher uses English so often' (100% of the remaining students), 'the content of the lesson is always much more difficult and complicated (100%), and 'I feel distracted when being observed by other people' (50%).

Capability of mastering the lesson in a normal and an observed period

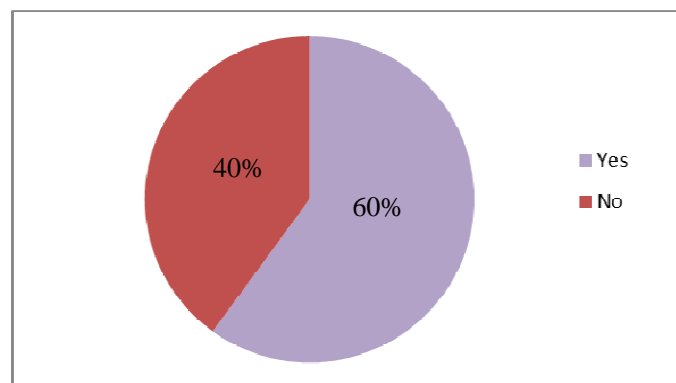


Chart 3. Question for highschool students: After a period which is under observation, do you feel easier to master the lesson than a normal period?

As can be seen easily from Chart 3, more students felt easier to master the lesson in an observed period than in a normal one, while the rest (40% of the interviewed students) insisted "No" when being asked. This small distinction between the two numbers may be explained that an observed period attracts them a lot with far more interesting games and pictures, etc. However, for slightly fewer students, the language and the main knowledge in these observed periods are still "out of reach" to them. To say the truth, some students admitted: "I was really fascinated by the nice pictures and posters during the period, but it does not mean that I can understand all that the teacher said and do well in my exercises". From this situation, although the number of students who do not feel easy to master the lesson is much fewer than ones who do, the issue should always be mentioned with equal considerations.

3.4.3. Findings from 'observing the observers' activities

Preparations for the observation activity (Pre-observing)

Only 35% of the observed teachers had lesson plans for the observed periods and 41% of them prepared class observation sheets for that period.

How the observers note down (While-observing)

According to the observations, 47% of the observers used notebooks to take notes. The number of the ones who took note into the class observation sheets was nearly the same, accounting for approximately 41%. Besides that, there were still 11% of the teachers noted down into blank sheets of paper.

How a feedback session is organized (Post-observing)

Feedback sessions are often carried out after the observations. Sometimes, teachers were busy teaching and this feedback stage had to be delayed until the following day. Once in a while, the teachers just had a few minutes for a quick feedback in the lobby, just during the break time. The feedback focussed on both methodology, lesson content, and language use. The quality of this stage, according to most of the teachers, usually depended upon the preparation in the pre- and while-observing stages.

4. Conclusion and implications***4.1. Conclusion***

The research comes to an end with confirmations of the importance of class observation activities in the professional development of every teacher. A number of implications for language teachers in upper secondary schools and third and fourth year students of English at Hue College of Foreign Languages are as follows.

Classroom observations are an effective tool for professional development if they are implemented in a well-prepared and thoughtful way, from pre-observation stage, while-observation stage, to the post-observation stage. In each stage, both teachers and observers have to discuss the focussed content for observation and make every preparation for this. Observation sheets are very important in each classroom observation with a focussed content. The feedback session is particularly essential since this will create opportunities for both teachers and observers, especially inexperienced ones, to interact and learn.

It is necessary for third and fourth year students of English to be well-equipped with all theoretical knowledge concerning classroom observation activities. The students have to familiarize themselves with all the classroom observation instruments before starting to go to upper secondary schools to make classroom observations. They should be guided do micro-teaching sessions and practice giving feedback. When they visit secondary schools to observe teaching or to practice teaching, they have to be guided to examine lesson plans, listen to detailed guides from secondary school teachers for lesson planning, visit real classes and meet real students to get to know their students before making observation or practising teaching, observe sample classroom observations and feedback sessions.

4.2. Implications

From the findings above, the following issues are presented, together with suggestions.

- There is a need to hold more workshops, especially for third and fourth year students, on ways to make class observations most effectively before, during and after each observation.
- It is of great importance to organize a stable schedule for the class observation activities.
- There should be a methodological aspect focus for each class observation. This focussed aspect should be related to the current ELT context and it should be agreed upon by the ELT teachers.
- It is suggested to have an observation sheet for each each focussed aspect.
- At the same time, a class observation sheet with three separate stages (pre-observing, while-observing and post-observing) is also needed.
- Besides using class observation sheets, it is also recommended that the third and fourth year students as well as the teachers should design a portfolio for the entire class observation activities they have made. By this way, each class observation will be made with high consciousness about what they will do with the notes they take down.

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