

On Teaching Observation and Its Practice

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ABSTRACT: *Teaching observation is vital to process of professional development for pre-service English teachers; however, obtaining the ability of effective teaching observation needs special and systematic training. For this case, after examining the definition of teaching observation, this paper illustrates the types, main bodies, methods and steps of teaching observation in order to provide them with useful reference for improving their teaching.*

Keywords: *teaching observation, teaching practice, types, methods, steps*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching observation, also called classroom observation or peer observation, generally refers to the activities in which the teacher's teaching process is systematically observed, recorded and analyzed by special observation technology, procedure and tool, aiming at improving the teacher's instruction and promoting their professional development. Recently, in European and American education fields, teaching observation has become an important educational research method and teachers' professional approach, which is widely employed not only by in-service teachers but also rather favored by pre-service teachers (Zhou Shihou, 2012). [1]

II. TYPES OF TEACHING OBSERVATION

The types of teaching observation include text observation, video observation and classroom observation.

1. Text observation

Text observation is the activity in which education practitioners' lesson plans are read and discussed, and recorded and analyzed by means of a certain tool and procedure. Simply speaking, text observation is to examine teachers' lesson plans.

The advantages of text observation lie in unlimited time and space, observing the text whenever and wherever you like. However, the disadvantages of text observation are obvious, that is, text is single word symbol, which belongs to mono-modality, lacking the auxiliary function of the classroom environment, especially the teacher's use of language, teaching manners and body language can not be reflected, which precisely is an important manifestation of teacher's own teaching style. However, text observation is necessary to pre-service English teachers. For example, they are able to master the regulations of lesson planning of the excellent teachers and understand their teaching techniques and innovations by observing excellent teachers' lesson plans, etc. Additionally, they can find out problems and gaps by analyzing peers' lesson plans, to provide reference for regulating and innovating instruction.

Text observation is the basic way that pre-service English teachers understand the regulation of teaching planning. It not only presents the form of teaching planning, but also reveals the requirements for using language. For instance, when describing teaching objectives, the main body of the behavior must be the students, what's more, the verbs of the behavior should be concrete, accurate, and checked easily.

The lesson plans from excellent teachers are important contents of text observation, which usually constitute models of teaching planning and practice for pre-service English teachers. Therefore, we pay attention to text observation, and regard it as the foundation for pre-service English teachers to make teaching planning. In practice, we make them conduct teaching planning according to some lesson, and then provide them with different lesson plans to let them compare, discuss and assess. In this way, participation in text observation can regulate pre-service English teachers' teaching planning and teaching process, and have the chance to find creative teaching planning and implementing so that they can have mirror function.

2. Video observation

Video observation refers to discussing and analyzing a teacher's or a peer's teaching activity by watching their teaching videotape. Video observation provides relatively real teaching environment, and it is convenient for teachers and pre-service teachers to watch repeatedly. Especially, the innovation of modern educational technology and the use of automatic recording and broadcasting system may naturally reflect the true teaching activities in the natural state, which does not influence the teacher's teaching, and it is convenient for pre-service teachers' discussion.

Although video observation is not as real as classroom observation, the former can be watched repeatedly, which is convenient for pre-service teachers to reflect their teaching, especially analyzing teacher talk, video observation has incomparable superiority.

We conduct video observation in two aspects. First, we watch teaching videotapes of excellent teachers, and examine their teaching ideas, teaching methods and teaching procedures, especially focusing on how they deal with cohesion of knowledge, integration of skills, verbal and nonverbal behavior, and crucial event in class, etc. in order to analyze and find out their teaching characters and styles. Second, we ask them to watch the teaching video of students who have got the first and second prizes in Zhejiang Provincial contests of teaching skills for pre-service teachers. Teaching of the students who have got prizes reveals the highest level of pre-service teachers, which is easy to arouse echo in their hearts, thus stimulating their interests and confidence to teaching.

In the process of video observation, we have regarded award-winning teaching videos as the main objects observed, which has achieved the good result. However, pre-service teachers are student teachers, who are different from skilled teachers. Especially they are imperfect in cohesion between given knowledge and new knowledge, handling crucial events, instructional ideology and deep cognition of teaching. Therefore, when organizing the normal university students to watch the video, at the same time, we asked them to carefully observe the teaching video of the award-winning players, and reflect their teaching philosophy based on the video to find problems and improve teaching. In this way, students' reflective ability is improved, and advantages and disadvantages can be distinguished from the teaching, which provides reference for their teaching practice.

3. Classroom observation

Classroom observation is to enter the classroom to observe the teacher's teaching activities, also called purposeful listening to classes. Classroom observation has authenticity, which reflects real classroom teaching situation. Unlike traditional teachers' listening to class, based on the combination of scientific spirit and positive evidence, classroom observation records and analyzes through scales, and finally obtains quantitative results. However, the level of listening to class is low, the randomness is strong, and often does not use the measuring tool. This is the reason why classroom observation can become the content of "action research", while listening to class not. However, High quality lecture records also have components of classroom observation, which has a positive effect on the promotion of teaching.

Classroom observation turns static teaching planning into dynamic teaching behavior. It can more authentically and vividly reveals the teacher's teaching style. Compared with text observation, classroom observation has more multimodality because it uses a variety of modes such as synergistic action of vision, hearing, touch and nonverbal behavior, to increase the effect.

With the progress of modern micro-classroom, the effect of observation has become better. The observers can observe the current situation of the teacher's teaching through the one-way glass in the isolated observation room, freely discussing, and the teacher conducting the class and the students have no access to it.

We attach great importance to classroom observation, and take our students to the school education base for educational observation each school year. After the observation, the teacher usually presents his/her lesson plan to the pre-service students, discuss with them about the lesson, and explore an alternative.

III. THE MAIN BODY OF TEACHING OBSERVATION

The main body of teaching observation includes self-observation of in-service teachers or pre-service teachers, peers' observation, teacher's observation, and the observation of educational experts and leaders of educational authoritative department. For pre-service teachers, the first three kinds of observations are common observation ways. The observation of educational experts and leaders of educational authoritative department mainly focuses on school-level assessment, hardly on cultivation of pre-service teachers, which is no longer specially discussed.

1. Self-observation

With the wide application of modern educational technology, it is not only possible but also common for pre-service teachers to use automatic recording and broadcasting system to analyze their teaching process. By self-observation, pre-service teachers can find problems and weaknesses in the use of teaching manners, classroom English, pronunciation, intonation, speech rate, and in the management of classroom questions and crucial events, so as to provide evidence for improving instruction.

Self observation is the premise of self reflection. Nancy Stenson, Jan Smith, and William Perry (1979) assume that "acquiring effective teaching skills is a developmental process". In their work they identified five necessary components of this process, including:

Obtaining Feedback. In order to determine how effective their teaching is, teachers first need to have information about their performance in the classroom. Obtaining feedback is thus the first component of the

developmental process....A crucial aspect of feedback is the extent to which the teacher feels able to accept it and work with it. Videotape, when properly used, can be an invaluable tool for providing a teacher with objective information.

Becoming Introspective. Given a source of feedback, the teacher needs to be able to analyze the information in a productive way....The most important factor of this component is the ability to be introspective about one's own teaching. The teacher must...develop the ability for self-evaluation rather than continue to rely on external judgment.

Accepting Responsibility. The ability to be introspective and to evaluate one's own teaching is a prerequisite to the third component, the teacher's acceptance of responsibility for his/her further growth as a teacher. Only from this point of view is it possible to recognize and accept both positive and negative aspects of one's own teaching as a preparation for bringing about appropriate change.

Choosing What to Change. The fourth developmental component involves the teacher's decision to devote the time and energy necessary to effect change. A major part of this decision will be the teacher's choice of which aspects of teaching s/he is ready to work on. It is...only when teachers themselves decide when and what to change that any real change occurs.

Effecting Change. The final component of the growth process addresses the need of teachers who have chosen to change some aspect of their teaching and are looking for information on ways of bringing about the desired changes. (Stenson, Smith & Perry, 1979:2-5)[2]

Reflection is potentially threatening. It involves the possible deconstruction of a belief system with which one has become familiar and its replacement with an alternative that may, in the initial stages, prove uncomfortable. In this it is analogous to the learning of another language, where an habitual system is discarded, to be replaced by an alien system of equal complexity, for which attempts at mastery may be traumatic (Birth,1992:290) [3].

2. Peers' observation

Peers' observation is mutual visiting class between the students, which is based on discussion and analysis. Unlike self-observation, peers' observation can more easily find problems and give new idea for solving problems. That is, the result from the discussion of peers' observation tends to become the resource for pre-service teachers' innovation, from which, therefore, they benefit a lot.

During the peers' observation, pre-service teachers should take notes, and fill in the observation sheet, which may be open, only including events, time, comments or questions such as Table 1. We can also use a more careful observation sheet, relevant to course, learners, language used and behavior of the observed, just as Table 2.

Table 1: Open Observation List

Time	Events	Comments/Questions

Ur (2000:322) [4]

Table 2: Careful Observation List

What learners do	What this involves	Teacher's purpose	Comment

Ur (2000:323) [4]

3. Teacher's observation

Teacher's observation means that teachers conducting educational courses or advisors guiding student teachers visit pre-service teacher's class. It is important to pre-service teachers because teachers can observe and evaluate their teaching in the theoretical high degree. Based on the basic teaching requirements, teachers or advisors make value judgment about pre-service teacher's instruction. At the same time, they determine whether or not pre-service teachers can apply theories into teaching practice, especially whether or not pre-service teachers can choose relevant teaching strategies and methods according to different types of lessons or language skills.

IV. METHODS OF OBSERVATION

Methods of observation refer to the methods by which the class that is being conducted is documented, which usually refer to note taking, sound recording and picture recording.

1. Note taking

Unlike general visiting classes, note taking in classroom observation is not casual, but filling in the observation list, for example, the above Table 1 and Table 2 can also be seen as simple observation lists. According to the observation list, the purpose of taking notes is clearer, the focus more prominent, and feedback is more effective.

2. Sound recording

Sound recording is the activity that the observer records the lecturer's lesson. With the progress of modern educational technology, a recording pen is taking place of tape recorder. The former is convenient and flexible, little disturbing to class. In addition, the lecturer himself/herself may record his/her lesson with a recording pen for the sequential self-reflection.

3. Picture recording

Picture recording refers to the activity that observers watch teaching video. Although video observation is not as real and vivid as classroom observation, the videotape can be watched repeatedly; therefore, it helps pre-service teachers reflect themselves. Especially for teacher talk, video observation has incomparable superiority.

As for video observation, we illustrate in the following two aspects. First, watch excellent English teachers' teaching video tapes, examine their teaching ideology, teaching methods and teaching procedures, especially understand how they deal with cohesion of knowledge, integration of skills, use of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, and crucial events, etc., to find and analyze their teaching features and styles. Second, watch of student winners' teaching videos. Their teaching videos reflect the highest level of pre-service teachers. In video observation, we regard the selected videos with prizes as main watching objects, which have good effects.

V. STEPS OF OBSERVATION

Teaching observation should follow the following steps:

1. Training observers

If they hope to have the ability of observation, pre-service teachers first must learn how to observe; thus, as observers, they must be trained. By being trained, they know the purpose, methods and content of observation, learn to fill in observation lists, analyze information observed, and explain with educational theories.

2. Observing lessons

Observing lessons is the stage in which classroom observation is conducted. Through observing lessons, pre-service teachers may obtain the firsthand teaching information. When observing a lesson, observers not only watch the realization of teaching purpose, choice of teaching methods, and arrangement of teaching procedures, but also examine the lecturer's strengths, weaknesses and teaching style, find the way that lecturer handles crucial events, and take notes.

3. Lesson evaluation

Lesson evaluation is the process in which the lecturer's lesson is evaluated according to observation and recording. Lesson evaluation can be conducted between the peers, and it also can be lesson evaluating activities that teachers control. Lesson evaluation between the peers helps understand the significance of teaching better, clarify and resolve teaching problems. In fact, lesson evaluation is reflection in groups, which tends to show collective intelligence and helps construct knowledge.

4. Reflection

The purpose of observation is to provide information for reflection. Reflection is to clarify the reasons of problems based on the results of evaluation. Reflection includes individual reflection and group reflection. Individual reflection only forms personal experience, which is the foundation by which pre-service teachers develop teaching skills and the source from which they will do special learning later. However, only self-reflection is not enough. Even the most clever and most creative students need to learn what can not be learned only by themselves from others.

According to constructivist view, teaching reflection is not necessarily purely individual, but it can be implemented with others. Being an effective teacher not only needs to look inside, but also needs to look

outside. We need to realize others' teaching ideas, and examine our own teaching belief and values, so that we can agree with a certain type of teachers and show it in our daily teaching (Williams M. & Robert, L. B.,2000:F22).[5]

In the process of reflection, we require students to set positive attitude towards reflection, including open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. That is to say, to carry out effective teaching reflection, pre-service teachers must be open-minded, responsible, and wholehearted in our desire to improve. (Bailey, et al. 2009:40)[6] Only in this way, they can face the real situation in the classroom, face up to the problems in teaching, and actively reflect on the teaching effect, and adjust the teaching methods in time to achieve the desired "ideal" course.

5. Relearning

Reflection is followed by a new round of learning. Relearning involves knowledge of educational theory and teaching practice. This kind of learning is not a simple repetition of theoretical and practical knowledge, but a spiral sublimation which reduces the blindness of learning. Through the study of these two kinds of knowledge, the normal students can gain new insight and better understanding of themselves as teachers, so as to enhance the teaching confidence.

Therefore, teaching observation is the basic the most important approach to teaching reflection. The main factor is the combination of science and pursuit of empirical spirit in the field of education research and practice and the combination of teachers' cooperation and teaching reflection.

VI. CONCLUSION

The professional development of pre-service English teachers is a constant cycle of "practicing, reflecting, re-practicing and re-reflecting". Therefore, the reflection followed the "learning" does not mean the completion of the reflective practice, but a new round of practice, and reflection should be carried out based on a new understanding, until satisfactory results are obtained. Actually, the teacher's professional development goals tend to point to an ultimate goal, for which the professional development of teachers is a lifelong implementation process of teaching practice and reflection.

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