



Techniques for focusing student teacher observation and feedback

*Sofía Dolores Cota Grijalva
Universidad de Sonora*

Abstract

The new curriculum in the English Language Teaching program of the University of Sonora includes Professional Teaching Practice as one of the main components. Now having this new area of development, instructors have to consider the new role as mentors to train and provide professional orientation and guidance to trainees of this program.

This paper discusses the role of the mentor, the student teachers' roles and knowledge, the implications of observation and the importance of providing effective feedback in the process of training and development of the trainees.

First, the new roles of the people involved, as well as a brief review of the basic teaching components will be presented. Then, the importance and purpose of observation introducing some key ideas and techniques about how to approach students during the observation process and how to carry on feedback will follow.

To conclude, it can be said that the new role of the teacher and mentor is crucial for future teachers' work. It is necessary to help trainees to develop teaching skills, making the experience effective and enjoyable. However it is also true that it is the student teachers' responsibility to be open to the challenges presented to succeed in their teaching practice. They need to compromise themselves in the journey of teacher development knowing that there is more than teaching knowledge and skills to succeed in this job.

Introduction

The new ELT curriculum in the English Language Teaching program of the University of Sonora includes professional teaching practice as one of its main components. From this perspective, teachers are now challenged to form student teachers who not only know the theoretical elements of teaching but are capable of succeeding as language teachers in real contexts.

This paper discusses the role and responsibilities of the teacher as mentor, the students' knowledge involved in teaching, the implications of observation during the training stage and the importance of providing feedback to trainees from the English Language Teaching program at the University of Sonora.



Mentor's role

The changing demands in education have brought new roles for the teacher since the traditional one as lecturer is no longer desirable. Now, teachers have many roles which range in part from helper, organizer, instructor, counselor and facilitator, to name some of them. Although the teacher plays many roles in different stages of instruction, for the purpose of this paper I will refer to him as a mentor who, according to the dictionary definition, is an experienced person who advises and helps a less experienced person.

A mentor "is typically a more experienced teacher working with a novice or a teacher new to a particular program" (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001, p.207). His main job is to structure students' practice and to help them understand their own teaching by identifying weak areas and work on them. One of the most important roles of a mentor is to guide students to reflect on their teaching practice and help students integrate themselves into the new school faculty and environment during the process of training. It is important to make them aware of school policies and activities and ensure the social integration in the classroom.

The job of the mentor is of great importance since she will provide the student teacher with the necessary support to make the transition from student to teacher. Regular meetings and conferencing are of great help for student teachers and a relationship of trust and respect will help them feel confident and relaxed.

Student teachers' role and knowledge

In contrast to the mentor's role, the role of students changes to that of responsible future teachers. To succeed they need to take the role seriously and have conscious control over the skills needed to do a good job. They need to be open to the different experiences in diverse contexts, be willing to learn from others and learn to reflect from their teaching practice by raising awareness in regard to classroom matters. It is extremely important to possess the basic knowledge involved in teaching (theories and pedagogical practices), be aware of their philosophy of teaching and become familiar with classroom practices (teaching skills).



Although much has been said about the type of knowledge student teachers must possess, Shulman (as cited in Randal & Thornton, 2001, p.27) makes a list of what he considers important. The author considers the following areas which constitute the core of instruction. These are:

Content Knowledge refers to the teacher's proficiency of the language she is teaching including, syntax, morphology, phonology, culture, etc. It is my experience that when the student teacher does not feel confident about her level of English, she tends to perform poorly in the classroom.

General pedagogical knowledge addresses the basic information student teachers have on issues such as classroom management, group control etc. and the knowledge about the basic components of a class (planning, lesson organization, etc.) and classroom techniques (discipline, group work, roles, etc.).

Curriculum knowledge refers to the particular use of different resources in order to achieve the school's goals which may be new to the practitioner and may require the teacher to change or adapt her thinking and ideas about how to achieve learning.

Pedagogical-content knowledge includes the methods, approaches and techniques the student teacher uses to teach the language, in other words, the deep knowledge about the theories of teaching in language education.

Knowledge of learners and their characteristics addresses the different kinds of learners and learning styles that exist; the teacher must be aware of these differences and how individuals learn.

Knowledge of educational contexts refers to different socio cultural and institutional contexts and how they affect the learner. For instance, what might work in one system might not work in another.

Knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values and the philosophical and historical issues incorporates the general view of how language teaching is seen throughout the world in order to have a complete vision of the language.

The implications of having a common understanding of the basic knowledge teachers must possess, will help us be sure that the methodologies, techniques, skills and strategies used in the classroom form a common ground for all language



teachers. It is very important to agree on all these elements in order to make observation comprehensible and useful for student teachers and mentors.

Observation

The role of observation emphasizes the practical side of teaching, and it is an important tool for future teachers. It is a fact that most of our teaching experience comes from ideas and tips of other teachers, especially if those teachers are experienced and well trained. Therefore, observation is an important skill student teachers need to practice and develop.

Through observation we learn from the series of events that take place during a class. According to Wajnryb (1992, p.1) “being in the classroom as an observer opens up a range of experiences and processes which can become part of the raw material of a teacher’s professional growth.” It is the first approach student teachers have in real life contexts which allows them to see what real practice is.

By doing observation, teachers have the opportunity to have a better understanding of their own teaching by reflecting and analyzing what they see. Observation activities help to achieve several purposes. Gebhard (1999) states that observations support the following aspects:

- help evaluate teaching
- help teachers to learn about teaching
- force teachers to refine their ability to observe
- make teachers more self-aware
- teach how to collect data for research purposes

Observation experiences give the novice teachers good opportunities to become familiar with classroom practices. In the Language Teaching Program of the University of Sonora, we ask practitioners to observe experienced teachers before they are sent to different institutions to accomplish their teaching practice. Once they have gained this experience, they teach in real contexts where they are observed by the mentor.



To develop observation skills, the mentor asks student teachers to observe experienced teachers and take note of what happens in the classroom. To do this, student teachers must be guided to take notes and be objective of what they find since student teachers usually find it difficult to focus on one aspect to observe. The support and guidance from the mentor is extremely important. He trains student teachers keep focus on particular aspects and make them aware of specific observable aspects. Once the student teachers learn how to gather information, the mentor helps them to interpret their data being careful not to jump to conclusions too quickly and being too critical of the teacher observed.

When student teachers carry on observations the following steps are suggested: First, students are asked to select a purpose of observation; then, they have to design a method to collect the information which is usually presented in class and discussed with the group; once the observation has taken place, the students have to write a report of what they saw describing objectively the data and finally the student tries to analyze and reflect on what happened based on the data collected.

Observe experienced teachers help student teachers to learn from practice. During this specific practice, it is not expected nor desired to provide feedback, but to discuss the positive and negative sides of the experience.

When the mentor observes student teachers and the role of the practitioner changes from the observer to the observed, the mentor's role is that of a mirror who will project students practice in order to analyze their teaching performances. During this practice the mentor discusses with the student teachers the focus of his observations as well as the format used for this purpose (see Appendix 1). Although it is important to establish specific criteria for the observations, the main aim is not only to ensure that practitioners reach the standards required but also to train students to be more self-aware in order to self-evaluate their teaching practice and develop their own teaching criteria (Malderez and Bodóczy, 1999). To lower anxiety and promote a climate of trust, there is a period of discussion and clarification about the elements included and the skills involved before student teachers are observed.



Hopkins (1993) describes three essential phases of this classroom observation process: the first phase is the *planning meeting*, which provides opportunities to discuss the lesson plan and objectives and agree on a particular aspect of the student teacher's classroom practice. During the second phase, which is the *classroom observation*, the mentor collects objective data on the agreed aspect of the teaching. The last stage is the *feedback discussion* that the mentor and the student teacher share and then agree on an appropriate action to improve a specific area of the student teacher.

The cycle of observation proposed by Hopkins (1993) is usually followed and the mentor's work after an observation is crucial for student teachers development. It is always important to share thoughts and feelings on how the observation went and agree on specific actions that will lead to strengthen student teachers' weak areas.

Observation is one of the key elements in teacher development, and it is important that teachers work on developing observation skills among their students as well as promoting reflection and discussion leading them to grow professionally.

Feedback

Providing feedback after observing the practitioner is not easy, since mentors tend to worry about hurting student teachers' feelings. However, to learn, practitioners "should reflect on their practice, which involves identifying problems, understanding the sources of the problems, then drawing up a plan to solve the problems" (Randal & Thornton 2001:68). To accomplish this, student teachers need to rely on the external observer in order to see things differently.

The feedback discussion is probably the most important part of observation since this is a good opportunity to reflect on and improve student teachers' teaching practice. It is the time when the practitioner and mentor openly discuss the positive and negative aspects of the lesson and agree on the changes needed. Although there are different approaches, such as behavioral, cognitive-behavioral, humanistic/person-centered and psychoanalytic (Randall and Thornton 2001), for the purpose of this paper I will use Egan's eclectic model (cited in Randall and



Thornton 2001 p.67). I believe that the help and support provided to students will depend on the particular stage of the practitioner and the type of problem they face, so sticking to only one approach would be unfair for the students.

It is important to approach student teachers in a collaborative way and create the right atmosphere which will help to lower students, and mentor, anxiety opening the channels of communication. It must be clear that the process of learning depends on both sides and that each student may face different type of feedback according to their specific needs.

To create a positive atmosphere and understanding, the following steps are suggested: First, discuss with the student teachers the lesson plan before the presentation of the class. Understanding what the student will do will give the mentor a better idea of what to expect from the class and understand the context where it will take place. Second, try to value and understand the student teachers' ideas and beliefs about teaching, asking them for clarifications and reasons for the activities planned. Third, if addressing a specific problem, be specific and ask them to explain to you how they feel about that situation and what they would do to change it. Allow student teachers to discuss issues that are relevant to them rather than what the mentor considers important. Fourth, provide them with different options to overcome a problem and make them reflect and plan for improving the situation. It is always important that mentors help student teachers to identify and understand the source of the problems in order to solve them. Be always attentive to verbal and non-verbal behavior since postures or gestures may be expressing acceptance or denial. To end the feedback, plan another observation where the student teachers will make the appropriate changes to the specific problems offering support and encouraging students to do a better work. Hopkins (1996, p.80) suggests that feedback appears to work best if:

- it is given within the 24 hours of the observation
- it is based on careful and systematic recording
- it is based on factual data
- it is given as part of a two-way discussion
- it leads to the development of strategies for building on what has been learnt



- the factual data are interpreted with reference to known and agreed criteria

Although there are many ways of providing feedback an atmosphere of respect and trust is important. Trust is usually characterized by respect of the individual's ideas, values and beliefs. A key element to establish such trusting relationship is the agreement of clear criteria on which the mentor will assess the lesson and the belief that the assessment is non-judgmental and motivated by empathy under constructive criticism.

Conclusion

As we have seen the new role of the teacher as mentor is crucial for future teachers' work. It is important to establish a common language in which the roles of mentors and student teachers are clear and both take responsibility of such challenge. Both need to compromise themselves in the journey of teacher development knowing that there is more than teaching knowledge and skills to succeed in this job.

It is the student teachers' decision, with the help of the mentor, to succeed in their learning process knowing that there will be many problems that can be overcome if they are able to reflect on them and learn from the evaluation of their actions.

References

1. Bailey, K., Curtis, A., and Nunan, D. (2001) Pursuing Professional Development. Heinle & Heinle, Boston
2. Gebhard, J. and Oprandy, R. (1999) Language Teaching Awareness. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
3. Hopkins, D. (1993) A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research. 2nd. Ed. Open University Press, Philadelphia.
4. Malderez A. and Bodóczy C. (1999) Mentor Courses. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
5. McIntyre, D. Hagger, H. and Wilkin, M. (1994) Mentoring, Perspectives on School-Based Teacher Education, Kogan Page, London.



6. Randall, M. and Thornton, B (2001) Advising and Supporting Teachers. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
7. Wajnryb, R.(1992) Classroom Observation Tasks. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Biodata

BA in British Literature from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), specialized in Translation (1981).MA in Language Teaching Training from the University of Exeter, England (1997-2000) .Designed and implemented the BA program in English Language Teaching (1995).Full time professor at the Language Department of the University of Sonora
Contacto: scota@lenext.uson.mx ; scota@rtn.uson.mx



APPENDIX 1

TEACHING PRACTICE OBSERVATION FORM FOR STUDENT TEACHERS
BA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING
UNIVERSITY OF SONORA
2008-II

Teacher's Name: _____ Date: _____
School: _____ Grade: _____ Group: _____
Student's Name: _____

Please indicate whether you consider the student's performance has been:
Excellent: 5 Good: 4 Satisfactory: 3 Needs Improvement: 2 Unsatisfactory: 1
NA=not applicable

PLANNING	SCORE
a) Prepared well organized lesson plan/activities	
b) Planned and used a variety of activities appropriate for lesson objective & students	
c) Established clear objectives	
d) Achievement of aims/objectives	

COMMENTS

CLASS PERFORMANCE	SCORE
a) Voice quality	
b) Pace and Timing	
c) Connect new knowledge to prior knowledge	
d) Use of target language	
e) Clear explanations/instructions	
f) Provide feedback	
CLASS MANAGEMENT	
g) Controlling the class	
h) Used positive reinforcement to manage behavior	
i) Engage students throughout the lesson	
j) Appropriate use of teaching aids/materials	

COMMENTS



PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE	SCORE
a) Professional appearance (self-confident, relaxed)	
b) Attendance and punctuality	
c) Patience and attentive to students' needs	
d) Rapport with pupils	
e) Creative	
f) Reliable and independent	
g) Preparation & Professionalism	
h) Desire to improve teaching performance	

COMMENTS

THANK YOU!

Adapted from:
Maldenez, A. & Bodoczky, C. (1999) *Mentor Courses*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.