

Self-observation report

Focus: Error correction

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Pre-observation focus

The observation was originally motivated by this being an obligatory activity in which I was instructed to carry out an observation during the course of the semester and then complete a report on how it was developed, carried out and what relevant findings the observation has produced. These findings then lead into a plan for future action, which would be included in the final report on the observation, which you are reading at present.

I decided to frame the observation as a self-observation project. This entails me setting up a video recorder at the back of the class, which then records footage which I'm able to review afterwards. I particularly enjoy this dynamic as it allows me to focus on my teaching from an external standpoint and offers me the opportunity to watch and re-watch myself in action. This then allows me opportunities to pick up on things that might otherwise be lost in the moment, or which another teacher might not notice or feel comfortable mentioning in the feedback session – for example, idiosyncratic gestures, or repeated physical tics which are easy enough to pick up on the video format.

Current technology makes this type of self-evaluation easy, convenient and within reach of any teacher wishing to analyse himself/herself in the classroom. The use of, in my case, a multimedia tablet, allows for autonomous professional development in a way that could scarcely have been dreamed of but a few years before. Wallace, in his 1998 discussion of the possibilities of self-observation, describes the making of videos as “the most intrusive approach” for observations (1998: 107), and suggests audio taping as a more convenient option. The paradigm has clearly changed significantly when a video-recording device is actually less intrusive than having a colleague sat in the back row of the class, receiving occasional furtive glances from the attendant students, who wonder “what *are* they doing back there?” Needless to say, the very idea of merely audio-taping one's class sounds both awfully archaic and painfully lacking in terms of the data it is able to correct. It should also be noted that another great advantage of making videos of one's classes is that the recording can be saved and reviewed weeks, months or years later, therefore constituting a valuable archive of professional growth that spans a considerable duration.

As previously mentioned, the video-based self-observation format allows the observed class to be watched again and again *ad nauseam*, which provides another marked advantage over traditional observation formats. In a traditional peer observation paradigm, it is at least advisable for the observation task to be as focused as possible. The external observer, unfamiliar with the dynamics of the class into which he/she has been thrust, can easily become overwhelmed by the sensorial tidal wave that inevitably arises in such situations, threatening to crush the observer within the churning waters of this informational tsunami. Tasks should therefore be kept as simple as possible where an external observer is concerned, and instructions concerning where to focus their analytic gaze should clarify exactly how they are to spend the brief time during which they are a visitor to this other class. Therefore, if timings are the focus, then the observer can be asked to time the changes and stages in the lesson plan, and perhaps compare these with the predicted times written on the teacher's lesson plan. If teacher-student interactions are instead the focus,

then the observer might be asked to tick boxes that correspond to each student when such an interaction occurs, therefore leading the observer to quantifiably comment on how much attention particular students are getting.

Where the video observation comes into its own, however, is that because the class can be watched as many times as is necessary (not to mention also paused and restarted and so on), a much wider range of data can fruitfully be gathered from it. Wallace (ibid) praises the more unstructured approach to observation due to its flexibility, which in the case of the video can be done without sacrificing a more objective goal within the dynamic of the observation itself.

In order to have an initial point of concrete analyse with which to work, I decided to look at how I manage the correction of spoken errors in class. Scrivener (2011) has a useful worksheet for this (included in appendix A) which allows various characteristics of spoken errors to be examined, including the type of error and how it was corrected, if at all. I therefore opted to use this worksheet as the initial point of investigation into my teaching¹, whilst also remaining open to any other fruitful insights that might come about from the observation. I chose to focus on error correction as this is an area which is hard to balance in terms of developing accuracy but without putting fluency to the sword, and because I am aware that, as I've recently focused more on speaking skills, it's become necessary to widen my approach to error correction in order to give my students the support that they require.

¹ NB Scrivener also supplies an extensive list of a variety of issues (see Learning English pp.390-393) which have arisen many times in his ample experience of observing teaching environments. These items would be worth looking up as possible lines of future inquiry.

Post-observation comments and analysis

The observation was carried out on Wednesday the 8th of April, in a level 4 (intermediate) class, and covered the part of the class from 4pm to 5pm.

Here is a representational list of errors present in this portion of the class:

1) Error: “a person who have”

Type of error: faulty subject/verb agreement

Indication / correction: the teacher repeated the mistake with a rising intonation, then stated that it was a problem with intonation, then showed which word was faulty on his fingers

2) Error: “a person who has chance”

Type of error: wrong word used

Indication / correction: correction supplied by teacher

3) Error: “a person who have”

Type of error: faulty subject/verb agreement

Indication / correction: ignored

4) Error: “yes, but depends”

Type of error: fragment / missing subject

Indication / correction: correction of “it” given

5) Error: “you lost your luck”

Type of error: verb tense

Indication / correction: ignored

6) Error: “persons”

Type of error: direct translation from Spanish

Indication / correction: the teacher repeated the mistake with a rising intonation, followed by the student self-correcting

7) Error: “we can show a video?”

Type of error: faulty syntax in question formation

Indication / correction: ignored

8) Error: “sometimes the things happen”

Type of error: overuse of definite article

Indication / correction: ignored

9) Error: “if you hard work all the time”

Type of error: syntactical

Indication / correction: ignored

10) Error: “if I hard work”

Type of error: syntactical

Indication / correction: the teacher explained the difference between the noun phrase “hard work” and the verb & adverb combination “work hard”. The student then produced the correct form, which was then reinforced by the teacher

11) Error: “I don’t successful”

Type of error: missing word

Indication / correction: the teacher repeated the mistake with a rising intonation, following which, the student offered “if I don’t become successful”

12) Error: “It’s most important than”

Type of error: confusion of comparative & superlative forms

Indication / correction: the teacher repeated the mistake, saying “it’s most important – no.” The student then self-corrected.

13) Error: “the theory talks about the practics”

Type of error: pronunciation of individual word

Indication / correction: correct pronunciation of “practise” supplied by teacher

14) Error: “A person who want to be successful”

Type of error: faulty subject/verb agreement

Indication / correction: ignored

15) Error: “when you make something you like”

Type of error: faulty collocation of make / do

Indication / correction: the teacher repeated the phrase, pausing at the end for the student to supply the correct word: “When you make something? Or when you...?” This was followed by the student self-correcting

It can be seen from this list that there are a number of different types of mistakes made, with a number of possible reasons for these. Many of these mistakes however represent two general concepts which I have recognised as being commonly true for our students:

- a) a great number of mistakes are basic errors which should not be made by “intermediate” students. Things like subject/verb errors are commonplace, and are made more frequently than to allow for occasional slips.
- b) many errors can be traced back to faulty or direct translation from L1 (Spanish), which in part I suspect to come from the students’ academic history of being in educational contexts where the grammar translation methodology dominates and which has led to the vast majority of student utterances being formed by them internally in Spanish, then mentally translated into English.

I generally feel satisfied with my correction of errors throughout the class, which I felt was effective. It should also be noted that I purposefully did not attempt to correct all mistakes as this would have significantly slowed the pace and flow of the class, particularly in the stages where I was presenting the class’s topic, which then would be built upon for a mixed skills approach focusing on luck, where I did not wish for the correction of systemic errors (particularly given that many of these continue to be made at a very basic level, and abound in quantity) to take over the class. Although accuracy is clearly of great importance, it should not be allowed to dominate content, which is the primary aim of communicative acts.

There are three areas which I feel invite future action and investigation:

- How to effectively tackle oft-repeated and basic mistakes. These are commonly heard in the majority if not all of classes, going up to level 6. Can they be removed, or are they now fossilised? If they can still be removed, then this needs to be done, as they cause considerable problems with understanding and strain for the listener. Perhaps a bank of mistakes could be created for each class, where learners would be motivated not to keep making the same mistakes over and over again, and where they would be encouraged to develop their own internal monitors.
- Don’t rely on repeating the mistake and hoping that the student will detect what the mistake is. I used this strategy a number of times, and seem to have settled into this being my stand-by correction technique, despite its effectiveness being at best debatable. I therefore intend to read up more on other options for this, and observe peers in order to see how they tackle this bugbear.

- As is often the case with many aspects of teaching in a Colombian context, and is to some extent to be expected with our particularly authority-based learners, being the teacher I end up being the sole source of correction. This unfortunately creates an atmosphere of dependency, which is tiring to be at the centre of, and also implies that if I do not correct all mistakes, which as previously stated, I have no intention of doing, they those which are not corrected are not recognised as mistakes. Students would be much better placed to continue their route of lifelong learning if they were to develop how to identify and correct their own and others' mistakes. Further investigation is recommended on this area.

Other aspects which arose during the course of viewing the self-observation video:

- I tend to use a lot of body language and physical reinforcement of verbal commands, which up to a certain point, is helpful to students as the corporal demonstration of the linguistic content makes what they need to do clear. It could easily however become a crutch, where students might no longer understand the commands in the absence of the body language. I therefore intend to cut down on this body language to see how my students react.
- On a similar note, I tend to give a lot of non-verbal feedback while students are speaking, in terms of smiling, nodding, shrugging, etc. This may perhaps (particularly in the light of the authority-based learning environment in which we find ourselves) give students the idea that they have already supplied a correct answer, and that correspondingly, no further answers are required. Being in agreement that receiving instant gratification from teacher approval is not always as beneficial as it initially appears, as stated for example by Caleb Gattegno in the creation of the Silent Way approach, I will experiment with giving few non-verbal clues back to students in the future, to see how they react, and to see whether they then produce additional ideas.
- I tend to fidget a lot whilst talking to the students, and play constantly with a marker pen as a form of countering my constant anxiety. I will therefore try to keep this under control and be less restless whilst in front of the class.
- I feel that my nomination strategies have developed well, and I'm now able to get all the students to talk in the course of a class.
- I also feel that the level of rapport with the students is an asset in my classes, and the use of music helps to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and calm, where student anxiety of making mistakes and being exposed as not knowing the answer can be minimised.
- My ICQs have developed well and aid students in understanding what they need to do at different points of the class.
- I monitor students well without hovering, and am able to support them in this way during the course of a range of activities.

- My audio-visual material is effective, and helps to structure the class as well as scaffold the activities and provide stimulus for visual learners as well as helping lower-level learners to stay on-track and understand what's going on.
- My TTT is not excessive, and I feel that I have a good balance between providing linguistic input while allowing for the classes to be primarily student-centred.
- Having built on previous self-observations, I'm now much more comfortable with having silence in the classroom. I no longer feel the need to always have someone speaking, or for there to constantly be action as such, as this vital time for students to think and consider their opinions is essential, especially for more reflective learners. Having sensitised myself more to the difference between objective and subjective time in the classroom², I am much better able to wait and let the class as a whole take a breath of air, as it were, which is beneficial for all.

² One might find an interesting parallel here with the ancient Greek concepts of *chronos* and *kairos* (particularly as interpreted by Jungian thought), where *chronos* is chronological time; i.e. that which is measured by a clock or calendar, and *kairos* is that undefined time which happens outside of objective measurements; an opportune moment when that which is necessary blossoms into being.

Plans for future development

- Research how to tackle oft-repeated and basic mistakes. How can the clock be turned back on students who are in a relatively high-level English class, allowing them to revisit and correct these errors which present a significant obstacle to their progress? In order to do this, I will continue reading up on the subject and trying things out for the remainder of 2015.
- Peer observation regarding error correction. In order to see how my peers are tackling the correction of spoken mistakes in class, I plan to observe another teacher from the same level before the end of this semester, particularly focusing on this aspect of their teaching.
- Research on how to encourage students to take ownership of their mistakes and promote a learning atmosphere where the teacher is not the sole source of correction. I will continue reading up on this subject and seeing how this can be improved for the remainder of 2015.
- Immediately cut down on body language when giving instructions and non-verbal feedback in class and register student response to this. I will also try to fidget less whilst in front of the class. I will then film myself in class next semester to see how this aspect of my teaching has evolved.

Bibliography

Scrivener, J. (2011) *Learning Teaching: The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching*, Macmillan: Oxford

Wallace, M.J. (1998) *Action Research for Language Teachers*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

Appendix 1 – Error correction analysis form

OBSERVATION TASK 8 Errors and correction

Note down some student errors. Categorise each error (e.g. wrong tense, wrong phoneme, meaning unclear, etc.). Describe in detail what happened.

Error: *I am agree.*

Type of error: unnecessary word

Indication/correction: The teacher held up three fingers (to represent the three words of the sentence) and then 'picked out' and 'threw away' the middle finger. The student looked puzzled, then said the sentence again without the middle word. The teacher acknowledged this correct sentence with a smile and said 'Good'. The student seemed to not quite believe that this was now a correct sentence. He repeated 'I agree'.

Error: *Give me that pen.*

Type of error: rude

Indication/correction: not commented on or dealt with

Some considerations:

- Did anyone notice that there was an error? Who?
- Did anyone indicate that there was an error? Who?
- Did the teacher do anything?
- Did anyone correct the error? Who?
- Did the student do anything?
- How was it corrected?
- Did the other students do anything? Who?

Error:

Type of error:

Indication/correction:

Error:

Type of error:

Indication/correction:

Error:

Type of error:

Indication/correction:

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