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'Keeping SCORE': Reflective Practice Through Classroom Observations

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Abstract

Reflective practice means that teachers must subject their own teaching beliefs and practices to critical examination. One way of facilitating reflective practice in ESL teachers is to encourage them to engage in classroom observations as part of their professional development. This paper reports on a case study of a short series of classroom observations in which this author, acting as a facilitator, aided a novice teacher as she negotiated her first year of teaching ESL. The classroom observation process included the use of a method of using seating chart observation record, or SCORE chart, to help a novice teacher not only to become more aware of her classroom practices, but also to improve her instruction.

Keywords

SCORE charts, novice ESL, observations, teacher, students

Introduction

Because classrooms are such busy places, with many different activities happening at the same time, much of what is really happening in that classroom for the most part actually remains largely unknown to the teacher (Richards and Lockhart, 2004). However, by systematically reflecting on their classroom teaching and their students' learning, language teachers can develop greater awareness and understanding of not only their own instructional processes but also their students' learning. One means of systematically reflecting on classroom practices is to engage in classroom observations. This paper reports on the latter where this author while acting as a facilitator for the teacher's reflections, observed a short series of classes while implementing a seating chart observation record, or SCORE charts (Acheson and Gall, 1987) to help a novice teacher become more aware of her classroom practices and thus improve her instruction.

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Reflective Practice

Zeichner and Liston (1987: 24) distinguished between routine action and reflective action and suggested that for teachers 'routine action is guided primarily by tradition, external authority and circumstance' whereas reflective action 'entails the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge.' When teachers engage in reflective practice, they subject their beliefs and classroom practices to some form of critical analysis so that they can become more aware of what they do and why they do it (Farrell, 2008). Although there has been much variance in exact definitions of reflective practice down the years in this paper it is seen as a process that helps teachers to think about what happened in their classes, why it happened, what was the result in terms of learning, and what else could have been done to reach lesson objectives? Or simply put into a series of questions a teacher can ask:

1) What do I do?
2) Why do I do it?
3) What is the result?
4) Will I change anything now that I have answers to the first three questions.

One of the most common ways of reflecting on our classroom teaching is to engage in classroom observation because this reflective activity can help teachers become more aware of their underlying assumptions and beliefs of teaching and learning (Richards and Farrell, 2005).

Classroom Observations

One of the most common ways of reflecting on classroom teaching is to engage in classroom observations. Cogan (1973: 134) has defined classroom observations as 'those operations by which individuals make careful, systematic scrutiny of the events and interactions occurring during classroom instruction. The term also applies to the records made of these events and interactions.' These can be carried out either alone, with the use of a recorder (audio/video), and/or having a peer or facilitator observe classes. Farrell (2008) has suggested that classroom observation within a reflective practice framework can give language teachers a means of collecting information about their teaching and classroom processes so that they can begin to examine classroom events in more detail. However, it may be difficult for any teacher, and especially a novice teacher, to really observe and reflect on his or her own teaching and so, it may be more helpful if he or she has the assistance of another 'pair of eyes' such as an audio or video recording and/or peer or a facilitator who observes the class in real time. Indeed, when teachers engage in self-reflection with or without the aid of a recording of the class, they may become too selective in what they listen for/to and look at, and how they interpret what they hear and see. Therefore, it may be more useful for their professional development to have an observer (either a peer or a facilitator) to provide a more 'objective' view of a lesson. As Cogan (1973: 138) has indicated: 'The advantage of an observer over the tape recorder is that the former can be specially trained to record selectively, to

shift his attention to a prespecified speaker when several individuals are speaking at the same time, and to record only certain types of events.' This was the case when this author was invited to observe a series of classes that a novice ESL teacher in Canada was instructing in a campus-based language institute for the purposes of her overall professional development. Specifically, this paper reports on a short series of classroom observations in which this author, acting as a facilitator/critical friend and using a coding instrument called a seating chart observation record, or SCORE charts (Acheson and Gall, 1987), facilitated a novice ESL teacher during her first year of teaching not only to become more aware of her classroom practices but also improve her instruction as she developed to become a more reflective practitioner.

The Process

I now outline a short series of classroom observations where I acted as a facilitator for a novice ESL teacher while using a seating chart observation record, or SCORE chart (Acheson and Gall, 1987). We choose to use SCORE to aid us in understanding the classroom communication patterns that were occurring in the teacher's speaking class. As Day (1990: 51) notes, the SCORE instrument is useful to look at 'teacher and student talk; at task; and movement patterns' and the teacher said she was interested in this aspect of her teaching when informed about a SCORE analysis because a SCORE can give a detailed description of the teacher's questioning behaviors such as:

- How many whole class questions does the teacher ask?
- How many students answer these whole class questions?
- How many individual questions does the teacher ask?
- How many students answer these individual questions?
- Who does the teacher ask the most individual questions?
- Where are they sitting? What part of the classroom?
- Which gender does the teacher call on most?

During the first semester, the novice teacher invited me, as facilitator, to observe her teach a series of her English conversation classes with the general idea of providing her with 'some' feedback on her teaching, but without any specific instructions of what to observe. When the teacher informed me about the time and place for the first observation and some details about the class such as the proficiency level of the students, the focus of the lesson and the instructional materials she would be using, we set up a pre-observation meeting to see what the observation focus would be and what my role would be during the observation. At the time, the novice teacher was a member of a small group of novice teachers who met weekly with this facilitator as a teacher group during the first semester of their first year of teaching. Each of the teachers invited me to act as classroom observer for different classes during that time and one of this series of observations resulted in the novice ESL gaining enormous insight into her own teaching. However, the group also contributed to this insight.

First Class

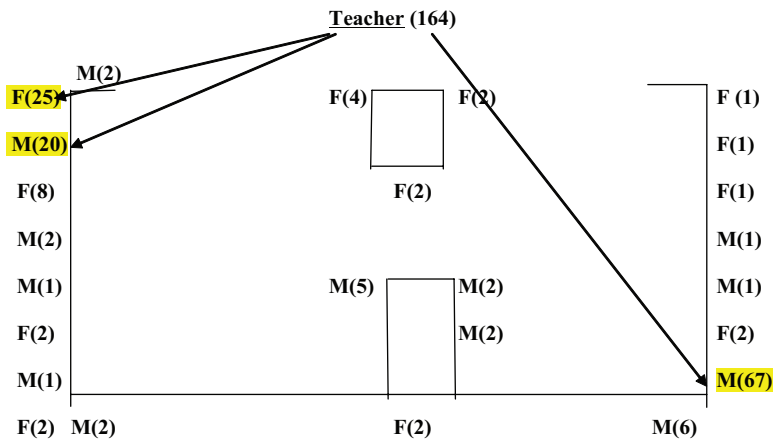
Pre-class Discussion

We conducted this 'meeting' on e-mail as the teacher was too busy to meet face-to-face before the class. After this pre-observation 'discussion' we both agreed that I would use a seating chart observation record, or SCORE (Acheson and Gall, 1987) instrument to plot the communication flow during the class.

Class Observation

The observed class commenced and after some initial teacher instructions and a review of previous homework, the teacher started a question and answer segment with the class that lasted for 20 minutes. During this 20 minute period I coded the communication that occurred using the SCORE chart. Figure 1 below presents the SCORE analysis of the 20 minute question and answer segment.

Figure 1. SCORE I



Note. F = female student; M = male student. The long arrows show the directional flow of the questions and answers.

After this 20 minute period, the teacher broke the class into pairs and each pair was given a specific task to complete and the class ended in this manner with students given an assignment for homework for the following class. I did not code this section of the class.

Post-class Discussion

After the class we examined the SCORE chart for the 20 minute segment as illustrated in Figure 1 above. The students were all sitting in a large rectangular class with outer tables and two inner tables. We noted that in the 20 minute period the teacher asked a total of 194 questions, and these further divided into 164 questions to individual students and 30

questions to the whole group. This works out to about 8 teacher questions for each minute during that 20 minute period. The teacher said that before class she had intended to ask each student at least one question during class to make sure all spoke at some time at least. However, she said she was surprised to learn that she had such a high frequency of asking questions in total and per minute.

We also looked at the flow of the communication in terms of which students were participating the most during this class segment, and before she saw the SCORE chart, she said that in her estimation everyone had contributed to the discussion and in a general equal rate of participation. However, when we looked at the SCORE chart (Figure 1) we noted that it clearly shows that this class segment seems to have been dominated by only one particular student, a male student in the bottom right hand corner of the chart – M67 – this means that a male student asked 67 questions. This number of questions accounts for 34% of the total interactions during that segment. We also noted that two other students in the top right-hand corner of the class, one female student F20 – this means a female student asked 25 questions – and a male student M20 – this means a male student asked 20 questions – also were very active in this class segment, but less so than the student (M67) in the bottom right corner of the class with each accounting for about 12% of the interaction time.

The teacher reacted with surprise to these findings as she had intended for this question and answer period within her speaking class to draw responses from all students. The intention was that all students would be active and answer at least one question (the SCORE indicates she was successful) but no single student would dominate the question and answer period. She also noted that she was aware that the student in the bottom corner was somewhat active but had not realized just how dominant he was and she was not aware at all that the two students in the top right-hand corner of the classroom were so active. We noted that these two opposite sides of the room were very active, the bottom right corner and the top left corner (see these areas highlighted in Figure 1 above), but all the other students were not. For the following week she said that she wanted to expand the interaction within her classroom so that she could include all the students as equally as possible and especially not have any students dominate the class.

Follow-Up Process

The following week during a group discussion on this issue, another teacher came up with the idea of using a method known as 'Talking Sticks' to try to spread the frequency of communication in her class. The other teacher in the group explained the 'Talking Sticks' as follows: the teacher gives each student two sticks and tells them that they can only speak when they give a stick to the teacher and then must stop speaking when they have no sticks left.

Second Class

Pre-class Discussion

During the pre-class discussion, the teacher said that she would implement the 'Talking Sticks' method for the segment where the class would have an interaction similar to the previous class and we agreed that I would conduct a SCORE analysis of this segment as before.

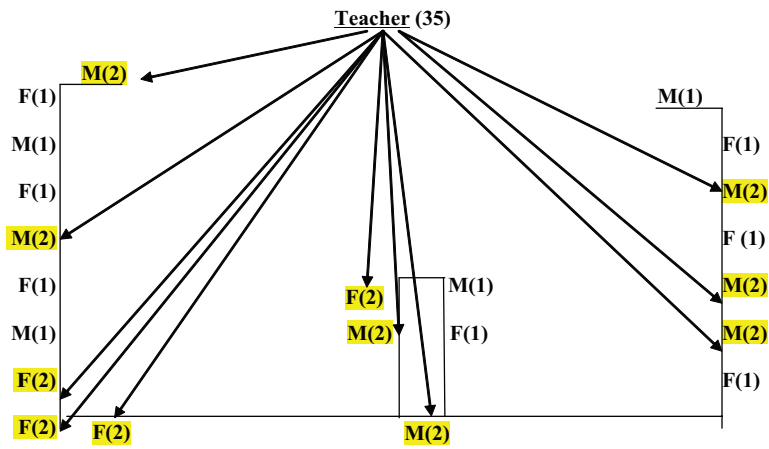
Class

The class proceeded in a similar manner as the previous one I observed had and when it was time for the teacher to have teacher student discussion time, she gave two small sticks (like popsicle/ice cream sticks) to each student. She told them that they had to give her a stick when they wanted to speak and when they had used both sticks they could not speak anymore. The students all seemed amused when they each received their two sticks and then the discussion began with the teacher starting by asking a question.

Post-class Discussion

After the class we examined the SCORE chart for the 20 minute segment as illustrated in Figure 2 below in SCORE II.

Figure 2. SCORE II



Note. F = female student; M = male student. The long arrows show the directional flow of the questions and answers.

The same students were all sitting in a large rectangular shaped class with outer tables and one inner table somewhat similar to the previous class. We noted that in the 20 minute question and answer period the teacher asked a total of 35 questions to the class with students accounting for 28 turns and each student participating using the sticks for two turns each. This was much less than the 194 questions she asked in the previous class. We also noted that in a change from the previous class, many of the students took much longer for each interaction with the teacher and they also initiated two or three further interchanges as a strategy for lengthening their turn before giving their final stick to the teacher. As the teacher noted when her 'most talkative student' (M67 in the previous class) wanted to speak more, she would not allow him to speak. She continued:

> I asked him for a stick. He said that he doesn't have one. I told him that he cannot answer the question. He replied that he has a great point and a wonderful idea. But everyone [all the other class members] told him that it doesn't matter since he used all his sticks. He had to be quiet. At the end of the class he told me that next time he will be very wise in how he uses his sticks.

We also observed that students she had considered quiet and shy (i.e. did not interact much) in previous classes were much more interactive now with sustained speech as outlined above. The teacher noted, 'My shy students realized that I care about them as well, and even if I cared before, now I can really show them that. It also showed my talkative students that the class is not only about them; that they have to share with others. I have noticed that my shy students actually are more concise and can express their points very well.'

Classroom Observations and Novice Teachers

SCORE is an observation instrument that codes the communication flows in the classroom and is usually used while the lesson is proceeding but it can also be done later with video and/or audio tapes but I would suggest the latter may not be as accurate as so much depends on the quality of the recordings. The advantage of using an observation such as SCORE is that it helps focus the observer on specific classroom actions that require low-inferences by the observer. Coding is based on evidence rather than the observer's opinion. Use of this instrument also focuses the post-observation conference discussion and because it is easy to familiarize the teacher with the SCORE process ahead of time, there will not be too many disagreements about what just happened. Of course, some may say that the above advantages can also be a constraint on the observation process because they will not know what to do if something happens that is not covered by the categories in SCORE. While this is true, for a novice teacher such low-inference observation instruments may be more useful because such low-inference instruments can focus separately on different features of classroom interaction, including verbal, paralinguistic, non-linguistic, cognitive, affective, and discourse features (Chaudron, 1988). In this way, novice teachers can become more familiarized with important aspects of teaching in a real context in small doses rather than become submerged with more open-ended, high-inference category systems that do not really contribute to their professional development. These systems may be more appropriate for more experienced teachers who can negotiate in advance what is to be observed and why. Novice teachers may not have the skills or confidence to do this.

When novice teachers engage in classroom observation as part of their professional development, they can become a powerful reflective tool because teachers can, as Day (1990: 43) has noted, 'develop a terminology for understanding and discussing the teaching process; develop an awareness of the principles and decision making that underlie effective teaching and; distinguish between effective and ineffective classroom practices.' When conducted with the aid of a facilitator who encourages talking with the novice teaching in a nonjudgmental manner such as with the use of a non-inferential observation instrument such as the SCORE chart used in the case outlined in this paper, they can give voice to a teacher's thinking while at the same time being heard in a sympathetic but constructively critical way.

The insight that the teacher in this case study gained from just two observations using an observation instrument such as a SCORE chart, and coded in real time by an observer, indicates that such non-inferential classroom observation instruments may be most beneficial to novice ESL teachers than more open-ended instruments. Because the observation was focused on classroom communication, the teacher could focus her reflections on this issue rather than more open systems where coding a particular behavior means the observer must make a strong inference and/or an opinion based on his or her preconceived notions on 'good teaching.' In this case, the use of the SCORE instrument enabled the teacher to move from a descriptive reflective phase, where she was able to 'see' the actual communication flow in her class, to a more critical stance on her practice where she could intentionally manipulate the communication flow in a direction she desired. In other words she could now make an informed decision about certain aspects of her teaching based on the evidence she obtained from these two classroom observations and as a result there is more of a convergence of her beliefs and classroom practices.

Conclusion

The goal of reflecting on our practice through the use of classroom observations is to become more aware of our teaching. When classroom observations with novice ESL teachers are conducted in a non-judgmental manner with low-inference observation instruments such as a SCORE chart, then these teachers can develop in a more focused manner and in a time frame they may be most comfortable with. As Watson-Gegeo (1988: 588) points out: 'By increasing their observational skills, teachers can gain new awareness of classroom organization, teaching and learning strategies, and interactional patterns in their own classrooms.'

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