

# Classroom Observation Tasks

A resource book for  
language teachers and  
trainers

*Ruth Wajnryb*

CAMBRIDGE TEACHER TRAINING  
AND DEVELOPMENT

Series Editors: Marion Williams and Tony Wright



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A resource book for language teachers and trainers

*Classroom Observation Tasks* shows how to use observation to learn about language teaching. It does this by providing a range of tasks which guides the user through the process of observing, analysing and reflecting, and develops the skills of observation.

The book contains a bank of 35 structured tasks grouped into seven areas of focus: the learner, the language, the learning process, the lesson, teaching skills and strategies, classroom management, and materials and resources.

Each task looks at one aspect of a particular area; for example, the language a teacher uses to ask questions, or how the teacher monitors learning, or how people interact in a lesson. Each task provides guidance in how to record observations, and questions to help users interpret the data and relate the experience to their own teaching circumstances and practice.

*Classroom Observation Tasks:*

- is addressed mainly to teachers, but also caters for trainee teachers, teacher trainers and others involved in school-based teacher support, teacher development and trainer training;
- has a comprehensive introduction to the tasks and a rationale covering the theoretical issues involved;
- places the responsibility for professional growth in the hands of the teacher.

Ruth Wajnryb is a freelance teacher trainer and materials writer. She has over 20 years' experience in English language teaching, including 13 years' experience in teacher education.

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# **CAMBRIDGE TEACHER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Series Editors: Marion Williams and Tony Wright**

This series is designed for all those involved in language teacher training and development: teachers in training, trainers, directors of studies, advisers, teachers of in-service courses and seminars. Its aim is to provide a comprehensive, organised and authoritative resource for language teacher training and development.

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# Thanks

The relationship between teaching and learning is a complex and fascinating one, generating ironies as well as beauty and reward. The overwhelming impression in my mind today, after more than twenty years' work as a professional teacher and teacher trainer, is how much I have learned from those I set out to teach.

In their own ways, the diverse groups of people with whose education I have variously been involved, have contributed to the knowledge base of *Classroom Observation Tasks*. I therefore gratefully and respectfully acknowledge my current and former language learners, trainee teachers and trainee trainers, as well as teaching colleagues, for their role in my learning and in this book.

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# Part One Introduction

## 1 Observation as a learning tool

### *Observation for learning*

This book is about observation as a learning tool. It is about being an observer in the language learning classroom and learning from the observation of classroom processes.

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. This book is designed to show teachers how to use these experiences to learn more about their own teaching. It aims therefore to make observation in the classroom a learning experience. This is done by providing a bank of tasks which guides teachers through the process of observing, reflecting and drawing conclusions.

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 experiences acquired in the classroom, and reflection on the whole experience.

It is important to say at this point that observation is a skill that can be learned and can improve with practice. It is often assumed, somewhat naively, that the ability to learn through observing classroom events is fairly intuitive. In fact, while few would deny the role of intuition in the preparation of teachers, the ability to see with acuity, to select, identify and prioritise among a myriad of co-occurring experiences is something that can be guided, practised, learned and improved. It is a major aim of this book to encourage these types of learning processes among beginning and practising teachers.

Let us see the wealth of learning that observation affords by considering: (1) who observes; and (2) for what purpose.

### *Who observes?*

Observation can serve a number of people in a number of contexts

## Part 1: Introduction

towards a number of different ends (see Fig. 1.1). This book is addressed mainly to *classroom teachers* engaged in observation as part of their professional development. The observation may be initiated either by the teachers themselves or by the school, as part of a school-based support programme for teaching staff, or beginning teachers, or newly-employed teachers engaged in an induction period. Other observers include:

- *trainee teachers* who observe teachers, other trainees and trainers as an important part of their own initial training process;
- *teacher trainers* who observe trainees teaching;
- *teacher developers* who observe teachers as part of a school-based support system;
- *trainee trainers* who observe teachers and trainee teachers.

### *For what purpose?*

There are a number of different purposes for observation. However, the primary one considered here is teachers' professional growth and development. Our aim is to give some guidance or structure to the process of observation.

Observation for assessment, such as that which takes place in pre-service teacher training courses or during probation periods or for employment-related matters, is not dealt with here. As it is usually value-based, directive, externally imposed, and coloured by factors not necessarily related to learning, it does not fall within our central notion of observation as a learning tool. Also, as this was the traditional, and often sole, reason for observing teachers and classrooms in action, it is an area that has previously received a lot of attention. Observation as a learning tool, on the other hand, is quite a recent development in the literature of teacher preparation and education.

## **2 Who is this book for?**

This book is designed to interest and serve a number of people involved in language teaching. They are:

- the teacher;
- the trainee teacher;
- the trainer;
- people involved in school-based support (e.g. co-ordinators, senior teachers, heads of school);
- people involved in trainer training, whether in universities, teachers' colleges or private institutions.



Context	Observer	Observee	Purpose of observation			Samples of observation experiences
			Training process	Ongoing development	School-based support	
The contexts of in-service and school-based teacher development	1 Teacher	Peer teacher		✓		Two teachers observe each other's teaching as part of a mutual self-development venture or project
	2 Teacher	Peer teacher or Senior teacher		✓	✓	A teacher observes another teacher (peer or more experienced) in response to a perceived need to develop in a particular area
	3 Teacher coordinator/developer	Teacher		✓	✓	A teacher invites a teacher developer to observe his/her teaching as part of school-based teacher support
The context of pre-service training	4 Trainee teacher	Teacher	✓			A trainee observes an experienced teacher as part of the classroom experience module of the course
	5 Trainee teacher	Teacher trainer	✓			A trainee observes a trainer teaching as a 'modelling' experience
	6 Trainee teacher	Peer trainee teacher	✓			Two trainees observe each other within the practical teaching component of the course
The context of trainer training/development	7 Teacher trainer	Trainee teacher	✓			A trainer observes a trainee for diagnostic and support purposes
	8 Trainee trainer	Teacher	✓	✓		A trainer-in-training observes teaching as part of systematic training in identifying and prioritising teaching behaviours
	9 Trainee trainer	Trainee teacher	✓	✓		A trainer-in-training observes a trainee teacher as part of the practical component of a trainer training course

Figure 1.1 Contexts and purposes of classroom observation

## Part 1: Introduction

The observation contexts which this book seeks to support are:

- pre-service teacher training;
- school-based teacher support;
- teacher development;
- trainer training/development.

These contexts may or may not co-occur within the one teaching institution.

In Section 5 (see pages 17–26), more specific guidance in how to use this book is offered to the various groups of people listed above. For the moment, let us examine the broad aims of these various groups and how *Classroom Observation Tasks* is addressed to them.

### *The teacher*

This book is addressed primarily to the teacher. The person we have in mind is someone who has completed an initial, pre-service training programme and is now working in a language teaching context. This might be English language teaching ('second' or 'foreign') or modern language teaching; with children or adults; in private schools or government institutions. It may be taking place in a target language speaking context (such as teaching English in an English-speaking country) or in a context where the target language is not spoken outside the classroom (such as teaching English in Japan, or French in England). In fact, neither the context of teaching nor the amount of teaching experience that the teacher has had is a constraint to users of the book. What is important is that teachers involved are interested in teaching (particularly their own) and in the various processes that occur and co-occur in language classrooms, and are motivated to engage in some structured tasks that will allow them to explore teaching in the areas of their interest and choice.

The teacher may wish to engage in some informal or semi-informal observations. These may be initiated and implemented by teachers in a collaborative effort. Alternatively, they might be structured in some way by the support offered by the school (see *School-based support*, page 23). Another situation may involve a teacher engaged in a course of in-service study, a component of which involves a programme of peer observation.

*Classroom Observation Tasks* seeks to provide stimulus and ideas for ways of exploring one's own teaching by observing other teachers and classrooms in action, or by having one's own teaching/classroom observed for the purpose of continued learning and exploration.

For further information on how observing the classroom is linked to teacher development, see page 8 and pages 18–19.



### *The trainee teacher*

Some trainees begin a pre-service teacher training course with some experience of the classroom, perhaps as a teacher of another language or perhaps as a primary-school teacher. Others have never before stepped into a classroom in the shoes of a teacher. Whatever the teaching background of the trainee, all have had educational experience in classrooms and hence they come to training with some expectations. These might be conscious or subconscious, or a blend of the two; they might be positive or negative; they might imbue the trainee with courage and optimism or with nervous apprehension or dread. Whatever the cargo of experiences and expectations that a trainee brings to a training course, one thing is certain – that the classroom has primacy of place in the learning and teaching experiences that lie ahead. It is important that these experiences are used in the process of learning to become a teacher.

Classrooms, however, are complex arenas where many processes co-occur and overlap. It takes a skilled and trained eye to perceive, understand and benefit from observing the proceedings of learning/teaching. This book is intended both to provide training in the skills of observing and to help trainees to understand and learn from their observations by making the experience of observing personally meaningful. The tasks in this book can be used for observing fellow trainees, experienced teachers or teacher trainers.

### *The trainer*

The task of the trainer is to help the trainees understand the various processes involved in the teaching and learning of a language and the complex array of activities that occur in a language classroom. The classroom therefore should play a key role in the training process. This book is intended to serve as a bank of classroom experiences which will complement other components of the training course.

The tasks can be used by teacher trainers as a part of their training sessions in a variety of ways. For example, all trainees could be given the same task to carry out, and the results compared in a plenary session. Alternatively, individuals or groups could do a task and prepare a presentation summarising the results for the rest of the class. This can in turn lead to a discussion of the theoretical issues arising from the area of focus.

### *School-based support personnel*

Many teachers are fortunate to be working in contexts that have various mechanisms of school-based support. This may take different forms – for example, a co-ordinator system in which a co-ordinator supports

## Part 1: Introduction

and guides teachers in the selection and implementation of a curriculum; a teacher development group; a senior staff member responsible for a programme of professional development; a head teacher keen to upgrade and support the skills of the teaching staff. This book will assist those people involved in providing school-based support by supplying mechanisms for allowing observation of classes to become a means of learning.

Regrettably, professional development sometimes amounts to one-off lectures given by a visiting 'expert' to the school. Very often, even this is not followed up by any systematic investigation in the classroom and report-back by teachers. The principles upon which this model of teacher development is premised is that teachers develop by being 'filled up' with knowledge as provided by an external source.

These days, teacher development is widely understood to be something very different: it is something that happens within the classroom and within oneself. It is often initiated by teachers themselves, and the role of school-based support is to help channel these energies in directions that will be valuable and meaningful to the teachers concerned.

### *The trainee trainer*

It used to be the case – and still is in many places – that people became trainers by virtue of being experienced teachers. A common scenario is that a teacher moves 'up' into training as a career step or as a promotion. It is only recently that people have begun to realise that there is an important place for the *formal and systematic preparation* of trainers, as much as there is for the preparation of teachers (Wajnryb 1989). (In a way, this parallels the misinformed belief that the only prerequisite for teachers of English was a proficiency in the language.)

At the very least, trainer training involves two groups of people: experienced teachers wishing to prepare for the roles and responsibilities of training; and experienced trainers willing to systematise and pass on the fruits of their experience in training. It also usually involves other people, as a key element is 'field work' or practical experience in the classroom. This book may be used by those involved in trainer training to enhance and refine people's understanding of the classroom, specifically from the perspective of teacher preparation. For example, how do people learn to become teachers? Which teaching skills are 'trainable', that is, more skills-oriented, and which 'educable', that is, have more to do with knowledge and awareness? How can classroom observation be used in the training of teachers?



### 3 Why a book on observation?

#### *Why observe?*

When we teach, we are often so absorbed in the purpose, procedure and logistics of our lesson that we are not able to observe processes of learning and interaction as they occur through the lesson. Being an observer in the classroom, rather than the teacher, *releases* us from these concerns and affords us the freedom to look at the lesson from a range of different perspectives outside that of the actual lesson plan of the teacher.

For the trainee teacher, this freedom is particularly important. In a way, this stage in training is akin to the ‘silent phase’ of a beginning language learner who listens, looks, observes, considers, analyses, reflects, but, significantly, is not required to produce (Dulay, Burt and Krashen 1982). Communication of this kind gives the learner a very particular role: they listen, read, are exposed to the target language but do not have to respond. Communication is one-way: directed *to*, not generated *from* the learner.

A ‘silent phase’ can influence learning. If we consider that the pressure to produce something channels all energies in one direction (performance), then the removal of this pressure releases a certain freedom: freedom to observe, absorb and reflect. A trainee teacher with the freedom to observe teaching is allowed time and space to become familiar with the culture of the classroom – its agenda of customs, rituals, expectations, patterns and mores – before having to try on any active aspects of the teacher’s role (Wajnryb 1991). This book’s observation tasks will structure and guide the silent phase of the trainee teacher’s course of study.

Developing the skill of observing serves a dual purpose: it helps teachers gain a better understanding of their own teaching, while at the same time refines their ability to observe, analyse and interpret, an ability which can also be used to improve their own teaching. It is an underlying premise of this book that the development of the skills of observing is integral to the processes of professional decision-making in which teachers are constantly involved.

#### *What are observation tasks?*

An observation task is a focussed activity to work on while observing a lesson in progress. It focusses on one or a small number of aspects of teaching or learning and requires the observer to collect data or information from the actual lesson, such as the language a teacher uses when giving instructions, or the patterns of interaction that emerge in a lesson. An observer may watch a lesson alone or with others; a number