The Role of Classroom Observation in Pre-Service English Teachers' Understanding of the Teaching Profession

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the role of classroom observation in pre-service English teachers' understanding of the teaching profession. Both systematic and unstructured classroom observations were used to evaluate teacher knowledge and the process that prospective English teachers undergo during a two-month classroom observation period. Based on a questionnaire and journals, our findings show that the participants (N=171) reportedly developed their critical thinking and their basic knowledge of teaching procedures such as generating motivation, using adequate EFL methodologies and classroom management. An extended classroom observation encounter allowed the student teachers' beliefs to evolve and their identities as English teachers to develop.
Keywords: classroom observation; teacher learning; practicum; pre-service Engllsh teachers, language teaching.

La mejora en la comprensión de la profesión docente de futuros profesores de lengua inglesa a partir de la observación de clase sistemática y no estructurada

RESUMEN: Este estudio pretende analizar el impacto de las técnicas de observación de clase sistemáticas y no estructuradas en el proceso formativo de futuros docentes de lengua inglesa. Los resultados, obtenidos a partir de un cuestionario y de diarios, muestran que los participantes (N =171), después de dos meses de observación de clase, desarrollaron su pensamiento crítico y su conocimiento sobre procedimientos didácticos, tales como generar motivación, el uso adecuado de metodologías de enseñanza del inglés y el manejo del comportamiento en las aulas. Igualmente, se produjo un desarrollo de las creencias educativas y la identidad docente de los participantes.
Palabras clave: observación de clase; formación docente; practicum; futuros docentes de lengua inglesa, enseñanza de lenguas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In initial teacher education, classroom observation is widely regarded as an effective teaching means (Blackmore, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004) because it enables observers to identify the nature of teacher behaviour such as the way classroom activities are structured and the way teachers and students interact (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman & Smith, 1966). In addition to sharing effective teaching techniques (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) and providing objective feedback regarding teaching performance (Muijs, 2006), classroom observation also can foster professional growth (Richards & Farrell, 2011). However, although classroom observation is valid for documenting and learning in-class dynamics, classrooms are complex; therefore, it might not be possible to capture all the aspects of teaching and learning because they cannot always be plausibly observed (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Numerous studies have highlighted the problems related to classroom observation as a basis for judging teacher effectiveness and have examined how knowledge gleaned from observation can be transferred to one's own practice (e.g., Devos, 2014; Strong, Gargani & Hacifazlioglu, 2011). Therefore, this study of the impact of classroom observations on pre-service English teachers' understanding of the teaching profession is important and adds knowledge to the existing body of literature.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several hundred classroom observation systems have been developed over the years, and these systems use a combination of approaches generally classified as either unstructured or structured (Wallace, 1998). The former are regarded as an analytical method with a degree of flexibility and are based on capturing what the observer believes are the most relevant aspects of observed events. Thus, this type of approach has been criticized for depending on how well informed the observers are and their own personal constructs (Subban & Round, 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2014). Systematic observation methods are based primarily on an "existing system of pre-specified categories" (Wallace, 1998: 110) and they appear to offer a more objective perspective of classroom events because few inferences or judgments are generally required by the observer. Overall, the literature suggests that classroom observations can be conducted for various purposes and be classified based on their evaluative or nonevaluative final goal depending on the contextual situation, the objective of the observation, and the education policies of each country.

2.1. Evaluative classroom observation

Evaluative observation is essentially used to assess teacher effectiveness, although there is a lack of agreement in identifying this efficiency (Kyriakides, Creemers & Antoniou, 2009; Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). This type of observation has also been shown to capture the "elements of teaching that are related to student achievement" (Tyler, Taylor, Kane & Wooten, 2010: 259). Danielson (2007) proposed one of the most widely used measures of teacher quality, which includes the following of four observation components to evaluate teachers: (a) teacher planning and preparation; (b) the

classroom environment; (c) teachers' instructions when communicating with students; and (d) professional responsibilities. Based on these four premises, Tyler et al. (2010) found that classroom observation using a top-down approach identified the positive impact of teachers' proficient overall classroom practice on their pupils' improvement in reading and mathematics. Although some researchers (Gallagher, 2004; Milanowski, 2004) reported only slightly higher gains in student achievement associated with higher quality teachers, Strong et al. (2011) claimed that the best predictors of student learning are high-quality teachers and effective teaching (Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien & Rivkin, 2005), which is reflected in student performance as much as four years later (Sanders, 2000). Systematic observation tools are also widely used to monitor classroom events including actions by teachers and students during a certain time interval (Nuthall & Alton-Lee, 1990). Nevertheless, limitations have been recognized in these systematic classroom observation measures. One such issue involves using classroom observation as a basis for making decisions about teacher effectiveness because this type of observation focuses only on categories or behaviours that are easily observed with measurement instruments (Ornstein, 1995) and is less useful for identifying certain practices not taken into account in these measures (e.g., Strong et al., 2011).

2.2. Nonevaluative classroom observation

Within a nonevaluative framework, classroom observation is regarded as a good way to improve teaching competence and teacher development (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; McNally, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2005) by covering a wide range of skills and competencies in a variety of knowledge areas. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) referred to these three basic domains of teacher learning: the knowledge of learners, the conceptions of the curriculum, and the understanding of teaching. Although previous studies frequently addressed the teacher's need for academic proficiency, numerous researchers suggest a practice-based approach to gain mastery in teaching (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006). More recently, Hollins (2011: 397) described the need to foster "the knowledge of learners, learning, subject matter, pedagogy, accountability and assessment, and the discursive practices in a professional community". Therefore, because observation is an active, participatory and involved process, observers are more likely "to benefit from close observation if they are appropriately equipped with the skills to observe", as indicated by Subban and Round (2015: 118). To address this matter, these authors offered a qualitative approach to classroom observation using a checklist (Gawande, 2011) with specific guidelines for differentiated instruction. To promote EFL student teachers' improvement as teacher professionals, Devos (2014) proposed a classroom observation framework based on Zacharias' (2012) model, which is embedded in a sociocultural paradigm and is to be used independently. Of particular relevance was the study conducted by de Vries, Jansen, Helms-Lorenz and van de Grift (2015), who used an observation instrument created by van de Grift (2007), which contained six standards: a safe and stimulating environment, efficient lesson organization, clear and structured instruction, engagement of students, adaptation of instruction to student differences, and teaching of thinking and learning strategies. However, nonevaluative observation lacks consistency and clarification regarding the roles of the student teachers and observed teachers, the observational aims, and the mentors' accompanying role in the mentees' gradual developmental process (Devos, 2014).

2.3. Reflective classroom observation for teacher learning

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the reflective model by Wallace (1991), which highlights the view that teachers develop through continuous reflection on the teaching that they observe or perform, presupposing an enquiring attitude toward the nature of pedagogic events. By critically examining their values in classroom actions, prospective teachers can become more aware of the possible convergence and disparity between their beliefs and practice such that their belief system can be constructed and transformed to guide their teaching (Farrell, 2007). From a socio-cultural perspective, student teachers' beliefs can undergo various changes through their interaction and practice during the practicum (Ng, Nicholas & Williams, 2010; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on the context and process of the changes that pre-service teachers experience during school placement. Thus, the objective of this study was to determine how classroom observations affect pre-service EFL teachers' understanding of the teaching profession. We therefore posed the following research questions: (a) What gain in teaching knowledge does a two-month classroom observation experience produce? (b) What classroom observation processes do pre-service English teachers undergo during a two-month classroom observation period?

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

Fourth-year student teachers who were enrolled in the undergraduate degree program in Primary School Teaching and were specializing in a foreign language at the University of the Balearic Islands in Spain (N=192) were invited to participate in the study, and one hundred and seventy-one students accepted (N=171). The participants were enrolled in practicum II, which consisted of two months of teaching practice at a primary school (6- to 12-year-olds). The majority (83.6%) of the participants were female (N=143), and the rest were male (N=28). The mean age of the respondents was 20.3 years (SD 7.7). More than half of the participants (58.8%) taught in an urban primary school, whereas 41.1% taught in a rural school. Seventeen primary schools, 45 primary school teachers and one university supervisor participated in the study. The majority of the observed primary school teachers (72.7%) had 10 to 15 years of teaching experience and had either more (54.8%) or the same (45.1%) number of years of teaching experience as the university supervisor. More than half of the sample (51.5%) observed three (32.2%) or two teachers (19.3%) during their placement, and the remainder observed one teacher (48%). All the participants (3 groups) observed lessons taught by foreign language teachers. Additionally, one-third of the participants (32.2%) also observed learning support teachers, 25.8% observed instructors who taught Spanish, and 22.5% observed instructors who taught Catalan, –Spanish and Catalan being the two official languages in the Balearic Islands. A small percentage of the sample (3.2%) observed science teachers.

The initial practicum meetings with the university supervisors occurred over two weeks and prepared students to formally undertake classroom observations. The first classroom observations were conducted in a systematic way using an observation form (Grimm, Kaufman & Doty, 2014; Hockly & Madrid, 2001) to record the teachers' name, level, class objective, teaching methods and materials, the role of the teacher, the pupils' work and behaviour, teacher-pupil interactions, teacher and pupil talk, evaluation techniques, and the overall impression of the observed lessons. Subsequent observations were tracked in the observation journals and included the participants' deeper insights and analysis to prevent abuse when using the observational tool and to act as "mental blinkers" regarding the observed teachers (Nunan, 1992: 110).

3.2. Research instruments

The research instruments administered included a questionnaire on perceived teacher knowledge gains from the classroom observations, and a journal. The questionnaire (McCluskey, 2010) was used to examine student teachers' views of teacher observations and to analyse the learning impact of observations based on how student teachers perceive their teaching practice learning development. The questionnaire revealed pre-service teachers' views of (a) observing teachers with different specialties and educational levels, (b) observing teachers new to teaching (1 to 3 years of teaching experience) and teachers with more experience, and (c) learning from observations regarding factual, practical, and/or reflective teaching knowledge. A total of five closed questions and six open-ended questions were included. The closed questions established an indicative level for the observations and the observed teachers, whereas the open-ended questions obtained data to help understand the participants' experiences and gains of observations during the practicum. To ensure reliability, the question-naire was initially piloted with 20 student teachers who had undertaken practicum I and had voluntarily participated in the study. To ensure validity, the items in the questionnaire were carefully worded to ensure that they actually measured the effect of classroom observations on the participants' understanding of the teaching profession. The researcher administered the questionnaire in a two-hour session in the last week of student teaching practice. The data collected from the questionnaire were evaluated by examining the relative frequency of each response. The open-response items in the survey did not confine the respondents to a specific set of answers, enabling them to express their perceptions more thoroughly in their own words (Brown, 2009). A qualitative data analysis was applied, thereby enabling categories to emerge from the data. Numerous key words were noted in the margins as the responses were read several times, and similar key words were combined into categories. The researcher asked a university professor to examine the study and assess the classific-ations as an external auditor. The interpretation was illuminated and thus strengthened by the excerpts from the questionnaires.

Data were also elicited from a journal in which the participants wrote once per week about their overall learning from the classroom observations. The journal included responses to semi-structured, open-ended questions. The participants were expected to examine the dynamics of the teaching-learning process and to explain how these observations enhanced their understanding of the teaching profession. The participants described three key learn-ing moments within the classroom observation period and explained how the focus of their

observations had evolved over the two-month period. The journal entries were coded using the established coding categories. The journal data enabled the participants' observation process to be explored in depth helping verify and disconfirm the questionnaire findings and indicating the overall teaching professional learning outcomes from the observations. Ethical guidelines for informed authorization and confidentiality were strictly followed.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Teacher knowledge gains from classroom observation experience

Regarding the reported gains in the participants' teaching knowledge, generating motivation (89.4%) was the key skill learned from classroom observations, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher knowledge gains from classroom observation

	N	Ratio (%)
Motivation induction	153	89.4
Classroom management	137	80.1
EFL teaching methods	130	76.0
Teaching beliefs	126	73.6
Specific subject teaching approach	121	70.7
Procedural knowledge from experienced teachers	102	59.6

These results indicate that after two months of observing primary education classrooms, motivation was regarded as significant in helping pupils learn. Teacher sympathy reportedly encouraged individual and collective motivation, as indicated by the following excerpt from a questionnaire:

> It is important for a teacher to ask the right questions and to maintain students' curiosity all the time, and not doing a reading task straight away but to prepare the students to want to do it. Among the teachers I observed, those who managed to motivate their pupils the most were the ones who asked easy questions that pupils could reply to. From then onward, they would raise the level of difficulty. I also learned from the teacher who passes on a general feeling of joy and well-being (Student 28).

Classroom management (80.1%) was also a key skill learned from the observations, and regarded as relevant in leading pupils to engage with the lesson, as indicated by the following questionnaire response:

I have learned that it is important for a teacher to be capable of dealing with conflicts that could appear in the classroom as well as being able to implement the necessary confidence for students to learn, because as a consequence this helps students to become engaged with the class tasks" (Student 133).

The data also reveal that the participants reportedly learned to visualize the implementation of diverse EFL teaching techniques (76%), such as the communicative approach, the focus on form, or the content-based approach, as indicated by the following excerpt from a journal response:

Now I understand what a content-based class is after seeing that the teacher gave a lot of importance to the plot of the tale, the characters, and the setting but also spent much time on the language of the story. In some lessons it surprised me that the teacher allowed kids to speak and make mistakes, but now I have realized that she really wanted them to have something to say, following the communicative approach. I learned that there are different ways to work with children, always adapting oneself to the circumstances of the group (Student 46).

Another key lesson from the continuous classroom observation was that the participants discarded previous false pre-conceptions about teaching and embraced a new belief about language teaching (73.6%), as the following journal excerpt illustrates:

I used to think that after reading a story in English it was important to immediately ask about unknown vocabulary. But now I noticed that teachers never do that straight away; they first emphasize what pupils already know, and then they introduce new vocabulary in context. Through the observation process, I became aware of what works in class and what does not. It gave me new ideas and helped me get rid of old clichés (Student 5).

This finding indicates that this participant had previously considered it important to ask pupils about the new vocabulary they did not understand, which implies that at that point, he decided that his prior view of teaching and learning must be discarded.

Observing teachers with different specialties also raised the participants' awareness of the need to use teaching methodologies that are appropriate to the specific content being taught (70.7%). Whereas slightly more than two-thirds of the student teacher group (59.6%) acknowledged enhanced learning by observing experienced teachers, nearly half (52%) reportedly improved their knowledge by observing both novice and experienced teachers. Although inexperienced teachers reportedly developed original ideas, adopted new methodological approaches, and increased student motivation, the student teachers said that the newer teachers lacked the ability to deal with students properly or to demonstrate knowledge regarding the suitability of learning tasks, which experienced teachers possessed. Many participants noted the ability of experienced instructors to handle student behaviour more efficiently than inexperienced ones and thus claimed to have gained procedural knowledge of approaching pupils in their classes.

4.2. Classroom observation process

The participants' observations of the first events were related to certain distinct ped-agogical features such as specific classroom activities, specific teacher attitudes, or specific student behaviours. The data collected from the journals refer to "activities they liked", "activities they had not seen before", "some pupils misbehaving in class", "pupils' enthusiastic reaction to being told a tale by the teacher", "all pupils loving the puppet speaking English", and "pupils enjoying singing at the beginning of the class", indicating that participants first noticed the pedagogical aspects. In the first journals, there are also numerous references to the overall objective of the lesson being related to specific grammatical or lexical features such as teaching "the present simple tense", "interrogative sentences", and "vocabulary regarding animals". In contrast, the journals collected after two months contain references to the overall lesson objective and the communicative acts: "the objective of the lesson was to talk about routine actions", "find out about their classmates' hobbies", "describe a house", and "a visit to the zoo". This shift indicates the participants' observational growth in grasping the main objective of the lesson. They progressed from a structural to a functional view, thereby grasping the communicative dimension of the lessons.

Evidence from the journals also suggests that the observations helped the participants identify the pillars of a lesson. First, the students noted the practice of separate skills in one lesson, such as listening, speaking, or reading. However, after two months, there were references to the teacher achieving his/her objective of reading a tale through a specific lesson plan by integrating various skills. The following journal entry illustrates this ability to identify a sequence of various learning activities and their interrelationships:

> At the beginning, I noticed the teacher would focus on speaking, asking lots of questions about the characters of the story or other tales, and I thought she only wanted to make them talk. But then I realized that she was doing these activities in oral expression and mimicry for a better understanding of the reading content (Student 109).

A continuous systematic observation of classes was reportedly more helpful at the beginning than at the end of the observation period. Through guided observations using observation records, the participants increased their focus on certain aspects of the lesson such as classroom interactions, language used by the teacher, feedback, materials, and activi-ties. This repeated focus helped the participants realize the complexity of these aspects and thereby grant them more importance in the education process. The journals following the two-month period indicate a more global perception of these categories and contain refer-ences to the entire lesson and the fact that the teacher "taught a good lesson" regardless of certain moments when one activity did not work out well: "Today, pupils have taken part in the whole lesson", and "in this lesson the teacher managed to motivate pupils to read".

The observation process also allowed participants to identify their ideological beliefs regarding the nature of teaching and learning. Notably, many participants remarked on the "affective side of it", the "chilled atmosphere", the teacher "accepting the pupil as he/she is", the "permanent positive feedback", and the belief "that all pupils could do it right". Thus, during the second month at the end of the observational period, participants included more

reflective comments than descriptive ones, as exemplified by the following journal quotation:

> I realized that what I appreciate most in any class is to create positive communication either from an image, a few questions, or a text, and if as teachers we can have all the pupils have their say and feel at ease and protected. It is obviously up to the teacher to create such an atmosphere to engage the pupils and to take the best from each one and boost that. Now I have a more critical view of teaching and teachers, regarding what they do, whether pupils' former knowledge is activated, how they respond to pupils' comments, whether they actually prepared the lecture beforehand or not, and if they are using a good lesson plan. I believe I have become more observant and critical with the teachers and with myself, and I believe this way I am a better teacher and I feel I now have a better understanding of what this job of being a teacher is about (Student 87).

This finding revealed that observation also helped the participants to reflect on the teaching profession and on their own teaching practice, spotting teaching techniques they considered more appropriate for themselves based on their beliefs and observations.

5. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the two-month classroom observation experience had an ameliorating effect on Through guided observations learning about the teaching profession, primarily regarding their development of declarative, basic teaching knowledge (Borg, 2009). The observations led the participants to identify key instructional procedural variables that categorically influence the teaching-learning process, such as generating pupil motivation or exerting pupil control. Similar results were obtained in the study by Boz and Boz (2006), in which field observational settings enhanced student teachers' knowledge of classroom management. Observations also developed the participants' EFL-specific knowledge and increased their awareness of the need to use appropriate methodologies for the content being taught. Similarly, Kane, Taylor, Tyler and Wooten (2010) showed that the Teacher Evaluation System (TES) made it possible to establish a cause-effect relationship between specific teaching practices –such as engaging students in discussions and questioning– and student outcomes in various academic subjects such as reading, indicating that the teacher was knowledgeable in the specific pedagogic techniques used to foster learning in that specific area.

Our study also shows that over the two-month period, the participants' main observational attention approach, their prism vision, shifted from an impressionistic perspective to a more critical one (McKay, 2006). During the first stage of observation, the journals of the participants were more incidental: they mentioned specific episodes that had caught their attention because of the pupils' or teachers' behaviour. The participants' perspective was that of a receiver of a product; that is to say, as a student, and they were unable to identify the continuity of the lesson, the unifying thread of the entire session. This view was also highlighted by Devos (2014), who noted the difficulty that prospective teachers have in noticing

observable behaviours that may lead to learning. Initially, the participants tended to focus more on purely mechanical matters such as teacher-student interactions, possibly because of the systematic observation based on guidelines in the first stage of our study. However, as the number of lessons increased, techniques were observed in more detail, including the basis behind them, their theoretical foundations, and the ideal structure in class (Zacharias, 2012). The participants observed the teaching models to be followed such as interactions focusing on the pupil, accounting for pupils' previous knowledge, and combining various language skills in one lesson. The student teachers were able to see the pedagogical sequences while observing the class as a whole. These findings indicate that classroom observations appear to lead student teachers to understand the teaching profession as a technical activity and that they developed their learning in terms of "knowing like a teacher" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001: 698). In the observations through the last stage, it is observed that it is not a student's prism but a learner's one to become a teacher. The findings focus on more subtle aspects such as the mechanism to motivate or reach all pupils. In our study, the continuous observation of pedagogic events led the participants to understand why a lesson worked properly and thus to develop an enquiring attitude toward pedagogic events.

Jenkins, Garn and Jenkins (2005) suggested that student teachers are not able to fully absorb learning from the observation of experienced teachers because there are fewer observable instructional mistakes. However, our study indicates that observing experienced primary education instructors, particularly their expertise in procedural knowledge, was valuable, which corroborates Zacharias' (2012) findings. In our study, observing novice teachers made the participants recognize that the novices were unaware of which methods work in a class. By identifying such a lack in novice teachers, the participants increased their own awareness of their training as future teachers. Combining the observations of experienced and novice teachers appeared to offer teaching models to emulate (Biesta, 2012) or to avoid, and endowed pre-service English teachers with a broader, truer perspective of what it means to teach in real-life contexts (Roness & Smith, 2010).

The observation reports also enabled us to examine the participants' ideological beliefs concerning the nature of teaching and learning, revealing that the participants placed value on the affective side, which included creating a relaxing environment, spreading joy, accepting pupils as they are, and providing constant positive feedback (Zacharias, 2012). At the same time, participants gradually acknowledged the pedagogical purpose of communication in the classroom (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Thus, observing others aided these future teachers in creating a professional identity, i.e., deciding which teaching techniques better fit their personality and performance in class and thereby gaining self-knowledge (Devos, 2014).

Through classroom observations, participants saw their reflections as teachers and thus raised their awareness of erroneous previous beliefs about the teaching profession (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Our results are consistent with the findings of Yuan and Lee (2014), which revealed that three pre-service language teachers' beliefs during a teaching practicum in a university in China experienced a process of change. Notably, classroom observations helped our participants activate this process of rebuilding their identity as a teacher (Olsen, 2016) and thus this process is to be acknowledged.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows the ethnographic efficacy of classroom observation as it enables prospective teachers to explore the complex nature of teaching and the learning process. The findings provide evidence of the positive impact of combined systematic and unstructured classroom observation in equipping pre-service EFL teachers with teacher knowledge and an understanding of identifying and developing appropriate classroom teaching approaches to facilitate learning. Notably, this study suggests that learning gained from school observations is not merely limited to knowledge regarding instructional techniques (Jonson, 2008) but also generates a critical capacity in student teachers regarding the intertwined relationships needed to sustain quality teaching (Loughran, 2002). The findings of this study may have implications for the design of teacher preparation practicums in terms of using combined observational practices to foster teacher learning. As Devos (2014: 17) noted, "the ability to critically and effectively observe in classrooms is a learned skill but crucial to becoming a teaching professional and a life-long learner".

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8. Acknowledgements