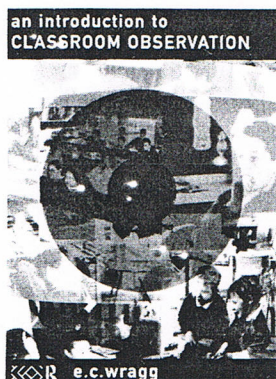


INTRODUCTION TO CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

by E.C. Wragg. London:
Routledge, 1994



Professor E.C. "Ted" Wragg is one of the few individuals involved in education in Britain who genuinely can be described as an "authority" on the subject. Currently the Director of the School of Education and Professor of Education at the University of Exeter, in the south-west of England, he is viewed as such for his contribution to the initial training of teachers and for his wider-ranging views on education expressed through regular articles published in *The Times Educational Supplement* - the Friday bulletin avidly sought out by teachers in staffrooms all over the country.

While the greater part of Professor Wragg's work has been dedicated to themes broader than the teaching of a specific subject like EFL, which concerns us, this recent publication seems to me to be highly appropriate to EFL teachers in Spain at the present dealing, as it does, with the

implementation of such wide-reaching changes as those which the *reforma* has brought about. *An Introduction to Classroom Observation* provides teachers with a manageable presentation of a number of practical tools any of us could use in order to stand back and look at the realities of our teaching. If you really want to know whether or not the *reforma* in your classroom has meant changes of any sort at all, how better to find out than by inviting an objective observer to watch, study, and then report back to you on what she has observed. But just a minute, that does have all sorts of other implications, doesn't it? How do you handle them? Let's look now in more detail at the areas covered in this book, and see how we can answer questions like these.

In the first chapter Professor Wragg introduces his topic, and faces up to the negative connotations which classroom observation has for many teachers, and answers these from his personal experience of the changing climate in education in Britain. In this respect, perhaps the book is somewhat ahead of its time in Spain. The kind of observation of teachers in training, or indeed of practising teachers on their probationary year - the equivalent of passing your teaching test and then teaching for one year with "L-plates" on - are quite different to the realities of the Spanish system. However, the kind of demands which are bound to emerge for more access to what actually goes on in the classroom cannot be ignored: recently talks among teachers representatives in Spain have broached the question

of quality and effectiveness in the classroom. Who, then, can we expect to want to become observers in our classrooms?

Clearly, teachers in training do, and should continue to attend and observe classes; so too can colleagues, materials writers and designers, other research workers, parents, heads of studies, inspectors, and so on. Unnerving though the prospect is to me, it seems that the "inner sanctum" of the classroom has been a no-go area for too many justifiably interested parties for far too long. But, and I know it is a very big "but", how do we go about the task of inviting a stranger into the classroom? And how do we manage this intervention, in all of its dimensions, before, during and after it happens?

Professor Wragg responds to these questions by providing a detailed overview of what classroom observation can entail, which indicates most clearly the kind of groundwork preparation which we need to go into it in order to ensure the success of classroom observation both in research and human terms. And it is to this research aspect that the book turns first.

The two chapters which follow the introduction develop the use of **quantitative** and **qualitative** research methods, respectively. Here, the author describes and distinguishes between two essentially different ways of analyzing a class under observation. These approaches are opposed in essence, and intuitively I would say that Professor Wragg comes down primarily in favour of the qualitative approach, although a

balanced "horses-for-courses" view is the one he propounds most clearly.

In these chapters the author outlines examples of classroom observation projects which use either quantitative or qualitative methods, and from the examples he gives it is clear which methods are more appropriate for which purpose.

This covers about half of the book, and the remainder then deals with the more human aspects of the context or contexts in which classroom observation takes place, the status, role and methodology of classroom research, and in the final chapter, the author's closing thoughts on "Observation and action: the dynamic school".

In fact, it is here that we should really take up his arguments with some considerable attention. Ted Wragg has certainly been into more classrooms than I have, or probably ever will have. Indeed, he has probably been into more classrooms than most of you who are reading this review ever will visit, too! His experience has led him to an all-too-clear awareness of the dangers of what he aptly calls "blue skies ideals" about our profession. Many of us are aware of the classroom stereotypes we can slip into - like putting on an old pair of slippers. It is easy to repeat well-trying and tested classroom routines, even when we are unsure as to their value, day after day, term after term, year after year. These same classroom processes are part of us and part of our professional lives: inviting someone into our classrooms to watch these is something we are - naturally enough - initially unwilling to do.

But, as Professor Wragg points out, here lies the heart of the matter. I suspect that I, and most of you, could find my way around my house in complete darkness, or even with a blindfold on. I wouldn't need lights because I know only too well that there is a door here, a bookcase there, a plant pot just on my right, and so on. Similarly, in my classroom, I don't actually see what I do; I don't hear what I say, or how I say it. Profitable collaboration between you (an observer) and I could enable me to winkle out some of the ticks in my teacher-talk, and to start to glimpse the beliefs and values behind my classroom practice. This would help me to gain a greater awareness of myself as a teacher, and to develop my professional skills in one way or another which could only be of benefit to all concerned - that is, me, my students, their parents or sponsors, my employers, and society at large - by producing an improvement in the quality and/or efficiency of my teaching.

Where can you or I find the starting point for this kind of observation? Well, in the early stages of the book, the author mentions a number of example situations. Here are just three of them:

"Imagine that the [primary] teacher is concerned that she always seems to be trapped at her desk." (p.3)

"If a teacher felt she was not involving enough pupils in oral work ..." (p.7)

"[The observer could make] ... a record of how well children appear to follow her [the class teacher's] classroom rules ..." (p.22)

These are not earth-shattering dilemmas, but simple, everyday concerns that teachers talk about over coffee and in the lunch break every day. They are all, however, the kinds of thing that carefully prepared, planned and managed classroom observation can easily help to resolve.

Earlier, I suggested that the implementation of the *reforma* made classroom observation an ideal tool for many of you to adapt and adopt as a means of evaluating the results of so much trial and tribulation in your teaching practice. How could you do this? One purpose of classroom observation is the assessment of change, and it can easily be focused on any of the four elements that go to make up the ecology of the teaching environment: teachers, pupils, materials or buildings. Any reform is designed to bring about change and, for example, the newer methods of classroom management which have been introduced over recent years - like pairwork, groupwork, project work - are now seen as part and parcel of our daily work routine, but are still questioned by some as to their value. Ask yourself about any one of these "What does this really mean in my classroom?" "How has it, changed my expectations of my learners and of my teaching?" "Is it really successful, or does it simply give the more disruptive pupils an opportunity to do their worst?" Then introduce an observer into your classroom to try and answer some of these questions and the qualitative approach which Professor Wragg details will help provide a means of finding the answers.

To begin with, a qualitative approach to research involves a

detached observation of what happens in a given setting. The observer in your classroom would make notes of what she sees according to a previously agreed agenda. She would then follow up the observation by interviewing you and some or all of the pupils involved. The questions your observer would be hoping to answer are the "Who?" "What?" and "Why?" questions about classroom events. Questions which you personally cannot begin to articulate because of your involvement in what you are doing.

It might be that you decide to invite one of your colleagues at school into your classroom to help you solve a question of pupil misbehaviour. In this situation, the qualitative researcher-teacher has an open-minded approach and uses a wide variety of approaches in order to try to understand, in retrospect, what is happening in the classroom. If we continue to look at our example based on the use of groupwork we can ask ourselves whether it is inherently a "recipe for chaos", or would the same pupils misbehave with equal regularity in a "traditional" teacher-to-whole-class teaching frame? Following one of the conceptual approaches to qualitative methodology described here - the *gestalt* - we could design an objective observation with the aim of recording specific events during the class, by describing at regular intervals what the three or four individual pupils chosen as the "typical" misbehaviors were doing. The observer would carry out this task in a "traditional" lesson and in a groupwork-based class. She would subsequently interview both the teacher and the

individual pupils about any specific event that occurred during those observations, looking for their personal interpretations of what they were doing, why they were doing it, and how they saw the development of events. Clearly all of this requires a degree of sensitivity which can only be gained through thorough preparation and practice. From my own experience I can suggest that an excellent way of taking some of the sting out of this - one that I used successfully with seven or eight colleagues in a school I taught in some years ago - is to make a pact with one or more colleagues to observe each other's classes: that way neither of you can feel they are at any kind of (dis)advantage.

In his analysis, Professor Wragg is at pains to underline the relevance of establishing a good working relationship between teacher and observer, and between observer and pupils. He discusses the different ways in which the observer-pupil relationship can influence the pupils behaviour depending on whether or not the observer is known to them, or on whether the observer is a participant in the teaching process.

Analyzing the fruits of any observation can only be successfully carried out if you use clear criteria. The quality and effectiveness of teaching must be judged in the light of balancing the process observed in the class with the outcome of this process. Is the learning which occurs worthwhile? coherent? appropriate? Observation must be followed up: it is not just at the human level that teacher and observer need to communicate

their thoughts and feelings on the classroom experience they have shared: the deeper analysis in collaboration is also vital to help us learn from the observation.

To draw this review to an end, let me say that *An Introduction to Classroom Observation* seems to me an excellent work on the topic it sets out to deal with, but it also is a sound grounding in an educational ethos which many teachers will benefit from. The dynamic classroom and the dynamic school are concepts basic to Ted Wragg's vision of education. They are concepts we would all do well to examine in some depth, and if we can, to put into practice in as much as we are able.

Reviewed by Bryan Robinson

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