RESEARCH ARTICLE

REFLECTION OF CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is to find out the implication of "classroom observation" was to identify and describe the different types of writing skills and sub-skills of writing used in the classroom, assessing teaching procedure and to suggest appropriate ways for developing learners skills. This study was conducted over a period of few weeks in three Engineering colleges affiliated to Osmania University, Hyderabad. The observer sat in the classroom to gather data with checklist to record their observations. Hyland (2003) believes that the retention capacity of the learners depends on the needs and curiosity to achieve his/her goal successfully while trying to do the task. This means motivation is important; if the learners are motivated, they do the task well.

Keywords : classroom observation ,writing skills, learners.

Classroom Observation

Mackey and Gass comment that, "Observations are a useful means of gathering in-depth information about such phenomena as the type of language activities, interactions and events that occur in a second and foreign language classroom. Additionally, observation can allow the study of a behavior at close range with many important contextual variables present" (2005: 186-187).

Weir and Roberts (1994) argue that, "observation is the only way to get *direct* information on classroom events, on the reality of programme implementation (164). They further argue that, "it is hard to justify an evaluation of the implementation of syllabus/curriculum materials or of a training programme, without observation (136).

Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) argue that classroom observation should be included in any evaluation of change implementation "since only then can we gain some knowledge of actual rather than reported behavior" (360).

In addition to the student questionnaire, teacher questionnaire, workplace questionnaire and student interview, one more instrument used in this study was a four month long period of observation.

Sarandakos writes (1998: 207) that, "Observation is an indirect method of data collection since in most cases, and it collects data without the information of the respondents. Often, the respondents know the observation is going on but may not know the exact reason of observation".

The advantage of using classroom observation is that it

(1)   Permits researchers to study the processes of education in naturalistic settings

(2)   Provides more detailed and precise evidence than other data sources

(3)   Stimulates change and verifies that the change occurred

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According to Becker (1989) and Mahr (1995) cited in Sarantakos (1998: 219), there are limitations in the classroom observation and some of them are:

- It cannot provide information about past, future or unpredictable events
- It is difficult to use this on large groups and
- It cannot offer data connected to frequency of behavior

Observation is a multi-faced tool for observing, evaluating and recording specific information about what is going on in the classroom.

Several elements that are common to most observational systems are

1. A purpose for the observation
2. Operational definitions of all the observed behaviors
3. Training procedures for observers
4. A specific observational focus
5. A setting
6. A unit of time
7. An observation schedule
8. A method to record the data
9. A method to process and analyze data (Stallings and Mohlman, pp. 469–471)

Therefore classroom observation is used in this study to elicit information regarding how the syllabus is being practiced in the classroom. More specifically, it is used to collect data about the physical condition of the classroom; modes of classroom organization, classroom interaction (student–student, teacher–student, error correction and feedback) and how different language items (listening, speaking, reading and writing, grammar and vocabulary) presented in the syllabus are practiced in the classroom.

A checklist was designed to study the events taking place simultaneously in the classroom. The Qualitative data included students' interview and Classroom Observation. The Tools of data collection were effectively employed to gather the data and the data was interpreted and analyzed. This paper discusses class Room observation and the data of the findings obtained from class Room observation are presented below.

Classroom observation was to observe how the writing Unit was taught. It studied the classroom interaction, teacher's role, learner's role and the method in which the teaching of writing material was presented to the learners. The teachers were not willing for the classroom recording so the researcher had to take down notes after observing the classes. As mentioned earlier, all the data collected for the present study was from the three colleges affiliated to Osmania University .

The B.E. 1/IV English theory classes were observed. These classes comprised of Undergraduate Engineering students numbering from 40-50 in each section. Each class has English theory for three periods per week for the duration of fifty minutes. Extensive observation was done from the month of September – March 2011-2012 and notes were taken during classroom observation. The teacher started with the syllabus in the month of September with Unit I, as the focus of the study was Unit III - Communication which started between January – March. The teacher started with paragraph writing and a little bit of grammar. The total classroom observations were for fifteen Classes and out of these, nine could be chosen for actual analysis.

The objective of classroom observation was to collect the data indirectly. The classroom observation helped a lot to supplement the data from students' questionnaire, teacher's questionnaire and student interview. The teachers refused the interviews to be recorded and some students were only willing for interviews, so the indirect method of data collection was a convenient mode of gathering information with the unwilling respondents.

The classroom observation helped to see/understand the methodology used in the classroom, how the teaching written material was introduced in the classroom. The combined observation of classroom and questionnaires helped to verify the teacher's opinion about the class. For example, in the questionnaire, the teacher mentions the use of tools in the classroom but it was not used in the classroom. Classroom observation also strengths the research findings; it allows the researcher to study the process of education in naturalistic settings and it helps to understand the teacher and student interaction relationship at each stage. It helped to understand the methodology used in the classroom to

implement the syllabus and the factors that influence teaching and learning.

The data was gathered for a period from January–March, the date, time, strength of the class, topic being taught, classroom ambience like ventilation and duration of the class were taken down.

The data collected from the classroom is presented in the form of observation, giving a detail of the process of teaching /learning of written communication.

Observation I

Date: 23-01-2012

Time: 2:10-3:40 pm

Number of students: 30 (present on the day of observation)

Number of male students-25, number of female students-8

Total strength - 45

Name of the Institution:

Branch: Information Technology

Topic: Notice

Classroom: big classroom ventilated, clean, a black board and benches sufficient space for teacher to move around.

Lesson: the teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and introduced the researcher to the class. The researcher sat at the back of the class so that she does not interrupt the class and still observe the classroom procedure.

The teacher briefed the previous topic and introduced the topic of that day by writing on the board and started the explanation by giving the definition of Notice, listed the elements of notice and asked questions to the students.

Students were mostly passive and took down the sample notice in their notebooks; the only tool used for teaching was black board. After the explanation the teacher asked the students to write a sample notice.

Comments: The aim of the observation to identify the procedures adopted to tech writing in the classroom, it was observed that the whole class was teacher centered and product oriented without any emphasis on the process of writing .The teacher did not go about with relevant models to help students understand the features to draft a notice .

Adequate attention was not paid to the different stages of writing namely, prewriting, while writing and post writing activities, the students were passive listeners in the classroom .There was no proper systematic evaluation of the work completed by few students.

Observation II

Date: 3-03-2012

Time: 1:20 -2:10 pm

Number of students: 55

Number of male students -35, number of female students –20

Total strength – 55 present on the day of classroom observation

Name of the Institution:

Branch: Information Technology

Topic: Complaint letters

Classroom: new block, first floor, ventilated, spacious, with black board

Lesson: the teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and introduced the researcher to the class. The researcher sat at the back of the class so that she does not interrupt the class and still observe the classroom procedure.

The teacher started the topic by explaining the importance of complaint letters; the teacher put the features of letter writing on the board - salutation, date, subject, main parts of the letter and explained the components. The teacher asked if any student had written a letter of complaint earlier and few students raised their hands (others were silent). The teacher then demonstrated a sample letter on the black board.

Then the teacher asked the students to write a letter to the Department of Electricity about frequent power cuts. The students began to write and some were discussing among themselves about the task both in their mother tongue and English.

The teacher went around and was helping students and correcting punctuation and format. After few minutes, few students were ready with their sample complaint letters.

Comments: The focus of the observation was to understand the methodology used in the classroom and the method used to teach writing in the classroom. It was observed that the class was more teachers centered and fewer learners centered. The focus was more on the product. Sufficient samples

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and format was not provided and no teaching aid was used.

The students were instructed to write without pre–writing, while writing and post-writing activity. They wrote only the main draft. The students who had previous knowledge worked fast and it was difficult to follow for the slow learners.

Observation III

Date: 23-01-2012

Time: 2:10 -2:50 pm

Number of students

Number of male students - 25, number of female students - 03

Total strength - 28

Name of the Institution:

Branch: Electronics & Communication

Topic: Letter of Enquiry

Classroom: The classroom was on the first floor, ventilated, clean with a black board. The teacher stood on the platform and a table was provided for the teacher.

Lesson: the teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and introduced the researcher to the class. The researcher sat at the back of the class so that she does not interrupt the class and still observe the classroom procedure.

The teacher wrote the topic Letter of Enquiry on the board as the students were familiar with the format after doing the letter of complaint. The teacher gave an example of a college librarian who wanted to place an order for books and write a letter to the publisher.

The teacher had audible voice but she did not put a template/sample on the board. The students in the first bench were attentive but some were not listening to the lecture. The teacher did not go around and instructed only from the dais.

Comments: the students could relate to the topic of letter of enquiry but there should have been some preparation of vocabulary words, structure or language that was situation oriented. The students understood the pattern but could not fill the letter out with appropriate words and structure.

 Observation V

Date: 24-01-2012

Time: 2: 10 -2:50 pm

Number of students - 38 numbers of female students - 35

Number of male students: 03

Total strength - 38 (present on the day of observation)

Name of the Institution:

Branch: Computer Science

Topic: Notice, Agenda and Minutes of Meeting

Classroom: same as above as the teacher had two classes for the same section, one in the morning and one in the evening.

Lesson: The teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and the students greeted the teacher and the researcher.

The teacher revised the points of Notice again as it was connected to the present topic. The teacher explained the elements of the agenda and minutes of the meeting. The agenda is attached to the Notice in that it has date, time, and the work to be done in the meeting and minutes that are written during the meeting.

Students volunteered with examples and it worked like a pre-writing session of sharing ideas and taking down points. Few students were not able to contribute any ideas.

Comments: It was observed by the researcher that the teacher and students interacted and some students gave ideas. They discussed among themselves and this discussion was useful because it generated ideas but the writing process was not helped by the teacher. The language functions, expressions and organization were not clear to the students. Some students were confused about the writing process.

Students were active and enthusiastic but their writing skills were not good. They were not familiar with language functions, organization, coherence and some of them did not participate at all. The teacher could have given some practice sessions on pre-writing or brain storming session and post-writing activity to the students.

Observation VII

Date: 25-02-2012

Time: 2:10 - 3:00 pm

Number of students - 40

Number of male students - 25, number of female students - 15

Total strength - 40 (number of students present on the day of classroom observation)

Name of the Institution:

Branch: Electronics and Communication
Topic: Paragraph Writing
Classroom: the classroom was on the first floor, big, clean and ventilated.
Lesson: The teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and introduced the researcher. As it was immediately after lunch, the students took some time to settle down. The teacher wrote the topic paragraph writing on the board and asked what is a paragraph and wrote the elements of paragraph on the board. The teacher then gave the definition of paragraph.
Students: Few of them answered what they knew about the topic but others were silent.
Teacher: defined paragraph, parts of paragraph - topic sentence, support, unity, variety and style and explained each feature.

The students listened quietly; then the teacher instructed them to write a paragraph on the topic "why did I choose to become an Engineer?" After fifteen minutes, the teacher asked the students to read out the paragraph on the given topic. Few students completed but some of them were still trying to understand and write a paragraph as they could not organize the points in a logical sequence.
Comments: The classroom observation was to see the method adopted to teach writing in the classroom. It was observed that the whole class was teacher oriented and product oriented, without any emphasis on the processes of paragraph writing. The teacher could have given a model of a paragraph to help students understand the features of a paragraph.

The teacher gave a lecture and no attention was given to the stages of writing, pre-writing, while writing and post-writing. Sufficient time was not allowed at the end of these classes to give feedback on student work.

Observation IX
Date: 5-03-2012
Time: 9:10 - 10:00 am
Number of students - 35
Number of male students - 10, number of female students - 25
Total strength – 35
Name of the Institution:
Branch: Computer Science

Topic: Writing Technical and Scientific Reports
Classroom: The Computer Science Engineering class is on first floor, it is big, clean, ventilated with a table for the teacher and a platform for the teacher to use.
Lesson: The teacher entered the classroom, greeted the students and the students greeted the teacher and the researcher. The class strength was less as it was the first period in the morning. The teacher waited for a few minutes and then introduced the topic, the Scientific Paper.

The teacher defined scientific paper and the objectives of scientific paper and gave guidelines to write a scientific paper:
Title
Abstract
Introduction
Materials
Methods
Results
Discussion
Literature cited
The students tried to understand as they were being introduced to this type of topic for the first time. Many of them had not read a research article or read a journal.

The teacher then explained the use of style, clarity, use of past tense, first person and active verbs.
Comments: The researcher observed that the class gave a mixed response to the topic. The students had to understand the elements of a scientific paper and use of grammar and language. This was difficult for the students and a sample would have helped them greatly. Grammar taught at this level helps students to write effective sentences and structure. The students were trying to understand and write why a study or experiment is performed. So here, some exposure should be given to them before explaining about a topic like scientific paper.

Summary and Discussion of the Findings of Classroom Observation

The purpose of the classroom observation was to identify and describe the different types of writing skills and sub-skills of writing used in the classroom. It was to find out if authentic material was used and to see if the teachers followed the different steps of prewriting, in-writing and post-

writing as well as the relationship between the teacher and the student. The significant observations of the researcher are discussed in detail below.

It was found that the class size was big, fifty five-sixty five students in each theory class. The researcher observed eighteen classes but only nine classes could be taken up for the study during the classroom interaction. It was found that the classes are teacher oriented, it does not encourage the students to be creative and the attention is more on the learners who respond fast and are active participants in the classroom.

Students were observed to be doing their paragraph writing and letter writing work without organizing points through prewriting, revising was not done and grammatical errors were also found in the students' work.

Students do not follow the three stages of writing; they write a draft, do not check and revise it but submit the work with errors. They write the paragraph or memo (any writing task) without drafting or brain storming. In the post-writing, students do not check the errors, content or organize points with all these factors and as such, the quality of their work submitted goes down.

The syllabus and the material

The syllabus and the material do not meet the demands and requirements of the students; it has few grammatical items, topics and sub-topics of writing skills but does not have sample materials. The teachers did not make any attempt to prepare extra material, give sufficient samples to the students to help them .

The Task

The task provided by the teacher was not planned; some of it was monotonous and repetitive. It did not challenge the students and involve their creativity. There was very less connection between what was taught and the objectives.

The teacher had very little time after the explanation and so the students were given home assignments where students invariably copied or did a bad job of the given assignment as home work. The teacher concentrated more on the finished product and completing the topics in the class. Micro-skills were largely ignored at every stage of

writing. Attention was not paid to the functions of the language.

There was no break up of writing activity into prewriting, while writing and post-writing work. All the three phases were clubbed together into one whole, while most of the students started writing their main draft without prewriting stages.

Recent researches in writing show the use of case studies, visual projects, live presentations and videos on techniques of resume writing to enhance the interest of the students. This kind of involvement on the part of the learner in classroom helps to improve their writing skills and helps them to produce better written text.

Methodology

The classes were found to be teacher centered; only lecture methods were used in the classroom. The writing Unit iii was allotted twenty one periods (each period is of 50 minutes duration) and altogether the English theory classes gets seventy one periods in one year of study from the month of September to April. Learners did not receive individual attention during the writing activity. There was lot of focus on the topic and how the topic will help at the future workplace, and no sufficient time to practice and complete the task .

The teachers

The teachers could not link prewriting steps to while writing. Sometimes they started well but in the later stages they could not build up to the topic. The teacher could not give proper feedback to the students because of lack of sufficient time. The teacher must try and give proper feedback to theirs student immediately so that the students remember and correct their errors. One observation was that the teachers showed no interest in encouraging the students to submit work .This implied that the teachers do not want to take upon the burden of correcting the work and providing the learners with feedback .

The teachers were reluctant to try new methods, to explore and experiment with new techniques and ideas. The teachers find it difficult sometimes to convince the students that writing skills are important. The teachers used only the black board and some of them wrote a few points but did not refer back to those points. The teachers were also not willing to explore and or experiment.

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Student related problems

Students were unable to write well organized paragraphs, use appropriate linkers to complete the task. The students did not have the capacity to write technical reports, use tables and explain them .The students felt this was because the teacher left the topic and went on to begin a new topic .the students were ill equipped to use many writing strategies as they were not exposed to it properly.

Byrne (1979) talks about the psychological problems like motivational factors in which the learners lack individual drive and need to complete the writing task. This further makes the writing skill that much difficult to acquire. Byrne's observation applies to this classroom observation where students are trying to acquire the writing skills.

Hyland (2003) also believes that the retention capacity of the learners depends on the needs and curiosity to achieve his/her goal successfully while trying to do the task. This means motivation is important; if the learners are motivated, they do the task well.

There are many factors which had their effect in the form of hindrances in learning/teaching of writing skills.

- The teachers felt that sufficient time is not allotted.
- The time allotted for English classes is either in the first hour of the morning when the students have not yet settled in or at the last hour at the end of the day when the students are tired.
- The classes are more teacher-centered where learners are reduced to being mere passive listeners.
- Sometimes the learners show enthusiasm and interest in the class room.
- Students could not differentiate between essay and paragraph writing; they condense all the points and make one paragraph.
- Student could not understand the language functions of formal writing skills.
- Students had problem in the three stages of writing - prewriting, while writing and post-writing. Proper conclusions were not provided and so the students did not know how to come to the end of a topic and made an abrupt conclusion.
- Students have problems with organizing, language and mechanics of writing.

Content related problem

Focus on main topic
no attention to supporting points
Very few points
Students lacked adequate input that would help them to build their knowledge in writing activities .As a result there was hardly improvement in their writing skills.

Organization related problem

Difficulties in organizing points
Language related problems
Not able to use proper strategies to organize the points.
Unable to employ appropriate language.
Difficult to write short meaningful sentences.

Language related problems

Poor mechanics of writing, difficulty in using punctuation, spellings, etc
Habit of using abbreviations like dt (date) sm (some)
Difficulty in using tenses, vocabulary
Difficulty in framing proper sentences
Tendency to mix tenses (more with past tense)

But the students can be helped to overcome these problems. The students need to be trained in the variety of sub skills of writing .They need to be explained the importance of prewriting and post writing.

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