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EFFECTIVE EXPLOITING OBSERVATION FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The article discusses the effectiveness of the usage of observation for university teacher professional development. There is an urgent need in developing positive attitude towards observation, which is widely used to measure teacher quality. The main characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of observation are analyzed, its usage for university teacher professional development (PD) is defined. Observation as part of PD is seen by researchers as a method or tool for data collection, which allows observers to evaluate teacher performance and develop strategies to improve it; ruin stereotypes and enrich insights about teaching; learn practical lessons; make conclusions based on observation. Observation provides information about relationships between teachers and students, usage of technology, the quality of instructions, activity types, classroom environment. The ways of effective exploiting of observation are offered. The materials and strategies used should be carefully examined, the procedure like a checklist, sitting chart, field notes or narrative summary, should be chosen. An approach when observers are independent, which means they do not participate in the lesson, is preferable. In order to avoid “the Hawthorne Effect” conclusions should be made after several observed lessons. The recommended number of observations is from two to four per academic year. The rubrics should focus only on some aspects of teaching. Before and after observation observers and observees should meet and discuss the issues related to the lesson. Observation is a skill which should be developed by practicing structured and unstructured observation. The effectiveness of classroom observations may be improved by exploiting high-quality standardized tools and observer training.

Key words: observation, university teacher, professional development.

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ЕФЕКТИВНЕ ВИКОРИСТАННЯ СПОСТЕРЕЖЕННЯ У ПРОФЕСІЙНОМУ РОЗВИТКУ ВИКЛАДАЧА УНІВЕРСИТЕТУ

У статті обговорюється ефективність використання спостережень для професійного розвитку викладачів університету. Існує нагальна потреба у формуванні позитивного ставлення до спостереження, яке широко використовується для вимірювання якості викладачів. Проаналізовано основні характеристики, переваги та недоліки спостереження, визначено його використання для професійного розвитку (ПР) викладачів університету. Спостереження як частина ПР розглядається дослідниками як метод чи інструмент для збору даних, що дозволяє спостерігачам оцінювати ефективність роботи викладачів та розробляти стратегії вдосконалення; руйнувати стереотипи та збагачувати уявлення про навчання; навчати практиці викладання; робити висновки на основі спостереження. Спостереження дає інформацію про стосунки між викладачами та студентами, використання технологій, якість інструкцій, види діяльності, навчальне середовище на занятті. Запропоновано способи ефективного використання спостереження. Матеріали та стратегії, що використовуються, повинні бути ретельно вивчені, слід обирати такі інструменти, як контрольний список, схема класу, нотатки або описовий підсумок. Підхід, коли спостерігачі незалежні, тобто вони не беруть участі в занятті, є кращим. Щоб уникнути «ефекту Готорна», висновки слід робити після кількох спостережуваних уроків. Рекомендована кількість спостережень від двох до чотирьох на навчальний рік. Рубрики повинні зосереджуватися лише на деяких аспектах заняття. До і після спостереження спостерігачі

та викладачі повинні зустрічатися та обговорювати питання, пов'язані з заняттям. Спостереження - це навичка, яку слід розвивати, практикуючи структуроване та неструктуроване спостереження. Ефективність спостережень заняття може бути підвищена за рахунок використання високоякісних стандартизованих інструментів та навчання спостерігачів.

Ключові слова: спостереження, викладач університету, професійний розвиток.

Formulation of the problem. The pace of modern life creates competitive environment in all areas of life. As in any sphere, traditional higher education cannot guarantee knowledge and skills for the entire teaching career. Therefore, professional development (PD) becomes a necessary part of teachers who strive to meet the needs of learners. PD may be defined as “activities that develop an individual’s skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher” (TALIS, 2009: 49).

Working in isolation, teachers lack professional support and feedback which are necessary to teach effectively. Conducting observation solves this problem as it provides experience impossible to obtain in other ways.

To observe and being observed is activity familiar to any person since school years. It appears to be simple to do, but in fact it is not as it takes a lot of efforts to exploit observation effectively. Observation is often approached formally, only when it is needed for promotion or obtaining license. Sometimes teachers prepare “an exemplary demonstrative lesson” which does not resemble the usual routine because they do not want negative response from their colleagues or officials. Trying to save face, they avoid asking for help if something goes wrong in the classroom. Such situation leads to overrating and distorting facts, teachers do not receive professional help which they need. Eventually, teacher quality is not assessed properly and problems become serious obstacles on the way to educational reforms.

Research analysis. The issues related to PD in general and observation in particular were in focus of many researchers: L. Darling-Hammond, C. Everston, J. Green, P. Grossman, H. Hill, M. O’Leary, S. Ross, L. Smith, H. Waxman. However, the problem of applying observation for university teacher PD needs further exploration. C. Campbell, L. Darling-Hammond, studying teacher preparation and evaluation, emphasized that assessment should draw on many sources of evidence, observation being an essential one; the problems of observer training, as well as systematic usage of observation were also investigated. The research of R. Marzano and M. Toth indicated the problem of accountability being more important in observation than professional development. M. King wrote about negative attitude of teachers towards observation due to the fact that they find

it threatening, which, as M. O’Leary mentioned, instead of continuous PD, led to the development of superficial skills and behaviours. Observers, who lack proper training, use complicated scoring systems, produce unreliable data, which makes observation time-consuming and unpopular.

There is an urgent need in developing positive attitude towards observation, which could be possible by introducing regular practice of observation, training of observers, developing reliable tools. As a response to this need researchers started to investigate the ways of improving the effectiveness of observation related to professional development.

The purpose of the article. The aim of this paper is to define the main characteristics of observation, highlight its advantages and drawbacks, explore its usage for university teacher professional development.

Presenting main material. The term “observation” is widely used in various subject areas. A generic definition of observation which may be applied in different fields is “method of data collection in which researchers observe within a specific research field” (Bryant, 2019). In research literature related to education, the terms “lesson observation”, “classroom observation”, “observation” are used interchangeably. The terms “learning walks” or “walkthroughs” are also common referring to short visits though (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). Observation is considered to be a tool for measuring teacher quality as it allows researchers to reveal what teachers really do in the class and evaluate their performance; it may be used for formative, as well as for summative assessment (Borg, 2018: 23).

In fact, observation is an important tool for measuring and improving professional practice in educational institutions (O’Leary, 2012). Observation is still considered to be the basis of teacher evaluation providing information which directly refers to teacher performance by measuring it quantitatively and qualitatively (New Teacher Project, 2013: 1). Observation is used to learn more about the needs of teachers; to identify the areas of professional development; it may be considered as a tool for checking quality, teacher professional development and collecting information (Akoue, 2015). Thus, observation is seen by researchers as a method or tool for data collection, which allows observers to measure quality, evaluate teacher performance and develop strategies to improve it.

Benefits of observation include opportunities to learn more not only about teachers and learners, but about the context which allows observers to understand better the reasons of what happens in class; notice things which are not visible for the others, or which they do not want to discuss openly (Bryant, 2019). Being observed within natural and authentic setting is equally valuable for novice and experienced teachers, who are engaged in teacher education program development and evaluation (Weber, 2016: 94).

Planning observation, one should remember that it is a complicated process and requires preparation. The meaning of observation may be presented as three forms of seeing: seeing as, seeing in and seeing that. “Seen as” means comparing the past experiences with newly obtained during observation which is connected with ruining stereotypes and enriching insights about teaching. “Seeing in” is connected with practical lessons learnt during observation, concrete activities which could be used by the observer. “Seeing that” is interpreting and generalizing, making judgments and inferences based on observation (Orland-Barak, Leshem, 2009: 36–37).

Observation provides information about relationships between teachers and students, usage of technology, the quality of instructions, activity types, classroom environment, to name just a few. The data collected during observation may be used for improving teaching practices, identifying specific ones which lead to better outcomes like learner engagement and academic achievement (Weber, 2016: 92).

The main purpose of observation is job-performance evaluation which is conducted by educational authorities. Such observations follow official procedures, and usually they are scheduled beforehand. Another purpose of observation is sharing teaching expertise aimed at professional development which is conducted by fellow teachers specialized in the same area or other academic disciplines. In both cases the goal of observation is to improve the effectiveness of teaching (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

Usually observers are university officials or colleagues, who may work in the same or different content areas. In case observers are teachers of other academic disciplines, they focus mainly on instructional practices possible to apply in various educational environments. Observation aims at fostering collaboration between teachers who often work in isolation, which leads to sharing best practices, provides materials for further data analysis, discussions, self-reflection, journaling (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013).

Observation may be classified according to the degree of observer’s involvement. There are two

approaches to maintaining observation: one which aims at being objective, not interfering with people under observation, and another which aims at observer’s involvement when they become part of the environment under observation (Angrosino, 2005). In this case it is challenging for observers to be objective, as they build friendly relationship with the observees and cannot assess impartially. Besides, as far as they are taking part in classroom activities, they cannot concentrate on the rubrics, checklists or take notes.

Observation is really challenging to conduct and assess considering its complexity, involvement of a certain number of participants and other characteristics. At the same time its presence in the PD course indicates the level which is recognized by educational institutions in any country.

It is necessary to take into consideration the peculiarities of observation which make it less or more effective. First of all, it is the fact that all the aspects of a lesson are impossible to observe. In order to overcome this difficulty it is advisable to focus only on a few aspects, for instance, classroom management, lesson structure, assessment, etc. (Richards, 2011: 90–92).

Secondly, observation is usually conducted by experts who have their own opinions and views, and, inevitably, present the results subjectively. In order to limit subjectivity, information gathered during observation should be clarified after the lesson by means of conducting a quick interview (Richards, 2011: 90–92). Observers should be prepared to be impartial, use rubrics, deal with unexpected situations, etc.

Thirdly, the presence of an observer influences all the participants of observation. It is important to remember about so-called “the Hawthorne Effect”, when people under observation behave differently due to various reasons (Bryant, 2019). They may perform better than usually or worse, protesting against unwanted changes in the classroom (Richards, 2011: 90–92). Therefore, observation should be carefully planned and only after several observed lessons of the same teacher conclusions should be made. It is advisable to take a video or audio recording of a lesson to be examined later: it provides additional opportunities for further analysis (Richards, 2011: 97). The materials and strategies used should be carefully examined, the procedures like a checklist, sitting chart, field notes or narrative summary, should be chosen. Ethics, which requires an observer not to become a participant or evaluator, is also very important (Richards, 2011: 101).

The number of observations depends on the categories of teachers: continuing contract have one required observation and post-observation conference during the second year of teaching and two

during the third year of work, beginning probationary have the same frequency plus one observation during the first year; experienced probationary have two required observation and post-observation conference during the second year of teaching. It may also depend on university policy, district, country, etc. (Richards, 2011: 90–92). Currently, between two and four observations per year for more experienced teachers are required in many cases, but some experts recommend even a higher rate in order to have a real effect on teaching (Hill, Grossman, 2013: 13).

In order to be effective, observation should be subject-specific, conducted by experts knowledgeable in the subject, it should provide information which is valuable for teachers (Hill, Grossman, 2013: 10). In fact, inaccurate scores may hinder improvement efforts redirecting attention (Hill, Grossman, 2013: 12).

Being aware of the drawbacks allows researchers to make observation effective. Common problems connected with observation are related to subjectivity of observers and faults with rubrics; results are inaccurate and make impossible to fix real problems; feedback is not provided properly (New Teacher Project, 2013: 2–3).

Overcoming obstacles and increasing effectiveness of observation is possible by assessing the content, how it is taught and how learned (New Teacher Project, 2013: 4). Rubrics should include what students are able to demonstrate in the classroom (New Teacher Project, 2013: 5). Rubrics should focus on a limited number of indicators (up to five) based on the outcomes of the lesson giving an opportunity for observers to track instructional strategies of teachers and compare their effectiveness (New Teacher Project, 2013: 6–7). It is possible to do as in higher education the attitude towards observation tends to be more flexible giving teachers more freedom in choosing rubrics, providing opportunities for peer-assessment and discussions (O’Leary, 2012).

Observations may last from a couple of minutes to a whole day. Observational notes, video and audio materials provide factual material for feedback and further analysis. Teacher’s behavior is also very important: if they act differently in the presence of an observer, it is a signal for learners whose reaction may be unpredictable (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). Different educational contexts should be taken into consideration: a stage in a teaching career, age, language level, skills, motivation of learners (Howard, 2015: 3). Supervision may range from more to less directive, from more authoritative to more facilitative, which creates certain environment and influences the results of observation (Confirmatory Feedback in Teacher Education, 2016: 7).

Before the lesson the criteria and goals of the lesson should be discussed, and, if necessary, negotiated. (Akoue, 2015: 13). Usually observers are briefly introduced and the purpose of their presence is explained. It saves time eliminating further questions and possible worries of learners, creating the atmosphere of trust and understanding.

In order to trace what is happening in the classroom, notes should be taken in the form of questions which may be used for clarifying later what was seen while observing the lesson (Akoue, 2015: 14). Questions for the meeting with the teacher (observee) should be prepared beforehand, as well as the questions planned to be asked after the lesson. Before the lesson questions about the objective, ways of dealing with possible difficulties, expected outcomes may be asked; after the lesson it is important to learn about achieving objectives, successes, areas to improve (Akoue, 2015: 15).

It is important to remember that observation without feedback does not make any sense (Howard, 2015: 2). Observation and feedback play an instructional and supportive role, beneficial for all the participants (Howard, 2015: 3). Post-observation feedback creates the conditions for reconsidering previous knowledge and beliefs after getting new knowledge and experience (Confirmatory Feedback in Teacher Education, 2016: 6).

The value of classroom observation is possible to increase by using standardized, reliable and valid observation tools and intensive observer training (Borg, 2018: 23). The unified observation tools are not developed yet. Still, there are some widely used in the USA which are generic or subject-specific. Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Framework for Teaching (FFT) may serve as examples of generic observation tools, which means that they may be used in any educational environment or content area. CLASS is used for analyzing teacher-student communication on a scale from 1 to 7 in three domains: classroom management, emotional and instructional support. FFT focuses on four domains: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, professional responsibilities, thus covering not only teacher-students interactions, but teacher performance as well (Borg, 2018: 23).

The Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observations (PLATO) is a subject-specific observation tool for English Language Arts (ELA). PLATO is based on four domains: speaking activities, representation of content, effective instruction and classroom environment, which are considered to be especially important for learning languages (Borg, 2018: 23).

Observation instruments usually use four- or five-point scales to grade a lesson: predominantly weak,

more weaknesses than strengths, more strengths than weaknesses, predominantly strong; unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, distinguished; innovating, applying, developing, beginning, not using.

It is important to keep the number of comprehensive elements reasonable considering the fact that more items require costly teacher evaluation. Meanwhile the debates on the issue of classroom observation indicate its actuality (Borg, 2018: 24).

The main criteria for the second language classroom observation developed in the University of Pennsylvania are: preparation, language use, lesson presentation, classroom management, classroom atmosphere, use of technology. Points are assigned for outstanding (4), good (3), fair (2) and poor performance (1).

The instructor should answer the pre-observation questions about the objectives of the lesson and the course, as well as post observation questions if the objectives are achieved and possible alterations. Final notes include additional comments of the observer, description of the strengths and suggestions for improvements (The University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

According to the Formal Classroom Observation Form, 7 criteria are used when observing the class: professional knowledge, instructional planning, instructional delivery, assessment of student learning, learning environment, professionalism, student academic progress. The data is obtained not only from observation, but also from examination of the documentation (The University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

One lesson may be conducted by Student Teacher and observed by two school officials, thus producing two checklists completed by Cooperating or Classroom Teacher, College Supervisor and one Self-Evaluation checklist completed by Student Teacher. Completion is done by ticking the items on the checklist which are focused on different areas of observation: for Cooperating Teacher they are preparation for the lesson, knowledge of the subject matter, classroom management, communication, students' participation and engagement; College Supervisor should assess general appearance, preparation, attitude, classroom management, effectiveness of lessons and presenter; Student Teacher should answer Yes / No questions about their objective, timing, staying on the topic, eye contact, using materials, explanations and instructions, etc. (Student Teacher Observation Checklist, 2018).

Successful observer training largely depends on standardization which makes the process of evaluation objective. In order to check the quality of such training three areas should be considered: training protocol, parameters and scoring. Training protocol relates to questions about a training manual, videos for scoring practice, guidelines to be completed; parameters con-

cern definitions of the issues, duration of observations, specific time and activities to observe; time interval for scoring, rubrics, procedure (Pianta, Hamre, 2016: 25).

Observation is a skill which should be developed. It is possible to do by practicing structured and unstructured observation timing each up to 5–10 minutes. Such activity is more effective if unstructured observation precedes structured.

Unstructured observation means taking notes of anything happening around; all the details including physical characteristics of the scene, feelings, etc. should be included. It is also advisable to take pictures, video, radio recording or draw. This kind of observation allows observers to single out what is really important for the research. Besides, such data may be collected several times and analyzed later (Bryant, 2019).

Structured observation is based on finding the answers to the research question or questions. The main feature of this kind of observation is usage of an observation template. Therefore, practicing structured observation starts with formulating a research question or questions and developing an observation template. Having the same time limit and location, one should focus on the features determined by the research question. Structured observation saves time and efforts and more suitable for inexperienced observers (Bryant, 2019).

Finally, the notes made during these two observations, should be compared and analyzed. Several structured observations, focused on different observation questions, are possible to conduct. Video recordings may be used for observation.

Besides the skill of observation in general, practicing structured and unstructured observation may develop a better understanding of the differences between them.

Conclusions. Thus, observation as part of PD is seen by researchers as a method or tool for data collection, which allows observers to evaluate teacher performance and develop strategies to improve it; ruin stereotypes and enrich insights about teaching; learn practical lessons; make conclusions based on observation. In order to avoid “the Hawthorne Effect” conclusions should be made after several observed lessons. The recommended number of observations is from two to four per academic year. An approach when observers are independent is preferable. The rubrics should focus only on some aspects of teaching. Before and after observation observers and observees should meet and discuss the issues related to the lesson. Observation is a skill which should be developed by practicing structured and unstructured observation. The effectiveness of classroom observations may be improved by exploiting high-quality standardized tools and observer training.

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