

Critical teaching observation for formative assessment purposes

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Abstract: The article explores the processes required for the observation and evaluation of teaching for formative purposes. In tandem, it critically approaches the overall context of teaching, namely the characteristics, factors, elements and particular aspects that affect the teacher observation we conducted, for formative assessment purposes, during a three-hour second grade Greek Language class. We focused on gathering remarks and suggestions that would assist the observed teacher in improving her teaching repertoire and practice, her overall professional development and, eventually, the improvement of the teaching process. We also enhanced our skills in teacher observation, formative assessment and reflecting thinking. The contemporary trends in teachers’ and teaching evaluation were also explored. Finally, critical reference is also made to the implementation processes of integrated teacher observation for formative assessment purposes, the methods, means and tools employed, the obstacles faced and the results of our feedback-oriented encounter with the observed teacher.

Keywords: teaching observation, formative assessment, critical analysis

Introduction and aim of research

This research seeks, initially, to present the process of observation, analysis and evaluation of a three-hour second grade Greek Language teaching session entitled “Invited and inviting” (14th unit, Volume B’) that took place in the Primary School of Kerameies, Kefalonia (Greece) on the 26th February 2014. The teaching assessment was conducted for formative and feedback purposes as well as for the improvement of our observation skills.

The second level explored the teaching process, the tools employed, the problems that emerged and the methodology and principles of assessment. For the formative teacher assessment, the tools and methodology of the Developmental Teacher Evaluation Kit (DeTEK) were selected, on the one hand, due to their validity and reliability and, on the other, because the observed teacher had four years of professional experience and thus could be in need of guidance whose nature would be revealed through observation and analysis of her teaching attitudes and practices.

1. Presentation and critical analysis of teaching observation

The unobtrusive, smooth and authentic teaching observation and assessment presupposes an atmosphere of pleasant interaction with the observed teacher: to meet her long before the observation day, to ease any reservations or fears about the particular procedure and to analyze with clarity and lucidity the aim and reasons of teaching observation and assessment. Right from the start and before the initiation of teaching, we informed the teacher about the personal characteristics profile she would also fill in.

Before the initiation of teaching, we were informed by the teacher about the targets she had set for the particular session. We took into consideration a) the objectives of the official Curriculum, b) the teaching-learning process set (in guidelines) by the didactic package (teacher’s book, student’s book, student’s activity book and the Pedagogical Institute educational software), c) the enrichment of the lesson’s targets by the teacher who designed and organized tasks not included in the activities’ textbook, d) the media and various materials utilized (teaching techniques, video, transparencies etc.) and e) the students’ ability level and the educational diversity of the classroom as presented by the teacher to our information. We asked the teacher to present us the whole range materials to be employed during her teaching and, in particular, the digital ones (video and transparencies) to gain prior knowledge of the diverse audiovisual media that would ease the observation process. The observed teaching session dealt with Language, unit 14, entitled “Invited and inviting” (Volume B’, Second Grade). It needs to be stressed that the first two teaching hours were conducted in the classroom while the third in the computer lab.

Upon entering the classroom, we introduced ourselves to the students, calmed them down and sat behind the desks so as to observe the teacher without disturbing the students.

According to DeTEK, observation/assessment focuses on six performance areas by using 22 indicators.

1.1. AREA I (*Business-like: the teacher is organized and systematic, focused and well prepared*)

At the beginning of the lesson the teacher informed the students about the lesson targets and, in particular, the use of invitations and greeting cards and the way they are written. She also mentioned the repertoire of teaching activities to be implemented as well as the process to be followed and the roles to be undertaken. She followed the course designed: initiation – presentation – text processing (of the invitation and greeting card) – additional activities (designed by her) – use of ICT by the students and homework assignments. As became evident during the teaching process, the teacher had made provision for the students, under the concern of their parents, to be prepared for the particular lesson (by a note delivered on the previous day) so as to bring to school various materials and means to create invitations and greeting cards. On the previous day, she had also asked for the software Revelation Natural Art (RNA) to be installed in the computer lab PCs to enable students design their own

(individual/collective) invitations and greeting cards in the simple and attractive learning environment of the RNA. The pace of the teaching process was appropriate for most of the students and without breaks. However, three students lagged behind and exhibited partial inability to complete the task (see further below).

1.2. AREA II (*Friendly: the teacher is warm, positive and extrovert*)

The teacher, at the beginning of the lesson, inquired whether all students had brought from their homes the means and materials required by the teaching activities. As it turned out, two students had not brought all the required materials. She dealt with the issue by using reserved materials and means and by inter-student borrowing. During the class, she provided guidance to the students in a calm manner and using low tone of voice. She often urged, encouraged and praised the students discreetly using phrases like “you can do it”, “you have the skills to cut a card”, “nice drawings and colors”, “the text is very good and simple”, “Aggeliki, you are doing very well with the PC” etc. The teacher, in a descending guidance manner, actively engaged in the activity the students that appeared to be lacking artistic skills, by stressing that each and every personal creation is acceptable and respected. She highlighted, pointed out and rewarded the “strong” points of each personal creation.

The interest and concern of the teacher to the students was widespread and apparent in various gestures – stances and attitudes: indicatively, the frequent eye-contact with all students throughout the class, her physical presence next to them, patting on the back and bending over them, the discreet and low-voiced individualized descending guidance provided to students when needed.

1.3. AREA III (*Verbally interactive: the teacher listens to, accepts, encourages and inquires*)

The teacher made use of supervisory material and models of the assigned constructions, presented the parts and way of designing the invitations and greeting cards and prompted students to announce their progress in order to provide clarification and avoid misunderstanding. With appropriate, clear and accurate instructions and questions she oriented students (“where would you write the Invitation?”, “what would you write first?”, “where would you write the sender’s/recipient’s name?”, “where would you put the drawing/picture?”, “what will you do next?” etc.). With several complementary questions, she guided students as to where to focus and made comments and remarks so they could be precise (“who is the invitation addressed to?”, “why did you put this drawing?” etc.). She also sought to engage most of the students in the discussion, that is, she gave a participatory and meta-cognitive dimension to her teaching (“how did you make it?”, “what did you do first?”, “why did you change your mind and modified your initial design?”, “what caused you trouble?”, “how would you improve the invitation had you had a second chance?”). She employed various asking techniques ranging from simple epistemological questions to

analytical, evaluative and synthetic ones.

1.4. AREA IV (*Stimulating: the teacher is imaginative, creative, engaging and avoids dull routines*)

The teacher asked students their birthday and whether they have a party and shared their feelings. She suggested activities and original creations that actively and creatively engaged all students, such as the making of a birthday invitation, a greeting card for Mother’s Day, an invitation to the Mayor to attend a theatrical play performed by second grade students as part of an Environmental Education Project.

She appeared enthusiastic: “What a nice idea, Niko”. “Your god mother will find the invitation amazing”. “Which of these three pictures would better match the carnival’s invitation and why?”. “Pick some of the pictures from the archive and tell me why you have chosen them”.

The teacher introduced innovative practices and ICT in her teaching. At the beginning of the class, she designed in the PC (with the aid of Kidspiration program) and on drawing paper a conceptual map for the invitation and greeting card. The students provided words, phrases and comments on invitations and greeting cards they had received (brainstorming). All remarks and comments were recorded in the conceptual map so that the key elements contained in invitations and greeting cards to be made clear.

Children found her humour and occasional jokes entertaining, primarily when, with the use of the PC, cartoons were inserted into the invitation and wrong choices were made i.e., when sad “emojis” appeared in happy invitations etc.

1.5. AREA V (*Individually-oriented teaching: the teacher treats each student as a distinct person*)

As stated, the teacher had taken into consideration the learning abilities and needs of the majority of the classroom. And yet, during that particular session, she overlooked the cases of three Special Education Needs students and was not prepared beforehand to respond to their individual needs and particular teaching-learning demands. During the class, she attempted to motivate and urge the three students to engage in the activities but with far from satisfactory results. The students replied: “I do not understand”, “I find it hard to follow”.

The teacher sought to actively engage students, used descending guidance, enhanced the self-esteem and collective exploratory progress of the students and played a catalytic role so that they (with the aforementioned exceptions) could meet the targets. The teacher used phrases like: “Katerina, you can do it”, “Work as a team”, “Is there another way to do it?”, “I’ll show you the way and then you’ll carry on by yourselves”, “Group three, keep on going bearing in mind the 4 elements of the Invitation”, “What part is missing?”, “How do you insert in Revelation Natural Art (RNA)” etc.

1.6. AREA VI (*Multi-media integrative: the teacher uses various technological media to dramatize, demonstrate etc.*)

As mentioned, the teacher made use of ICT to develop a conceptual map (brainstorming) with the Kidspiration software and the video projector. During the third teaching hour, conducted in the computer lab, she split the class into heterogeneous groups of 2 or 3 students per PC and showed them the word processor (word) and Revelation Natural Art (RNA) software. Using ICT, drawing paper and verbal initiation, the teacher achieved audio-visual perception of information (2 senses-2 channels of stimulus input).

The students created invitations and greeting cards with texts, colors, drawings, pictures. In the end, all students, including the aforementioned 3 (who had difficulties and for whom we suggested differentiated intervention), played a role-playing game with recipients/senders of invitation and post-persons. The role-playing games were coordinated by the teacher who also actively participated in one – the exemplary role-playing game. The teacher made use of most of students’ senses (multi-sensual learning) such as vision, hearing and touch in activities such as: a) discussion, b) use of PC and c) crafts, that is, the use of means and materials. In tandem, the role-playing game, to which she was also actively involved, revealed the students’ and teacher’s artistic and mobility skills.

In the end, and having thanked the teacher and students, we reviewed some of the assessment points, before they fell in oblivion, and handed the personal characteristics profile to the teacher to fill it in for her part.

2. Results of the encounter with the observed teacher

As prescribed by the DeTEK, feedback commenced with the positive aspects of teaching and the teacher such as: appropriate organization of teaching, verbal clarity, utilization of questions, concern for the lesson and the students, use of multiple practices and means (ICT, conceptual map, crafts, etc.). Having highlighted these points, the teacher was asked to justify/comment upon some of her practices. The discussion was partly conducted on the basis of the 100 indicators form and focused on the points of divergence between my comments and her views.

The only dark spot worth mentioning was the case of the three students who had difficulties in following the lesson. We asked her if she had identified the issue and how she could have handled it. She replied that she was troubled and that she might have differentiated her teaching to match their learning level, interests and learning profile. We concluded that she should have prepared different activities (or divide and simplify the original ones) that would follow the Curriculum guidelines albeit with a differentiated content, modified manner and alternative final product compared to the rest of the class. The teacher agreed with our proposals and, upon reflection, suggested ways (activities) of tackling the problem.

Both the replies to DeTEK forms and the outcome of the discussion did not show

considerable divergence between the two parts involved (12% divergence in the replies). For this reason, we skipped the second phase of the assessment process and proceeded with the third where, after the identification of the problem, we suggested the teacher to attend a series of exemplary teaching courses and seminars on differentiated teaching.

3. Critical account of an integrated teaching observation for formative assessment purposes

Formative assessment seeks the qualitative improvement of the teaching profession and teachers’ work, the provision of guidance, assistance and feedback to teachers and an opportunity to develop their competencies (Kyriakides, 2001, Pasiardis, 1996, Stronge, 1997, Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2002). For this reason, it is critical both for teachers’ development, particularly early in their career when confidence in their teaching adequacy is low (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy & Hoy, 1998), as well as to the quality of education provided as a whole (Pasiardis & Savvides, 2014a, b). Yet, we believe that for formative assessment to properly work the assessment criteria have to be completely understood before observation commences. These predetermined criteria will allow the observer to focus on the substantial elements of teaching and concentrate on the facts. In tandem, according to Tang and Chow (2007, 1080), developing an understanding of assessment criteria shared by both the observer and the observed, is essential for the self-improvement of the observed teacher.

The second point that needs to be stressed is the “breadth” of the assessment criteria. According to van de Grift (2007, 137), “effective teaching means looking for and working on the right balance in a range of activities and teaching strategies. From this point of view, we regard teaching as a multidimensional construct”. Thus, a reliable system of formative assessment should take into consideration the multi-dimensionality of teaching and evaluate as many of its aspects as possible.

During the observation, the evaluator should emphasize data recording -a demanding task given the multiplicity of activities and students’ and teacher reactions during the class- having in mind that “constructive feedback has to be based on evidence” (Tang and Chow 2007, 1069) and that “immediate classroom practice ... is the primary concern in post-observation conferences” (ibid, 1067). Observation needs to be as objective as possible and, although the observers may have followed their own pedagogical strategies in the past and have own personal experiences and views, “the acknowledgment, and perhaps reminder, that there are a multiplicity of approaches to teaching” is critical (Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan 2008, 220).

As Harris (1986) points out, formative assessment presupposes selecting appropriate evaluation criteria, establishing performance specifications and selecting, adapting, and designing materials for data gathering and analysis. As far as performance specification is concerned, the choice of observation tools requires demanding preparation. There are various methods and tools and thus the evaluator is called upon to ensure their effectiveness in terms of data gathering and adopt them considering the peculiarities of the case in hand.

Conclusion

The observation process of the class in question indicated that right observation requires right preparation by both the observer and the observed. The evaluator needs to select the appropriate methodology- system of observation/formative assessment and be in position to use the tooled selected. Full control of the DeTEK parameters, our chosen system, requires, in our view, time, practice and experience. Moreover, the observer needs to prepare the observed a) by providing information about procedural matters and b) psychologically, by establishing an atmosphere of trust, extroversion, friendship that would allow problems to show themselves during the post-observation conference.

Systems, such as DeTEK, allow a gradual, multilevel/multifaceted assessment as the observation results are classified in three levels of abstraction starting from the most abstract framework and ending at the most concrete elements: from the initial six performance areas, to the 22 performance indicators that contextualize the six areas and, finally, to the 100 behavior statements that explore and reveal practices and teaching styles. Thus, as an assessment technique, it offers quantitative and qualitative control over the achievement of the teaching objectives. And yet, it is far from comprehensive for, as Moraitis remarks for assessment systems in general, its value is relative, since it cannot take into consideration [teacher’s] personality as a whole (Moraitis, 2002).

The formative teachers’ assessment system, by and large, facilitates feedback not only through peer observation but also because it allows teachers knowledge of the assessment criteria to the extent, they are called upon to fill in their own profile. After all, and as our discussion indicated, developing a shared understanding of assessment criteria “helps the teacher to grow in the ability to be self-monitoring of pedagogical practice” (Tang and Chow 2007, 1069) and facilitates self-directed improvement. We believe that self-observation encourages teachers to adopt a reflexive approach to teaching, to analyze data and to implement the new knowledge and experience acquired to teaching practice.

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