

Three-Way Observation: The Perfect Circle or Bermuda Triangle?

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Introduction

Classroom observation has always played an important role in teacher education and training. According to traditional views of observation, by observing how teachers conduct their lessons, solve problems of classroom management, and interact with students it is possible for novice teachers to develop a repertoire of strategies and techniques that they can apply in their own teaching. However the significance of what is observed depends on the theory of teaching the teacher holds. In using classroom observation, it is therefore necessary to go beyond a focus of techniques and strategies experienced teachers employ and to *use observation as a way of collecting information that can be used to develop a deeper understanding of how and why teachers teach the way they do* (Richards, 1997). To help us do that, there are two influential types of observation for professional development: *self observation* and *peer observation*, both of which are based on teachers' active participation for their own professional development.

Kurtoğlu Eken (1999) questions very reasonably “why should all these be in the interest of teachers only?” and conducts a *learner observation* process in which she replaces the teacher observers with learner observers with the belief that *teachers have a lot to learn from their learners, and learners have a lot to learn from each other*. Ultimately, because lessons are for students, their feedback is at least as important as that of the observer.

Three-way Observation

As it combines peer observation with learner observation, one step beyond both is ***three-way observation***. In three-way observation not only an observer but also the learners share their ideas and perceptions with their teacher after an observed lesson. It works in the following way:

- a) Colleagues work together. A teacher invites another teacher to work with him or her.
- b) They arrange to carry out several observations of each other's classes, i.e. to take part in peer observation.
- c) Rather than use the procedures for peer observation, data is collected at the end of each lesson on the students', the teacher's, and the observer's perceptions of the lesson.

Information is collected at the end of a lesson when the teacher allots 5-7 minutes to the following activities.

The students' task: Think back on the lesson that you just experienced and write answers to these questions.

- a) What were the main goals of the lesson?
- b) What is the most important thing you learned from this lesson?
- c) What did you think was the most useful part of the lesson?
- d) Was there anything about the lesson that was not very useful to you?

The observer's task: As you observe the lesson try to answer these questions.

- a) What were the main goals of the lesson?
- b) What is the most important thing the students learned from the lesson?
- c) What did you think was the most successful part of the lesson?
- d) Was there anything about the lesson that was not very successful?
- e) How did you feel about the lesson as a whole?

The teacher's task: At the end of the lesson you taught, answer these questions.

- a) What were the main goals of the lesson?
- b) What is the most important thing the students learned from the lesson?
- c) What did you think was the most successful part of the lesson?
- d) Was there anything about the lesson that was not very successful?
- e) How did you feel about the lesson as a whole?

The class teacher then collects the students' comments and arranges for a time to review them together with the observer's comment.

The first study on three-way observation is cited in Richards (1998, p. 151). The results of this study reveal that there is “a gap between the way teachers and learners see the classroom”. Can three-way observation fill this gap? The second study on three-way observation comes from Yurtseven (2002) with more in-depth results. According to her, three-way observation could help to fill this gap.

The Study

As a replication of Yurtseven's study (2002), the purpose of this paper is to explain how another three-way observation process has been realized in an exploratory study carried out with an intermediate class at METU, Department of Basic English.

In order to collect data about the perceptions of the students, observer and teacher, a reflection form was used (Appendix A). All the parties used the same form so that the researcher could see to what extent their perceptions on the observed lesson matched.

The research questions were as follows:

- a) What are the potential benefits of three-way observation?
- b) To what extent do the observers', teachers' and students' perceptions match?

Participants

18 intermediate students who were attending the preparatory school at METU in the 2008-2009 fall term participated voluntarily in the study. They were all Turkish students. As for the teachers, two teachers worked in this study. They are currently employed at METU, Department of Basic English. Similarly, both of them were Turkish.

The Procedure

1. The teacher and the observer decided on the day of the observation. They talked about the aim and the process of the study. (The aim of the study was to see whether there were any matches between the perspectives of the students, observer and teacher and to find out the potential benefits of three-way observation).
2. The teacher informed the students about the aim and the process of the study. She told them that they – the students, the observer and the teacher herself – would answer the same questionnaire about that observed lesson in the first ten minutes of the next lesson.
3. The teacher conducted the lesson as usual.
4. In the first ten minutes of the next lesson, the questionnaires were distributed. The students were given the Turkish version of the questionnaire because their proficiency in English was not sufficient to express their feelings well.
5. The questionnaires were analysed to see whether there were any similarities and/or differences between the perspectives of the students, observer and teacher and to find out the potential benefits of three-way observation.

Data Analysis

During analysis, the responses for each question in the questionnaire were highlighted according to the key words and the highlighted data was categorized. Then the data was put into tables to show the similarities and/or differences between the perspectives of the students, observer and teacher (Table 1).

Colour coding was used to show the similarities between the answers of the different participants. At the end of each answer, the number of students who gave the same answer to the question was indicated in parenthesis.

	Teacher (T)	Observer (O)	Students (Ss)
Question 1: What did the students learn in the lesson?	How to write a good topic sentence (TS) covering the features of both open and close ones	How to write a good TS covering the features of both open and close ones	A. writing open / closed TS (18) B. importance of outlining prior to composing (12) C. identifying & writing topic + controlling idea (10) D. how to write a paragraph (5) E. some vocabulary (1)
Question 2: How do you feel about students' involvement in the lessons?	All involved A variety of interaction Highly motivated	All actively participated Very intelligent ss who question everything, which is quite nice although it might be challenging for the teacher from time to time	A. good participation (13) because of discussing possible answers (3) because of writing and speaking parts (2) but we were a bit tired because it was the 3rd lesson have to be active because of group work (1) B. I could have done better but I did my best (1) C. I did not participate much but I listened to it carefully because it was very useful (2)

<p>Question 3: What aspects / areas were you particularly happy with?</p>	<p>writing TS on OHTs. analyzing each other's TSs according to criteria</p>	<p>producing sentences critically analyzing each other's work working like a team, helping each other to achieve a goal</p>	<p>A. Writing in groups and discussing alternatives with friends (10) B. Using OHT to see TSs rather than writing on board (7) because we could see more examples (5) because it was relieving to see others make mistakes 😊 (1) C. Putting sentences into the correct order (5) D. Beginning of the lesson (3) E. Everything was OK because I was not bored and learned better (3) F. Learning vocabulary with pictures (2)</p>
<p>Question 4: Which of the activities did you like the most? Why? Explain briefly.</p>	<p>Evaluating TSs with the class</p>	<p>“Productivity is really important to me and ss produced really nice sentences. In addition, they evaluated their own work, which is the highest level of learning according to Bloom’s taxonomy.”</p>	<p>A. Studying with OHP (5) because we did not waste time on board because it was easier to follow B. Putting into correct order (4) because I understood the whole plan of a paragraph because we started with a simple task and continued with more difficult tasks C. Learning voc. with pictures (4) D. Group work activities (4) because it was fun because we help each other E. Individual work (1)</p>
<p>Question 5: Do you have any suggestions for this lesson? If yes, explain briefly.</p>	<p>Satisfied Nothing more to add</p>	<p>It would be better if T had elicited criteria from ss & put it on board before ss wrote TSs</p>	<p>A. Everything was fun & great (17) we should continue to have lessons like this (2) B. I felt important because the T asked me to reflect on the lesson (1) C. To have more & different examples to understand better (1)</p>

Table 1. The similarities and differences in answers provided by the teacher, students and observer

Implications and Conclusion

The data collected from this mini research mostly confirmed the conclusions reached by Kurtoğlu Eken (1999) and Yurtseven (2002).

The first research question aimed to identify the potential benefits of three-way observation. Findings revealed that three-way observation seemed beneficial for the learners as the process, when carried out systematically and carefully, helped them to gain awareness of teaching behaviours as well as their own learning. In addition, as they actively participated in the process, learners had the opportunity to express themselves as individuals with their preferences, their

learning styles and their concerns in a non-threatening environment which in turn probably led to an increase in their motivation. Last but not the least, three-way observation showed the students that they have an important stake in decision making, and that teachers value their suggestions.

It was also beneficial for the teachers as three-way observation proved once again that “we have a lot to learn from our learners, and that our learners have a lot to learn from each other” (Kurtoğlu Eken 1999, p. 240; Yurtseven, 2002, p. 6). Learners’ suggestions are invaluable because they not only offer an insider’s point of view but also provide direction for future exploratory practice. Therefore, points raised in these observations can be put to use and incorporated into future lessons.

Our second research question aimed to determine the extent to which the perceptions of observers, teachers, and learners matched. The findings showed that there was no consistent match or mismatch. However, the existence of such a match is not what really matters. According to Richards (1997), a gap between the way teachers and learners see the classroom does exist and three-way observation could help to fill this gap (Yurtseven, 2002). Thus, what really matters is to be able to determine the gaps when there are any, and to try to fill them as much as possible with help from colleagues and maybe more importantly with from students with three-way observation.

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Appendix A

Reflection Form (For teacher, observer and students)

1. What did the students learn in the previous lesson?
2. How do you feel about the students’ involvement in the lesson?
3. What areas/aspects were you particularly happy with? Explain briefly.
4. Which of the activities did you like the most? Why? Explain briefly.
5. Do you have any suggestions for this lesson? If yes, explain briefly.