



LANGUAGE MATERIALS OBSERVATION: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING

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Abstract:

The language classroom is an important site of research for investigations in the field of applied linguistics (Dörnyei, 2007), and the effectiveness of language theories and materials can be examined in a real-world setting in a systematic approach. Furthermore, materials development is the most effective way in field of linguistics and applied linguistics because the theories of language teaching and learning can be made meaningful and relevant by reference to practical procedures (Tomlinson, 2003). Observing the materials in the classrooms is one of the qualitative research methods for evaluating and developing language materials and reflecting on language theories which are explicitly or implicitly embedded in the activities of the materials (Alkhaldi, 2014). This study focuses on classroom observation of language materials which are rarely investigated in the field of applied linguistics taking into consideration that there is possibly a contradiction between what is one's espoused theory and one's theory-in-use, that is, what is done in reality. Therefore, this study analyzes the following aspects of observations of materials-in-use: reasons and purposes for materials observations, the environment, and the importance of materials observation study. It also discusses the methods and types of materials observation, observational schedules, the materials observer's role, and a sample case study. Finally, it provides insights for teachers and researchers to reflect on language teaching and learning theories and develop their own practices towards effective language materials development and professional development training.

Keywords: materials observation, language theories, materials development, professional development

1. Introduction

Language materials are widely used for teaching and learning English as a Second Language (SL) in non-native English speaking countries such as Arab countries. Many

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materials are potentially well-written by well-known authors and publishing houses; however, many international materials have been written for commercial purposes (Dat, 2006 & Alkhalidi, 2011). Dat (2006), for example, has indicated that publishers of global materials often try to achieve commercial benefits. Moreover, the language materials (e.g., the course books) may not be appropriately used in the classroom as prescribed by their authors. In other words, language materials reflect language theories which are supposedly derived from the findings of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research (Alkhalidi, 2014), but there is a mismatch between the findings of the related research and the real practice (Saraceni, 2003). This shows that there is a need to conduct purposeful classroom research to observe the materials in use and provide insights for researchers and teachers into evaluating and developing the materials, gaining insights about the materials in use, triangulating with other related research instruments, and/or the need for professional development training.

The classroom is the main focus of the teaching and learning process (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). The term 'classroom research' is a broad umbrella, and it concerns any research study that examines teaching and learning in context (Dörnyei, 2007). Field (1997) elucidates that such related research is possibly a professional imperative; the teachers and/or researchers can extend their knowledge by undertaking discovery projects of the impact of the teaching and learning process. Classroom research is broad, and the researchers need to specify their needs, purposes, and reasons, observation schedules, and observation methods. In other words, the classroom is a source of information out of which teachers make the process of teaching and learning effective (Wajnryb, 1992). However, their practice might not reflect the related findings of SLA research.

To be more specific, classroom observation is a systematic data collection method that leads to informed judgements, key changes, and to accepted practices (Tilstone, 1998). This means that observation is a purposeful examination of teaching and/or learning events through a systematic process (Bailey, 2001). It is different from questioning since it provides direct information and thus it is a basic source of data for empirical research (Dörnyei, 2007). Observation can help researchers observe whether or not the materials are used as prescribed. This is considered as retrospective evaluation which evaluates the language materials while they are in use to decide whether they work well or not (Mukundan, 2009). Further studies about observing the language theories in the classroom have been recommended (e.g., Basturkman, 1999). Consequently, this study aims to analyze the process of materials observation by taking into consideration the reasons, purposes, methods, and types of observing the materials in the classrooms.

2. Reason and Purpose of Observation

Classroom observation has served four main reasons or broad functions (Bailey, 2001). Firstly, pre-service teachers are observed by teacher educators in the practicum context as a pre-service training programme for the development of their teaching skills.

Secondly, practicing teachers are observed by new teachers or colleagues for the purposes of professional development. Thirdly, practicing teachers are observed by department heads, principals, supervisors or head teachers so as to judge the extent to which the teachers adhere to the expectations of the administration for teaching methods, class control, and curriculum coverage amongst other things. Fourthly, classroom observation is widely used as a means of data collection in classroom research. This study is concerned about the latter function, as discussed below.

Observation is vital for a variety of reasons such as the assessment of skills in all areas of the curriculum, the evaluation of curriculum content in relation to need and the evaluation of teaching, development of the curriculum and for general information to ascertain a greater understanding of the point of view of learners, amongst other reasons (Tinstone, 1998). Within the area of the curriculum, the language materials and their effectiveness would be an obvious interest (McGrath, 2002). Therefore, observing the materials in use will be useful for identifying whether they are used purposefully to achieve the target of using them (effective language teaching and learning).

Observations are important for materials evaluation and development, professional development training, and research purposes. They should help teachers sharpen their awareness of what their learners are doing and heighten their ability to evaluate their own teaching practices for professional development purposes (Williams, 1989). Observations can form part of a training program for teachers; therefore, one potential purpose of observation is the professional growth and development of teachers (Bailey, 2001 & Williams, 1989). The purposes of this study are to provide insights about the language theories in use, and professional development training for teachers and researchers.

2.1 Classroom Environment

There are two broad dimensions of the environment of the classroom, the instructional context and the social context (Dörnyei, 2007). Firstly, the instructional context concerns the influences of students, teachers, curricula, learning tasks, and teaching methods, amongst other things. Secondly, the social context considers the classroom as the main social arena for students which potentially offer intensive and deeply personal experiences such as friendship and love. These dimensions are interdependent and interact with the complex learning process, resulting in various implications for several disciplines and directions of research within areas of education, sociology, psychology and anthropology. In other words, the environment is very complicated and there should be a pre-defined plan and purpose to observe the materials in use.

The classroom environment is crucial since it may determine how the theories will be applied. Language teaching and learning theories may not be implemented according to the plans and the environment might be a contributing factor. Furthermore, there are some variables that need to be taken into consideration such as the allotted time, the curriculum, financial incentives, exams, regulations and policies set by the ministry of education, and the learners' factors such as their levels, needs, and interests.

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) present a list of reasons why teachers may be uncomfortable because of a mismatch with:

- a) *“Their teaching environment (national, regional, institutional, cultural, etc.)*
- b) *Their learners (age, language level, prior learning experience, learning styles, etc.)*
- c) *Their own preferences (personality, teaching styles, beliefs about language teaching and learning)*
- d) *The course objectives (syllabus, institutional targets, etc.)*
- e) *Materials (texts, tasks, and activities)”*. (p.12)

They argue that teachers develop language teaching and learning theories which they apply in their classrooms. It is beneficial for teachers to articulate their theories by reflecting on their own practice. Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) maintain that teachers can learn about the process of learning and about themselves. In other words, observing the language theories of the materials in the classroom is very important, and it potentially requires that researchers take into consideration the environment in the observation process.

2.2 The Importance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the fact that the observation of materials-in-use is rarely investigated in a systematic and principled way. Observers may attend classes without clear reasons, purposes, schedules and criteria. The advantage of an observation is that it allows researchers to see what teachers do without relying on what they say they do (Dörnyei, 2007). The collected data from the classrooms also provides the opportunity to obtain ‘live’ data from ‘live’ situations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Observing the language materials while they are used in classrooms gives strong indications about the potential suitability of the materials (McGrath, 2002). He maintains that the materials observation makes a key contribution in evaluating and determining the effectiveness of the target materials, and provides insights into how the language materials are used; therefore, they will provide suggestions and recommendations for materials development.

The language materials are widely used in many countries. However, they are generally not used in the way they are supposed to be (Alkhalidi, 2011), and many learners still fail to develop their language abilities satisfactorily (Tomlinson, 2011). Consequently, observing the materials in a systematic and principled way is significant for providing insights to the field of applied linguistics, particularly materials evaluation and development. The observers will be able to determine the effectiveness of the materials, and they will gain insights about language theories. They will also have professional development training while they observe and analyze the language theories and reflect on the evaluation process.

2.3 Observation Methods and Types

Methods of observation are chosen according to the reasons for conducting the observation and hence they are usually linked to large-scale quantitative and qualitative research methods (Tilstone, 1998). They are powerful tools for obtaining insight into situations, but they are beset by issues of validity and reliability and the least problematic observation schedule is itself selective, just as perception is selective (Cohen et al., 2007). Ellis (1998) discusses macro and micro evaluations; macro-evaluation is an evaluation conducted for collecting data relating to various administrative or curricular aspects of a program. A micro-evaluation is characterized by focusing narrowly on some specific aspect of the curriculum. Researchers might wish to observe the 'macro' details or observe a particular aspect (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

Ellis (1998) states that "*their attention is likely to focus less on the programmes as a whole and more on whether specific activities and techniques appear to 'work' in the context of a particular lesson. In other words, any macro-evaluations that teachers make are likely to be the result of a whole series of micro-evaluations carried out on a day-by-day and lesson-by-lesson basis*" (p.218). When an evaluation is related to the materials used in the classroom, or some feature of these, it is more likely to seem more manageable and less daunting (McGrath, 2002 & Ellis, 1998). Therefore, researchers can observe how different teachers, who teach the same class, use the materials with that class (McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

Cohen et al. (2007) identify three types of observations: highly structured, unstructured and semi-structured. Highly structured observations have observation criteria worked out in advance. Semi-structured observations will have an agenda of issues; however, they will obtain data to illuminate these issues in a far less predetermined manner. Unstructured observations are far less clear on what they are looking for and the observers need to observe first what is taking place before making a decision on its significance for the research.

The distinction is often made between structured and unstructured observations. Clark and Leat (1998), for example, elucidate that structured or systematic observation is often used with large populations so as to generate data which can be used for statistical analysis, whereas unstructured observation has no predetermined categories but records as much of what happens in the classroom as possible. Dörnyei (2007) discusses the difference between the main two types of observations; structured and unstructured observations, but he discusses in more detail structured observations that make use of an 'observation scheme' since the structure observation is a unique method of data collection associated with classroom research. It seems that the observations may not help the researchers and materials developers to check the most appropriate rating of all the addressed criteria of the observation schedule in one lesson. This is due to the fact that the pre-determined categories/criteria are selectively comprehensive but the observed lesson(s) may not be comprehensive, covering all the criteria or language skills/activities in one class.

The researchers need to be guided by a 'fitness for purpose' notion in the type of setting and the amount of structure imposed (Cohen et al., 2007). They argue that if the researchers, on the one hand, know what they want to observe in advance, it may be

more effective to go into a situation with a prepared schedule for observation. On the other hand, if the researchers wish to go into a situation and let the situation elements speak for themselves, it may be more appropriate to choose a less structured format for observation. It seems that semi-structured schedules are appropriate to observe the effectiveness of the theories and materials in an attempt to observe specific aspects and to keep it flexible to generate other observation data, as discussed below.

2.5 Observation Schedule

Using an observation schedule (also called scheme, form, protocol or checklist) is likely to be efficient (Cohen et al., 2007) since it contributes a clarity of focus (Bailey, 2001). Adding structures to classroom observation by means of using observation schedules makes the process of observation more reliable and produces findings that are comparable across language classrooms (Dörnyei, 2007). He maintains that guidelines for structured observation make documenting the task of complexity of classroom reality doable, and help the researchers focus on certain key events. Coding schedules, therefore, introduce systematicity into the research process. Processing data from structured observations is also relatively straightforward and can be further analyzed using statistical procedures.

Dörnyei (2007) argues that researchers can select from a number of readily available instruments if they decide to use a structured schedule; however, they need to adapt the instruments according to their focus and classroom situation. He maintains that the observation schedules can contain 'rating scales' for the researchers to make overall judgements about some observed aspects. The researchers can also develop their own schedules from scratch by developing their own criteria based on the related literature review and experience taking into account their reasons for the observation, purposes, and environment.

With regard to the observation categories, the processes of observations are varied and involve different and changing combinations of participants, so the range of categories covered has been broad, including teacher talk and body language, the organization of the task and the behaviors of the students (Dörnyei, 2007). The categories of materials observation should be related to the materials themselves and how they are used in teaching i.e., related activities (theories) to listening, speaking, reading, lexical items, grammar, and writing. Although the observation is guided by the use of a schedule, researchers think that the use of pre-prepared categories in such instruments produce a sort of 'tunnel vision': the categories determine (limit) the scope of the observations; therefore, researchers prefer to specify spaces in the schedules to take notes during the observations (Bailey, 2001).

2.6 The Observer's Role

The role of the observer/researcher is to make some judgements about events being observed, and enter responses into a rating scale so his role is non-intrusive (Cohen et al., 2007) and he is not typically involved in the setting; therefore, he is described as a non-participant observer (Cohen et al., 2007 & Dörnyei, 2007). Williams (1989) considers

the role of the observer to be positive and helpful if the purpose of the observer is to train teachers for professional development. Brown (2001) argues that the researcher's role is to make connections between research/theory and classroom/practice. The role of the researcher/observer in purposeful materials observation classes is to observe the language activities (theories) and materials in a polite and helpful way and to make connections between theories of English language teaching and practice in a systematic way, as discussed earlier.

3. A Case Study

A case study was conducted by Alkhalidi in Jordanian classrooms in 2011. He used qualitative and quantitative research methods and instruments to evaluate and develop the Jordanian materials in high schools. One of the used research instruments was the observation schedule. It was used as a triangulation with other research instruments. As an experienced observer, he had teaching experience and classroom observation experience in two countries, Jordan and United Arab Emirates. He developed a semi-structured observation schedule based on the related literature taking into consideration the following categories: listening, speaking, reading, writing, lexical items, grammar, and error correction.

The researcher indicated that there are many items to observe in the classrooms; however, he observed some criteria which are related to the materials-in-use. Briefly, the key findings of the materials observations are:

- The researcher did not observe three language skills (listening, speaking, and writing) or more precisely, most of the observed teachers did not include such skills in their observed classes.
- The researcher observed that there was a focus on the following items: error correction, reading, vocabulary, and grammar.
- He observed that the teachers taught the items of grammar appropriately, but some of them used the grammar-translation method in the teaching process.
- The results provided insights about materials-in-use, and the aspects of practice which deviated from the claims of the authors stated in the teachers' books, but this is beyond the scope of this research due to the word limit (for more details, see Alkhalidi, 2011).
- The results suggest criteria to be taken into consideration in the materials writing, evaluation, and development such as the importance of grammatical items, lexical items, and reading skills in improving the language skills for communicative purposes and other purposes. The observations suggest the following evaluation criteria to be incorporated in a revised a principled evaluation framework:
 - To what extent do the activities of grammar help the learners to use the language in useful sentences?
 - Does the lexis provide the learners with the needed items for communicative purposes?

- To what extent do the reading activities encourage the learners to be engaged in learning the language?

To summarize, most teachers focused on grammar, lexical items, reading, and error correction, whereas listening and writing skills were not observed. Speaking was used for teaching, but it was not the main focus as a skill. The reason could be lack of time, the materials contents, some policies (e.g., training their students for exams), lack of experience in teaching listening and writing skills, learners' weaknesses in some skills, or the materials did not provide the learners with opportunities to practice grammar and other items/skills in a communicative way. The materials observations provided the researcher with in-depth insights about the materials, language skills and activities, authors' claims, and about the process of materials evaluation and development.

4. Conclusion

Observing the materials in the classroom is an important process that helps researchers and teachers get useful data from the practical use of the materials. The researchers can conduct materials observations on a variety of lessons, topics, and skills using semi-structured schedules taking into consideration criteria related to the materials themselves. The researchers and teachers should bear in mind the purpose of the materials observations such as evaluating the materials, determining the effectiveness of language theories, developing the materials, achieving professional development training, and/or providing insights and recommendations for current or future research purposes. Researchers, for example, can reflect on language theories which are embedded in the activities to identify whether the theories are effective or not (Alkhalidi, 2014). In other words, the classroom is the real place to see whether the language theories have been implemented as prescribed by authors or not. Language theorists and materials writers plan theoretically how things should be delivered based on some studies and/or experience; however, the activities (theories) may not be delivered appropriately as planned due to a range of factors such as the learners' needs, levels, interests, classroom environment, policies, regulations, and other possible constraints (e.g., standardized materials, exams, and topics to be covered amongst other things).

In sum, materials observation is essential in assisting teachers to receive professional development training and develop their philosophy as to what makes the materials effective for teaching and learning the language. The authors may write their own materials based on the findings of SLA research and suggest some teaching methodologies to teach the language activities which involve the language theories. However, the teachers may not teach the activities and skills as recommended by the authors due to different reasons, as discussed earlier. As a result, conducting a systematic and principled materials observation will be insightful and significant in achieving effective language learning, materials development, and professional development training.

About the Author

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