



Notions of “invisibility” in the ELT Teachers’ Classroom Observation Practices

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Miguel Martinez¹

Abstract

The classroom observation has been immersed in the teaching, training and research processes in education. Few ones have rarely talked about the observer subject position during this practice, neither the importance of the social practices carried out during the time of observing. I pretend to show the classroom observation as a natural experience in ELT field activities, where the observer, rather than an "expert" with great knowledge is also a teacher, an educator and a student. It is the moment to write about the invisible practices during a classroom observation, it is also time to shine it as an activity that requires reflection and criticism.

This reflection article seeks to view what the common eye sees in classroom observations, what most people want to see, but also, it wants to pop up the discontinuities in this practice, what is not observed, what many teachers and observers have silenced for long time.

Key words: Classroom Observation, Teaching, Training, Subject Position, Observation Social Practices.

¹ Is a Teacher in a BA in Teaching Modern Languages program. He holds a B.Ed. in Teaching English and a Masters in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Currently, he is a PhD student at the Inter-Institutional Doctorate Program in Universidad Distrital FJDC-ELT emphasis.

His research interests focus on Social practices, subjectivity, Teachers Training and Resistance practices. miguel.martinez.gestor@gmail.com

Resumen

La observación de clase ha estado inmersa en los procesos de enseñanza, capacitación e investigación en educación. Pocas personas han hablado raramente sobre la posición del sujeto observador durante esta práctica, ni sobre la importancia de las prácticas sociales llevadas a cabo durante la hora de observar. Pretendo mostrar la observación de clase como una experiencia natural en actividades del campo de ELT, donde el observador, en lugar de un "experto" con gran conocimiento, es también un docente, un educador y un estudiante. Es el momento de escribir sobre las prácticas invisibles durante la observación de clase, también es el momento de resaltar esta como una actividad que requiere reflexión y crítica.

Este artículo de reflexión busca mostrar lo que el ojo común ve en las observaciones del aula, lo que la mayoría de la gente quiere ver, pero también, evidenciará las discontinuidades en esta práctica, lo que no se observa, lo que muchos docentes y observadores han silenciado por mucho tiempo.

Palabras Claves: Observación de clases, Enseñanza, Capacitación, posición del sujeto, prácticas sociales de observación.

Introduction



Image taken from: <http://bigbrother247.co.uk/bbau-big-brother-launches-september-8/>

Who says there is no one observing us, is it possible to be observed all time? Can I do whatever I want to when people observe me? There are some of the questions regarding the observation practices. I would like first to bring your attention with a TV show which will state a general idea of this reflection article topic.

“It's a house with many cameras inside it and follows your movements through microphones to *catch every step*. This is the Big Brother House. Big Brother U.S. (franchise). The Big Brother House is where the participants stay during their time in the performance. It works as a real home *but is surrounded with many cameras, microphones and two way mirrors throughout the house*. Inside the house, it looks like a regular one, it is actually located inside a studio where the production people save everything through the two-way mirrors within a dark camera alley surrounding the house. Infrared cameras are also installed through the house which enables to *capture the space* while in complete darkness” Taken and adapted from: ([https://bigbrother.fandom.com/wiki/Big Brother House](https://bigbrother.fandom.com/wiki/Big_Brother_House), 2007).

It is probably not the best way to begin an academic article since “The Big Brother House” is something related to fashion or fancy and maybe without an academic context. However, it seems to be about a social practice where the participants play a relevant role in the environment. The observation practice is an activity that is evidenced in many situations and which is also used in classrooms ... in educational contexts. This reflection article finds out to explore the classroom observation as a social practice where people are involved in different unseen dynamics, sometimes there are silenced practices and in several instances, these practices have not been shown.

The classroom observation has been performed most of time in the practices of teaching and it involves coordinators, students as well as the administrative staff. I would like to organize this article in a way that the reader can capture two relevant issues, the social practice in classroom observations and the subject position in this practice. A theoretical background will be offered to analyze the point of view of scholars who talk about this topic, getting an argue about their thoughts and have a point of view of these. There will also have

information about classroom observation practices at the time of Teaching (in pre-service, in service, in training and research process). Finally, the reader can draw their own conclusions about this practice and the importance of identifying some situations that are not seen from the common eye, maybe these practices are ignored, invisible and are happening when classroom observation comes out.

Literature explored

There is no secret that the topic of classroom observation has been discussing many times, especially in the ELT (English Language Teaching) field. Many authors have written about the purpose of classroom observation, their importance in the teaching practice, either from the pre-service teaching environment towards in the practice of in-service teaching training. I have been able to explore several books, academic articles, educational journals, even magazines where classroom observation is shown as a systematic practice, standardized and in many situations into an evaluation/judging practice. One of the aims of this article is to analyze "other" practices within the practice of classroom observation. From my experience as an observer and ELT educator, I would like to take out many experiences which have emerged at the time of observing and are invisible for the ELT community. I look forward to having the opportunity to express the teachers' feelings at the time of the observation, also talking about the *power* that several observers have when implementing this practice and how the administrators/directives approve the classroom observation for evaluating and procedure purposes.

First of all, it is very important to know the authors' positions about classroom observations. In Farrell's words (2008), classroom observation could see as a reflective practice process where language teachers get important information about their own teaching and classroom practice. Classroom observation actions are more carefully in terms of paying attention to specific details.

At the same time, Kumaravadivelu (2007) puts forward a “critical classroom observation”. This one includes teacher’s self-observation of a class accompanied by the students and an outside observer. It is used as a method to get closer teachers in the course of conceiving their own teaching.

Here an important reflection could be done and it is about the importance to have classroom observations in the Teaching practices. A broader panorama of this topic through other definitions is provided below.

Classroom observation has been recognized as an alternative process of assessing the learner performance (Campbell & Duncan, 2007), a relevant aspect of a staff appropriation mechanism (Lam, 2001), a tool for giving a self-monitoring (Wichadee, 2011), a complete device for supervising education contexts (Hismanoglu & Hismanoglu, 2010), and a key instrument for doing self-evaluation (Choopun & Tuppoom, 2014).

In fact, observation is the easiest research process that teachers can get into their classrooms (Ma & Ren, 2011) as they would notice the facts inside and outside in the classrooms. (Merç, A, 2015. p.13)

About this, it is appropriate to analyze that there are also several types of classroom observation practices for teachers. One of the most common is the one which is done by the pre-service teachers, who are supposed to be observed by their mentors as a requirement in their teacher education programs. In this practice it is noticed that students play a role of observers (teacher's classes) and also be observed in their pedagogical practices. "Expert" teachers have the ability to correct and ensure that a good practice is provided within the classroom through an observation process. Many experts use rubrics that help to give scores and most of time, they follow a standardized guideline/step by step validated by other experts in the field.

The people who have been involved in Education contexts or getting to start in, facing the practice of classroom observation at the very beginning of their professional development but this practice goes on and in the future they will have more experience related to this topic.

There are also other ways to catch on the classroom observation definition. In a written text by Martinez M (2019) called *Classroom Observations under the Expert Reasoning System*, is stated that classroom observation has been considered to take three main forms: The first one for professional development, the second one for rewarding events, and the third one for social costs.

Most of the researchers think that the most effective use of classroom observation is for professional development (Montgomery 2002). About this, classroom observation deals with a strong component of teacher professional development, as it is considered as an “improvement” for language teachers’ trough training.

Also, language teaching quality plays around the teaching and learning processes taking place in the classroom. Despite this, formal observation and feedback are a complement to improving teaching quality and practice (Jonson 2009), many ELT teachers feel upset or getting anxiety and worry when happens an event of classroom observation. As observers, worldwide, it could be considered a top-down exercise, (Li, 2009).

Even though in the ELT field, the topic of classroom observation has been explored for many scholars, (Wallace, 1991; Richards JC & Farrell TSC, 2005; Cosh 1999) few studies have been devoted to analyzing the things which are not seen, the invisible aspects, the struggles the people have at the time of having this practice. As it was mentioned before, one of the aims of this reflective article is to pop up these situations and try to offer another option to be analyzed.

Classroom Observation Iceberg

It is well known that an iceberg is a large floating mass of ice detached from an ice part and carried out to sea. In many cases, a part of it, is not seen. Maybe the information which is not clear enough is that the top portion is called **Tip** and the bottom submerged in water is called **Iceberg**. In this image, it is shown an Iceberg... a Classroom Observation Iceberg that evidences some Tip ideas and also Iceberg ones.



Image 2. Iceberg Image taken from: <https://www.freepik.es/vector-gratis/ilustracion-paisaje-iceberg/> own authors design from Venngage.

As the reader may look at on the iceberg, there are several practices that are seen at the time of classroom observations. An expert is necessarily required to observe others, this person has the expertise of having the lenses inside the classroom to provide specific information, evaluating a process or providing feedback to the teachers. The observer, most of time, has an observation format which supplies the items to be observed within an ideal and standardized practice depending on the context they are located on.

The observer has earned the privilege of observing others' classes because he has received training on this. This person has studied the appropriate movements that a teacher should have in the classroom, the type of methodology / approach to use, how to assess students and even they know the classroom management that teachers should carry out. It can be noted that the observer, from a *Tip* view, has the right to evaluate any class with his own argues, with an appropriate objectivity since the community has given him that right ... that knowledge. It is well known that the practice of classroom observation is handled by an objectivity fact of the observer. When observing, the person must be precise and demanding when the results come out. It can be concluded that observing a class is not as easy as one thinks, a high level of understanding, critical sense and experience in the field is also required.

It has been spoken from the position of the person who observes, however, the classroom observation deals with a social practice. This practice focuses its attention on the dynamics of the human being, not only of the person who observes, also of the observed person. For that, I would like to highlight the social practices in classroom observations within the work of Schatzki, more precisely to mention that this practice is principled and organized. Schatzki argued “*Orders are parts of the companies (eg. People, feelings, things), actually, the practices are organized activities. Human coexistence, constantly evolving fixed points of arranged situations and organized actions*”. These senses of social orders such as regularity, stability and interdependence can be traced in observation practices. It could be noticed that different nexuses are developed in a classroom observation, for instance, teachers’ daily routines, academic teachers’ meetings and when their classes are observed. Maybe some teachers construct an unconscious social practice, a social practice which has a sense of regularity and the activities the teachers are doing seem to be principled and normalized. Social order in the classroom observation practices is non-regularity; there are discontinuities that need to be visualized. Here is necessary to talk about the unseen aspects, the classroom observation *Iceberg*.

It is a bit complicated to be in the shoes of teachers and more when the school context and the needs of the students are not known. From my experience I have had multifaceted practices where I have worked as a school teacher, I have been trained to observe classes and I am an observer. Here I see the difficulties and opportunities that are inside a classroom. It is not shown when the observer understands ethically and ontologically the work of the teacher who is observed. At the same time, several observers do not feel superior when it comes to observing, there is a bottom up practice, where the teacher can provide tools to the observer as well as the observer can help in the teaching processes.

One of the situations that called my special attention is the “dealing word” between the observer and the observed teacher. I could see wonderful classes, I mean, a class with all the best practice requirements but I cannot know if it is a recorded one, a class which is just prepared for the observation time. The teacher

also laughs at observers since they can performance whatever they want to with their students. Here the idea of subjectivity handles a fundamental part of this topic and for this I would like to bring an anecdote I got to highlight this part.

...I was called to observe a teacher in a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. I knew very well the teacher; I mean we used to drink coffee and talked about other things different to education. Her English proficiency was not the best, she tried to communicate fluently but she could not do so well. The point is that her coordinator heard that the teacher did not have an “appropriate” English level, immediately, the coordinator asked me to observe her class. When I entered to her class, the most of students were happy to see her, they smiled and had fun in the activities performed. The teacher tried to speak all time in English but she got pronunciation, fluency and communicative mistakes. I took my observation format and I decided not to put she got a wrong English level. Why, I think the students have enjoyed their classes, she also wanted to see the students happy and I was sure at that time, the education is not just about following a format, keeping in a rubric and observing the errors. The education is going further analyzing mistakes through an observation. There were many tensions of this teacher at the time of being observed but I could change my role, I had the power to give a positive reason to the coordinator to let the teacher goes on the classes, I kept in mind that I changed my role as an observer, I used to do an observation as a colleague, as an Educator...

Many events are on the iceberg, I think it is also important to document them and be able to reflect upon what can be done to help the ELT field. It is not my intention to solve the struggles teachers have at time of observing or having a solution of the tension of the observer/observed teachers, in fact, I am very interested in being aware of what is invisible in classroom observation practices having a critical position and exploring the results of this long experience.

Final Thoughts

This article sought to analyze the practices imply in classroom observations, reflecting on the subject position and the social practices of the observer. I also traced back on the definition of classroom observations looking at different

situations in the ELT field. To point out, I do not want to show the classroom observation as a problem statement in Education, in fact, I have been studying the discontinuities this practice offers as well as the uncommon aspects representing at the time of observing a class.

It is expected that the reader, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, a researcher and / or education directive have the enjoyment of going beyond the normalized practices of classroom observations. People could decide if they hold on the idea of a regular practice of observation or if they analyzed the "other" forms that are offered during this practice. This is the beginning of an extensive research study about classroom observations, the objective is that teachers who have been observed and observers appear in the research texts, documenting their feelings at the time of observation, their subjectivity, the tensions that are handled in this practice and the teachers' struggles at the time of being observed, criticized and evaluated by other ones.

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