Teacher Observation and Greek State Teachers of English: Current Practices and Suggestions for Improvement

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Abstract

This paper presents the use of teacher observation to bring about change in Greek state teachers of English and to suggest specific guidelines for the improvement of the current observation practices used with teachers. For this reason, after critically presenting the current condition of teacher observation in the Greek context, it addresses observation within Transformative Learning Theory and it presents the views of Greek state teachers of English concerning observation as these were recorded in a research project that was conducted a few years ago. Finally, there are specific recommendations drawn from the research when combined with theory of teaching.

1. Introduction

An investigation of teacher observation has not been dictated merely by a strong personal interest in it and its potential effects on teachers and the quality of education,. What has also triggered this wish to research observation is the fact that there has been little research conducted on it in the context of Greek state schools. It appears that observation has been treated as if it were an issue to avoid talking about. There is a rather broad “fear of the inspector” as a remnant of past practices when the state’s official came into the classroom to observe the lesson and prepare an evaluative report for the particular teacher.

Is teacher observation “bad”? Could observation help teachers *observe* (i.e. self-evaluate) their development? How could observation be framed in order to be accepted by Greek teachers? These are the questions this paper wishes to address.

2. Teacher Observation in Greek State Teacher Education Projects

In the context of Greek state education, teacher observation is present in: i) the initial programs offered by the Greek Peripheral Education Centres (PECs) and ii) as a practice employed by the advisors responsible for the counselling of state teachers of English in their area of authority.

2.1. Teacher Observation in the Teacher Education Programs Offered by the Greek Peripheral Education Centres (PECs)

The Greek Peripheral Education Centres are responsible for the training that is delivered to the newly-appointed teachers to the Greek state schools every year. The initial training involves three phases and is realised in every region, every year (Vergidis et al, 2010)¹.

The first phase of the training addresses all the newly appointed teachers as well as the teachers that have been appointed on a one-year contract to teach in Greek state schools (anaplirotes – supply teachers). This phase of training involves 60 hours (or 30 hours for “anaplirotes”) of training on teaching methodology, classroom management, lesson planning, new technologies or evaluation delivered to classes of 20 to 30 teachers (or 5 to 10 teachers for more remote areas of Greece). In this phase of teacher training in PECs, teacher observation is conducted through the context of microteaching or when teachers study videotaped lessons in order to critically analyze certain teaching practices. However, whether these practices are used or not depends on the tutor and the methodology s/he is to employ in her/his sessions.

The second phase of the training addresses teachers with teaching experience of less than 8 months and focuses on observations; teachers observe their advisors, headmasters or more experienced teachers delivering lessons. The particular phase of training begins with a 2-hour preparatory session on issues relevant to teaching practice as well as on observation. There follow 14 hours of observation of teaching and 14 hours of debriefing sessions after observations (total: 30 hours). Actually, the whole phase takes up a week every day of which participants

¹ The data mentioned in this paper refer to the reality of state teacher education till the school year 2010-2011 (Vergidis et al, 2010).

observe teachers for three hours and then, meet to discuss the observed lessons. For this purpose, teachers form groups of 15 (or 5-10 for more remote areas). These groups may involve teachers of different subjects if the necessary number of participants is not covered with teachers of the same subject.

The final phase of teacher training is realised towards the end of the school year and involves ten hours. Here, the 20-30 participant teachers meet and discuss issues that have concerned them, problems they have faced or good practices they have used over the school year.

2.2. Evaluation of the Use of Observation in the Initial Training Offered by PECs

In surveys conducted by PECs themselves for purposes of internal evaluation (OEPEK, 2008; Kapsalis and Rampidis, 2006), a large number (32% - 62%) of teachers, headmasters and the people working in education management have claimed that they are quite satisfied with the training offered. The major reason for teachers' dissatisfaction is that the methodology used embraces the transmission-based approach as it focuses mainly on theory rather than practice. Teachers' need for actual teaching is usually neglected and the use of teacher observation is limited. It is a fact that the majority of teachers are excluded from the second phase where experiential methods (observations) are employed since most teachers when appointed have already taught as "anaplirotes" in previous school years.

More importantly, when observation is realised, it seems to be problematic for various reasons. First of all, it is not clear who sets the focus and the parameters of the observations of the second phase so that teachers' needs and expectations are taken into account; or it is not even clear if any specific parameters are set to guide the observation process. Furthermore, on every day of observations of the second phase, three hours of observation are granted the same general debriefing session; that is, there is a single session for the three lessons observed. It could be argued that this hinders the proper reflection, analysis and evaluation of each lesson so that an extensive discussion of the necessary changes is not possible and the next lesson cannot be carefully planned.

Moreover, the participant teachers observe an advisor, a headmaster or an experienced teacher, rather than observe each other. Given the way observations are designed and realised, teaching is considered to be a matter of knowledge on how to teach or a skill which can be conveyed to teachers quite naturally and it is taken for granted that they will perform as such once this knowledge or skill is demonstrated (Wallace, 1991). In such a model of observation, there are

considerably limited opportunities for juxtaposition of views among teachers on real problems in their context and cooperation in the context of peer-observation and self-observation are not involved in the teacher education program. Teachers are denied the invaluable experience of observing each other, exchanging views and cooperating in order to achieve improved teaching behaviour and, therefore, a better teaching outcome.

Finally, the program that teacher observation serves appears to fail to bring about a conceptual change or a change in teachers' actual classroom practices. Actually, only a few teachers of those who have participated in PECs' education programs openly reported a radical restructuring of their current belief systems (OEPEK, 2008). For, even when teachers are asked about their personal beliefs, they are not required to make any associations between their beliefs and their classroom practices.

2.3. Observations Organised by Regional Advisors for Teachers of English

Another case where teacher observation is used in order to help Greek state teachers of English in their everyday condition is the observation of a lesson delivered by an advisor or another teacher.

Unfortunately, observation in this case is seldom systematic as most of the times it is a one-off process and may not be realised by all the advisors in all the regions of Greece. Nevertheless, when observation happens, it is unlikely that it is properly designed or well-structured. For instance, teachers of different working experience or needs who have never met before participate in the project. Usually, the pre-observation stage is omitted or the focus and the parameters of the observation are pre-determined without the contribution of the participant teachers.

Furthermore, the post-stage may fail to feature the necessary elements. Actually, in the debriefing session, teachers usually avoid making any comments to the teacher observed – they appear to consider this to be threatening to the particular teacher; thus, they fall back on making rather general comments. In this way, observation of this kind ends up treating teaching as an art- a craft to be watched and imitated (Wallace, 1991).

2.4. Observation Practices in the Context of the Didactics Course Offered by the University

Apart from the observation practices mentioned so far, a Greek state teacher of English may have been involved in observation practices in the context of

the University: namely, in the context of the Didactics course offered by the departments of English Studies at the Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki. The Didactics course addresses students in the final academic year. The trainees observe teachers at various schools using observation tasks designed and developed by the University so as to reflect on the teachers' decisions. Finally, student teachers take on teaching responsibilities and teach as well. These observation practices could be characterised as "developmental", since student teachers have the opportunity to become familiar with classroom culture, its agenda of customs, rituals, expectations, patterns and mores before actually trying on any active aspects of teacher's role (Wajnryb, 2002).

According to the evaluation of this program of observations by its designers (Karavas and Drossou, 2009; Sougari, 2011), student teachers are helped in all the main dimensions of teaching. Also, their confidence and self-efficacy beliefs are enhanced and they are better prepared to take on "real action". They are familiarised with the practice of observation and can, therefore, use it to improve themselves in the future by observing themselves or colleagues.

An interesting conclusion that the designers draw is that student teachers' beliefs appear not to be influenced by this course in didactics. They argue that any teacher education-preparation program needs to compete with, replace or otherwise modify the theories that already guide student teachers. Teachers' beliefs should be the focus of attention if we wish to attain a powerful and long-lasting change in teachers' self-awareness, knowledge, skills in teaching the English language and in their attitudes so as to eventually achieve their development.

The theory that brings teachers' beliefs to the forefront is Transformative Learning Theory. And this is will be handled in what follows.

3. Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory was developed by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s. It is a theory which assigns great importance to a person's belief system as the origin of her/his actions and stresses that any attempt to bring about change in someone should involve these beliefs. Change is successful, or *transformation* occurs, when the transformative process addresses and finally manages to affect one's beliefs and eventually, helps the person better interpret the real world and react to it more effectively.

The main concepts of this theory are the meaning schemes and the meaning perspectives. These are the particular structures-personal beliefs that function as filters through which the phenomena in the world are interpreted. On the basis of this interpretation, the individuals' action is defined. The individual acts in a situation in accordance with the way s/he understands the situation; s/he

re-acts to the particular understanding of the situation in question (Mezirow, 1990; 1991; 2000).

It is noteworthy that these schemes and perspectives may have been sub-consciously adopted by the person over the process of personal growth in a specific social context. In our case (i.e. the case of teaching), meaning schemes and perspectives may stem from: 1) a person's experience with formal knowledge (i.e. her/his studies) and/ or from 2) her/his experience of schooling and instruction: her/his personal experience as learners and as teachers (Richardson, 1996). As a result, this person may be acting without necessarily having realized the origins of her/his actions. Usually, in such cases the person's beliefs appear to be extremely powerful and resistant to any changes. For, the person considers such beliefs as the only version of the truth about the world which s/he must respect and guard at all costs, even if in a specific situation this "truth" fails to bring about the desired outcome.

The desired transformation takes place through an intentional and conscious process (Bowers Sipe & Rosewarne, 2005; Brookfield, 1995; King, 2009; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2003). This process starts from a dilemma; a problematic situation in which the individual realises the dysfunction or insufficiency of the schemes and perspectives used for the interpretation of reality (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991). The problematic schemes and perspectives are to be *reformed* so that they may provide an image of the real world that is more accurate and more effective in terms of the respective reaction.

The process of transformation starts from a conflict between the individual's confidence in the efficiency of her/his belief system and the perceived failure of this system to address the problematic situation s/he faces. And according to the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, «Πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι»; "war is the father of everything". And as with any war it involves resistance that must be beaten if someone aims to succeed. Once the failure of the existing belief system is perceived, the person experiences feelings of insecurity, unease, or even anger towards the realised need for reconstruction of her/his belief systems. This is a crucial stage as such feelings may create resistance to change: the individual either steps back to his existing beliefs and practices or decides to move forward to a new, transformed reality.

As soon as the individual overcomes the negative feelings and decides to transform the assumptions guiding her/his actions so far, s/he is involved in self-reflection and a critical analysis of the assumptions behind her/his actions. More efficient alternative interpretations (i.e. assumptions) are sought and, on the grounds of the newly formed assumptions, more effective alternative reactions are designed to better meet the needs of the problematic situation s/he finds herself/himself in. On such a basis, a new course of action is planned and pilot-implemented. This involves feeding back on the new beliefs and the new ways of acting.

It could be argued that transformation is “a long often painful voyage...it may feel more like a mutiny rather than a merely exhilarating expedition to discover new lands” (Kegan in Mezirow, 2000). It appears to be an “*Ithaca*”² of some type...a “sweet” yet strenuous, exploratory travel towards one’s goal- in our case teacher transformation.

4. Observation in Transformative Learning Theory

Observation seems to have the potential to support the existence of a perspective transformation. Actually, observation constitutes one of the main steps one is to take in order to transform one’s belief system. Observation feeds reflection that defines future action. The individual is to observe herself/himself, critically address her/his actions and the assumptions on the basis of which these actions were shaped and after evaluating their efficiency decide on the changes that should be realised.

Transformation is realised through a series of recursive cycles where the person:

1. Observes her/his actions,
2. Realises the inefficiency of the already used system of assumptions; a problem raised when one’s beliefs prove to be not efficient enough for the individual to handle a difficulty in the real world
3. Develops a plan of action,
4. Acts accordingly,
5. Observes this “new” action,
6. Critically reflects on this action and its outcome, and then,
7. Develops a new plan of action according to the conclusions drawn from the reflection. (Mezirow, 1991)

In the case we discuss (i.e. Greek state teachers of English), observation could prove beneficial not only in the strictly defined context of teacher education but also in the context a teacher finds herself/ himself in (self-directed and on-going learning). Observation in teacher education and training would involve teachers in deep intellectual processes (in self-awareness, (self-) reflection,

² The term I am using is adopted from the famous metaphor the Greek writer Constantine Kavafis (1911) used.

critical analysis, experimentation). In this way, the teacher education programs would not be based on “someone else’s firm ideological views for what should be a successful practice” (Karavas and Drossou, 2009) and may, thus, enhance their effectiveness. For, there have been lots of research and studies showing that mere demonstration or practice without directly addressing one’s beliefs may prove fruitless. Most importantly, extensive observation practices in an education program could enable teachers successfully realise observation in their daily life in order to develop their teaching practices and themselves, in general.

If observation were to be introduced more systematically in the Greek context so as to help teachers develop, it would be important to record what Greek state teachers of English believe, need, expect and wish regarding teacher observation. This is what the research described below did.

5. The Greek Context

5.1. The Research

Research conducted in 2007 addressed Greek state teachers’ beliefs, needs and attitudes towards teacher observation and its introduction in the Greek state education condition. Also, it investigated their previous experiences of teacher observation. The aim was to examine the ground on which observation would be required to operate if it were to be introduced in Greek state schools more systematically (compared to its current use as described in section 2).

For the needs of the specific research, questionnaires along with interviews were used (in an attempt to combine a quantitative kind of research with a more qualitative one). The questionnaires were delivered to all the state teachers of English of the prefecture of Argolida and to students of the postgraduate program of the Hellenic Open University for teachers of English (132 subjects). After the teachers’ answers to the questionnaire were analysed, there followed interviews of four Greek state teachers. The interviews aimed to cover issues that could not be addressed through a questionnaire or issues that needed a fuller and more in-depth coverage. In the interviews, the teachers who participated had successfully completed the Hellenic Open University’s module on teacher education and -as a result- they could function as “qualified consultants” (Tudor, 1996) for my research as they had a background knowledge which was really invaluable for more to-the-point comments.

5.2. The Findings of the Research

As the research has shown (figure 1), the vast majority of Greek state teachers of English have never been observed. This fact could prove a considerable hindrance against the introduction of observation in Greek state schools as it is likely for someone to be hesitant or even an opponent to any innovation because of the “expectable” fear for the unknown. And this was stated by teachers themselves.

The lack of similar experiences along with the pressure felt by teachers were acknowledged to be the greatest difficulties against the introduction of observation in Greek state schools (Figure 2). Further down in the ranking of factors hindering the introduction of teacher observation stood teachers’ unfamiliarity with the observer and the lack of confidentiality. Also, observation was claimed to be hindered by the lack of the time needed for a complete

Figure 1. Previous observation experiences

Figure 2. Difficulties against the introduction of teacher observation

observation process to take place as well as the lack of understanding on the observer's part. Other parameters claimed to make the introduction of observation difficult related to the relationship created between the observee and the observer, objectivity issues and the lack of clear observation criteria.

Figure 3. Observation Purposes

When asked about the ideal purposes of observation, teachers opted for and ranked highly aims that are inherently developmental. Feedback was claimed to be the highest aim of observation. Then, high in the list are reflection, self-evaluation and self-improvement. However, teachers not only

acknowledged observation's contribution to self-improvement, but also to the dissemination of innovations and good practice; that is to the change and the improvement of education, in general. All the aforementioned goals were ranked higher than others with a more judgmental orientation or with an orientation towards the convergence of state teachers of English with the national policy.

Figure 4. Observation Patterns

The next question addressed the issue of ideal patterns of observation, that is who observes whom. Here, teachers spoke loudly in favour of peer-observation and assigned superiority to novice teachers observing experienced ones over experienced teachers observing novice ones. A large number of teachers also favored a teacher observing a panel of teachers (i.e. various teachers) while the least preferable options were that of a panel of teachers observing a teacher (like the current practices of observations are) or a principal observing a teacher. Among the other options teachers suggested were teachers observing advisors, advisors observing teachers or a trainer observing teachers (both novice and experienced ones).

When asked about the relationship between observee and observer, teachers said that an observer could not treat the observee as a friend nor is s/he there to protect the observed teacher. What is certain is that teachers appeared to prefer an observer who is supportive and available when needed so as to provide the teacher with the necessary advice and guidance. The observer is to focus on teacher development, be a good listener and try to motivate the observed teacher to pursue self-development.

As for the frequency and the timing of observation (see figures 6 and 7 respectively), teachers suggested that observation should be regular. Over 70% of the teachers opted for regular observations of more than twice or three times,

Figure 5. Observer's Attitudes

Figure 6. Observation Frequency

while a 45% claimed that they would like observation to take place over four times a year. Teachers also said that observation should take place throughout a school year in a combination of observations at the beginning in the middle and at the end of a school year. Teachers seemed to believe that a teacher

Figure 7. Observation Timing

involved in an observation process should *constantly* undergo recursive cycles of teaching, observation, reflection, rationalization of the choices made, testing of the alternatives suggested for the confrontation of the problems detected in observation and implementation of the new plan.

6. Implications for Improvement

The questionnaires and the interviews involved in the aforementioned research have recorded Greek teachers' beliefs, expectations and wishes concerning teacher observation. On the basis of the data, there have emerged certain considerable suggestions for the improvement of the current practices of teacher observation in Greek state schools. These recommendations appear to meet the requirements set by the relevant theory.

Greek teachers acknowledged the significance of observation as part of on-going special training courses (rather than a one-off seminar) where they would cooperate with other teachers in order to critically reflect on, analyse, evaluate and re-shape their teaching practices. In this way, they said that they "would develop a framework they could follow in the future to promote their development".

Greek state teachers of English claimed that in any observation project, the teacher should be the focus, dynamically participating in the decision making; s/he should be the main one setting the aim, the focus, the criteria of observation as well as the observation techniques. The teachers should be

treated as persons with self-agency; with their own needs, wishes, personality and style.

Teachers should be the active constructors of their cognition and action. And this is better achieved when they are involved as whole persons. That is when their belief systems, skills, knowledge, attitudes and feelings are directly addressed and elaborated on in order to be transformed as is seen necessary. Therefore, observation should directly involve and dynamically elaborate on teachers' beliefs and feelings. Both teachers' used and expressed theories (the theories reflected in their teaching behaviour and the theories the teachers themselves believe they are implementing) should be critically addressed and altered. Only if observation addresses both these sets of theories could it eventually influence teachers and have a more powerful and long-lasting effect on them as persons and as teachers.

Furthermore, teachers expressed their preference for regular observations (over 3 times per year). Observation should be realised in cycles; it should be a spiral process. All the interviewees were open to a continuum of observations which would be well-structured and purposefully interrelated to one another. They believe that a series of observations would produce more powerful effects on teachers and their development and avoid the possibility of a "bad day".

Teachers also stressed that there is a need for systematic and well-structured observation schemes. All the teachers highlighted the importance of well-designed pre- and post-observation stages. As for the pre-observation stage, it was found that this stage was absent in teachers' previous experiences of observation albeit highly important. Teachers went on to ask for such a preparatory stage where the people involved in the observation would become familiar with each other and a cooperative, supportive, friendly relationship would be established which is necessary for the successful realization of observation. Also, teachers said that it is in this stage that all the necessary parameters would be mutually agreed and decided upon (for example, the focus of observation, the criteria or more practical issues such as where the observer would sit and whether s/he might interfere in the lesson).

Coming now to the post-observation stage; teachers claimed that this should be realized right after the observed lesson (rather than after a number of observed lessons as the current practices of observation in PECs are). The debriefing session should feature all the necessary elements for the greatest assistance to the teachers. It should involve rationalisation and critical reflection on the teacher's choices. It is important that the teacher realise the hidden beliefs guiding her/his practice. Apart from realization, there should be an evaluation of her/his teaching. Both the strong and the weak points of her/his teaching should be spotted. These strengths and weaknesses would then show the way her/his teaching is to be modified so that teaching goals

are more successfully achieved. This would pave the way to her/his future development.

Moreover, teachers stated that the observee should be granted the major role at the post-observation stage. The observer's role is subsidiary rather than judgmental or prescriptive. The observer should serve the teachers' development; s/he ought to support and motivate them to further pursue their development. S/He should also be a facilitator; s/he is to reveal aspects of the teachers' teaching that they have failed to notice themselves and make further suggestions for the confrontation of the problems detected without imposing them onto teachers. S/He should be available when needed by the observed teacher, qualified and well-trained on both teaching issues as well as on observation and s/he should firstly strive to pursue the observed teacher's development.

At this point, we should stress that teachers acknowledged the contribution of a preliminary, introductory training course to a successful observation scheme. They considered it to be an effective way in which teachers could be assisted to improve their reflection skills so as to successfully employ them in the observations to follow.

Another point is that teachers asked observations to take place in their own context. There should be a link to actual teaching behaviour in their own classrooms; only then will the experience be utterly meaningful to them. Also, they will be helped to better realise their context, better interpret its multiple aspects and better (re-)act to it.

As we have seen, teachers especially valued peer observation and asked for a network of teachers who would take various roles (observees and observers) and reflect upon their and others' teaching practices. Collaborative observation would lead to cooperative transformation. And it is a fact that both the observer and the observee may benefit from this process. It is not only the observed teacher that is assisted and may transform her/his belief system and action; it is also the observer who can benefit from the observation process. The observer becomes more self-aware as s/he realises her/his difference from the observed teacher; also, s/he experiences the testing of alternatives and may well adopt different techniques performed by the observee.

A final comment made by the teachers who participated in the research which is worth mentioning is that they would be open to evaluation within the context of a developmental observation scheme. The latter is extremely interesting as teachers appear to be willing to overcome the initial fear-hesitation towards the introduction of any attempt for teachers' evaluation. They seem to be willing to be evaluated for their self-development and the improvement of their teaching practice on condition that this is realized in a strictly development-oriented context.

7. Conclusion

Taking all this into consideration, it could be concluded that observation could and should be a well-designed and meticulously used tool for the development of every single Greek state teacher of English in their everyday situation. We need to help teachers do what is needed for their on-going growth: i.e. we need to help them develop their self-reflection, their self-analysis and their self-evaluation skills. Observation (be it peer-observation or self-observation) appears to have the potential to assist state teachers to do this; it can help teachers transform and improve their teaching of English. It is important, therefore, that the researchers' attention is set on how observation could best help teachers towards this direction. For, as a Chinese proverb says:

"To give a man a fish will feed him for a day, while teaching him how to fish will allow him to feed himself for a lifetime."

Chinese proverb, 5th century B.C.

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