

# THE ROLE OF OBSERVATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** The study aims at exploring observation in language classrooms within the context of teacher education, examining how observation can provide student teachers with suggestions for effective teaching and development. The paper looks primarily at the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and outlines a qualitative research project which includes ethnographic elements with regard to the teacher trainer who is the researcher in the current situation. The participants are student teachers in the course of teaching practice. The analysis of the data obtained through observation tasks includes the comparison of unstructured and structured observation in the classroom. The findings reveal that teacher trainees can gain substantially from focused observation targeted on particular areas. The study shows the beneficial aspects of this method and also sheds light on its possible integration into the training of prospective teachers.

**Keywords:** observation, focused observation, foreign language teacher education, observation tasks

## 1 Introduction

An important concept with regard to the nature of foreign language teacher education is that of the period of teaching practice. As teaching experience represents a period during which theory is applied in real practice (Wallace, 1991), it is mainly related to the classroom and the processes in it. Given the vital importance of systematic reflection on classroom experience, preparing student teachers for their job is impossible without observation as the core around which reflection can take place and professional development (Swan, 1993; Wallace, 1991) can be achieved.

In line with my work as a teacher trainer supervising trainees who are doing pair-teaching, I have always been aware of the benefits of observation in teacher education. However, my particular interest has been related to the apparent complexity of the process. The main reason for this is that pair or team teaching involves coping with numerous spheres simultaneously. In the main is teaching, which embraces many aspects, and the people involved. In practice this means that besides working on being efficient and professional, trainees need to understand whether students achieve the objectives of the activities, materials and methods. It is also necessary for trainee teachers to monitor the students' performance and identify areas of difficulty in which the students need help. This leads to the concept of classroom observation itself.

The phenomenon can be examined from different perspectives. At present, it is mostly the "working" together aspect that is in the focus of discussion. My experience shows that the specific favourable circumstances of pair or team teaching inevitably offer a great opportunity for observation as when trainees work together multiple occasions lend themselves to the action of watching and noticing. With respect to pair or team teaching, lessons can be shared

or trainees may take turns to conduct them alone. Turn-taking, when trainees prefer it or consider it best for the situation, is normally associated with regular intervals within the lesson or on a weekly basis. Participating in a team obviously widens the scope for observation and helps student teachers become more active observers. The basic understanding is that trainees can develop their own teaching through constantly monitoring and observing in the lessons. When only teaching without concentrating on observation, student teachers become preoccupied with themselves. On the contrary, having observers in the room raises special awareness of what is going on (Wajnryb, 1992; Wallace, 1991). With this kind of awareness, trainees' development as teachers is highly promoted. In light of these considerations, my research draws on integrating observation into teaching behaviours. The central concern of how to arrange the parts of the complex process into an efficient system has revealed a puzzle to explore – how to find a way to work toward organising classroom observation more successfully in order to develop the core which enables student teachers to achieve their own understanding of their classroom experiences. Finding a solution to the puzzle was seen as central to the trainees' professional development.

## 2 Rationale for the study

Schemes of pre-service teacher education are always responses to the specific need to prepare teachers for the classroom. I have been involved in teacher training at the Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT) at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest since 1993. Up to the present, I have worked with fifty-four student teachers with a teaching practice longer than usual in the Hungarian teacher training institutions. In broad terms, my responsibilities include creating the frame and operation of the actual teaching experience at the school. This is achieved through ensuring that trainees become familiar with the different possible dimensions of teaching. Most crucial for development is that student teachers can obtain a better understanding and awareness of how to create a successful learning environment in the classroom.

In recent years, marked attention has been directed towards the question of successful learning and teaching (Kramsch, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Mitchell, 2000). While the cognitive aspects are still taken into account, the new learning theories have shifted the focus of the language as input to questions about the process of learning as discourse and social relations (Belz & Kinginger, 2003, Mc Groarty, 1998; Wilhelm, 1997; Xu, Gelfer, & Perkins, 2005). In this respect, the recent view (Allwright, 2005; Jonhson, 2006) of learning is that it is more complex and that knowledge originates from theory but also emerges out of the transformation and reorganization of experiences in the particular context.

This more general view of the process of learning has had an important impact on how foreign language teachers learn to teach. Apparently, the broad area of providing instruction, support and inspiration to student teachers can be approached from different aspects. However, it is necessary to look at what helps trainees improve their teaching behaviours. For instance, the role of the trainer as someone who offers guidance in practice is vital (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1994, 1996, 1997; Malderez & Bodóczy, 1999). Elliott and Calderhead (1995) make the point that “in order best to facilitate professional growth, the trainer needs to have clear ideas about teacher professional development” (p. 42). This statement has been supported by several researchers (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1994; Elliott & Calderhead, 1995; Oberg & Underwood, 1992; Wallace, 1991) whose work is used as an analytical starting point in my study.

With reference to the relevant literature, it becomes obvious that although the integration of theory and practice in foreign language teacher education has long been recognized, new approaches closely bound with exploratory and reflecting teaching (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1996, 1997; Major, 2003; Révész, 2005; Schön, 1987; Wallace, 1991) have been adopted. While addressing experimental knowledge, more fruitful and beneficial ways of gaining the main ingredients of professional training emerge (Kagan, 1992; Widdowson, 1997; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). Taken together, new teaching and learning methods place emphasis on theory-presenting occasions for students to reflect (Farrell, 2007) upon issues when they arise in real life. On the whole, the implications are that teacher education needs to unite thought and action in order to be successful.

In line with the above considerations, the teaching practice, in which there are many different aspects and people involved, is inevitably related to the processes in the classroom. In these terms, another major issue will be addressed: observation. Classroom observation is widely recognized (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Wajnryb, 1992) as a central component of teacher preparation and development. Research on the matter (Gebhard, 1999; Wajnryb, 1992) supports the view that observation is a useful tool in learning to teach. That is the reason why the knowledge and understanding of classroom observation, which accompanies the development of teaching skills, becomes crucial for the period of school-based training.

### **3 Research topic and research questions**

The increasing awareness of the new approaches in teacher training and my considerable experience as a school-based teacher trainer have made me interested in the notion of classroom observation as a tool which trainees can use to develop as teachers. The concern in my role has always been to foster observation within the framework of teaching practice. Involvement in teacher training over the years has demonstrated the necessity for finding out how observation skills and strategies can be acquired and used efficiently. Furthermore, in my work, I have always intended to investigate how observation can influence professional formation and teacher development. In this respect, the research questions are formulated as follows:

- (1) How can observation in pre-service teacher education help trainees learn?
- (2) What makes observation in pre-service teacher education meaningful and effective?

In order to answer these questions I made an attempt to explore the field of observation. The major objective was to consider the role and importance of observation in teacher training. My particular aim was to look at how observation tasks in teacher preparation could contribute to the better understanding of the underlying processes in the classroom as well as their roles. I investigated how my trainees used the observation tasks in order to develop in this particular situation. It was relevant to see if they could apply the tasks for the purposes of observation, discussion and reflection. The goal was to examine whether using observation tasks increased the trainees' practical knowledge and motivation. My intention was to move beyond gaining a profound awareness of the issue of observation and to explore it in more practical terms.

## 4 Review of the literature

### 4.1 Foreign language teacher education

The research on preparation of teachers proves that it is an integrated activity in the process of which language teachers are taught to teach (Freeman, 1989; Kagan, 1992; Kennedy, 1993; Strevens, 1974; Swan, 1993; Wallace, 1991). This, of course, is not a new idea. The process has long been viewed as “a highly complex activity which requires knowledge, understanding, practice and experience before it can be carried out in a fully professional and effective manner” (Strevens, 1974, p. 26). It must be stressed that knowledge about applied linguistics and language acquisition as well as skills in methodology make up what is referred to as the “knowledge base of teaching” (Freeman, 1989, p. 31). Wallace, however, calls it “received knowledge” on the grounds that the trainees have received it rather than experienced it in action (1991, p. 12). Truly, a lot more is needed in order for language teacher education to succeed. In addition to knowledge and skills, the weight of Freeman’s opinion comes down in favour of attitude and awareness (Freeman, 1989).

Despite the acknowledged importance of knowledge, skills, attitude and awareness (Freeman, 1989; Kennedy, 1993, Swan, 1993; Wallace, 1991), it is worth discussing a further element; that of personal qualities. Admittedly, teachers are different personalities and being involved in the learning/teaching process, they are given the chance to be individuals. The teacher as a personality with his or her own beliefs, experiences and values can be seen as the humane dimension that goes beyond the traditional views (Farrell, 2007; Freeman & Johnson, 1998). This dimension can be of extreme importance when considering teacher education as an interactive process in which many individuals take part (Kerry & Mayes, 1995; Maynard & Furlong, 1995).

As we understand more about the process of teacher preparation, we realise that it is a more complex process than was once thought (Gwyn-Paquette & Tochon, 2002); that it is especially useful to focus on teaching itself, the teacher as a learner, as well as the particular context (Gwyn-Paquette & Tochon, 2002; Kagan, 1992; Widdowson, 1997; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). The underlying assumption is that the process of teaching practice has two basic educating strategies: training and development (Freeman, 1989). These strategies share the same purpose of achieving change (Kagan, 1992) in what the teacher does and why. Both of them are seen as essential parts of preparing student teachers for their job. In respect of decision making based on knowledge, skills, attitude and awareness, the purpose of language teacher education integrated in the broader context, is to generate change (Freeman, 1989; Kennedy, 1993).

When writing about teaching practice, it is inevitable to comment on supervision. Within the concept, it is assumed that “general supervision” (Wallace, 1991, p. 108) refers to outside the classroom, whereas “clinical supervision” (Wallace, 1991, p. 108) is related to what goes on in the classroom. Wallace (1991) points at the different ways of implementing clinical supervision and identifies the main approaches to it. In the prescriptive approach the supervisor is seen as someone who makes judgements about the trainees’ actions. The collaborative approach on the other hand, suggests that the supervisor and the trainee are regarded as colleagues. The supervisor is the one who is more experienced and reacts to the process in order to raise awareness and increase reflection. Furthermore, Wallace (1991) highlights that prescription to a certain extent is sometimes necessary because it gives confidence and relieves anxiety, but the suggestion is that prescription should be given

carefully so that the main aim is collaboration. Truly, there is a wide choice of supervisory behaviours, but teacher trainers should not limit themselves to one mode of supervision only (Wallace, 1991). The mode of supervision would strongly depend on the needs of the student teachers and the nature of the particular situation, and it is likely to change during the course of teaching practice.

#### 4.2 Classroom observation

Supervision includes a concern with the fact that it is always a special occasion when somebody is sitting at the back of the classroom (Wajnryb, 1992; Wallace, 1991). We move on to a consideration of the role and importance of observation in teacher education. Before elaborating on this important issue, it is useful to briefly consider what is meant by observation from the perspective of teacher education. While observation is viewed as an essential part of any teacher training programme, whether pre-service or in-service, it is regarded as the process of capturing the events of the classroom (Maingay, 1988; Sheal, 1989; Wajnryb, 1992; Williams, 1989). As it is essential to ensure the least interference in the classroom, a fundamental issue of observation concerns the requirement of non-involvement (Gebhard, 1999). However, observers may cause conscious or subconscious frustration and pressure as well as having an impact on the classroom dynamics (Wajnryb, 1992; Wallace, 1991). At the same time, the underlying assumption is that observation is a powerful tool which gives participants opportunities to gather data and gain insights into the classroom (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Wajnryb, 1992).

In Gebhard's words (1999) observation is "non-judgemental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation" (p. 35). This perspective has roots in the view (Allwright, 1988; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Swan, 1993; Wajnryb, 1992) that collecting objective data goes beyond the classroom to establish a connection with another crucial aspect of the teaching-learning situation, particularly what is known as discussion. Observations are usually preceded and followed by discussions; therefore, when integrated in the broader context of teaching practice, classroom observations are perceived to play a significant role in teacher formation. In this study special weight is given to the experience of observing which requires more than the time spent in the classroom. In the language of this research, the term observation is mainly related to data collection in the classroom; however, the preparation and follow-up phases are considered equally essential.

First and foremost, it is extremely relevant to note who observes who and for what purpose. Certainly, one teacher can observe another teacher for the purpose of self-improvement or research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Gebhard, 1999; Mackey & Gass, 2005). There is also observation for assessment; indeed, this was the traditional, and often the only reason for observing teachers and classrooms (Gebhard, 1999; Sheal, 1989; Wajnryb, 1992; Williams, 1989). As for the teaching practice, it provides numerous opportunities for observation among the participants involved. In this particular context, although evaluation is inevitable, the emphasis is not on assessment as such but on professional development (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1994; Gebhard, 1999; Medgyes & Malderez, 1996). According to Williams, classroom observations should be "developmental rather than judgemental" (1989, p. 85) in the sense that they offer opportunities for teachers to improve their awareness, abilities to interact and evaluate their own teaching behaviours (Maingay, 1988; Williams, 1989).

There is no doubt that the classroom is a place where many processes of learning and teaching occur. In this respect, it is extremely relevant to consider what to observe and how to observe it (Wajnryb, 1992). These are obviously integrated. What the teacher does and what really happens in the foreign language classroom are what is usually observed. However, apart from the teacher and his or her contribution to the situation, the learners and their contribution need to be described (Allright, 1988). It is also relevant to make decisions about which events we intend to describe in the foreign language classroom as well as which aspects to take into consideration (Allright, 1988).

Furthermore, in order to observe the classroom and what goes on in it for the purpose of continued learning and exploration, it is essential to capture the events of the classroom as accurately and objectively as possible and not only to make a record of impressions (Allright, 1988; Wajnryb, 1992). In this respect observation can be more global or more focused. The importance of observation procedures in addition to coding schemes has been emphasized in recent research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005). Regarding the types of observation, there are differences between observation processes in terms of how structured they are. On the one hand, highly structured observation has a clear focus and involves carefully prepared schedules, rating scales and coding systems. Semi-structured and unstructured observation, on the other hand, have far less clear foci; they therefore require less preparation but take longer to analyse (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Mackey & Gass, 2005). In order to ensure deeper understanding of the classroom, the suggestion is that one should focus on broader categories or more specific issues.

Drawing on focused observation in the context of teacher training, it must be stressed that different aspects of classroom behaviours can be depicted using classroom observation tasks (Wajnryb, 1992). An observation task as defined by Wajnryb (1992) is a focused activity used to collect data and information while observing a lesson. This is important at any stage of the teaching practice but especially when student teachers have problems or want to focus on certain issues (Wallace, 1991). Observation sheets can provide meaningful tasks and offer an opportunity to collect focused data for reflection on the area of concern (Wajnryb, 1992; Wallace, 1991). They help the observer to perceive the happenings in a systematic way in order to understand and analyse them (Wajnryb, 1992); therefore, they are appropriate to utilize in order to observe the classroom and what goes on in it for the purpose of continued learning and exploration.

In conclusion, as far as observation during the period of teaching practice is concerned, it can be seen as a method for ongoing training and learning (Wajnryb, 1992). Wajnryb, for example, claims that the process of recording the events of the classroom for further reference is “a multi-faceted tool for learning” (Wajnryb, 1992, p.1), Allwright sees observation as “the essential key to provide relevant feedback” and “a means of a more trainee-centred approach to teacher training” (Allwright, 1988, p. 57). Extending this concept leads us to consider the advantage of observation, which is that it is a powerful means of teacher development (Swan, 1993; Wallace, 1991). Most important of all is to recognise the need for observation in teacher preparation. As learning to teach is a recycling process as well as a decision-making process, a great deal of reflection is needed in order to ensure effective training and development (Wallace, 1991). As a wide range of processes take place in the language learning classroom, reflection on these is impossible without the process of observation, therefore, it is particularly relevant to bear in mind that recalling and analysing data can be considered essential for facilitating the reflective process (Wajnryb, 1992). The events of the classroom are recorded accurately so that the data are reliable and could form

the basis for discussion and reflection between a teacher trainer and student teachers (Allright, 1988; Wajnryb, 1992). Observation and discussions after the lesson offer student teachers an opportunity to become aware of how issues are related and interact. This allows them to develop particular skills and techniques, as well as leading them towards professional improvement and experience. Thus, observation can be seen as an important means for developing as a teacher.

## 5 Outline of the teaching situation

The Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT) at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest began its work in the 1990/91 academic year. The course of study was created in order to satisfy the increasing demand for English language teachers in Hungary and accordingly the great need to train these teachers effectively in a comparatively short period of time (Elekes, Magnuczsné-Godó, Szabó, & Tóth, 1998; Medgyes & Nyilasi, 1997).

The traditional Hungarian model of teacher training used to provide five years of study including a two-month (about fifteen isolated lessons) teaching practice when one trainee teaches a group of learners under supervision. In contrast to the traditional way of educating foreign language teachers, CETT offered three years of study with one major (Bárdos, 2001; Bárdos & Medgyes, 1997), but including a whole school year (between one and two hundred hours) of teaching practice (Ryan, 1996) when a pair of trainees taught a group of learners (Bodóczky & Malderez, 1996). While maintaining its focal role, due to budgetary reasons the teaching practice component (in the third academic year) was reduced to a period of one school term (about sixty lessons) in 2001. The three-year programme, described in detail in Medgyes and Malderez (1996), led towards a three-year college-level (B.Ed.) teaching degree and not a full (M.A.) university degree. However, this degree entitled graduates to teach in both primary and secondary schools. In addition, graduates had the opportunity to continue their studies in the regular philological programme at Eötvös Loránd University, which provided them with a full M.A. in two years' time. Most students took this opportunity to achieve higher qualifications (Révész, 2005).

In order to comply with the rapidly changing global environment and the new requirements, the Centre for English Teacher Training introduced a revised four-year programme in 2002. The programme obliged the participants to become double-major students. It must be noted here that, regarding curriculum issues, i.e. the kind and number of classes students received, the two programmes were practically the same. The main difference lay in the timing of the teaching practice component within the programme. For students following the new programme, the teaching practice took one semester and was in the fourth year. As for the number of credits, the CETT type of teaching experience was equal to the general college teaching practice (ELTE Credit Lists, 2002; CETT Credit List, 2002) but the project for teacher training could still place special emphasis on the length and quality of the period of teaching practice.

The course of study at CETT was innovatory in that it involved team teaching as a special form of teaching in an extended teaching practice – a period leading to personal and professional growth. Ryan (1996) highlights the main differences in priority that emerge from comparison of the two models, namely the traditional one and the model offered by CETT. These differences are not only in the number of years from entry to graduation. The most striking difference between the two models lies in the amount and nature of teaching practice

involved. CETT students have the opportunity to participate in a unique teaching practice, in the course of which a pair of trainees takes full responsibility in the teaching environment (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1996). First and foremost it takes place in ordinary primary or secondary schools. Trainee teachers take a class in a school, working in pairs, and they teach the class for the whole term. Trainees are actually responsible for the class and they are the only people teaching the students. The trainee and his or her partner are required to be in the classroom throughout all their lessons, even if only one of them is conducting the lesson. Trainees are also strongly advised to carry out the lessons as a team but they are given considerable freedom at this point. On a sustained and systematic basis, student teachers are supported throughout their teaching practice by both their school-based teacher trainer and their CETT-based classroom studies tutor as well as their partner.

Team teaching is surely the essential basis of the scheme. It has a general educational value and can be considered as a useful and valuable experience (Bodóczy & Malderez, 1994; Medgyes & Malderez, 1996), however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on this issue. Suffice it to say that in practice, team teaching strengthens the process of reflection and offers a great opportunity for observation. Working with a partner during teaching experience is particularly useful because it creates an effective learning environment. Apart from in-class work, the process also requires collaboration before and after lessons. Besides pre-and-post lesson discussions with their peer and teacher trainer at school, student teachers have weekly sessions with the classroom study tutor at the university. During these sessions trainees (pairs teaching at different schools) work in groups of six or eight and discuss different classroom situations and behaviours. Student teachers are also expected to reflect on important issues when keeping diaries and journals about their teaching practice. Developing self-awareness in this way can be considered as an extremely important stage of teacher education and development. Trainees also have to write their thesis on topics related to their teaching practice, the research and experience gained in the classroom.

## **6 Research design**

### **6.1 Research methods and data collection**

With the intention of establishing a better approach for classroom observation, I decided to carry out a small scale qualitative research project in the context of my teaching situation. The specific aim was to make the student teachers more aware of the processes in the classroom and to ensure effective discussions and reflection after the lessons. The study reported here was conducted in the academic year 2005/2006 when I worked with four trainees (two pairs) doing their teaching practice as a part of their studies at CETT. The project was scheduled in October and the place of the teaching experience was the grammar school where I worked. Each pair of student teachers was responsible for a class at secondary level and had four English lessons a week, a lesson being a forty-five minute session. The project was designed for five consecutive weeks (forty lessons) of training. The research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase the student teachers had observation sheets with no specific observation tasks. For a period of two weeks (sixteen lessons) they could observe the lesson and learning without any predetermined focus. At this initial stage, the trainees concentrated on whatever attracted their attention in the scope of observation. Rather than using designed task sheets, the pre-service teachers were free to select from what went on in the classroom. One example of how the observation sheet was filled out is included in Appendix B. In the second phase, which lasted three weeks (twenty-four lessons), the student

teachers were given observation tasks. In order to facilitate understanding, prior to the actual classroom time, the pre-service teachers received some explanation about how to complete the tasks. After this, the materials were completed in the lessons. Appendix C presents one example of a completed sheet. Eventually, in both phases of the study, the post-lesson discussions were grounded in the data taken from the observation sheets. With regard to the trainees' observational field notes, in order to get meaningful results, they were typed up and later analysed. Summarized in these terms, this paper presents the challenges from unstructured observations in the first two weeks as compared with structured observations in the subsequent three weeks.

It is necessary to bear in mind that in the course of the research the student teachers could experience different situations for observation. Firstly, as team teaching during the teaching practice puts a great deal of emphasis on collaboration in the classroom, the student teachers had the opportunity to observe each other in lessons they taught as a team. Secondly, the pre-service teachers could observe each other in lessons conducted by one trainee with the other observing. Observations in all cases were preceded and followed by discussions. Discussions did not aim at making judgements about what was good or bad. The main purpose was to make the trainees think about and reflect on what had been done in the classroom.

Data collection involved the pre-service teachers' observational field notes taken in the first phase of the project and the observation task sheets in the second phase of the project. In order to support the research findings, triangulation, particularly data triangulation, was used (Mc Groarty & Zhu, 1997). Triangulation within the qualitative research also included written reflections in the student teachers' journals and diaries (one example in Appendix D) as well as the researcher's observational field notes taken during classroom observation. Dialogues between the pre-service teachers and the researcher also provided data for this part of the study. As these were not tape recorded, I took field notes about the student teachers' reflections. Due to the limitations of space, these notes are not included in this paper; however, they can be made available through personal contact with the author.

## **6.2 Instruments for data collection**

In the course of the research two major instruments for data collection were used: (1) observation sheets (example in Appendix B) which contained no specific tasks; (2) twelve consecutive observation sheets (example in Appendix A) which were designed to include particular tasks. The purpose of the first, which had a simple format, was to require the two pairs of trainees to write down any of their observations related to the particular procedures in the lesson. No predetermined questions or instructions were given about what to observe. The purpose of the second instrument was to give the process a clear focus for observation. In order to achieve this goal, an attempt was made to involve the two pairs of trainees in the process of observation by focusing on particular areas. Selection of the areas was based on a combination of prior research and theory (Wajnryb, 1992) as well as my own experience. An adapted version of various observation tasks designed by Wajnryb (1992) was used. The purpose of referring to this quite recent source in the literature of classroom observation was twofold: to guide the trainees' observations and to provide opportunities for reflecting and drawing conclusions. The emerging key issue was that the collection of tasks by Wajnryb (1992) directed attention to areas of observation relevant and useful to the needs of the trainees in our own particular situation. The table in Appendix A displays the twelve

observation tasks that were utilised in the second phase of this study. A full display of all the task sheets would be beyond the scope of this paper; however, the two specific samples of observation sheets filled out are included to provide typical examples (Appendix B and Appendix C). In the course of research all trainees were given the same observation sheets.

The twelve observation tasks were planned to cover the period of twenty-four lessons in the course of three weeks (twelve for each pair of trainees). The sequence of the observation tasks was devised so that the early tasks were specific and simple (Tasks 1, 2 and 3), whereas the later ones were more complex and holistic (Task 11 and Task 12). The major question was how observations should be focused. Some observation tasks needed a sharper focus (e.g. Task 3). In the later stage of the project the focus of observation needed to shift towards more challenging tasks (Task 11 and Task 12). As it mentioned above, the choice of areas to observe was justified by the needs of the student teachers and the group of learners in this particular situation on the one hand, and the important issues relevant to the early stage of teaching practice, on the other. Finally, observations were targeted on six areas: the learner, the lesson, learning, materials, teaching skills and classroom management. It is essential to note here that in practice the areas neatly overlapped, especially during discussions when interpretations were made.

First and foremost, several observation tasks (Tasks 1, 2 and 9) were designed to provide an opportunity for the student teachers to sharpen their awareness of how their students could contribute to the lesson. As the trainees tended to concentrate more on what they did rather than on what the learners did, these tasks were intended to encourage the student teachers to consider the importance of learners' participation. In order to keep the students interested in the learning process, it was necessary to include a variety of activities in the lesson, however they proved inadequate. Therefore, it was important for the trainees to find out and develop different techniques to motivate the students and help them learn (Task 8).

With regard to the context of teaching practice, it was impossible to observe what went on in the classroom without considering what the teacher did. Any task inevitably meant observing the teacher as well, but the tasks did not put the weight of observation directly on the teacher, therefore they were meant to produce quite a different effect. An attempt was made to relieve the tension and as a result the teacher being observed was less frustrated. The tasks demanded paying attention to what went on in the classroom, although the teacher inevitably remained in the scope of observation. Eventually, the focus of observation needed to shift towards more teacher-centred tasks. Such tasks demanded more attention on the teacher's behaviour.

One further aspect to be mentioned is that when teachers are being trained, they are required to plan the timing of their lessons carefully. It often proves quite difficult for beginner teachers to predict the time spent on a particular activity during the lesson, and it is difficult for them to cover all the activities that have been planned. This is the main reason why it was important to take this relevant aspect of the lesson into consideration (Task 3). Timing, however, was not seen as a problematic area in the current teaching situation. On the contrary, this task was included with the clear intention of encouraging the trainees and pointing out that there was an important area they could deal with successfully. As for the issue of instructions, it must be noted that the trainees had gone through different stages of improvement in this area (Task 4). Nevertheless, it was necessary to recycle this focus of observation in order to give the trainees an opportunity to achieve better skills in the language

of instruction-giving. Similarly, it was essential to make the trainees more aware of the significance of learners' errors, as problems could show what areas needed to be taught in the future (Task 6). Another reason for including an observation task on correction was that one of the trainees was particularly interested in this area and intended to choose it as the topic of her B.Ed. thesis. Furthermore, it was relevant for the student teachers to gain the ability to reveal the aims of the lesson stages and activities (Tasks 5, 7, 10, 11 and 12) or find out ways of making these explicit. The purpose was to raise the issue of the extent to which student teachers plan their aims for teaching (Task 11) and what decisions they make in order to achieve them (Task 12). It was also important to discover how appropriate the activities had been for the learners' level or needs (Tasks 7 and 10) and what effect they had had on the teaching and learning process (Tasks 12).

On the whole, the ultimate aim of the procedure used for data collection was to develop and refine the trainees' ability to see and hear what went on in the classroom by looking at different elements of classroom activity and taking advantage of keeping observation records. Each task contained a column for comments, which outlined an attempt to give freedom to the observer for sharing any thoughts or observations. Following these considerations, the instrument for observation and recording was meant to give the pre-service teachers an opportunity to experience the difficulties of the lesson, but also to make them satisfied with their professional growth and improvement.

### 6.3 Participants

The core of data was gained from four pre-service teachers at the Centre for English Teacher Training (CETT) at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. The course of their study was related to the two programmes, namely the three-year programme and the four-year programme, both of which included a one-semester teaching practice component as described earlier in this paper. All participants were female. Two of the trainees had chosen their partner. There was one random pairing. None of them had been involved in teaching jobs, but all of them had had teaching experience in one-to-one tuition. Obviously, from the point of view of experience in teaching the participants presented a homogeneous group. All participants were willing to contribute to the projected objectives. The trainees' special permission was asked for the data to be used. Additionally, strict confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed.

As for the learners in the classroom, they were fourteen 14-year-old boys and girls in the first group, and fourteen 15-year-old boys and girls in the second group. The learners in the first group were first-year students, whereas the learners in the second group were in the second year of their studies. The groups of learners had four English lessons a week, each lesson lasting forty-five minutes. Both groups followed the same textbook: *New Headway Pre-Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, 1991). The classes were homogeneous in terms of age and cultural background but the students had different needs because of differences in their previous language learning experience. They naturally had varied learning styles as well, thus the trainees needed to be aware of the difficulties in the particular settings. The pre-service teachers had to be concerned with the needs of their pupils and the importance of meeting these needs.

## 7 Findings

The study yielded several findings. Both my own notes and observations and the participants' comments (see Appendix D) indicated that initially, at the start of the teaching practice, it was sensible to begin with more general and unstructured observation. In these terms the findings seemed to confirm Wajnryb's opinion that trainee teachers need "time and space to become familiar with the culture of the classroom" (1992, p. 7). This period was necessary because it introduced the student teachers to the investigation of their own classroom experiences in a gentle and non-threatening manner. The trainees needed this early stage to get an impression of the class as a whole and the students as individuals. They also needed the time to get accustomed to the role of the teacher in the teaching/learning process. Moreover, observation without a focus was good to start with as the trainees were unable to see all the details. It was difficult for some student teachers to observe all aspects of the classroom at the same time. As there was so much going on in the classroom, after a few weeks the process of such observation became vague and inadequate for purposeful post-lessons discussions. The key finding was that when the prospective teachers observed in the classroom without any focus, it was not especially productive, as the trainees did not know what to look out for. The results supported the view offered by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, (2000, p. 303) who state that "unstructured observation is far less clear on what it is looking for". The need for focused observation in teacher formation became crucial.

With regard to focused observation, both I and the trainees found that it helped the trainees to observe the lessons in a more effective way than observing in the classroom without any focus. It was certainly an advantage that the student teachers could concentrate on specific questions. The questions promoted learning in the sense that they enabled the trainees to discover and explore more professional and methodological issues. The significance of this was that the trainees could develop as teachers. The findings of the study suggested that structured observation raises better awareness of what goes on in the classroom. It also became clear that in order to get meaningful results, apart from the preliminary selected areas to observe, it was necessary to ensure that the trainees were given the opportunity to comment on what they noticed and considered to be of high value. This no doubt gradually increased self-observation. It helped the trainees realize that although the lesson was a whole, it was constructed out of small elements, and each element had a very important role. While focusing on these elements, the trainees gained a better understanding of how interdependent the elements of the classroom were.

Of particular importance for this study was the use of the findings in the classroom in post-observation discussion. Wajnryb (1992), for example reminds us that task-based observation demands organisation and expression of thoughts, a process which promotes learning. Attention is drawn to the fact that tasks look at what goes beyond the scope of the classroom. These speculations are in relation to the assumption (Gebhard, 1999) that classroom observation remains rooted in analyzing and interpreting which play a major role in the different stages of development in the profession. With regard to this, task sheets were seen as the core around which important issues were debated. In this respect, it appeared that the observation tasks played a significant role in the trainees' reflection and awareness about the different aspects of the classroom. Among the main advantages was that focused observation made the post-lesson discussions more to the point. In addition, it was also apparent that the observation tasks triggered conversations about different aspects of the processes of teaching and learning. For instance the learners' own role, perceptions and motivations were particular areas which the trainees tended to neglect or do not show enough

courage to cope with; therefore during the period of the study these issues were regularly addressed. As a result, the student teachers reported developmental shifts in their focus from teaching and the teacher to learning and the learner. Another point to consider is that apart from guiding awareness, the discussions confronted the trainees with different choices and solutions regarding the lesson. For example, in the post-observation discussions it was useful to exchange ideas about what the teacher could plan and try out in order to motivate the students. Consequently, an attempt was made to involve the trainees in the experience of evaluation. However, it was found that there was a need for better understanding of the process as well as more consistent work in this area.

The findings also highlighted some problems in the course of research. First, there was some difficulty experienced in terms of the format of the observation sheets. It should be noted that although the sheets were carefully designed, the wording caused ambiguity. It was necessary to give some explanations prior to implementation. On the other hand, the trainees sometimes needed more space for recording. Second, in the situations when one of the trainees was teaching and the other was observing, recording of observations could be done quite easily, but when both trainees conducted the lesson and were in front of the class together, it seemed difficult to fill in the observation sheets. Short written records were sometimes added after lessons. Unfortunately, this was a constraint in the situation.

On the whole, the study showed that the observation tasks played an important role in this particular context of teacher education. Generally speaking, the research project proved that the student teachers could benefit from focused observation using observation sheets. The point at issue here is that it was useful and beneficial to choose the areas as foci of observations according to trainees' needs and particular teaching situations. Eventually, the observation tasks became an indispensable part of the process of learning to teach.

## 8 Conclusion

The study lasted five weeks and involved two pairs of trainees. It was not, therefore, a large-scale investigation. The research project was designed to investigate objective evidence with regard to the impact of focused observation on these particular student teachers' professional development. With reference to the literature, there were some good reasons why unstructured and structured observation procedures were closely integrated into the teaching practice as a whole. It was found that structured observation created better effects as the participants seemed to benefit more from guidance. One of the main contributions of this situation was that observation tasks were used to facilitate classroom observations. The tasks were regarded as a learning tool which helped the pre-service teachers focus mostly on areas which they needed to work on. The observation tasks were also intended to make the trainees think about what lay behind decisions made before or in class. Therefore, apart from the purposes of more focused observation, the tasks were exploited in follow-up discussions when in order to increase their awareness, the trainee teachers were requested to reflect and draw conclusions on the collected data.

As the detailed analyses of the results indicated, the participants could benefit from the research project in a variety of ways. For example, the process offered the student teachers an opportunity to look more closely at what they did in the lessons and to consider why they did it and what the outcome effect was. Furthermore, participants demonstrated a better understanding of the processes in the classroom in terms of planning which became a more

deliberate and successful undertaking. The student teachers' improvement could be discerned in their ability to perform in a more efficient way on the basis of the post-lesson discussions and interpretations of what was observed. It is also important to note that there was a growing change in the trainees' practical knowledge which translated into deeper understanding of the teaching behaviours and the learning processes in the classroom. As a result of this, both decision-making and problem solving improved significantly. Finally, the degree of satisfaction with the rewarding outcomes in teaching and learning process indicated that the approach increased the participants' delight in their professional growth and development.

In conclusion, although the results cannot be generalized, the findings of this research bear great importance on achieving a more successful learning environment in teaching practice. However, several issues related to the study need to be considered further. For example, the question of what should be the focus of classroom observations has many possible answers, therefore it opens prospects for future research. In this particular case it was the teacher trainer who made decisions about the areas to be observed, nevertheless, it might also be possible to find out whether pre-service teachers can design their own tasks. This approach can be essential if trainees want to explore teaching in the areas of their interest and choice. It will be most useful to explore whether observing and recording can give student teachers a better or different chance to experience the difficulties of the lesson and whether observing and recording can motivate them in a different way. In a follow-up study, more groups of learners and different task sheets can be integrated into the process of observation.

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## APPENDIX A

Table of observation tasks

1	The learner as doer	Lesson stage	What learners do	What this involves	Teacher's purpose			Comment
2	Learner level	Student	Level	Signs of level	Teacher's strategies			Comment
3	Timing	Lesson stage	Time planned	Time spent on activity				Comment
4	Giving instructions	Lesson stage	Teacher's instructions	Comprehension of instructions				Comment
5	Learning aims	Lesson stage	Teacher's aim	Explicitness of aim				Comment
6	Managing error	Lesson stage	Learner error	Error correction	Process effect			Comment
7	Checking learning	What does teacher check?	How does teacher check?	Why does teacher check?	How does student respond?	Process effect		Comment
8	Learner motivation	Lesson stage	Student	Learner's behaviour	Signs of motivation	Teacher's praise	Effect on the learner	Comment
9	Learner as resource	Lesson stage	Student	Learner's participation	Teacher's feedback	Teacher's aim		Comment
10	Task analysis	Introduction	Link to previous task	Task stages	Teacher's role	Learner's role	Appropriateness to level	Comment
11	Lesson planning	Lesson stage	Materials	Classroom organization	Skills	Teacher's aim	Time spent on activity	Comment
12	Teaching and learning roles	Lesson stage	Classroom organization	Skills	Teacher's role	Learner's role	Teacher's aim	Comment

## APPENDIX B

## Unstructured observation

Procedures	Observation
<i>Homework checking</i>	<i>The teacher corrected the mistakes. The students repeated the words.</i>
<i>Pre listening task- brainstorming (8.12-8.21) CRIME-collecting words related to the topic</i>	<i>According to the lesson plan, this task should have been finished by 8.14. The teacher is 7 minutes behind the schedule Teacher: What does a 'killer' mean? Student: 'Murderer.' Teacher: What does a 'robber' mean? K.: A man who stole money or something from somebody. Some students are able to explain the words in English.</i>
<i>Listening Task: underline the words we talked about in the previous task.</i>	<i>The teacher explained the task once. She only asked: Do you understand? Everybody was reading the text in the course book instead of listening to it. The teacher was not monitoring.</i>
<i>Comprehension questions</i>	<i>Teacher: Is there anything that you do not understand? There was no specific question.</i>
<i>Listening Task: answer the questions</i>	<i>The students read the text again. The teacher was not monitoring. T. described the pictures in English. He had difficulties with the last picture. He did not know the word 'guest'. The teacher helped him.</i>
<i>Checking</i>	<i>The teacher wrote the solutions on the blackboard. The students were only looking at the course books. They were not correcting. The teacher should have asked them to write the solutions in their notebooks.</i>
	<i>The teacher explained in English first and then translated the explanations into Hungarian.</i>
	<i>The students did not seem to understand the point of the task.</i>

## APPENDIX C

## Structured observation – Learner motivation

Lesson stage	Student	Learner's behaviour	Signs of motivation	Teacher's praise	Effect on the learner	Comments
<b>Homework checking</b>	D.	<i>She volunteered.</i>	<i>She wanted to read the homework</i>	<i>OK</i>	<i>She smiled.</i>	
	Zs.	<i>She volunteered.</i>	<i>She wanted to read the homework</i>	<i>Very good</i>	<i>She looked proud of the outcome.</i>	
<b>House description</b>	D. Zs.	<i>They wanted to give the solutions.</i>	<i>They did it for smiling faces.</i>	<i>Very good. The teacher gave them smiling faces.</i>	<i>They looked at each other. They were happy.</i>	<i>I observed that both learners asked: 'Do I get a smiling face?'</i>
	Sz.	<i>She wanted to make a sentence.</i>	<i>She wants to make a sentence for a smiling face.</i>	<i>Well done.</i>		<i>Smiling faces seem to motivate the learners very much.</i>
	T.	<i>He showed positive attitude to the task.</i>		<i>OK. Very good.</i>		
	B.	<i>She tried hard.</i>	<i>She made an effort to speak about her room.</i>	<i>The teacher helped her. The teacher encouraged her.</i>		<i>The personal element seems to motivate students.</i>
<b>Listening activity</b>						
<b>Checking</b>	<i>Pairs of students read the solutions.</i>	<i>All of them volunteered.</i>				<i>I observed that working with a partner motivated the students to complete the task.</i>
<b>Reading aloud activity</b>	K.	<i>He read the text in the course book.</i>	<i>He seemed to like the task.</i>	<i>OK. Very good. Thank you.</i>	<i>He looked delighted.</i>	<i>Texts that are interesting for the learners can motivate them.</i>
<b>Homework</b>	E., Sz. and D.	<i>'Shall we look at the number of smiling faces? Let us discuss the smiling faces.'</i>		<i>Let us talk about the homework first.</i>		<i>Evaluation seems to motivate the students.</i>

Now think back. What stages of the lesson allow themselves to assessment?

Thank you for completing the task sheet.

## APPENDIX D

### Student teacher's diary

#### **2 weeks without observation tasks**

If there is no focus of observation, the one who observes might miss a lot of important points.

All aspects of the lesson cannot be observed at the same time.

It is like getting used to a dark room.

I could only get an impression of the class.

Not having a focus for observation makes the whole process of observation a bit vague after a few weeks when the impressions are gone.

#### **3 weeks with observation tasks**

I completed the following observation sheets:

##### **Learner as a doer**

I could observe who was active, who was bored and why, who participated, etc.

##### **Learner level**

It was useful to collect signs for the students' level of knowledge. We will have to consider this issue when planning the lessons.

**Timing:** I observed that my partner was very good at timing. She managed to do the lesson as it had been planned. I hope focusing on timing will help me. I am not good at timing and I always have problems with this when I plan my lessons. But I did not get any ideas about how I should plan.

##### **Giving instructions**

When completing the task sheet I realised that instructions in the classroom have to be formed carefully as they have a very important role and influence on the students' work. I became aware of the fact that instructions have to be clear and at the level of the students, because the students have to understand them. This task sheet helped me to learn about the aspects of giving instructions. I will take these aspects into consideration later when I have to give instructions in my lessons.

##### **Learning aims**

It was very useful for the teacher to see the ratio of objectives after the lesson. While teaching the class, we need to pay attention to so many things that we cannot really observe the ratio of objectives.

##### **Managing error**

The observation task helped me in two ways. First, as I observed our students I became more aware of who made mistakes. I also became aware of the types of errors. I therefore gained a clearer and more complex knowledge of my students. Second, I learnt more about the role of error correction, for example, how important it is to correct students' mistakes and when it is needed. I became interested in how mistakes can be corrected.

##### **Checking learning**

This observation task made me aware of the importance of checking. I personally need to plan the checking stages more carefully.

##### **Learner motivation**

I became aware of the power of evaluation. We can use this tool to motivate the students. I became interested in the issue of motivation. It seems to be very important. Students work hard when they are motivated.

##### **Learner as resource**

This task helped me to gain a more complex knowledge of my students. I could observe them from outside, from another point of view. Observations helped me to get to know my students better. I think I can use the information later.

##### **Task analysis**

##### **Lesson planning**

##### **Teaching and learning roles**

These observation tasks were useful. Apart from the stages, I could see the lesson as a whole. I became more aware of how a lesson has to be built up.

The headings and the format were always clear. Sometimes I wrote so much that the space was not enough and I needed another sheet of paper. Besides, the columns proved to be too narrow to write in. At the beginning, I had problems with the column of 'Comments', because I did not know what it meant exactly. But I asked my teacher trainer and she explained it to me. On the whole, the tasks were clear and easy to complete.

To sum it up, the observation tasks helped me to become more aware of teaching. The tasks drew my attention to aspects of teaching which had not come to my mind before. I had not known that they existed at all.