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BEYOND CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS OF ENGLISH CLASSES IN COLOMBIA

MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS OBSERVACIONES DE CLASES DE
INGLÉS EN COLOMBIA

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Abstract: The text herein is a reflection of classroom observation practices pertaining English classes in Colombia. There is a need to highlight that classroom observations are not just practices aimed at evaluating, criticizing or judging; these practices are adequate scenarios in which reflection and criticism play a leading role. Moreover, a specific strategy called classroom observations of English classes in Colombia was analyzed from 2012 - 2019 in data sources such as bilingualism programs, English improvement plans, and news featured in Colombian newspapers. The author delves into the hidden aspects of this practice, the unseen elements in academic research and things that should probably not be revealed when observer and observee are interacting in this dynamic.

Findings expose a different and critical stance concerning classroom observations of English classes in Colombia through categories proposed; finally, the reader will be able to identify some aspects that are probably beyond this practice, which are still carried out in education processes in Colombia this country.

Keywords: Teachers' professional development, ; classroom observation, ; reflection processes, ; observer subject.

Resumen: El presente escrito es una reflexión basada en las prácticas de observación en clases de inglés en Colombia. Es necesario recalcar que las observaciones de clases no solo son prácticas para evaluar, criticar o juzgar; a su vez, estas prácticas se constituyen como escenarios propicios en los cuales la reflexión y la crítica cobran un papel preponderante. Igualmente, se realizó un análisis de una estrategia específica, como lo son las observaciones de clases de inglés en Colombia, desde el año 2012 hasta 2019, en fuentes como programas de bilingüismo, planes de fortalecimiento de inglés y noticias de periódicos colombianos. El autor indaga sobre lo oculto en estas prácticas, lo que no se ve en las investigaciones académicas sobre el tema, y lo que probablemente no se debe mostrar cuando el observador y el observado se encuentran en esta dinámica de observación. Los hallazgos muestran una postura diferente y crítica sobre la estrategia de las observaciones de clases de inglés de Colombia por medio de unas categorías propuestas y, finalmente, el lector logrará identificar lo que posiblemente está más allá de estas prácticas que aún se llevan a cabo durante procesos educativos en este país.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo profesional docente, observación de clases, procesos de reflexión, sujeto observador.

INTRODUCTION

Without speculation, there is no good and original observation.

Charles Robert Darwin

Observations of English classes are evinced in teacher training processes and performance evaluations, they are also used to provide information on quality standards in the country's government programs, to input data on education projects, and more.

Although class observations of the English subject in Colombia are used as a technique to collect information and to assist academic and scientific research, it also makes room for a reflection of daily teaching practices; based on the aforementioned, it is important to explore our own teaching dynamic, which materializes through observation (Lasagabaster, 2006, p. 68).

Yet, some questions arise: What is the significance of observing English teachers? Which are the specific elements to be considered by the observer in his/her task? Do English teachers agree with the observation? Which sensations are regarded by the observer/observee during this practice? The main purpose is not to answer these questions, but to understand the position of the observer, the observee, and what is undercover in observation practices throughout this text. At the same time, the reader is invited to reflect about his/her own experience in this process and inquire into likely "options" when having a class observation.

Se debe mencionar, además, que este artículo consta de la introducción, la metodología con un material de estudio, los resultados obtenidos y una discusión a manera de conclusión que posiblemente brindará un aporte teórico, metodológico y reflexivo sobre lo que está más allá de las *observaciones de clases de inglés en Colombia* (OCIC).

The material used herein references a study (conducted by the author of this article between 2002 - el 2019) which is used as an analysis for the reader to perceive the dynamics that took place in processes of classroom observation of English classes Colombia, including the national government's strategies, teachers' professional performance and English teachers' pedagogical training.

Moreover, the results of this article seek to expand the outlook of this practice, which is not to be regarded as a practice of judgement or as means of evaluation and teaching professional development. Some of the categories that emerged in this study are developed. Also, what texts fail to mention about observations is explained, in particular, what figures and statistical data fails to reveal concerning class observation practices in Colombia. It might be possible to provide a different take on encounters by observer and observee, what is invisible..., what fails to meet the eye in conversations between them and the importance of the exercise of observing others.

In this reflection, the reader will find biographic particularities on class observation, situations faced by researchers, class observers and observed teachers. Also, sections on authors specializing on this topic, with the aim of delving into the initial questions and of having a critical and reflexive questioning of the practice of classroom observations of English classes in Colombia in recent years. Lastly, the article introduces a conclusion that reflects on critical and analytical stances deriving from classroom observations, its processes and rubrics.

METHODOLOGY

It's on the strength of observation and reflection that one finds a way.

Claude Monet

This article of reflection follows a qualitative approach and it is based on the analysis of observations of English classes in Colombia. It made use of a file comprising government plans, English improvement strategies and some newspapers' references of classroom observations of English classes as situations to promote teachers' professional development, evaluate parameters linked to the classroom and follow-up on standards of the government's educational policies. This research is considered to be interpretive, exposed to the particular.

Also, the theory's construction is evident through continuous reflection deriving from a deep immersion in the field, pertaining collected data and its impressions of the specific context (Hernandez Sampieri, Fernandez, Collado y& Baptista Lucio, 2008, p. 442).

In terms of methodology, Table 1 acts as the core of the text, it helped categorize the results for posterior analysis and reflection. The analysis was an intellectual production exercise of the author's doctoral studies, in a seminar called Critical Discourse Analysis, covering practices of observation of English classes, the topic studied throughout the research project. There was an inquiry of the different characteristics of practices of observation of English classes in Colombia durante from el 2012 to el 2019 in national government programs/plans, English improvement strategies and files of Colombian newspapers which covered the topic in news and stories. Data collection was conducted with the Colombian local context in mind; information was not compiled in large numbers, which allowed a simpler analysis technique to identify the study's beneficial information (Tinto, 2013, p. 146).

Table 1 is divided in two parts. The first references information sources containing the topic of observation of English classes, followed by information taken from the original source and that in which the author identified segments related to the topic. There is an invitation to consider the diverse particularities covered by the topic of observations of English classes in Colombia.

Table 1. Observations of English classes in Colombia 2012-2019

Source	Description
1. Municipal Bilingualism Plan of Mosquera (2012), <i>Mosquera Lives English 2012-2021</i>	According to the Bilingualism Plan, classroom observation was defined as a valuable tool to improve teacher performance because this practice identifies the components and provides training feedback to the teacher's performance in the classroom (p.15). Workshop sessions are organized and intended to be accompanied with constant classroom observation with teach teacher, so as to receive training feedback about the practical use of the topics covered in the workshops (p.47).
Ministry of National Education – MEN (2014), <i>Colombia Very Well – 2015-2025 National English Program</i>	One of the program's strategies is based on the creation of teacher communities, which enable sharing teaching experiences, mutual learning and disseminating best practices (for instance: peer observation, lesson study, open classes, etc.). One of the objectives of peer observation is mutual observation, aimed at teachers identifying opportunities to improve their teaching practice (p.74).
3. Hernandez Santamaria (2018), <i>¡Bienvenidos los cambios! Evaluación integral a los docentes de nuestro país</i> Changes are Welcome! Comprehensive Evaluation of our Country's Teachers	Peer observation is a key element to this reference (at least partially since it is not a surprise video or hidden camera). [...] The video has to be recorded by the teacher, with his or her own resources, or with an ICFCES' cameraman, at no added cost. The quality of the recording must be guaranteed, which is why MEN has designed manuals and informative videos both for the recording and to adapt the teacher's practice under evaluation [...].
4. MEN (2016), Bilingual Colombia. Foreign Native Trainers Program	Per this strategy, foreign native trainers (fellows) 'support bilingualism managers in the process of class observation on their visits to the educational institutions' (p.87).
5. British Council- District's Secretary of Education. Agreement 1550 of 2017	A 'Guide of Class Observation Rounds' was formulated as part of the proves of Training Schools and Teachers' Teachers. Some objectives of the observation rounds are: I. Bring trainee teachers closer to progress benchmarks. II. Acknowledge that progress benchmarks are elements that constitute an adequate teaching practice and will be used to provide feedback on their practice. III. Begin a culture of class observation within trainee teachers as means to attain good classroom practices' (p.2).
6. MEN (2018-2019), <i>Handbook to auto-record the practice video</i> . Evaluation with Training Diagnostic Nature (ECDF, for its Spanish acronym)	The Evaluation with Training Diagnostic Nature includes an overall handbook to guarantee the quality of auto-recording (self-observation) in the educational and pedagogical practice of the classroom teacher. Another situation to consider is that the video of the educational practice has to be taken in the period in which the teacher is being evaluated and must deliver the regulations' provisions (p.5).
7. Cabrales (June 7 th , 2019), <i>Las 2 Ollas</i> <i>"Las fallas del examen de ascenso docente"</i> Failures of the teachers' promotion exam	[...] The Evaluation with Training Diagnostic Nature evaluates several Colombian teachers to decide whether or not they are promoted or relocated in terms of salary. One of the techniques consist of recording a video. The writer therefore argues the following: 'the video is nothing but a farce, a futile spectacle with the likely purpose of contributing income to ICFCES and to certain universities involved in the process through the collection of a considerable amount'.

Table 1

Observations of English classes in Colombia 2012-2019

Source: compiled by the author during the Critical Discourse Analysis seminar, interinstitutional PhD in education at la Universidad Distrital FJDC, Bogota, 2019.

It must be stressed that Table 1 only has seven primary sources of information, and that the analysis covers 2012 to 2019. Several authors, academics and researchers among the theoretical references of classroom observations of English classes have described and addressed the topic; however, the idea of writing this article entails the possibility of conducting an analysis of some of the national government's education programs, bilingualism plans, educational quality improvement strategies, of external entities and news in local newspapers related to class observations. Also, diverse points of view are identified concerning what goes beyond classroom observations of English classes in Colombia. The following are the categories that rose throughout the analysis. The intention is to support what has been studied and what has not been said in terms of classroom observations of English classes in Colombia.

RESULTS

Observation is the most basic empirical process.

Mario Bunge

Concerning this text's results, it is important to explain that the information in Table 1 includes only some fragments that evince class

observation practices (information taken from each source is expanded in content); likewise, emerging categories are proposed by the analysis to attempt covering the seven sources that have been described. The following is an explanation of the categories that stand out as a result of this research.

Evaluation and Feedback in Observations of English Classes

Before establishing this category –based on observations of English classes,– it is essential to add that the dictionary of Real Academia Española defines the verb to evaluate as: “attributing value to something or somebody, in terms of an implicit or explicit project”, and feedback as: “the action and effect of providing feedback”. With these in mind, observations of English classes are processes that have a particular attribution and also undertake a valuation; a grade/value is allocated and comments are provided to explain it!

In English classes, it is common to evaluate pedagogical and academic processes through observation. While observing and evaluating English classes in schools and institutes, methodologies proposed in the syllabus (class guidelines) are also evaluated to see if English teachers’ are doing tasks “well”. Many questions arise based on particular experiences of English teachers: What does it mean to do a “good” task? Does it imply following planned activities and solving them very literally? Creo que, pFor now, inquiring into good or bad teacher practices in or outside the classroom is irrelevant, or maybe not! What is interesting in this first category of evaluation and feedback is going deeper into what is typically described and usually shown in teaching training books, things that are unlikely to be seen or that remain hidden.

As stated by Martínez, Cruz, Bamond, Fernández and Strotmann (2018), it is important to consider the detail of observation methods and techniques. They also argue the following, per Gosling (2002):

The development model [is] where an expert or more experienced professor conduct a summative evaluation or diagnostic of another teacher. This model aims to be for the observee’s benefit. And the peer review model [has] a balanced relationship between observer and observee, which aims to benefit both. (p. 3)

It is no secret that in the Colombian context, the “expert teacher”, i.e., the one with the greatest experience, greatest academic training, highest position, etc., is the most suitable to observe an English class of a teacher who is getting started on his/her professional experience or who has not reached his/her qualifications. Both parties will receive some type of incentive for their professional development in exchange: the observer grows by providing concepts pertaining analysis, evaluation and criticism, while the observee receives meaningful comments and input.

The aforementioned is known as peer observation, colleagues observe one another to mutually benefit in their daily practices, and to undertake a feedback exercise. It is evident in Table 1 (sources 1 and 2), when these introduce “training feedback on the practical use of topics covered in

workshops”, and also in “the objective is that improvement opportunities in teaching practices are identified based on mutual observation”, respectively.

In that sense, a hidden element of observations of English classes (evaluation and feedback) has to do with the fact that “experts” who observe the classes and offer feedback are not defined. Moreover, almost every educational process tends to observation-based evaluation of what is seen live/immediately, of what the expert’s eye can conclude upon observing teachers’ practices. If a coordinator, director or external observer engage in observing an English class and, and the teacher fails to successfully deliver the class objective, the result is a bad score that could even endanger his/her job.

There are other evaluation methods (in this document’s author’s opinion) which could be significant. One of them would be interrogating students prior and after the observation. Students are frequently confident in evaluating the teacher, they are directly linked to the academic processes, and a talk with them could provide more data than a class observation. In other words, observation cannot become the go-to mechanism to evaluate and judge a teacher’s task in and outside the classroom. Dialog between teacher and observer, students or teachers’ narratives about class development, or an informal talk with the academic community can be considered alternatives to inquire into teachers’ class dynamics.

Nevertheless, who appoints the experts to observe the classes? How did they get there? Why is the observer-observee relation vertical? Are class observations a hierarchic positioning?

These are questions that derive from this analysis. They go beyond observations; it is relevant for English teachers to analyze said situations, drive their own reflections and achieve an action plan to face evaluation and feedback processes. More processes were identified in class observations, these will be covered in the next sections.

Control, Criticism and Discipline

El siguiente punto trata del control, la crítica y la disciplina en las observaciones de clases de inglés. Before justifying the topic, it is convenient to cite quisiera Rekalde, Vizcarra and Macazaga (2014): “Observation is an interactive method to collect information which requires the implication of the observer in the events being observed, since it allows perceptions of the reality being studied [...]” (cited by Rodriguez, Gil, & y Garcia, 1996, p. 7).

Although the aforementioned is taken into consideration, observation is not just about collecting information; it is a development that involves several occurrences (both in the school context as well as in the teachers’ professional development and educational quality processes). Control, criticism and discipline are particularities in class observation, most specifically of English classes.

From the experience of this article's author as English teacher and class observer, it can be said that control exists when imparting *debo praxis*. through guidelines that have been established for decades and validated by the teacher and other academics in the field and society in general. Certainly, these guidelines go hand in hand with the observer's disposition, the observer controls the step-by-step of the teachers' dynamics in the classroom in an evaluation rubric. There is control in English classes since observation focuses on an insisting step-by-step of the activities, on a universal and modern evaluation system and on a rigid class management structure depending on the context's needs. As I see it, English classes are set up to persist in a homogeneous system, and indeed class observations will focus on that, in something that is ratified by men, a normalized practice in current educational processes. What is the amount of control in class observation?

Directors of educational institutions, peer observers, government entities (ministries and local secretaries) need to collect data of teachers' practices in the classroom. How can this be achieved? Class observations provide figures/numbers to identify shortcomings, improve mistakes and multiply "good" practices.

This is similar to a system of control and discipline, which has to be implied in each of the actions taking place when observing a class. The analysis in Table 1, source 3 shows that, according to MEN's "Evaluation with Training Diagnostic Nature. (ECDF, for its Spanish acronym), and in Hernandez's words, P. "*theEvaluation with Training Diagnostic Nature is a methodology that offers greater objectivity and comprehensiveness in the diagnostic of teachers exercise, because it focuses on pedagogical practices and services the teacher's particular context*". This new teacher's evaluation has to do with control, since class observation "[...] by peers will allow seeing –at least in part (because it is not secret video or hidden camera)– what the teacher is doing in the classroom, the way in which he/she offers knowledge and encourages student learning [...]" (2016). Certainly, control and discipline are present in this auto-recording practice (observation).

Another trait of control and discipline in class observation practices has to do with the guidelines and formats that the observer has to fill out during the exercise. The practice, its results and observation are under control while registering the teacher's hits and misses in positive or negative points, passed or failed, and even observer's comments regarding several class components.

The observation format is divided in precise structures as to what the observer must look for: performance, goals, objectives, strategies, materials, resources, evaluation and many others, to control class observations. It must be said that uniform/universal formats exist to conduct observations, and that some are produced by the parties involved based on their context, yet the intention is to control what the observer needs to do his/her job through a format. To provide more depth to this category, Annex 1 illustrates the particularities of a class observation format that considers components of control and discipline.

Since this article intends to show what goes beyond class observations, it is necessary to mention that, concerning the practice of auto-recording (observation), teachers can decide whether to be who they really are in front of the camera or not. Some will even overact or have unforeseen situations while filming, which cannot really be observed or inserted into the video. Although a proper *praxis* will be discernible beyond the little details, it could be that excellent actors record their videos and seem to be “good” teachers in front of the camera.

Class observation does not always portray class’s naturalness in full. According to the recollection of a teacher who was scheduled for an observation: “Teacher M, I am aware that you will be observing my class tomorrow, I am getting prepared [...] I will study my script and turn into a great actress in the classroom, you will see [...]”.

Likewise, class observation formats place the observer in a limited scenario; most times, there is no opportunity to register additional comments on the form, notes have to be taken in the form, there is no room for observations concerning elements that are divergent, invisible, authentic in these class observation rubrics. There is disregard for the moment after completing the format or rubric; the observer may fail to observe a situation, forget to write something down, make mistakes (as humans often do when taking notes of a particular situation at a given moment). Of course, the observer plays a key role in the road that goes beyond the observation of English classes, and this fact can be argued.

The Observer Subject

This is one of the most analyzed categories due to the fact that not many authors have researched the observer subject in practices of observation of English classes in Colombia y también por el gusto frente a esta particularidad. Some elements that are not described and appear to be “beyond” observation of English classes in Colombia are considered.

Observers are not objects, they are subjects. Observers have their own biases, need to talk about their experiences, wishes, the educational environment, their own training and interests. Observers are people with subjectivity who need to become subjects. This subject has had his own subjectivity transformed, is or has been building a new subject. In Quiceno’s (2004, p. 98) words, the subject is transformed when he/she faces other experiences, it is a modification of the subject’s way of being” (Foucault, 1994, p. 101).

Therefore, the observer has his/her own subjectivity or subjectivities. It is important to mention that this subject has been positioning himself in activities pertaining evaluation, professional development and educational quality. Many of the so-called “expert” observers have credentials and experience, both academic and in their disciplines. Class observers have been trained to fulfill a pertinent task in their practices, must be familiar with the context and prepared to conduct an efficient observation of the case.

Several teachers who are scheduled to be observed research the “expert” prior to the event, with the goal of checking if the expert is proficient in the language (English), has postgraduate studies (masters’ degree, studies abroad, international exams, among others), extensive experience as a teacher and training as observer (several years in the field). All of which leads to validity and positioning while in the observation. Then the observee realizes the subject is highly qualified, he/she now feels like the right one to observe the class..., “he/she is granted ‘permission’ to enter the classroom to criticize, judge, evaluate, give feedback and more”.

Often in Colombia, foreigners are considered better or more skilled to perform a task. This concept applies to the English teaching field as well. Some people believe that foreigners will observe their class better or will be a better observer based on the fact that he/she is foreign (from an English-speaking country, such as the United States, England or Australia), even if the person fails to have the aforementioned credentials. As an example, Table 1 reference 4 states that fellows must support bilingualism managers in the observation of classes at the educational institutions. Thus, it can be analyzed that the subject’s position is the result of a government program (MEN, 2016) in which former native trainers support educational processes by observing teachers’ classes, receiving a validation as expert subjects in class observations.

The goal of this category is to show the hidden *Es difícil tener un solo posicionamiento en mi caso, ya que he observado clases, he recibido entrenamiento para observar y también he orientado clases como profesor de inglés. Mi mirada es un tanto multifacética; por ende, no quisiera generalizar si los profesionales extranjeros hacen bien o mal su trabajo, o si el observador es quien tiene la última-universal palabra en las decisiones finales, o si el profesor es la víctima en estas actividades de observaciones de clases.* variable, which is often disregarded in papers or research about class observations.

With that said, what is invisible about the observing subject is laid out in the negotiations between the observer and the observee. These conversations, which nurture the practice of class observation and assist professional growth, are an exercise of reflection and mutual support. As explained by Parra and Hernandez (2019):

Observing in a context implies applying an unstructured observation strategy to identify patterns in class events and to open spaces to drive collaborative dialog (between observers and observers and observees) to reflect on possible underlying mechanisms of these patterns. (p. 2)

The teacher does not feel right about being observed and the observer makes an agreement to conduct the exercise differently. There is no need to observe, an informal talk, having coffee before and/or after the observation generates trust and leads to the most significant variables of the English class’s pedagogical processes. A more humane approach is to dialog, understand each other and get into the teacher’s shoes, this will center class observation on ethical and humane principles. Is this considered in class observation reports?

The observer subject's dialogs/narratives with and from the teachers fail to make it to the charts of educational quality improvement, these are not considered important to triangulate information in research and oftentimes, they are entirely dismissed. These narratives between the observer and the teachers must come to the light since these could reveal possible changes and solutions for educational strategies in Colombia.

DISCUSSION

It is important to know what must be observed.

Edgar Allan Poe

With the aim of looking at observations of English classes in Colombia in a way that is critical and reflexive, it is convenient to develop some suggestions, opinions and aspects related to the topic.

The following are some details of observations of English classes in Colombia. The process of observation requires reflection and the people involved in it have the opportunity to mutually learn, it goes beyond control/evaluation of educational processes, as explained by Lasagabaster (2006):

It is important for the spirit of the observation to prevail, the goal is not to supervise or inspect with a prescriptive goal; it is not about evaluating the teacher, it is about observing what happens in the class in order to benefit everyone in the teaching-learning process. (p. 75)

Observations of English classes in Colombia offer the chance to work in groups and collaboratively; several subjects are involved in skills concerning listening, argumentation, analysis, and make the invisible visible in school contexts, particularly for English classes in Colombia. Another trait of these observations is based on the training required to be an observer and to steer a "good" observation within the classroom. As seen in Table 1, source 5, an organization such as the British Council has a step-by-step approach followed by recommendations, objectives and aspects to consider while conducting the observation. Although it is a rigid process, as previously mentioned, observation is also a structured, organized, justified and validated process to efficiently respond to the requirements of the coordinator, expert, external organization, directors and national government.

If the reader chooses to stop reading at this point, he/she will be able to conclude that class observations are necessary as a practice to evaluate teachers. Yet, the invitation is to look beyond these observations, analyze the variables provided by observation and be open to what is different/distinct about observations held in classrooms.

As an example, these are some of the reasons why another English teacher has been observed in his/her practice:

- To learn a new activity, method, technique applied in English classes.
- To acquire new components that help improve pedagogical and human tasks.

- To find other learning environments and different factors in and outside the classroom.

These are not “recipes” to conduct an adequate class observation; it is a reflection helps deduce that the most important thing in observation is the ethical act involved.

In sum, observation practices in English classes are, to put it in different words, rituals that pertain a large part of English teachers, and which, like it or not (unfortunately) must be faced and lived with. What about the students’ stance *El sentirme bien o mal al ser observado o como observador posiblemente fue expuesto durante este artículo en el que traté de plasmar mis sensaciones sobre el tema. Lo único que me faltó estroughout the observations?... Aren’t students the core axis in teaching-learning processes? Not a lot has been said about students in this text but writing about them during class observation processes would be a rewarding and important matter, thus making them more visible in observations to English classes in Colombia.*

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