THE USE OF OBSERVATION OF VIDEOED CLASS TIME AS A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT.

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INTRODUCTION

Direct observation by one primary foreign language teacher of another's class time is often impossible. The teacher may be the only foreign language specialist in their school or area. They may not be able to free up the time to spend on class observation or their colleague may not be happy with the idea of being observed. For these reasons, the teacher, or the local or national professional development or training team, may decide that self-study of a video of a colleague teaching is one useful alternative to direct observation. In this paper, I will look at the use of 'indirect'-- i.e., video—observation, and at nine fundamental questions that such a project needs to consider before embarking on the time- consuming task of making videos and self-study packs.

1. WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF THE VIDEO OBSERVATION?

The fundamental long- term aim will presumably be to improve the primary pupils' learning of the foreign language being taught. Other aims may well be to help teachers to:

♦ Feel responsible for their own development (if they don't already).

♦ Gain a clearer understanding of their own classrooms and experience.

♦ Learn something from and about the colleague on the video.

♦ Achieve greater skill in some areas of their work.

♦ Enjoy the process.

2. WHAT'S LIKELY TO WORK *AGAINST* THESE AIMS?

Apart from the obvious problems that would be caused by using long, boring videos with bad or no support materials, there are a number of issues that need to be thought about carefully, early on in the project. In many cultures, teachers will be put off if they get the feeling that the video shows some sort of ideal super teacher whose work they're supposed to mimic. They will also be put off if they feel that the people providing the video are bureaucrats who have forgotten how busy a teacher's life already is. Another quick way of alienating teachers is to ignore or brush aside their concerns about ideas contained in the video and the language skills necessary to implement them. Just as computer purchasers are entitled to after-sales service, so teachers accepting training packs have the right to have their questions and concerns responded to.

3. WHAT'S LIKELY TO WORK *FOR* THE AIMS ABOVE?

Involving teachers from the start by asking them what areas of classroom work they feel confident in and which they would appreciate help with, will help ensure that any

videos produced are relevant to their concerns. Short, interesting videos with good support materials can be presented as a chance to pop in to a colleague's classroom rather than as a model to be followed slavishly. Materials and tasks accompanying the video, can encourage teacher control and choice as well as deliberately trying to generate feelings of increased confidence. Materials and tasks can also, in their content and methods, mirror the messages in the training material. Thus, if one of the main messages in the video is that multi-sensory work is important when teaching foreign languages in the primary classroom, then, in my view, it will be helpful to include some multi-sensory work in the teachers' training pack. To give another example, if the video contains activities for presenting and recycling vocabulary, then some of these activities can be used in the trainers' pack to present and re-cycle the professional terminology the teacher is trying to learn for that section. (For further ideas on this kind of reflexivity see Woodward 1991).

Of paramount importance is the prediction of and response to teachers' concerns about the material and its implementation. Pennington (1995) looks at three types of teacher concerns when teachers are learning and thus changing their practice.

i)   Procedural (concerns about techniques, materials and the logistics of implementing new ideas.

ii)   Interpersonal (teacher and student reactions, roles, motivation, and class atmosphere)

iii)   Conceptual (the teacher searches for personal meaning and integration of theory and practice)

Because of the participant population on the present project, we could add a fourth type of concern, linguistic, to reflect teachers' concerns about the use of the target language implied in the materials and activities.

It's impossible to predict exactly what concerns a teacher will have at each of the four "levels" mentioned above when faced with the new ideas in the video. Nevertheless, by involving teachers from the outset, during a trialing period and later on, concerns can be responded to and fora provided teachers to communicate with each other about their concerns (see below).

4. WHAT AREAS CAN A TEACHER FOCUS ON WHEN OBSERVING A VIDEO OF A CLASS?

As all students and teachers know, classroom encounters can be complex affairs. There are many aspects involved. Some of these aspects can be teased out and named separately. Below is a non-exhaustive list in random order.

♦ The layout and the organization of the room. (Size, display space, windows, furniture, equipment)

♦ The pupils (number, age, grouping, behavior, level)

♦ The teacher (body language; voice; personal style; clothing; general facility with the language, the students, the materials, activities; and how comfortable they are in their work)

- Class management (noise level, movement, roles of teacher and students, rules, rapport and atmosphere)

- Activities (type, length, steps, the senses and intelligences they encourage students to use)

- Materials (type, level, degree of technology, topic, length, audio-visual impact)

- Lesson type (e.g., vocabulary review, storytelling)

- Lesson structure (e.g., greeting→warm up→vocabulary review from aural recognition through Total Physical Response to oral reproduction→introduction of new song…)

- Language involved (in teacher instructions; in the materials and task,i.e., the 'focus language'; student to student interaction language around the task; balance of the four skills; percentage of mother tongue and target language and of real communication vs mechanical practice; other issues are the speed and naturalness of the target language use)

- The time involved (in preparation, in class, in clearing up, in homework, as well as in 'wait time' before and after questions. There's also the question of learning time vs teaching time)

- The assumptions and the beliefs in play (the teacher at work will by their choice of materials and activities and by their actions and their decisions betray to the viewer of the video their habits and their beliefs about learning and teaching. If the video

includes interviews with the teacher on the subject of their beliefs and their reasons for decisions made [see below], then their personal view of effective learning and teaching will be made deliberately more accessible to the viewer).

The elements of the classroom encounter listed above are present in all lessons and can constitute a distracting or bewildering number unless care is taken to allow the viewing teacher to select from them for particular focus. We need to bear in mind too, that regardless of the areas of focus selected by the makers of the training pack, teachers will naturally notice all kinds of other features. This brings us to the last area of focus which I will call the teachers' 'filters'.

♦   The viewing teachers' filters

As well as finding some of the above components of a videoed lesson more interesting than others, the viewing teachers will also have their own concerns and ways of viewing life generally. Some will notice similarities between the videoed teacher's setting and their own. Other viewing teachers will tend to concentrate on differences. Some viewers will be interested in 'the new', others afraid of it. Some will be relatively unjudgemental. Others will have very strong beliefs (e.g., "All foreign language classes at primary level should have a musical component") and will judge the video accordingly (e.g., "There's no music in the videoed class. I therefore have no real respect for the videoed teacher's work"). Some viewing teachers will recognize an implication that the training pack offers them the chance to extend their teaching repertoire. Other viewing teachers will regard the video as TV and thus for

entertainment rather than action. Yet others may feel de-skilled if the language and the methodological competence of the videoed teacher is far beyond their own.

5. WHAT BASIC STRUCTURE COULD BE USED TO FRAME THE VIDEO OBSERVATION?

A traditional and relatively unprovocative overall structure could comprise: Introduction, Before viewing; While viewing; and After viewing—with several passes through the cycle in order to note different components of the videoed lesson (see Question 4 above) or for viewing from different viewpoints (first example, "Imagine you are the little girl in the front row. How much do you understand of this activity"; second example, "Imagine you're the teacher with the camera on you and this has just happened. How would you feel and what would you do next?")

6. WHAT ACTIVITIES COULD BE USED WITHIN THIS FRAMEWORK?

<u>Introduction to the project</u>

Time and stimulus could be provided for the teacher to think about their own professional development so far and their present setting. It would be important for teachers to provide and have access to information for and about colleagues embarking on the project material at the same time but in different languages and countries. Teachers could consider what particularly interests them in their foreign language teaching and

how they feel they learn best. There could also be access to reading banks. A look ahead at all the project material so that viewing teachers can plan their learning would be advisable.

Before viewing

Before watching a video on a particular topic—e.g., storytelling—teachers can be given tasks and time to recall their own experience on the topic, retrieve or learn associated professional terminology and appropriate classroom language, and decide what in their current practice they like and which areas they deem themselves less effective. In order to tune the viewers into the setting of the video more quickly once the video starts, still pictures of the opening frames can be provided for pre-viewing discussion. Tasks for completion before, during or after the viewing need to be considered and understood so that the teacher has a choice of their own and of other people's foci.

While viewing

Some teachers will prefer to simply watch the video without doing any of the tasks provided. Nevertheless, if the tasks are interesting and, especially if they mirror tasks that are included in the class on the video, the teacher will be motivated to carry them out at some stage since they will give first hand experience of new techniques and

improve the teacher's understanding of how much there is to observe, thus enhancing the value of the training materials.

<u>After viewing</u>

Immediately after viewing, teachers can work on any of the following:

♦ Noting down in a viewing journal their first impressions, similarities and differences between the video setting and their own and what, on first viewing, they liked and disliked.

♦ Finishing off tasks related to the video—e.g., sequencing, matching, writing captions for sections or noting down useful classroom expressions uttered in the target language.

♦ Reading transcripts, lesson plans, related articles and interviews.

It may be advisable for the teacher to stop after a few tasks and to view again on another occasion using different tasks. After a later viewing, a teacher can then:

♦ Make an action plan.

♦ Write lesson notes.

♦ Contact a 'study buddy'. (See below.)

♦ Visualize the use of a particular idea in their own classroom.

♦ Try out something new in their classroom and keep a note of any critical moments,

problems and solutions.

♦ Take part in teacher to teacher communication. (See below.)

7. WHAT MATERIALS COULD BE USED TO SUPPORT THE FRAMEWORK AND ACTIVITIES ABOVE?

If enhanced language learning and teacher development were always merely a question of the teacher watching a stranger at work and then mimicking them in their own classroom, then all that would be necessary for this project would be a simple video. However, as our understanding of what matters in classrooms and of how teachers and learners learn and change has passed through different stages, so the materials involved in teacher training and development have also changed. When what a teacher *does* was considered important, observers used to make little ticks in boxes to count the number of times a teacher, for example, smiled. When what a teacher *says* was considered important, we counted the number of, for example, open and closed questions. Current wisdom has it that teacher thinking and decision- making is important so our teacher development materials can reflect this. Some materials that can be considered, therefore, in a project of this kind—whether the materials are in the mother tongue or the target language—are: interviews (possibly with transcripts) of the videoed teacher talking about their aims, beliefs and decision processes before and after the video segment on their teaching; case studies on colleagues; gauges of learner reaction; a viewer's guide

containing observation task banks (see bibliography); short relevant and interesting readings; lesson plan banks as well as snippets of lesson transcripts. Producing CD-Roms and multiple video packs and guides may or may not be beyond the resources of a training team. In either case, however, it's advisable to look at resources already commercially available to see if they or the ideas they contain are adaptable for use with primary foreign language teachers working and studying on their own (see bibliography).

8. HOW WOULD TEACHERS COMMUNICATE THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT THE OBSERVATION EXPERIENCE?

Because many primary foreign language specialists receive little or no training and also go on to work in relatively isolated circumstances away from other primary foreign language teachers, most of the material posited for the project will need to stand alone. Care needs to be taken, however, to provide arenas for teachers working with the materials to express their feelings, problems and solutions. (Their feedback will also be needed by members of the training team at the pilot stage and beyond.)

Depending on the amount of time, money and technology available, I would suggest some of the following ideas could be used:

♦ Private study journals, including audio tapes of own lessons kept by the individual

teacher. Critical moments or quotations can then be selected from these for

presentation by the teacher to others in the arenas below.

♦ Teachers can be linked up within or between schools, districts and countries so that they can act as study buddies or critical friends for each other. Means of contact can include telephone, letters, e-mail, visits, conferences and local meetings.

♦ A magazine can be set up in paper or in electronic form so that teachers can write in with their own findings including lesson plans and tips, useful target language gambits for the classroom, as they use and trial the material and ideas. (See the bibliography for a Japanese newsletter of this type.)

♦ Questionnaires, interviews and conferences are more traditional methods of gaining feedback and inter-teacher contact.

The main point of all the ideas above, apart from self-expression, is the creation of a professional community of primary foreign language teachers whose self-esteem rises as they try new things out and present and solve problems for each other.

9. HOW WOULD THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EXPERIENCE BE EVALUATED?

The overall aims cited under the first question above were to provide a classroom encounter more effective for language learning and to enhance the autonomous development of primary foreign language teachers across Europe. Quite a tall order for a small project producing one pack of material. Nevertheless, when out walking in real terrain, we do manage, with individual strides, and occasional orienting glances at a map,

to cover long distances and climb steep slopes, provided that we are careful to check the relation of the map to reality and vice versa.

This paper is an attempt to provide a sketch map. The involvement of teachers as suggested in the answers to questions 3, 4, 6-8 above gives the chance for the project team to check the map against reality. Later on, the teachers will be able to report back about whether they feel they have developed as a result of the materials, activities, and professional contact. As for the pupils, perhaps the only real test is of their willingness to continue with languages in the secondary school, to return to languages later in life and the effectiveness and attitude with which they use languages in life.

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<u>Bio data</u>

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