CAPITALISING ON OBSERVATION IN RESEARCHING THE POETRY CLASSROOM

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Introduction

In some of my classroom research I have used observation as a means of evaluating the approaches to poetry adopted by teachers, poets and students. This most often entailed observing teachers guiding students to read poems as part of A-level English lessons, but it also involved watching poets engaging young people with poetry writing and performance at school. The reason for which I used observation as part of my research methodology was that it helped to provide me with insights into what happened in the black box of the poetry classroom. While observation offers a range of advantages to researchers interested in lesson dynamics, there are also certain limitations and challenges to be aware of.

Faith in the Observable

Classroom events typically consist of human behaviour taking place away from the view of those who are not involved in the English lesson. For researchers interested in learning about this behaviour, observation poses unique advantages. When he champions a 'faith in the observable' (p. 239), Allwright (1988) implies that a study that lacks an observational component suffers from an interpretational problem. As a highly versatile mode of data gathering, observation 'is fundamentally different from questioning because it provides direct information rather than self-report accounts' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 178). It is the researcher's act of observing behaviour in the English classroom that enhances the method's validity (Gillham, 2008). The argument for using observation is that 'we have plenty of evidence that what

we see influences our judgements more than what we hear' (Newby, 2014, p. 347). For this reason, many researchers are convinced that data consisting of behaviours and events can best be collected by means of classroom observation (Holliday, 2015).

Observation plays a fundamental role in developing our understanding of English classroom practices and in improving the quality of those practices (Wragg, 2012). Some of its strengths consist of the capacity to provide researchers with systematic accounts of classroom interaction as well as enriching and complementing data generated by other methods (O'Leary, 2020). Among its characteristics is the fact that it takes place in a naturalistic setting (i.e., the English classroom) and that it presents the researcher with a holistic viewpoint through the opportunity to observe what takes place in that setting (Newby, 2014). Notwithstanding the uniqueness of each research context, Newby (2014) affirms that 'What we have to do as researchers is demonstrate that out of our unique observations there is something that is meaningful for and relevant to other contexts' (p. 351). However, Harbon and Shen (2015) warn that the data gathered by means of classroom observation depicts snapshots of what occurs in a restricted period of time. Thus, any conclusions drawn from observation are tentative rather than conclusive.

Despite the fact that my use of observation provided me with a mere snapshot of the main events that take place in poetry sessions, this research method was crucial in allowing me to form a more complete picture of teachers', students' and poets' approaches to texts in class. In this sense it complemented and crosschecked the participants' own descriptions of lesson events in the interviews I conducted soon after I observed their lessons. Classroom research that uses observation is not primarily concerned with generalisable findings and hence most often the sample is quite small and selected because of its appropriacy for a study's purposes rather than in a random manner (Simpson & Tuson, 2003). In my research, observation was a crucial means of forming a fuller picture of the praxis of teachers, poets and students at particular institutions when shut inside the classroom.

Inactive and Known

The kind of observation used in my research was overt and non-participant, a role that Newby (2014) labels as 'Inactive and known' (p.

352). Since some of the observation sessions were conducted at the post-16 college where I worked as a teacher of English, both the students and my colleagues obviously knew me. My presence in the classroom might have impacted on each observed lesson but I sought to diminish this by being as unobtrusive as possible. By sitting in a corner of the room and refraining from participating, I focused on observing each poetry lesson in as inconspicuous a manner as possible to minimise reactivity.

I was not granted permission to video record the poetry lessons, however, in spite of the fact that 'video data is obviously richer… the video recording process is much more difficult and obtrusive' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 139). Observation by individuals other than myself was also not possible given that it was already very hard for me to be granted permission to observe lessons and practically impossible to negotiate entry into the field for other observers. This meant that one of the limitations of my observation sessions was its lack of inter-rater reliability. I sought to offset the effects of this limitation by means of method triangulation and member checking, which are important components in ensuring a study's trustworthiness (Xerri, 2018b).

In the observation sessions held at my school, I observed every teacher conducting a one-hour poetry seminar and collected the data by means of an observation scheme that included a number of instruments (i.e., an events checklist, rating scale, and notes). After each observation session, the teacher in question took part in a semi-structured interview that was conducted in a one-to-one manner (Xerri, 2018a). The interview partly served the purpose of clarifying a number of observed lesson events.

I chose to observe seminars rather than set text lectures because of the idea that during a seminar students should be given the opportunity to develop critical thinking and the ability to engage in argumentation; one of the teacher's roles during such a lesson is that of listening (Nicholls, 2002, p. 89). My first-hand experience of poetry seminars was at odds with the notion that students in post-16 education are used to a style of teaching 'based on a relatively intimate, interactive discussion group' (Amigoni & Sanders, 2003, p. 75). Moreover, my research at a similar school had already indicated that students were primarily dissatisfied with what went on during their poetry seminars rather than their lectures. They seemed accustomed to listening to a lecture without having to intervene, but in a seminar they expected to

be actively engaged in the reading and discussion of texts. By means of observation I sought to understand which events were most frequent in the teachers' and students' poetry seminars at my school.

Observer's Paradox
One of the challenges I faced whilst conducting the observation sessions forming part of my research was that of reactivity, which is considered to be a threat to validity (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher's presence in the classroom distorts normality and thus researchers have to account for any distortion and evaluate it, otherwise there is the risk that the observations end up being an invalid picture of what typically happens (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). Depending on the impression they form of the researcher, teachers and students might act in the ways they think they are expected to (Wragg, 2012).

Non-participant observers need to act as if they are a 'fly-on-the-wall', i.e., highly unobtrusive (Simpson & Tuson, 2003). However, Dörnyei (2007) admits that 'It is a real challenge in most situations to find ways of minimising the intrusion so that classroom events are as natural and unstaged as possible while we are present' (p. 190). In my research, I tried to bank on the fact that the participants knew me well in order to make them feel more at ease whilst being observed. Given that observation is a highly intrusive data-collection technique, I sought to reduce the level of discomfort for the observed teachers by reassuring them that they would have an opportunity to examine the completed observation scheme after the session (Simpson & Tuson, 2003). This obviously did not make me completely unobtrusive but my intention was to somewhat allay any anxiety on the teachers' part and thus lead to as realistic a set of events as possible.

Moreover, the fact that the study employed method triangulation meant that the effects of observer's paradox (including Hawthorne and halo effects) on the findings could be adequately evaluated. This was because any discrepancies between what I observed and the way the participants described classroom activities in the interviews could be noted. I was also aware that researchers studying their own context can exploit the built-in advantage of always being participant or privileged observers given that they are an organic part of the educational environment of the institution where they are conducting their observations (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). My knowledge

of the institutional context and of the teachers and students allowed me to identify any events in the poetry lessons I observed that might be considered a result of reactivity.

Observer Bias

Another challenge I encountered whilst carrying out the observation sessions was this method's likelihood to be affected by observer bias (O'Leary, 2020), which while being unavoidable can be identified. It can best be dealt with by being open about one's assumptions and discussing these with colleagues: 'Such discussions will help to remind you of the different ways things might be viewed and so reduce bias in your approach' (Simpson & Tuson, 2003, p. 18). I was fully aware that researchers are advised to check their interpretation of events against those of the teachers whose lessons they observe, and to reflect on the implications of any differences between their account of lesson events and those of the participants (Simpson & Tuson, 2003). Given that the validity of a study is related to its credibility in the eyes of its original participants (McDonough & McDonough, 1997), in my study the above advice was put into practice when I showed the completed observation scheme to the teachers. This enabled them to confirm my interpretation of what had occurred in the observed poetry lessons (Xerri, 2018b).

Discussing my interpretation of lesson events with the observed teachers facilitated the process of '"making familiar things strange", or in other words, seeing things that are before our eyes in ways we haven't consciously noticed before' (Burns, 2010, p. 57). Even though researchers studying their own teaching context can occasionally find it hard to distance themselves from their own classroom experience, beliefs, and biases about an institutional environment they are intimately familiar with, at the same time they are most likely to understand the meaning of lesson events that might escape the attention of a visiting researcher (Wragg, 2012). When doing observation in a familiar setting, researchers might still experience a level of shock given that they are interacting with the environment from the point of view of researchers rather than in the role of teachers (Angrosino, 2007). In my study, my efforts to look at the poetry classroom from a stranger's perspective (Holliday, 2015) complemented another significant way of validating the data, the participants' views following the observation

sessions (Simpson & Tuson, 2003). These two techniques were a means of heightening the validity and trustworthiness of observation as a research method in my study (Xerri, 2018b).

Observation Scheme

In my research I used an observation scheme that consisted of a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments. Harbon and Shen (2015) indicate that irrespective of which strategies and techniques researchers use for observation research, what is most significant is that the instrumentation facilitates the systematic gathering of data. Structured and unstructured techniques 'represent points on a graded scale' and 'the extremes can be used in combination to complement each other' (Gillham, 2008, p. 5). Actually, 'in practice usually some combination of the two approaches takes place' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 179). In my research I primarily used a structured approach to classroom observation but complemented this with elements typical of analytical observation.

The use of an events checklist is considered to be a form of structured observation, which 'implies planning and the use of some previously established categories' as well as 'prior decisions about what to record' (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 105). Researchers who use a checklist are 'ultimately interested in what the observable behaviour tells [them] about something deeper: the aspect of learning or teaching under study' (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 107). When using a checklist, it means 'that you are clear in advance of undertaking your observations exactly what categories of variable you wish to investigate'; however, a researcher also needs to be open to 'unexpected patterns…suggested by the data' (Simpson & Tuson, 2003, p. 68). The main benefit of an events checklist is that it allows the researcher to form 'an objective picture of the patterns of activities occurring in a classroom and to identify how well they relate to a particular, or desired, teaching approach' (Burns, 2010, p. 65). Such a method 'makes the process more reliable and produces results that are comparable across classrooms and over time' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 185). I used an events checklist because I wanted to form a clear picture of the occurrence of a specific set of lesson events across the different observed poetry sessions and to be able to make the necessary comparisons.

An events checklist with time sampling was used because this method 'gives a chronological representation of the flow of the whole class, that is, the distribution of the particular phenomenon throughout the class' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 180). Interval recording of every one-minute interval was used since this facilitates the process of calculating frequencies, observing simple patterns, and noting an approximate sequence of events (Cohen et al., 2018). The categories forming part of the checklist were based on the insights derived from the literature on poetry education. For instance, the analytical descriptions of poetry lessons found in certain studies (e.g., Dymoke, 2000) served the purpose of enabling me to focus on a set of lesson events. Event frequencies were subsequently calculated in terms of percentages of the total lesson time. As suggested by Dörnyei (2007), the total tally marks for each event were added up and percentages acquired by dividing the sum by the total lesson time (sixty minutes) and multiplying it by 100.

The observation scheme used in my research also contained a rating scale that I completed at the end of each observed lesson in order to help me determine the presence or absence of certain general events and behaviours. In fact, a rating scale's purpose is 'for the researcher to make some overall judgements about some aspects of the class observed' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 180). The rating scale's design was based on a set of observation guidelines developed by Gosling (2000) and on the classroom observation schemes that feature in several studies (e.g., Hardman, 2008). Rating scales are part of a structured approach to classroom observation and 'The main criticism of the use of rating scales is that they…depend to a considerable extent on the judgement of the individual observer' (Simpson & Tuson, 2003, p. 44). However, I sought to validate this instrument's results by discussing the completed rating scale with the observed teachers and in this manner tackling any possible bias on my part.

The main disadvantage associated with structured observation is that since checklists 'systematically reduce the raw data, interesting events in that data that are not included on the checklist will not be noted' (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 106). However, I partly addressed this problem by complementing the checklist with observation notes. While not commensurate to the rich description associated with an analytical observation approach, these notes allowed me to record any thoughts and questions evoked by what I was

observing. Moreover, the act of integrating classroom observation with semi-structured interviews allowed me 'to fill out an interpretation of what was happening in the classroom that would not have been apparent from event counting alone' (Wragg, 2012, p. 11). According to Wragg (2012), 'Observations and interviews allow the taken-for-granted to be explored in greater detail' (p. 53). For this reason, each one of the observed teachers was interviewed soon after the session, as were a selection of their students.

Conclusion

Through the use of observation, I discovered how poetry is sometimes seen as being so enigmatic that it requires teachers and students to torture it for meaning or else approach it as if it were a mathematical equation that needs to be solved (Xerri, 2013, 2016a). But I also saw how the act of incorporating creative writing and spoken word performances enhances students' engagement with poetry (Xerri, 2016b, 2017). Once its challenges and limitations are addressed, observation has the potential to illuminate what teachers, poets and students do when interacting with poetry in the classroom environment. Through the vital role that it can play in research, observation helps develop our understanding of poetry's place in the English lesson and the attitudes, beliefs and practices that people rely on when engaging with it in the classroom. In that way, we come to better appreciate how that engagement can be improved.

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