ObservationWeb: A Reflection Technique for Observation

RADISLAV MILLROOD

The observation web is a technique used to reflect on the activities which are used in a lesson.

The importance of classroom observation techniques has been repeatedly mentioned and written about by many writers (Bailey 1990; Day 1990; Nunan 1987, 1992; Spada 1990; Wajnryb 1992). Nevertheless, there is a need for handy and time-saving observation techniques which can be used to reflect on the lesson that is being observed.

Features of activities

Many present-day activities focus on developing linguistic competence, for example, the ability to use lexis, grammar, and phonetics of the language. They also develop the pragmatic (practical) abilities of the learners to use the language for real-life communication. Many activities stimulate thought processes in learners by forcing them to think and make decisions. Other activities develop background knowledge in learners. This background knowledge serves as a valuable source of useful information in carrying out the activities. Any activity can be made teacher- or student-centred. The activities can be individual with every learner working autonomously, or interactive with learners dependent on each other in doing the task.

Types of activities

An activity is called linguistic if its purpose is to develop linguistic competence in the learners. Examples include substitution, completion, transformation, and fill-in-the-blank activities. A cognitive activity stimulates the thought processes in the learners. These analytical and reflective techniques include analysing, matching, cloze, sequencing, and jigsaw. Pragmatic activities teach practical use of language in situational circumstances (e.g., note-taking and socializing). Informative activities broaden the students' background knowledge of the subject being studied through reading, listening, or exchanging information. Teacher-centred work is dominated by the teacher. The teacher dominates not only when the learners are working individually, but also if the teacher continuously interferes with student-centred and/or autonomous activites such as role-plays and group discussions. Student-centred activities involve the learners in active work. In individual tasks the learners work separately (a choral repetition drill is also an individual activity). In interactive work the learners actively co-operate with each other.

Any one technique or activity actually has a number of features going on at the same time. Included are linguistic, pragmatic, individual, teacher-centred exercises, and pragmatic, cognitive, interactive student-centred exercises.

The challenge is to work out a convenient technique for observing all of the activities during the lesson.

Observation web design

The observation web is designed as a circle divided into eight sections. Each section corresponds to a certain feature of an activity used in the lesson: linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic, informative, teacher-centred, student-centred, individual, and interactive.

Features of the activities of the on-going lesson are marked (strokes) on the observation web every five minutes in the corresponding section. Because an activity can be linguistic, pragmatic, individual, and student-centred, or pragmatic, cognitive, interactive, and teacher-centred, several features of the activity are marked on the observation web at a time. What is marked depends on what features have been observed during the lesson. Thus, the web is gradually built by the observer during the lesson.

By the end of the lesson the observer has an observation web which shows the dominant features of the activities used in the lesson. The observation web serves as the starting point for the review and discussion of the lesson.

The use of observation webs

The observation web was used to observe the lessons of 10 teachers. The teachers had previously been classified as "innovative" or "traditionalist" based on their teaching styles. The following describes typical traditionalist and innovative lessons.

The traditionalists preferred the techniques that developed language awareness and pragmatic abilities in their students. The innovative teachers were interested in focusing in their classes on thought-stimulating, insightful, and motivating techniques. There were also teachers among the 10 selected who tended to be more eclectic and pragmatic. These teachers would very carefully select the activities for their lessons based on their own experiences and needs. They did not follow any one particular methodology.

The observation web of a traditionalist is shown in Figure 1. In the lesson given by this teacher, the emphasis was on linguistic and pragmatic activities, teacher-centred techniques, and individual tasks. The teacher checked the homework, which was a written gammar exercise. The teacher then asked the students questions about the topic being studied (Traveling in Britain) and the students took turns answering the teacher's questions.

After that, the students read from the text, answered the teacher's questions based on what they had read, and summarized the reading. After that, the students took turns reading dialogues which they had previously prepared as homework. Then the teacher told and dictated a humorous story about a traveler. The lesson ended with the teacher giving the homework assignment.

The observation web of the innovative teacher is shown in Figure 2. The emphasis in the lesson was on motivating the learners by having them do interactive tasks. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher did a warm-up by giving the students a quiz on British traditions. Next, she had the students do a jigsaw exercise by having them read different stories about British culture. At the end of the exercise, the teacher checked the stu-

dents' understanding of the stories by giving them a short quiz. This was followed by a role-play in which the students simulated touring London. The students who participated in the role-play competed for the title of "Mr. or Ms. Inquisitive." The students were awarded points for answering questions about the role-play. The lesson closed with a class discussion titled, "Is London an old or a young city?"

The observation web of a "balanced" teacher is shown in Figure 3. The lesson started with a vocabulary building exercise in the form of questions and answers on the topic of health protection. The exercise was both linguistic and cognitive as it did not only help to review the vocabulary but also stimulated cognitive responses from the learners. After that, the students read a story about health care programs and did a matching exercise to check their comprehension of the passages in the text. This exercise was useful for expanding the general knowledge of the learners, developing pragmatic skills in reading, and boosting cognitive processes. This was followed by the grammar stage of the lesson. First, the models *should, ought to, have to, must* were reviewed. Then an article titled "Ten Recommendations on How to Stay Healthy" was read. Using the information they had gained from the reading, the students gave to each other their own recommendations on how to stay healthy. The activity was interactive, developing pragmatic and cognitive skills and adding to the general knowledge of the learners. The lesson was a balance of interactive activities, individual work, teacher-centred activites, and student-centred techniques.

Description of a typical English lesson in Russia

The observation web technique was useful in identifying and describing the most common or typical English lesson in the Russian schools. Ninety observations were conducted and analysed in four Russian provinces: Tambov, Ryasan, Lipetzk, and Samara. The observation web of a typical English lesson is shown in Figure 4. A typical lesson begins with a questioning session. The goals of the questioning session are to review language struc-
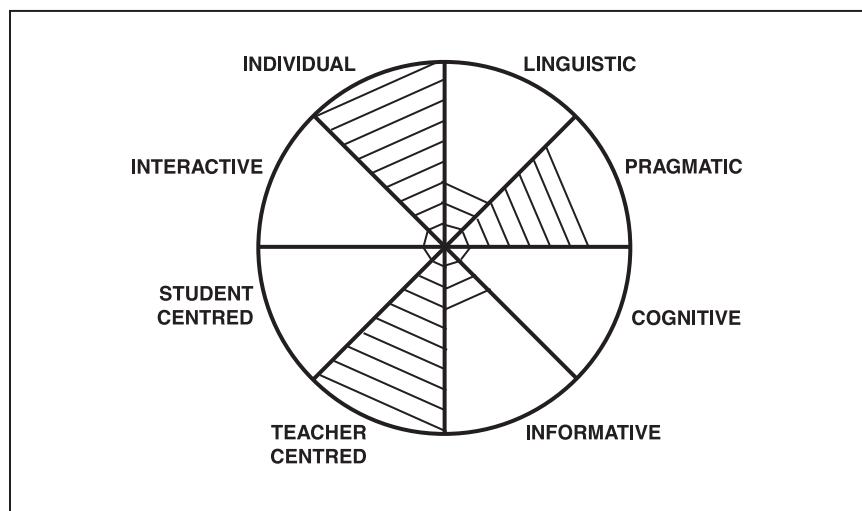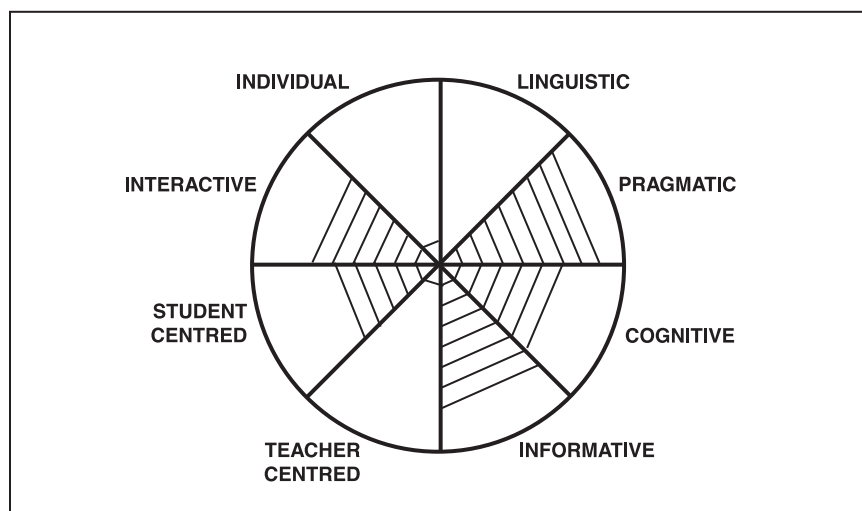
tures and practise communication skills. Asking questions and describing pictures is also a popular technique. Another commonly used activity is dialogues.

The dialogue activities include listening to the dialogue, reading it, and changing the wording and the plot of the dialogue. The cloze technique is also becoming very popular with Russian English teachers, and the activity is often done as pair work. An important part of the traditional Russian English lesson is working with the text. Russian teachers of English consider the text to be the most essential component of any textbook, and a great number of exercises included in the lesson are text-based. The students practise word use including chorus drills, English-Russian translation, and the reading and discussion of the text. Grammar drills are often used in the form of controlled question and answer exercises, Russian-English translation, filling in the blank, and completing or transforming techniques.

The typical Russian teaching approach is not designed for building communicative skills. The lessons are mostly aimed at developing the pragmatic skills of the learners. The lessons are teacher-centred and offer little genuine interaction among the students (see Figure 4).
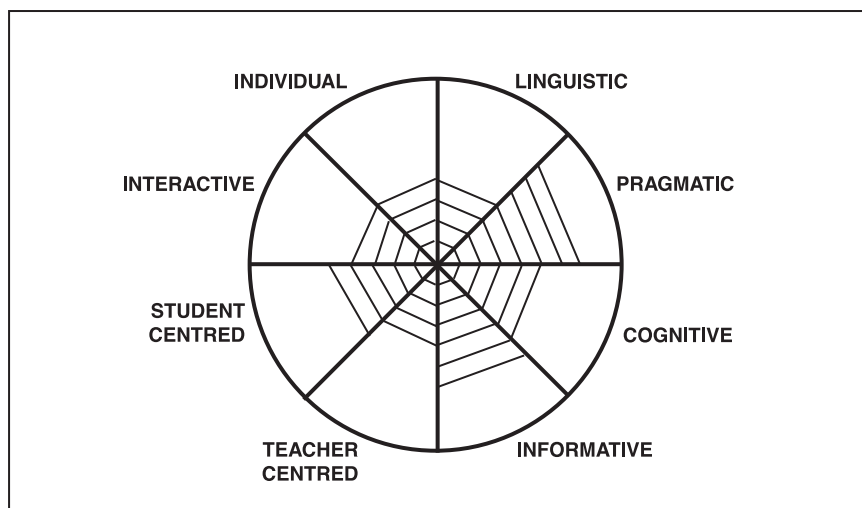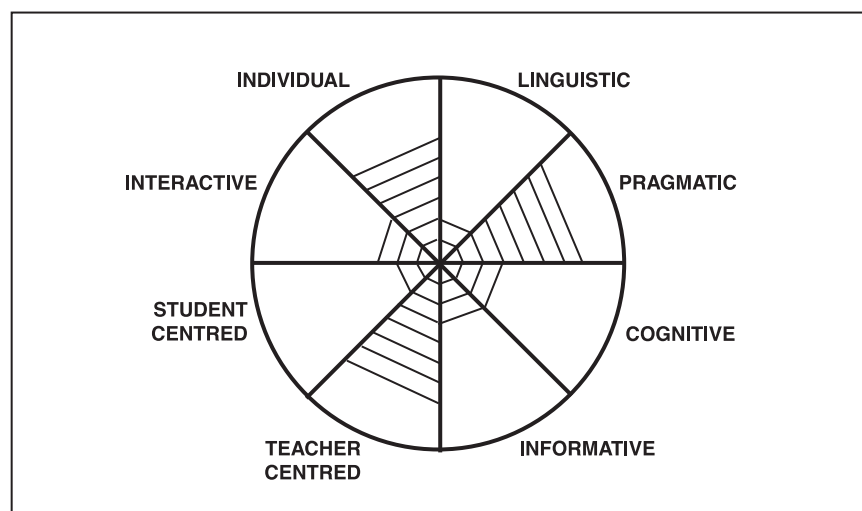
FIGURE 3

FIGURE 4

References

Bailey, K. 1990. The use of diary studies in teacher education programs. In *Second language teacher education*, eds. J. Richards and D. Nunan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Day, R. 1990. Teacher observation in second language teacher education. In *Second language teacher education*, eds. J. Richards and D. Nunan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D., ed. 1987. *Applying second language acquisition research.* Adelaide: National Curriculum Resource Centre.

———. 1992. *Research methods in language learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spada, N. 1990. Observing classroom behaviours and learning outcomes in different second language settings. In *Second language teacher education*, eds. J. Richards and D. Nunan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wajnryb, R. 1992. *Classroom observation tasks.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This article was originally published in the July 1998 issue.

Using the observation web patterns to determine the effectiveness of teaching

The best results in the observed classes were achieved when the teachers used the balanced type of instruction, that is, the lesson was linguistic and communicative, teacher- and student-centred, and individual and interactive. The classes which were observed were of mixed ability, so different learners were in need of different teaching strategies. When the teacher emphasized student-centred work, the independent learners were able to cooperate with the others and complete the task. On the other hand, the dependent and less sociable students felt abandoned and needed the teacher to help with the assignment.

To achieve the best results the students needed various activities to help develop their linguistic competence and communicative skills.

Conclusion

The observation web has proved to be of help in analysing the organization of the lesson. Using it, we were able to identify and compare the typical patterns of a lesson. The technique can be used during both preservice and inservice teacher training sessions.