Classroom observation: desirable conditions established by teachers

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Teacher observation is regarded as an essential procedure in the teacher training process. However, the vast majority of observation experiences have a top-down approach, as they are usually established by experts such as university teaching staff or school inspectors working for the administration. With a bottom-up approach in mind, this paper examines the attitudes of a wide range of teachers towards observation by focusing the analysis on three classes of attitudinal components: the cognitive, the affective, and the conative components. 185 infant, junior, secondary, university, and private language school teachers completed a questionnaire concerning the role of observation in the language classroom. The main result is a decalogue of prerequisites, a how-to handbook for successful classroom observation, compiled by teachers themselves.

Keywords: classroom observation; teachers’ attitudes; teacher training

Introduction

Wallace (1998, 89) states that, while there was a time when the knowledge base for the teaching profession was provided by university professors, nowadays the experiences of teachers and pupils in the classroom are just as important in the teaching/learning process. This is a belief with which we are in complete agreement. Since its conception by Kurt Lewin in 1946, and its subsequent development (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, 2000; Elliott 1991; Burns 1999, 2005; Mills 2003), action research has played an important part in giving the teacher a central role in understanding and, through critical appraisal, improving their approach to teaching.

Burns (2005, 57) calls a series of proposals ‘related branches’ of action research. These include action learning (McGill and Beattie 1995), practitioner research (Middlewood, Coleman, and Lumby 1999; Zeichner and Nofke 2000), reflective practice (Ramani 1987; Nunan 1989), and exploratory teaching (Allwright and Bailey 1991; Allwright 1992). Both in these related branches and in the action research cycles put forward in different varieties of action research, observation plays a key role in the teacher’s development.

The attitudes and beliefs of language teachers towards observation are therefore of value and importance, since observation can be a useful tool to improve the teaching of languages.

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Although traditionally, classroom observation appraisal has been considered to take three main forms (the first one for professional development, the second one for reward, and the third one for promotion), researchers and practitioners generally agree that the most effective use of classroom observation is for professional development (Montgomery 2002). In accordance with this, in this paper, classroom observation is regarded as a key component of teacher professional development, as any quest for improving language teachers’ training and language teaching quality must revolve around the teaching and learning processes taking place in the classroom. However, it is a proven fact (Aubusson et al. 2007; Borich 2008; Gebhard and Oprandy 1999) that many teachers – even the most experienced ones – dislike and even fear being observed, as they find classroom observation stressful and intimidating, which is why articles with titles such as ‘Survive teacher observations’ (Sasson 2008) are not uncommon. Although formal observation and feedback are integral to improving teaching performance and practice (Jonson 2008), many professionals express their anxiety and worry when it comes to classroom observation, as observers in many parts of the world tend to exercise top-down authority (Li 2009). Typically, there are two procedures. The first of these is known as top-down. This implementation is designed by experts, many far removed from classroom realities. The second is bottom-up, whereby the teachers’ perspectives are considered first and foremost and it is they themselves who design how the project is to be carried out.

Although there are differences depending on the context, most teachers are unaccustomed to being observed and the mere mention of observation provokes uneasiness, nervousness, and tension amongst both in-service and pre-service teachers, in the belief that their professional competence is going to be questioned or judged (Borich 2008). The conclusion to be drawn is that, first and foremost, the observed person has to feel comfortable psychologically, trust being a fundamental objective, before the benefits of observation can ultimately be reaped. Hence, the establishment of a congenial relationship with those to be observed is a basic step, as observation must be built on a foundation of trust. We firmly believe that teachers’ voices need to be heard in order to boost and facilitate their participation in observation activities by unravelling the conditions that may lead to mutual confidence and respect between the person being observed and the observer. The need to build a climate of trust has been widely acknowledged (Aubusson et al. 2007), especially at a time when educational administrations and university research teams have planned to implement classroom observations as part of their projects, as is the case in the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) experiences recently implemented not only in Spain (Lasagabaster and Ruiz de Zarobe 2010), but also in the rest of Europe (Dalton-Puffer and Nikula 2006; Ruiz de Zarobe, Sierra, and Gallardo 2011) and beyond. As Wragg (1999) puts it, nowadays it is much more likely that one person will sit and observe the lessons of another than might once have been the case.

Recent research (Li 2009) suggests that observers rarely mention their feelings of success with the social relationship or with the personal development of the observed person, as the technical dimension more often than not outweighs the affective dimension. Although the affective dimension is habitually mentioned in literature, most books and articles do not delve into it. That is why the objective of this article is to gather data which will ideally help to pave the way to successful and effective classroom observations, by bringing the affective dimension to the
fore. Based on the theoretical framework put forward by Rosenberg and Hovland (1960), teachers’ attitudes towards observation cannot be regarded as a unitary concept, but rather as a complex of three classes of components. The cognitive component has to do with thoughts and beliefs. A favourable attitude may entail a stated belief in the importance of observation to improve language teaching and its value in teacher training. The affective component relates to feelings towards the attitude object (in this case observation). It is the emotional component of an attitude and the feeling may concern like or dislike of observation. The cognitive and affective components may not always be in harmony, as a person may express positive attitudes to observation, but more covertly that same person may have negative feelings about being personally observed due to deep-seated anxieties and fears. As a result of these fears, feelings may occasionally be at variance with formally stated beliefs (Baker 1992). The conative (readiness for action) component is defined as an intention or plan of action in a particular context and under specific circumstances. A person with a favourable attitude to observation may state they would be willing to participate in an observation programme. Thus, attitudes to observation can be inferred from cognitive, affective, and conative responses. Research has demonstrated that it is possible to distinguish between these components both empirically and conceptually (Hewstone, Manstead, and Stroebe 1997). This three-component theoretical framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

With this theoretical framework in mind, this paper focuses on the following research questions:

- what thoughts and beliefs do teachers have towards observation (cognitive component)?
- is observation linked to positive feelings (affective component)? and
- under what circumstances should observation be implemented (conative component)?

It seems reasonable to expect that the careful consideration of teachers’ views regarding the prerequisites for successful classroom observation will help to diminish concerns and resistance to observation.

Figure 1. The three components of attitude to observation.
Method

This paper analyses the results of a questionnaire designed to ascertain the views of teachers, regarding observation in the language classroom in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC). The BAC is one of the 17 autonomous communities in Spain. It is a bilingual community, in which both Basque (the minority language spoken by 32% of the population) and Spanish (the majority language spoken by 100% of Basques) are official languages, and all students learn Basque either as a subject or through immersion programmes. The teaching of a foreign language means that all students have to study three languages in their curriculum. In this study the languages taught were Basque and Spanish as L2, and English and German as a foreign language.

This section is split into three sub-sections, detailing the survey sample, the instrument used to gather the information together with the procedures followed, and the analysis of the results.

The sample

The participants were not confined to any one sector, and included infant, junior, secondary, university, and private language school teachers. In total, 185 teachers took part, distributed as follows: 77 infant/primary (up to 12 years), 47 secondary (12–16 years), 39 university, and 22 private language school teachers.

All the participants taught in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) of Spain. Almost half (46.5%) held primary school teaching diplomas, 40.5% were university graduates, and 11.9% held doctorates. Regarding age, 36.4% were under 36 years old, the majority (57.1%) were 36–49, and just 12 (6.5%) over 50. As for gender, 74.3% were female and 25.7% male, reflecting the current balance in language teaching in Spain, where three out of four teachers are women.

The sample included a large number of committed and experienced teachers. A high proportion – over 80% – participated in some kind of refresher course at least once a year, while 73.5% had worked in the profession for 5–21 years. As regards the language taught, 74.1% taught English, 9.7% Basque and 4.3% Spanish or German as a foreign language. The preponderance of English as the dominant foreign language in the Basque education system – and by extension in Spain and much of Europe – is clearly noticeable in our cross-section.

The instrument

In order to carry out this survey a questionnaire consisting of 30 open and closed questions was devised, divided into two parts. The first section (items 1–10) dealt with personal details and information regarding experience and other points like those outlined in the sample subsection above. The second section (items 11–30) comprised a series of questions designed to ascertain the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of language teachers regarding language classroom observation. Teachers were also asked regarding their views on participation in observation activities.

Methodology

No previous information was provided before distributing the questionnaire, in an attempt to preserve the participants’ original attitudes to observation. The
questionnaire was distributed among teachers to complete individually and anonymously. Out of a total of 250, 185 were received duly completed. The fact that these questionnaires were distributed personally by the researchers indubitably contributed towards such a high response, but the researchers’ role was simply that of distributing the instrument without engaging in any discussion about the contents. After the responses to the closed questions were coded, they were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences).

In the closed part of the questionnaire, a four-point Likert scale (from unimportant to very important) was used in question 14, to determine how useful observation was really considered when compared to other key aspects of teacher training and development. For ease of reading, the unimportant and of little importance categories have been bracketed together under one heading, and the fairly important and very important under the other.

The qualitative data (open items) analysis was carried out through intensive examination, interpretation and reading of the teachers’ contributions. We followed the Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006) procedures of descriptive and analytic coding, with notes in search of categorisation and analytic understanding. In this way data were organised according to themes in the form of summaries of the words taken directly from the data, so that similar data could be grouped and given conceptual labels. The focus is not merely on gathering or putting a mass of data in order, but on organising the many ideas that emanate from the actual analysis of the data, so that what is relevant to classroom observation is allowed to emerge. Grounded Theory is therefore based on a concept–indicator model, which helps researchers to code concepts; concepts which are developed, categorised and dimensionalised on the basis of texts and contextual knowledge. The quotations provided by the respondents were originally written in either Basque or Spanish, but they have been translated into English by the authors before being included in this paper.

Results
In the following lines the results will be analysed following the aforementioned three components of attitudes towards observation, namely the cognitive, the affective, and the conative components. The findings from the full analysis of responses will then be used to compile a decalogue of the elements considered necessary by teachers for successful observation.

The cognitive component: thoughts and beliefs
On initial consideration the low numbers who had participated in some kind of course, seminar, training session, or symposium on language classroom observation, just over one in four (26.8%), can be pointed out. Bearing in mind that the majority of our sample regularly participated in teacher training and/or refresher courses, this was more than a little surprising. However, this slight participation contrasted with the interest which the topic aroused in our group. Over half (54.4%) had read books or articles on the subject, and over 80% said they would attend a course or training session with observation as its theme. These data are displayed in Table 1.

It is worth pointing out that over 95% of our language teachers deemed teaching experience and language methodology to be the most essential elements needed in
order to become a better teacher, both rated as being more important even than improving language fluency. Classroom observation was also considered to be fairly or very important by 84.8% of the survey.

When asked whether classroom observation could help teachers to improve, the response was as seen in Figure 2.

This figure confirms the importance given to observation by teachers in Table 1. Of the 185 participants, the great majority agreed on the effectiveness of observation, while just one totally disagreed with the statement and four more disagreed, in total 2.7% of the survey.

The sample was also asked if they had ever been observed in class. As regards being observed by a student teacher, half had had this experience, and 65.9% of these believed that it had not helped improve their teaching, basically because they had had little feedback from the observer. Of the 34.1% who had found it useful, the two areas it most helped to improve were lesson planning (including more varied and detailed activities) and being able to share opinions with the trainee. This idea is summed up in these two quotes: ‘you take greater care planning and carrying out the activity in class. It enhanced interaction with the pupils’ (teacher 63); ‘preparing the class better and being able to comment on the day’s classes’ (teacher 14).

45.3% of the sample had been observed in class by someone other than a trainee teacher. In 51.3% of these cases the observer was a co-teacher, a procedure especially favoured in infant and primary education for early-start second language learning. However, the responses showed that the teachers had been observed by an assortment of people: school inspectors (16.6%), publishing representatives (7.7%), foreign teachers (5.1%), representatives from diverse organisations such as Euskal Telebista (ETB) (Basque Television), HABE (Institute for teaching Basque language to adults), by trainee teachers going on to teach subjects in the minority language, etc. Some had been observed by different individuals (for example, by a school inspector and a trainee teacher at various points in time), and of these teachers, 51.3% thought it had helped improve their teaching; quite a lot more than the 34.1% in the case of trainee teachers. Most remarks referred to overall improvements in the teaching–learning process, but some were more specific: ‘it gave me food for thought regarding my function. I became aware that I should give my pupils a more leading role’ (teacher 13).

When those who were predisposed to being observed were asked how this should be done, around half chose having notes taken by the observer. Thirty-five percent

| Table 1. Importance given to different aspects of teacher training and development. |
|----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Of little or no importance | 3.3% | 96.7% |
| 2. L2 Methodology | 4.4% | 95.6% |
| 3. Improved L2 fluency | 11.6% | 88.3% |
| 4. Classroom observation | 15.2% | 84.8% |
| 5. Testing | 16.4% | 83.6% |
| 6. Education psychology | 17.1% | 82.9% |
| 7. Phonetics and phonology | 18.6% | 81.3% |
| 8. Linguistics | 33.2% | 66.8% |
| 9. Education theory | 41.4% | 58.6% |
| 10. Use of literary texts | 42% | 58% |
were indifferent to the method used, while just 12.7% preferred to be videotaped. The note-taking option was chosen in the main for its straightforwardness, being much less intrusive than having, for example, video cameras in class: ‘I don’t want to see or hear myself on video a posteriori’ (teacher 25). On the other hand, those attracted by the advantages of video underlined the importance of being able to observe and improve: ‘it makes it possible to get a global perspective of the classroom, and examine important questions such as body language, which are not recorded using other methods’ (teacher 181). To sum up, we can say there is a difference of opinion regarding video use, which seems to depend mainly on the personality of the teacher.

On being asked whether they had ever observed a fellow teacher in class (excluding a trainee teacher), 77% said that they hadn’t and 23% said they had. Positive assessments far outnumbered negative ones. The most favourable statements related to methodology, teacher–student interaction, and, above all, the transmission of new ideas and the relationship with colleagues: ‘it taught me to see what I should bring into the classroom and what I shouldn’t. To be more critical of how I perform. To improve teamwork, be more open to other colleagues, etc.’ (teacher 63); ‘to see that I’m not the only one with the same problems’ (teacher 13). Finally, some preferred to restrain from criticising the work of the teacher being observed: ‘observation was a very positive experience, as long as it was mutual and the teachers trusted each other. Reaffirming positive aspects is far more important than delighting in negative ones’ (teacher 73).

Far more (87%) considered the benefits of observation important than those who highlighted the disadvantages (12%), while just 1.3% said that it depends on the situation, an option not included on the questionnaire, but which the participants added in comments to justify their position. Becoming more aware of and reflecting on their teaching and failings, together with being able to compare and contrast ideas with colleagues, were the main reasons given of the benefits of observation: ‘it aids reflection and you become aware of positive and negative aspects’ (teacher 10).

There were some who went even further, giving observation a fundamental role: ‘only with observation can teaching (not just an L2) be addressed’ (teacher 103). The disadvantages of observation can be summarised in the anxiety and nervousness which it can create, and the unpleasantness that a feeling of being monitored
can cause, falling thus into the affective component: ‘you turn into a bundle of nerves. We don’t like feeling interrogated’ (teacher 11). Taken to its most negative extremes, there were even statements like: ‘it’s an additional strain on your daily workload, heavy enough as it is, and not very satisfactory’ (teacher 42). These final statements serve as a bridge to the affective component.

The affective component: feelings

The affective component is closely linked to teachers’ likes and dislikes. The most frequent reactions from those averse to being watched were uneasiness, distrust, insecurity and anxiety about having an observer in class with them: ‘it’s not for me. I’d be more concerned about the observer than the class’ (teacher 135); ‘it would really inhibit me’ (teacher 137); ‘worry. I couldn’t teach naturally’ (teacher 144); ‘having someone else in class would have a really negative effect’ (teacher 182). Among the most clear-cut rejections were: ‘I don’t like feeling watched’ (teacher 64). Criticism was also centred around how being observed would affect the way the class went: ‘it would create an unreal situation. It would distract the students’ (teacher 153); ‘no, because I couldn’t operate at 100%’ (teacher 146).

The next block of questions gathered information about the teacher as an observer and about their preferences with respect to who they would like to be observed by. In fact, the participants were asked whether they would like to play the role of an observer in a colleague’s class and by whom they would like to be observed. The aim of the first of these items was to ascertain if the participants were happy to take on the role of observing a colleague. The result was favourable, but by a slight margin, 51.4% versus 44.1%, with another 4.5% willing if the conditions were right. All those in the last group agreed on the importance of observation as long as ‘the observation is done within a team with clear objectives’, and as long as there was rapport between the teacher and observer. When given the option of being able to choose their observer, the results were as displayed in Figure 3.

Observation by a colleague or a teacher-trainer were easily the preferred options of our sample, a total of two-thirds opting for these possibilities. Co-teachers were preferred because they shared the same circumstances and knew about the realities of the job: ‘by being in the same situation, a colleague is aware of the problems that confront us’ (teacher 104). Likewise, the trust and communication that could exist between the observer and the person being observed was valuable: ‘as we are
in the same line of work, it’s easier to improve it together’ (teacher 25). The most frequent reasons for choosing the teacher-trainer were expertise and objectiveness: ‘the person most capable of assessing my work in class’ (teacher 107). Far and away the least popular option was the school inspector, chosen by just one teacher. Also worth mentioning is that only 8.6% chose the researcher, perhaps because many teachers feel them to be somewhat disconnected from classroom life.

On being asked if they would like to be observed by a native speaker, the majority showed no preference. 54% chose I don’t mind, pointing out that ‘as regards teaching, there’s no reason why a native speaker should be better than someone from here’ (teacher 14), and that, in any case, ‘the aim is the same: to improve teaching standards’ (teacher 56), from which we can conclude that raising standards was the main consideration, for which the observer’s native tongue was irrelevant. The most highly valued aspect, for the great majority, was teaching experience, rated as more important than linguistic expertise. This was clearly summed up by teacher 141: ‘from my experience, being a native speaker does not necessarily imply being a more capable L2 teacher, sometimes quite the opposite in fact. I’d prefer someone competent, native or otherwise, for it to be a rewarding experience.’

A quarter of the sample were opposed to the idea, many because of the anxiety and unease they might feel when being observed by a native speaker: ‘I would feel self-conscious because of the difference in linguistic proficiency’ (teacher 9); ‘I’d be conscious of any errors and what the observer might think of me’ (teacher 18). The other 20%, however, wanted a native speaker, arguing that it could improve their linguistic abilities: ‘it could be beneficial, particularly phonologically’ (teacher 13).

The conative component: under what circumstances

Up until now we have looked at teachers’ beliefs and feelings towards observation, without asking under what circumstances they would be willing (the conative component) to directly engage in activities of this nature, something we will examine hereafter. When asked if they were prepared to actively participate in this type of experience, 58.8% said they would, while 39.4% were averse. These percentages are significant when we consider that 84.6% (see Figure 2) asserted that classroom observation was an important element in improving teaching expertise, yet barely three in five would actually take part and two in five were ill-disposed towards participating.

Some of the most frequent positive comments were linked to how observation could improve teaching skills. In the opinion of our sample, observation makes the teacher question their own style of teaching: ‘you can always learn something listening to other people’s experiences and different ways of doing things’ (teacher 2). Some opinions expressed the specific nature and importance of observation: ‘you can draw conclusions regarding the teaching process which can’t be derived any other way.’ (teacher 182). One of the foreign teachers justified their support for observation, pointing out that ‘the standard of language teaching in Spain is quite low. If it could be improved using observation, that would be great.’ (teacher 97). Judging by the contributions made by university lecturers, there appeared to be general support for this technique, little-used in these Spanish institutions: ‘I think it’s one of the most necessary methods for ongoing teacher training, one that is already used in universities abroad, like in the USA’ (teacher 129).
The main reason – at all levels – given by those reluctant to participate in observation activities was lack of time. ‘I haven’t got time; I’m taking part in a project about first steps in language learning’ (teacher 1). Others thought other aspects deserved higher priority: ‘I think I know more interesting ways to improve my teaching’ (teacher 92). Some attested to a lack of information on the topic: ‘I don’t know the subject or what taking part in a group involves’ (teacher 4). From university lecturers, we encountered unequivocal replies such as ‘I don’t think it’s useful’ (teacher 120), and reasons related to their research work: ‘It has no bearing on my research’ (teacher 112).

Regarding whether they were willing to be observed in class, the percentages were very similar to the item above: 56.6% were disposed to being observed, while 38.5% were reluctant. The main grounds from those in favour of observation were that it would be a positive and rewarding experience, give them chance to analyse and correct their shortcomings, allow constructive criticism of the teaching process, and that teachers could benefit from the experience of their colleagues: ‘it might be good to get constructive feedback from someone more erudite and practised’ (teacher 5).

After analysis and categorisation of the survey’s open questions, we see in the teachers’ contributions some themes that frequently appear in their comments regarding observation in the classroom, namely environment, time, and characteristics of the observer and the process of observation. The following categories and remarks, from most to least quoted, illustrate a decalogue which teachers believe necessary for successful observation:

- The need for a friendly, supportive environment, where there is empathy and trust between the observer and the observed, as well as mutual respect: ‘there must be a climate of trust between the observer and the observed’ (teacher 96);
- Understanding that observation takes up time: ‘observation requires time which often isn’t available’ (teacher 4). The time factor was cited most often by primary school teachers;
- The observer should be inconspicuous and affect the class as little as possible: ‘involvement of the observer in the classroom and activities so that the pupils are not aware that there is an observer’ (teacher 177);
- Establish, from the very beginning, the objectives and procedures to follow: ‘know quite clearly for whom, how and why’ (teacher 52);
- Criticism should be constructive and the observer needs to remain objective about the work of the person being observed: ‘in order to improve it is important to be positive from the start. It shouldn’t be about just compiling information and negative observation’ (teacher 16);
- The observer should be experienced and also familiar with the subject being taught: ‘first and foremost, experience of L2 teaching and methodology is needed’ (teacher 119). Several participants also stressed the need for the observer to be skilled in observation techniques: ‘it should be someone qualified who can carry out the work without bias to cloud their conclusions’ (teacher 108);
- There needs to be co-ordination between the observer and the observed so that the findings can be talked about and assessed together: ‘agree a time and
prepare some activities with the observer, comment on them and assess them together’ (teacher 100);

- The observation process should not be an exercise detached from classroom reality: ‘it shouldn’t be based on theoretical concepts, but on feasible procedures: no theory blah blah and bureaucratisation’ (teacher 116);

- The observation has to be systematic, to avoid obtaining a distorted view of what happens in class and so that its benefits are tangible: ‘it needs to be followed through properly, not something done once and leading nowhere’ (teacher 169); and

- It must be voluntary: ‘the teacher being observed has to feel comfortable and to have freely chosen to be observed’ (teacher 15).

Discussion

Analysis of the results of our survey helps give a picture of teachers’ attitudes regarding observation. We would welcome further in-depth research to explore whether the information collected here is representative of the feelings of teachers in general, regardless of the type of school or its geographical location.

The first block of results refers to the first research question and, therefore, to the cognitive domain (beliefs and thoughts of the teaching profession). The main conclusion is that the vast majority share a positive attitude regarding observation and think the advantages of observation outweigh the disadvantages. Observation was also a highly rated element in teacher training and improvement.

However, those teachers who had been observed were not completely positive about their experiences. Those watched by trainee teachers gained little or nothing from it, and neither did one in two teachers who were monitored by other observers. It is remarkable that despite all this gloomy data, teachers still feel favourable towards observation and believe in its usefulness. In the case of those observed by student teachers, the reasons for discontent are clear: there was no systematic observation, nor was there any interchange of opinions, as the trainee was there simply to learn, not contribute.

With regard to those observed by non-trainee teachers, one of the reasons which might explain why little benefit was gained from such experiences was that observation was usually limited to testing new projects. Consequently, the observer and the observed do not design the project together, there is no rapport between them, the teacher might feel defensive, and it is not something voluntary and agreed to freely. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the percentage of teachers who found something positive in the observer’s contributions was greater in this case than in that of the trainee teacher.

These results seem to suggest a need for more opportunities for observation in which teachers can participate, as well as the setting up of working groups in schools and support networks which reach across the education strata. Another element could be university research projects, with the active participation of teachers from all categories.

The ideal situation, according to comments received from teaching staff, is one in which the activity is carried out in co-operation within a team. The opinions of colleagues and the students themselves is something sought by teachers. Gebhard and Oprandy (1999) collected impressions and comments from teachers who had taken part in observation activities and these teachers also expressed the need to
share their experiences and understanding. Research carried out regarding teaching methods involving more than one teacher with a class (team teaching and co-teaching) (Smith 1994; Cranmer 1999; Johnston and Madejski 2004; Creese 2005) can contribute towards creating the climate of trust needed for observation to be rewarding and fruitful.

With regard to our second research question (the one concerning the affective component), it should be remembered that there will always be some teachers reluctant to take part in this type of activity, typically because of unease and anxiety, and also because observation is often seen as a means of assessment. Wallace (1998) also mentions the anxiety we tend to feel about our own teaching capabilities, even practised and competent teachers, and that we might not be making full use of our abilities.

Teachers also expressed concerns about how observation would be implemented, that is, our third research question: under what circumstances should observation be implemented (the conative component)? Regarding the top-down versus bottom-up observation procedures, our participants clearly preferred the latter, agreeing with Widdowson (1993, 267), who stated that one of the main concerns of teachers is that they do not become excessively dependent on so-called experts, who are often detached from classroom life, and that any attempt at innovation does not turn into an additional strain on an already heavy workload.

Considerably fewer teachers were willing to be at the heart of a team than those prepared to take part in observation activities, the main reason being lack of time. We are all aware that teachers’ schedules are busy enough as they are, and the time and effort needed to design and implement a serious observation programme is more than what many teachers can spare. Wallace (1998, 8) expressed the mood of teachers when he said that what they needed was time in order to teach more effectively, a feeling that the reader will probably share. Now might be the time to reiterate an oft-repeated suggestion to the education authorities, that working groups be set up in schools where teachers have been relieved from carrying out teaching duties to work on projects designed to innovate and improve, and with at least some guarantee of success.

Likewise, it is essential that observation does not turn into a simple fault-finding exercise. It should be carried out in an atmosphere of mutual trust, where a positive critical analysis is foremost. Many authors in this field (Ghebard and Oprandy 1999; Oprandy 2002; Richards and Nunan 1990; Wallace 1998) have stated similar opinions. Mann (2005, 11) points out, agreeing with Freeman (1982), that ‘symmetrical [peer] relationships do not always guarantee success and there has long been a tradition of working to overcome the negative connotations of peer observation’. In his review of the professional development of the language teacher, Mann (2005, 111) compiles contributions from several authors who have devised guidelines for effective peer observation (Good and Brophy 1987; Pennington and Young 1989, among others), highlighting the benefits of a reflective procedure that promotes the teacher’s development (‘active teacher development’) (Cosh 1999, 2004; Thedgold and Piai 2000). More recently, the work of Richards and Farrell (2005) on strategies for the professional development of teachers talks of specific benefits both for schools and for teachers.

We are well aware of the fact that research designs in education are incomplete by nature, as the phenomena under study are more complex than what can be
grasped in a given research design: ‘it is thus inevitable that only a glimpse of a multifaceted reality can be provided’ (Dewaele 2010, 222). We have tried to minimise the limitations of the current study by combining qualitative and quantitative data through open and closed questions. However, a deeper approach could be obtained by combining the use of the questionnaire with discussion groups and interviews. This would allow us to obtain a more accurate picture of teachers’ attitudes towards observation.

Conclusions
While the vast majority of school curricula identify the communication focus as essential for the language classroom, the truth is that little research has been carried out to ascertain whether this is actually being implemented. There is little doubt that classroom observation can be a valuable tool in giving us a more comprehensive picture of what actually happens in class, and help attain a higher standard of teaching and more effective teaching methods. Burns (1999) criticises academic research procedures for having created a chasm between theory, research, and practice, which has resulted in many teachers becoming skeptical about any type of research (and even belittling it), considering it to be the private reserve of academic researchers who, in their opinion, lack hands-on experience about what happens in the language classroom. Teachers who share this view of academic research will surely find classroom observation closer and more interesting, as its main objective is to encourage reflection and, by that, unearth strategies which will improve teaching. The decalogue compiled in this paper will hopefully help to reach this objective.

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Notes on contributors
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