Demystifying Research 7

Observational Research and Nature of Group Work in the ELE Classroom

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Thought seed:

Did you ever feel observed covertly? Women seem to know if someone ogled them, even from a distance. Very often we have heard stories of our kings taking on a disguise and walking among their subjects to know what they really felt about the way the kingdom is ruled. We would have similar things to check in on our kids and/or our pets. What are the reasons for doing this? Are there any advantages? Do people behave differently if they know they are being told that they are being observed? How and why? What would you say about yourself? Why is it important to observe anything in its natural state or setting? When people alter or overdo or underdo under observation, do we see the real self of them or the altered self? Then what is truth? Is there a projected truth and an altered truth? Think!

As teachers in service, we need to strive for professional development; one of the ways of doing this is to publish articles in journals. It is also possible that we would like to work on a project. In the last two columns we had written about the differences between survey and interventional studies, and the ethical issues involved; we had also written about the types of variables that can be examined in intervention studies, and the need for in depth qualitative analysis in such studies. Such studies are possible when we are clear about our research problem. Sometimes, particularly when it is work that we would like to do for a doctoral dissertation or a

big project, (where our research questions are wider in scope) we may wish to carry out a long term intervention study; in order to narrow down on such intervention, a base line observational study may be required. In some specific contexts, we may also need such observations for a small interventionist research project. In some or all of these contexts, (doctoral thesis, big or small research project) we will need to begin with observing students in or outside class before we narrow down on our actual research problem.

For example, we may have a hunch, particularly when teaching intermediate or college level students, that the way we put our students into groups is resulting in low or no task completion in our classes. With great fervour and zest, we would have divided our students into groups and asked them to complete tasks. By the end of most of our classes, we may have found that there is a big gap between what we thought could be achieved and what has actually been accomplished by our students. We may have dismissed this gap between expectation and accomplishment as incidental, or not given much thought to it; a little self reflection and introspection may push us into realising that we do not know our students very well and that we have a combination of extroverts, introverts and even loners in our classes along with a few who prefer to work alone. Caught up either in the so called very effective 'think-pair-share' communicative conundrum, or the insistence that there must be compulsory group work in English

classes to prove that we are with the times, and aware of modern methods, all of us insist on the whole class doing group work. With performance anxiety or maybe just eagerness we get into the 'count from 1 to 5, 6, 7 or 8' depending on the number of students, and then ask all the '1's, the '2's etc. to form groups. Inadvertently we could land up grouping our introverts with extroverts and 'making' them into silent members. Alternatively, we could be putting all the introverts, or loners into one group, leading sometimes to failure, with a few sprinkles of random success thrown in. This is a problem even at the school level, but much more so when we are working with adults who know themselves, what kind of person they are and who they would like to work or not work with.

In such a context, we could decide to carry out an intervention study, of course to be written up and published as a paper, to find out the types of groupings that will work or rather will be the most productive in our classes. The 'accepted and tried out' ones are the homogeneous, heterogeneous or random groupings, based usually on ability, (language proficiency in our case). In rare cases, if the teacher is one who is rooted in Indian grassroots multilingualism, the grouping could be based on the common denominator of the more enabled/dominant/comfortable language. Such a language based grouping ought to be one of the standard norms in our country, wherever there are students with varied mother tongues/dominant languages in the classroom and where there are many students who have moved from the regional to an English medium of instruction at the college level. However, such a grouping is rarely considered, largely because we do not recognise the other languages in our repertoire as valuable assets (Deepa and Durairajan, 2022). In the context of the plausible research study being presented here, however,

let us assume that there are few or no first generation learners in that class and that therefore language based grouping is not needed.

For purposes of this discussion, we will take it for granted that we would like to put our students into personality groups and then carry out an intervention study. In order to do this, however, it is important for us to get to know our students and their personality types. Our actual study will be one where, having identified personality traits in students we could attempt to try out one of two things. First, if in an anthrogogic setting, the teaching of adults who are over 18 years of age, (Deepa, 2022) we may wish to leave the choice of individual/pair/group work with our students and observe/measure the effect of such a choice in task fulfilment. Our focus would then be on what type of student wishes to work alone, or in pairs or in groups. Second, we could ask the students to form their own groups, use the information we have obtained through our observation, identify the types of students who have chosen to work with each other, and then examine the effect of such a choice on the work produced by them. I (Dr. Shree Deepa) do this regularly in my classes. My students are very happy with such grouping: in an informal discussion they told me that they loved having the freedom to decide whether to work alone, in pairs, and more importantly, if in groups, who they would like to work with.

Such an intervention study, (to examine the effect of personality based grouping, or non-grouping, as the case maybe, if some students choose to work alone, on task fulfillment), however, has to be preceded by a detailed, meticulous observation of the students in order to identify their personality traits. Such stable traits or characteristics, cannot be identified through a simple direct questionnaire. There are, of course, long indirect questionnaires

in psychology which could be used to identify these traits, but they are always backed up by detailed observations. Since the information on these personality traits is needed only to feed into our study, it would be better if we observe our students. For such an observation, however, we need to choose our manner and level of observation. When it is our own students, and we have access to them in and out of class, we could take the stance of what is known as the active participant observer. This implies that we make ourselves visible to our students, and tell them that for a research project, we are going to observe them; we also get their permission to do so. However, this may make the students very conscious and they may change their behaviour patterns. Alternatively, wherever required and needed, we could get permission from higher authorities, and pretend to mingle with the students, (if the opportunity arises during a cultural festival, or a sports programme) and observe them, without telling them that we are doing so. This is one kind of there, but not there, (visible, yet invisible from the perspective point of view) type of observation. Here we are taking on the stance of the privileged active participant observer. A third possibility would be to go to a new place, a new class, (a new college) and from day one, (with only the permission of the higher authorities) give ourselves a different identity (not as a teacher/researcher) and mingle 'incognito' as it were, with the students, and observe them. This would mean that we take on the stance of the passive observer. A month or two later, whether we join that college or not, we could get permission to teach there for a semester or a few months, reveal our stance, and then, as the teacher-researcher carry out the intervention study that focuses on personality based groupings and its effect on task fulfilment/completion.

These types of observations are known as participant observation in contrast to direct quantified observation. They are used normally in ethnographic studies. The first one is easy, visible and announced, but therefore may not be very successful. The second and third, from an ethical perspective, could be described as problematic, but we would like to state that in psychology and anthropology, it is the third which is the most common; without it we would not have got the descriptions of languages during the structural era. Bloomfieldian linguistics was possible only because linguists went out into the field and listened and observed, making detailed notes of what they heard around them, as passive observers. The famous anthropoligist Malinowski worked with tribals in a similar manner. The now well known terms, context of situation and context of culture attributed to him, would not have been possible without such 'passive incognito' observation. This is not all:every time one of us observe and take down what our children do or say, we are 'incognito' passive observers. The origins of Hallidayan functional linguistics can be traced to the 'hidden or skulking behind a sofa observations' of his son Nigel. The purposes of our observations and what we do with the data is what should ethically guide us.

In our area, which is English language education, it would definitely not be ethical or acceptable, to do an incognito observation of our students' speaking ability and mark them on that basis. For that, we would have to carry out a direct active observation where we tell them before hand that they are going to be observed. By contrast, a sports or fitness instructor, who wishes to select a few students for a national meet, could just go into a playground as a privileged active observer, along with even another coach, (where a few may know why he/she is there) and yet, could make notes of the performances of all those involved. To identify personalities, (could be

leadership, loneliness, extroverts or introverts) it is often necessary to go in as a passive observer, who is not known as an observer to those who are being observed. However, we need to remember that the purpose of our kind of observation is never to evaluate the student for any kind of certificate, but only to provide information to the observer, as initial information, for further work.

Research work on the nature of groups in class, and their effect on student performance, has to be preceded by meticulous 'invisible' observation. What we would need to do, would be to get ethical clearance where needed, unlike sociologists and anthropologists who carry out their work only in public spaces and places.

In another column, we will look at the data that we could collect from these three types of observations and related research issues.

References

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