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Class Observation Week

Martha Iancu

One way to motivate and invigorate ESL students is to give them the opportunity to observe mainstream content classes. This helps them stretch their developing English abilities and gain a more realistic sense of their proficiency along with insights about their host institution's educational culture. Class Observation Week is one way to organize ESL student observation of regular classes.

The English Language Institute at George Fox College, a small liberal arts college in Oregon, inaugurated Class Observation Week in 1990 to provide students with constructive experiences while faculty were participating in a professional conference. Student and faculty response were so positive that Class Observation Week has become a regular feature of each semester's schedule.

Overview

Scheduled for the middle of the semester, Class Observation Week provides a welcome change in routine. During Class Observation Week, all ESL classes are cancelled and students select regular college courses to attend as observers. For each class they attend, students take notes and complete a Class Observation Report (see sample) on teaching style, student involvement, and lecture content. Students turn in the Class Observation Reports to their ESL listening and speaking instructor to receive credit for the week. To follow up, students share their impressions and reactions in subsequent ESL classes.

Observing regular classes is an eye-opening experience, during which students begin to realize what listening, note-taking, and discussion skills they must cultivate to succeed as matriculated students. They get a feel for various teaching methods used in a U.S. college and for the professor's expectations of student participation. They begin to recognize the similarity between learning activities in ESL and those in other academic courses, and many gain new respect for their ESL courses. They return to their ESL studies with renewed vigor and determination.

Organizing Class Observation Week

The Class Schedule

About 1 month in advance, we send a memo to all college faculty informing them about Class Observation Week and inviting them to list any courses during that week in

which observers would be welcome, taking into consideration their examination schedule, seating availability, and other limiting factors. We ask them to provide course number, course title, the days, times, and locations of classes, and the maximum number of observers that they would prefer. An announcement is also made at the weekly faculty lunch. Due in one week, faculty responses are processed to compile a class schedule. A separate list of classes is made for each day of the week.

The Preliminary Plan

One week before Class Observation Week, ESL students receive a packet containing instructions, the class schedule, a planner for the week (in duplicate), and a set of Class Observation Report forms. Students make a preliminary plan of classes they would like to observe, selecting several alternative classes in case their first choices are full. They then turn in one copy of the planner to an ESL instructor. The preliminary plan is tentative;

Sample Class Observation Report

Course _____ Name _____
Professor _____ Location _____
Date and Time _____

1. How many students are in class today? _____
2. How does the professor teach? (lecture, discussion, small groups, etc.) _____
3. What is the main topic of today's class? _____
4. Does the professor speak clearly? _____
5. What audiovisual aids does the professor use? (blackboard, overhead transparencies, video, audio, movies, etc.) _____
6. What do the students do during class? Are they attentive? _____
7. Did you participate in class? Explain. _____
8. Would you like to take this course someday? Why? _____
9. Would you like to take other courses taught by this professor? Why? _____
10. Other comments _____
11. In this space, write an outline of the lecture (or of the course activities)

12. In this space, write a paragraph entitled "The Most Interesting Things I Learned in this Class."

students may choose to substitute different classes from the Class Observation Week schedule as the week progresses.

The purpose of the preliminary plan is to start the students thinking about what kinds of classes they would like to attend. At this time, if a student expresses strong interest in a class that is not listed on the Class Observation Week schedule, it may be possible to obtain permission from the professor for the student to observe that class.

Faculty Reminder

On the Thursday before Class Observation Week, a memo is sent to participating faculty to remind them that during the following week they may have ESL observers in the classes that they listed and to thank them for their involvement. A brief summary of expectations about student behavior and accountability is included.

Observer Etiquette

To keep the good will of the faculty, students are briefed on observer etiquette. We advise students not to enter a class late; to go to an alternative class if a class already has the maximum number of observers; to sit quietly, observe the class, and take notes. We ask them to only speak during class if the professor asks them to participate, to stay in class until all students are dismissed and, as appropriate, to thank the professor.

Class Observation

Most students observe at least 10 classes, modifying their initial plans if they choose. They complete their Class Observation Reports and do supplementary assignments, such as interviews with regular students. The unusual freedom to attend classes of their own choice magnifies the students' gains from the experience. Occasionally, however, a student may be tempted to abuse this freedom, "fake" the class observations, and take off for the week. The consequence in these rare cases is a failing grade.

Evaluation

Students are graded on the number of Class Observation Reports that they complete satisfactorily, consistent with their English ability level. For an A grade, a student must complete at least 10 reports satisfactorily; for a B, 8 reports; for a C, 6 reports; and for a D, 4 reports.

Classroom Support

Appropriate preparation and follow-up activities enhance the class observation experience. The instructor may treat Class Observation Week as an independent unit or incorporate it into the curriculum as a context

for applying previously learned skills. Two objectives of the class observation experience are for students to become familiar with the host institution's classroom culture and to exercise their academic listening and note-taking skills. For lower proficiency students, the former is emphasized, while for higher proficiency groups the two objectives assume approximately equal weight.

Preparation

Preobservation activities related to classroom culture might include discussing vocabulary and questions from the Class Observation Report, answering questions from the point of view of the students' home cultures, or preparing to conduct an interview with a student from an observed class. Other activities might focus on academic listening and note-taking skills, like identifying main ideas or recognizing clues to relationships between ideas (e.g., exemplification, definitions, or comparison and contrast). You might give the students an additional assignment, such as preparing an outline of the main points of an observed lecture or listing examples of, say, definitions that they hear in various lectures. To avoid frustrating the students, make such an assignment very clear, limited in focus, and within the students' capabilities.

A potential problem involves students who observe a good number of classes but who do not fill out their reports satisfactorily. To forestall this, it is helpful for students to evaluate examples of completed Class Observation Reports as part of their preparation. Necessary academic skills for completing the Class Observation Report include outlining and paragraph writing.

Follow-Up

In follow-up discussions about classroom culture, students describe classes that they attended, telling what they liked and disliked about them; compare and contrast U.S. classes with those in their home culture; relate surprising, impressive, or puzzling aspects of the classes; brainstorm advantages and disadvantages of various teaching methods and audiovisual aids; or summarize and evaluate interview results. Regarding academic skills, students discuss their difficulties understanding and taking notes in different classes, suggest strategies for overcoming these difficulties, comment on ways that professors make note-taking easier for students, and present the results of any additional note-taking assignment.

The ultimate goal of the class observation experience is to inspire students to cultivate skills and strategies for coping with the

challenges they will confront in non-ESL courses. Some students, however, may feel overwhelmed. You should seek to imbue students with a sense of accomplishment for whatever insights they bring back from the class observation experience, even if they understand very little of the content of lectures. Students must be assured that by persevering in their ESL courses they will master the skills necessary to succeed in regular courses.

Curricular Connections

Class Observation Week can be a rich resource for the ESL curriculum. With a professor's permission, you can have higher level students attend a certain class the entire week. They prepare the week's reading assignment for that class in their ESL reading course. In their listening and note-taking course, they use videotapes of the lectures to upgrade their note-taking skills. In this way, students get a taste of the demands they must be prepared to handle routinely as regular students.

Conclusion

By providing a stimulating yet nonthreatening context in which students apply their English skills to content of interest to them, Class Observation Week brings a new dimension to an intensive English program. To accommodate each program's unique conditions, some features of Class Observation Week may require modification. For example, programs that use the quarter system rather than the semester system could shorten Class Observation Week to 2-3 days.

For Class Observation Week to succeed, an intensive English program must have the support and cooperation of the host institution, including administrators who promote professional development for ESL faculty, and faculty who welcome ESL observers into their classes. Also, the intensive English program must be able to dedicate administrative and clerical time and materials to organizing Class Observation Week. With such support and cooperation, Class Observation Week has proved a worthwhile component of the English Language Institute at George Fox College.

Author

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