

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Vidojka Harej, Tanja Nemec and Lois Beaver

THE STRUCTURE OF THE INSTRUMENT AND THE RATIONALE

In this chapter the classroom observation schedule will be discussed. The Baseline Study Team decided to include classroom observation as the most appropriate means of getting information on the situation in classes with language assistants. Although there was only one instrument it was divided into two parts: observation of the students during the lesson and observation of the language assistant and teacher who were performing the observed lesson. In addition, the teacher and language assistant were interviewed briefly before the class to gather data on the class and the aim of the lesson to be observed. This data was recorded in the first section of the observation schedule

The classroom Observation Schedule

The classroom observation schedule and the associated pre-observation interview gathered the following data: type of school, number of years learning the foreign language, number of students per class, skills practised in the class, type of teaching, work management, lesson topics, teaching goals, type of material, time sharing between the teacher and the language assistant and observers' evaluation.

The observations took place in May and June of the school year 1999/2000. They were planned to be as objective as possible, so two observers were required for the observation of the same lesson. One or both of the observers were members of the Baseline Study Team. The observers received instructions on how to perform the observation, and a pilot observation was recommended to assure better performance during the actual observation.

During the observation process one of the observers carefully drew arrows on the sociogram, in order to get a detailed picture of the interaction between the language assistant and the teacher, the language assistant and the students as well as the teacher and the students during the teaching process. The observer was provided with two versions of the seating arrangement of the students (classical and U shape). The other observer paid attention to the content of the lesson and methods used, the atmosphere in the classroom, the motivation of the students and initiatives taken by the students themselves. After the observation the two observers discussed the lesson observed and wrote general comments on the lesson (see *Appendices 1,2*).

THE NATURE OF THE SAMPLE

Five primary and 29 secondary school classes were observed: all together 34. One instrument was returned blank with the exception of the sociogram.

Only sixth and eighth grade classes were observed in primary schools. In secondary schools all classes from Grade One to Four were observed. However, the number of Fourth Grade classes observed was low, probably because of the time of the year - they were preparing for the *Matura* examination.

In the 34 schools 14 of the teachers observed were mentors.

The data shows that the average number of years that the classes observed had had a language assistant, was between one and two years.

Out of 34 classes observed 25 were classes for the first foreign language, which in most cases was English so there were more English language assistants than language assistants for other foreign languages (German, French, Italian) in the sample. In seven classes the foreign language was taught as the second and in one class only as the third foreign language.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

Type of Teaching Used during the Observation

We¹ wanted to find out how much the teacher and the language assistant shared the lesson and whether there was more team than solo teaching. We also expected that there would be more team teaching in classes taught by mentor teachers than in classes taught by other language teachers. In fact there was not much difference.

In general, in the lessons observed there was 41% of solo teaching as opposed to 59% of team teaching. This can be further explained as shown in *Table 4.1*, which shows differences in the amount of team teaching between different types of schools. It is apparent that more team teaching was practised in mixed, primary and vocational schools than in grammar schools. Most individual teaching took place in grammar schools. This might, for example, be due to the fact that the assistants wished to work on their own because the level of the students' language command was higher.

Table 4.1 Type of teaching according to the type of school in the observed lessons

	<i>Solo teaching</i>		<i>Team teaching</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Primary</i>	1	20	4	80	5	100
<i>Vocational</i>	3	37.5	5	62.5	8	100
<i>Grammar</i>	10	58.8	7	41.2	17	100
<i>Mixed (Vocational and Grammar)</i>	-	-	4	100	4	100

¹ In this chapter 'we' refers to the Baseline Study Team.

The data also shows that in some cases the language assistant was teaching alone and the teacher was either teaching the second half of the class (split classes) in another classroom, or the teacher was temporarily absent and the language assistant was his/her substitute or he/she was even doing something else out of the classroom.

Judging from the sociograms, the results of which can be found in *Tables 4.15* and *4.16*, teachers were less actively involved in classroom activities than language assistants. The reason might be that the teacher wanted to allow the language assistant more time, in order to take advantage of having a native speaker in the classroom. Another reason might be that the teachers did not know how to share a lesson with the language assistant. This shows that teachers most probably need some general training on how to work with language assistants in the classroom.

We wanted to find out whether the type of teaching was affected by the number of students present in the class. From *Table 4.2* we can deduce that more team teaching was practised in smaller classes than in larger ones. From the data we cannot say why this was the case.

Table 4.2 Type of teaching according to the size of classes

	<i>Smaller classes (13 to 20 students)</i>		<i>Larger classes (21 or more students)</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Solo teaching</i>	4	30.8	8	44.4
<i>Team teaching</i>	9	69.2	10	55.6
<i>Total</i>	13	100	18	100

Three classroom observation schedules did not give information on the type of teaching.

Work Management

We expected that assistants would use a variety of work management (students working in pairs, groups, or individually) and that the teacher would use more frontal work management, for example while giving instructions. More than one type of work management was observed during the lessons. *Table 4.3* shows the different kinds of class management and whether they were used by the teacher or the assistant. As can be seen from this table, both the teacher and the assistant used frontal teaching. This can be explained by the fact that when giving instructions for any kind of teaching frontal teaching occurs.

Table 4.3 Work management

	<i>Teachers No.</i>	<i>Language assistants No.</i>
<i>Frontal</i>	6	29
<i>Group</i>	5	11
<i>Pairs</i>	2	14
<i>Individual</i>	7	17

It should also be noted that we compared smaller classes with larger classes and we found that more instances of pair work occurred in larger classes, where the activity was led by the language assistant. (See Chapter 5, *Table 5.9.*)

We expected the teacher to be present in the classroom, follow the lesson, observe the students and the assistant and to offer help when needed. The results given in *Table.4.4* show that teachers were actually giving support to the assistant and the students. It should be noted that the three teachers who were not present in the classroom were probably working with the other half of the split group.

Table 4.4 What is the teacher doing if not teaching?

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Listening to the language assistant and giving support when necessary</i>	9
<i>Helping weaker students</i>	4
<i>Sitting at the back of the classroom</i>	2
<i>Correcting test papers</i>	1
<i>Not present in the classroom</i>	3

Timesharing

We expected that during the observed hour both, the teacher and the assistant, would be actively involved in the teaching process, unless the class was divided into two groups, one taught by the teacher and the other by the assistant in two different rooms. We found out that the teacher's involvement in the lesson ranged from 0 minutes to 45 minutes, which did not meet our expectations. However, it should be noted that during the lessons where team teaching was observed teachers were, on average, actively involved 21 minutes out of 45. (For more detailed information see Chapter 5, *Table 5.8.*)

Teaching Goals

Table 4.5 shows that the main focus of the observed lessons was on acquisition of vocabulary, encouraging speaking, raising intercultural awareness and not so much on grammar and writing.

Table 4.5 Teaching goals of the observed lesson

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Acquisition of vocabulary</i>	14
<i>Encouraging speaking</i>	6
<i>Raising intercultural awareness</i>	5
<i>Practising grammar structures</i>	5
<i>Language transfer</i>	4
<i>Essay writing</i>	1

The data also shows that the goals were set more in the field of communication than in grammar, although practising grammar was the goal in five lessons. However, since grammar was taught in four cases in grammar schools we presume that a higher number of lessons practising grammar and vocabulary could be due to the requirements of the *Matura* examination.

Language Skills

We expected that speaking and listening skills would be practised more than other skills because encouraging speaking was felt to be the language assistants' strongest point and would be most interesting and beneficial for the students. Listening was practised as part of speaking, even though it might not have been explicitly focused on. *Table 4.6* indicates the skills that were included in the lesson plan. A lesson plan might include a number of different skills, for example speaking following reading a passage, or writing following speaking. Therefore, the total number of skills does not match the number of classes observed. The data shows that speaking was by far the commonest skill practised in the classes with language assistants, followed by reading, writing and listening.

Table 4.6 Language skills practised during the observed lesson

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Speaking</i>	33
<i>Reading</i>	18
<i>Writing</i>	15
<i>Listening</i>	14

However, it is interesting to compare these results obtained in the observed lesson to the information on skills usually practised with the assistant, showing that speaking and listening were really the most commonly practised skills (see Chapter 7, *Table 7.6*).

Materials Used

Textbooks

We wanted to find out whether language assistants used set textbooks, regularly, during their lessons or other materials. During the induction course the mentors and the assistants were advised of the benefits of using supplementary authentic material. The data shows that out of five primary schools observed, three used a textbook. Out of eight vocational schools observed, six used a textbook and out of seventeen grammar school classes observed, thirteen used a textbook. Out of four mixed schools observed, three used a textbook. These numbers seemed quite high. However, it should be noted that other supplementary materials were used as well.

The numbers in *Table 4.7* were calculated on the basis of the number of classes where the textbook was used. There might be a discrepancy in the interpretation of the question in the classroom observation schedule as it was not clear whether the question was asking about the textbook used in the observed lesson or about the set textbook used generally.

Therefore, some observers took into consideration the textbook, which was usually used in the class and others the one used during the observed lesson, which later became apparent

during discussions at the second workshop. It should be noted that teachers used more than one textbook or other supplementary materials.

Table 4.7 Textbooks used in classes

	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Vocational</i>	<i>Grammar</i>	<i>Mixed</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Headway</i>	-	5	6	2
<i>Prospectus</i>	-	1	-	-
<i>Reward</i>	-	-	1	-
<i>Project</i>	2	-	-	-
<i>Touchstone</i>	1	-	-	-
<i>Themen neu</i>	-	-	2	-
<i>Moment mal</i>	-	-	1	-
<i>Blick</i>	-	-	1	-
<i>Panorama de la langue française</i>	-	-	2	
<i>Buon giorno</i>	-	-	-	1
<i>Le Nouveau Sans Frontières</i>			2	
<i>Total</i>	3	6	15	3

We expected that the assistants would use various supplementary materials, but that the teacher would concentrate on the textbook. As *Table 4.8* shows the assistants used more kinds of materials, and more frequently than the teacher.

Table 4.8 Use of sources by teachers and language assistants

	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Language assistants</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Textbooks</i>	4	14
<i>Dictionaries</i>	1	2
<i>Printed supplementary materials</i>	6	26
<i>Internet and video</i>	-	5
<i>Audio tape</i>	-	4
<i>CD-ROM</i>	-	1

The teacher and the assistant could have used more than one source.

We also noted which type of supplementary material was used in the observed lessons. As can be seen in *Table 4.9* the assistants and teachers used different kinds of supplementary teaching materials.

Table 4.9 Types of supplementary materials used by teachers and language assistants

	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Language assistants</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Newspapers</i>	1	6
<i>Brochures</i>	1	1
<i>Adverts</i>	-	2
<i>Technical texts</i>	-	1
<i>Literature</i>	-	5
<i>Poetry</i>	-	3
<i>Films</i>	1	1
<i>Photographs</i>	2	6
<i>Realia</i>	1	5
<i>Other</i>	5	6

Topics

We expected that the language assistants would teach target language cultural content: teenage topics, current events, and small talk. We expected the teacher to teach curriculum-based topics, and grammar. The data in *Table 4.10* shows that a variety of different topics were covered in classes with language assistants, whereas grammar was rarely taught by the language assistant. There were only five out of 34 cases when grammar was taught which shows that grammar was the domain of the teachers while language assistants helped students with extra practice or, if lessons were shared, the teacher was expected to do the teaching part. Favourite topics were literature, interculture and food.

Table 4.10 Topics of the observed lessons

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Grammar</i>	5
<i>Literature</i>	4
<i>Interculture</i>	3
<i>Food</i>	3

Table continued overleaf.

<i>Teenagers</i>	2
<i>School</i>	2
<i>Professional issues</i>	2
<i>Headlines</i>	1
<i>Cars</i>	1
<i>Graffiti</i>	1
<i>At the doctor's</i>	1
<i>Picture description</i>	1
<i>Clothes and appearance</i>	1
<i>Celebrities</i>	1
<i>Homelessness</i>	1
<i>Family planning</i>	1
<i>IQ</i>	1
<i>Holidays</i>	1

One unidentified

We expected that these topics would cover various aspects of life. Besides, as can be seen from *Table 4.11* many of the topics were used to discuss the target culture or to compare cultures.

Table 4.11 The content of the topics

	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Language assistant</i>
	<i>No.</i>	<i>No.</i>
<i>Comparing cultures</i>	3	17
<i>Current events</i>	1	9
<i>Reinforcing stereotypes</i>	1	2
<i>Challenging stereotypes</i>	0	7
<i>Local culture content</i>	2	7
<i>Target cultural content</i>	3	18
<i>Grammar</i>	2	5
<i>Other</i>	2	10

More than one content of the topic was possible.

The results show that the language assistants focused on cultural content and current events. Less input on the part of the teachers may be due to the fact that most of the

teaching was done individually by the language assistants. Two language assistants reinforced stereotypes but reasons for this were not obvious from the data. It was also noticed that none of the teachers challenged any stereotypes, indeed one of them even reinforced them.

The Classroom Atmosphere

We expected that the atmosphere in the classroom would be relaxed. The data showed that this was indeed the case. If we look at the sociograms (See *Tables 4.15* and *4.16*) we can say that students in primary schools were the most relaxed. This shows that students were confident with the language assistant, which is very positive in language learning. It was real communication with a native speaker preparing the students for the use of language in real life situations. Another reason for a relaxed situation in the classroom with the language assistant could be the fact that during such lessons students were not assessed. Nevertheless, in some cases the observers noticed that the students were too relaxed or even badly behaved during the lessons with the language assistant.

Students' Motivation

We expected the students' motivation to be quite high. As can be seen in *Table 4.12* our expectations proved to be correct in general except the four classes in grammar schools. For those four classes general comments written by the observers were checked. From these comments it was obvious that in all four cases according to the observer, the classroom management was bad, only the students in the first rows were asked, it was their last lesson which meant they may have been tired and the language assistant did not address them by name, but addressed them as a whole class.

Table 4.12 The students' motivation

	<i>Classes of Students</i>
	<i>No.</i>
<i>High motivation</i>	9
<i>Fairly good motivation</i>	20
<i>Bad motivation</i>	4
<i>Total</i>	33

One unidentified

The high motivation of students in classes with the language assistant was understandable. The language assistants brought a kind of freshness to the classroom with their personality and the topics they dealt with. They also attracted students' attention presenting and explaining a different culture. Last but not least they had an advantage as a native speaker over the home teacher as students felt they had genuine contact with the authentic language. Language assistants often brought some authentic realia into the classroom or used games to motivate students.

We expected that classes which had had a language assistant for a longer period of time would be more motivated than those which had had a language assistant for a shorter period of time. The data on students' motivation shows that students were fairly motivated

during the lessons with the language assistant regardless of the number of years of having had a language assistant. On the contrary, only four classes out of 34 classes observed were not motivated. It did not matter how many years students had had a language assistant. The data collected about the students' motivation showed that the majority of students appeared to be positively motivated during the lesson with the language assistant in all types of schools which was proof that having a language assistant in the classroom was a very positive feature.

The Initiative Taken by Students

We expected the students to take quite a lot of initiative. This is explored in *Table 4.13*.

Table 4.13 The initiative taken by students

	<i>Classes of Students</i>
	<i>No.</i>
<i>A lot</i>	8
<i>Quite a lot</i>	14
<i>Some</i>	6
<i>None</i>	5
<i>Total</i>	33

One unidentified

The data shows that out of 33 classes 14 took quite a lot and eight a lot of initiative. According to the general comments by observers in the three grammar school classes and two mixed school classes where there was no student initiative the observers mentioned reasons such as the language assistant not calling students by name, the language assistant nominating only students in the first row, the skills that were mostly practised were reading, little discussion, the language assistant did almost all the talking, or the students were tired as it was their 6th or 7th lesson that day. The observers also noticed that there were a few dominant students in quite a lot of classes who responded to language assistants' questions all the time and of course also took a lot of initiative. We suspect that this feature would have been typical of lessons with the regular teacher, too.

Sociogram

We included the sociogram into the Classroom Observation Schedule because we thought it would be the most appropriate instrument for measuring classroom interaction. It should give a reasonably precise picture of the communication going on in the classroom between the students, the language assistant and the teacher. This picture was obtained by drawing arrows on the instrument between interlocutors whenever communication took place in the classroom (see *Appendix 10*). We expected that there would be higher interaction in grammar school classes than in other secondary schools. The reason was that we believed that students in grammar schools would be more self-confident because they had a better knowledge of the language. In primary schools a high level of interaction was also expected, as the pupils tend to be willing to communicate.

We also expected that the level of interaction with the language assistant would be high, especially where the language assistant was teaching alone. We did not expect much interaction between the teacher and the language assistant.

The way the sociograms were analysed

The sociograms were grouped according to the types of schools:

- 5 primary schools
- 8 vocational schools
- 17 grammar schools
- 4 mixed grammar and vocational schools

In *Table 4.14* we can see a list of all possible types of interaction among the participants during the observed lesson.

Table 4.14 Types of interaction

$LA \rightarrow T$	<i>Language assistant - teacher</i>
$T \rightarrow LA$	<i>Teacher – language assistant</i>
$LA \rightarrow All$	<i>Language assistant - all</i>
$LA \rightarrow Ss$	<i>Language assistant – individual students</i>
$T \rightarrow All$	<i>Teacher - all</i>
$T \rightarrow Ss$	<i>Teacher – individual students</i>
$Ss \rightarrow LA$	<i>Individual students – language assistant</i>
$Ss \rightarrow T$	<i>Individual students – teacher</i>

Each sociogram was analysed and all arrows were counted. Then the frequencies for each of the eight types of interaction for each of the four types of schools were added up and the eight averages of different types of interactions for each type of school were worked out.

The results of the sociogram

Table 4.15 shows the total number of interactions in all lessons observed, according to eight interaction types, and according to different types of schools.

Table 4.15 The total number of interactions

	Primary schools (5)	Vocational schools (8)	Grammar schools (17)	Mixed schools (4)
	No.	No.	No.	No.
$LA \rightarrow T$	-	16	17	24
$T \rightarrow LA$	2	16	17	24
$LA \rightarrow All$	80	160	459	76
$LA \rightarrow S_s$	90	304	425	104
$T \rightarrow All$	5	8	85	40
$T \rightarrow S_s$	35	24	102	20
$S_s \rightarrow LA$	280	400	493	152
$S_s \rightarrow T$	45	8	102	28

Table 4.16 shows the average number of interactions in all lessons observed, according to eight interaction types, and according to different types of schools.

Table 4.16 The average number of interactions

	Primary schools (5)	Vocational schools (8)	Grammar schools (17)	Mixed schools (4)
	No.	No.	No.	No.
$LA \rightarrow T$	-	2	1	6
$T \rightarrow LA$	-	2	1	6
$LA \rightarrow All$	16	20	27	19
$LA \rightarrow S_s$	18	38	25	26
$T \rightarrow All$	1	1	5	10
$T \rightarrow S_s$	7	3	6	5
$S_s \rightarrow LA$	56	50	29	38
$S_s \rightarrow T$	9	1	6	7

In general the data showed the highest interaction between the language assistant and the students - the interaction being reciprocal. However, in grammar schools the language assistant did not address individual students as often as in other types of secondary schools, but addressed the class as a whole more frequently.

In fact, the largest number of initiatives came from students addressing assistants. Of all kinds of schools the highest number of initiatives came from the students in primary schools whereas the number of initiatives in grammar schools was the lowest which was the reverse to our expectations.

The interaction between students and the teacher was lower than that of the students and the language assistant and it supported and complemented the interaction between the students and the language assistant. The teacher seemed not to play an important role in teaching. He/she looked more like an observer, a moderator or sometimes he/she helped with explanations or translations. We assume that the teacher wanted to have a more passive role in the classroom in order to let the language assistants have as much time and space as possible during his/her presence in the classroom.

There was little interaction between the teacher and the language assistant. The reasons may have been:

- interaction was not part of a lesson plan
- the language assistant managed the lesson without the teacher
- the language assistant's solo teaching
- the teacher only worked with students in groups.

All the evidence shows that lessons with language assistants were student-centred so that students could benefit from them as much as possible. The teacher's role was to co-operate and keep the balance of the class. For example, the teacher monitored the lesson.

The results of the sociogram partly met our expectations. The sociogram complemented the observations we made about students' motivation and their initiative. As mentioned earlier, the grammar school classes behaved differently than expected, namely they interacted less in comparison to other schools. Our expectations were met as far as the level of interaction between language assistants and students was concerned.

The number of classes with team teaching was 14, out of which there was practically no interaction between language assistant and teacher (LA→T) and between teacher and language assistant (T→LA) in only three cases. In the remaining 11 classes our expectations, that the teacher and the assistant would not interact much, were met.

General comments

We asked for the observers' general impressions of the lessons, which might give us additional information on the lesson and help us explain the data. These comments were written on the basis of a discussion of the lesson observed between the two observers after the observation and so they provide a kind of a summary of the lesson. Positive comments were as follows: relaxed atmosphere, diversity of activities, humour, active students, supportive atmosphere, resourceful teaching, and good motivation. The negative comments were as follows: student's inactive, poor motivation, disruptive students, teacher centred, and impersonal approach.

CONCLUSIONS

- There was more interaction between the students and the language assistant than between the students and the teacher.
- The overall positive effect of language assistants was evident. There was a high level of interaction between students and language assistant.
- The interaction between language assistants and students was obvious. Students interacted well with the language assistant and student initiative was very high.

- The motivation was high and the classroom atmosphere was relaxed.
- The language assistant mostly practised speaking skills.
- It was evident that students liked lessons with language assistants.
- There was some difference in the number of interactions between different types of schools. Students in primary and vocational schools interacted with the language assistant more often than students in grammar schools.
- The role of the teacher was mostly to complement the assistant and help the students.
- The three main teaching goals of the lessons were acquisition of vocabulary, encouraging speaking and raising intercultural awareness.
- Against our expectations textbooks were used frequently by language assistants.
- In the lessons with language assistants frontal teaching was quite common which did not meet our expectations.
- A variety of topics were covered by the language assistant among which intercultural topics prevailed in all types of schools and literature played an important part in grammar schools.
- Language assistants mostly taught in classes where the foreign language was the first foreign language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ There is a need to encourage co-operation between teachers and language assistants.
- ❖ The concept of team teaching should be explained as a means of teaching with a language assistant and teachers should be trained how to approach and perform team teaching.
- ❖ Examples of good practice should be collected, presented and analysed to promote better teaching. The sociograms of the observed lessons could be collected and given to future language assistants to give them a clearer picture of good and bad practice in the classroom.
- ❖ Language assistants should be given training in classroom management, which would help them cope with discipline problems in larger groups especially if they have not had any previous teaching experience. It would also help them to make interaction even better.
- ❖ Materials on topics met by the students with a lot of enthusiasm should be centrally collected and later suggested to the new incoming language assistants to help them in their lesson planning and their teaching. Prior to their arrival in Slovenia or as soon as they arrive, language assistants could be asked to offer some possible topics they would like or would be able to teach so that teachers could choose in advance according to the needs of the curriculum. Some flexibility during the teaching process is however necessary.
- ❖ Classroom observations similar to those, which took place in May 2000, should be repeated every few years to follow up the progress made in language teaching with the language assistants within the scheme. Future observations should give a clearer picture of the language assistants' abilities according to their previous professional pedagogical education.