Sampling Use Of Language In The Classroom

Various observational methods may be used to help teachers form judgements about aspects of the behaviour of individual pupils. These same observational methods may be used for sampling use of language in the classroom but it is important to be aware of the limitations of these approaches.

First of all, the language used by pupils, even young children, can be highly complex and teachers lack training in understanding the normal processes of language acquisition and how to describe the use of language. It takes practice and training to make reliable and accurate transcriptions of pupils' utterances and a variety of analyses of samples of utterances are possible ranging from simple word counts to complex profiling of grammatical usage, vocabulary and/or phonology. Teachers should always seek specialist advice from a speech and language therapist if one is available.

Secondly, it simply is not a realistic aim to use observational methods alone to arrive at an understanding of pupils' language abilities. For instance, a pupil's use of a particular word or grammatical structure is no certain proof that the pupil understands how and when this is to be used. Equally, it is frequently observed that a pupil's understanding of an aspect of language may long precede its actual use in appropriate contexts. Therefore, some form of testing is going to be required to complement observational methods.

Some aspects of a pupil's use of language may be observed in school but others are more likely to be observed at home in particular settings. Therefore, parental cooperation in getting together realistic language samples is going to be helpful in gaining a fuller picture.

Most children continue to learn aspects of language use into their teenage years. The problem with later language acquisition by children is that there simply has not been much research done. Moreover, even with younger children, with whom there has been relatively much more research, not all aspects of language acquisition have been thoroughly examined. Thus, it is more difficult to be certain what are the typical sequences or stages for use of many aspects of language. This is unfortunate because these 'developmental norms' can be useful (though by no means definite) indicators of teaching sequences.

Finally, there is a need to know the context for what pupils say and do. For instance, does the pupil say more spontaneously than he does in response to questions or statements from the teacher? Does the pupil say more during specific activities? Is the teacher more likely to get responses in activities involving use of actual items or will the pupil respond well to discussion about pictures? Does the pupil tend to say more when interacting with a particular adult or pupils?

When real consideration is given to the complexity of recording and analysing use of language, there is a danger of giving up prematurely because of not seeing the wood for the trees. However, observations can be useful for generating hypotheses about a pupil's language abilities even though they may require further testing and they help teachers to check on the generalisation to the ordinary classroom environment of language skills that have been learned in more structured teaching settings.

There will not be enough time for an in-depth study; such case study activities are more

important for researchers into child language acquisition or language disability. It seems most practical for teachers to focus on aspects of language use that are of particular interest: for instance, has the pupil started to use verbs, adjectives or pronouns.

An important consideration is about what constitutes a sufficient sample of utterances for analysis. In order to generate a reasonable profile of a pupil's overall language abilities and needs, researchers often recommend working on a minimum sample of 50 to 100 sentences or words depending upon the focus of the profiling. Others recommend obtaining 30 minutes minimum of taped interactions between a child and the adult of which 15 minutes should be in an unstructured free play setting and 15 minutes of dialogue on some aspect of the child's experience. In the case of a quieter child, it may be necessary to continue to sample until a pattern emerges.

When looking for a specific, targeted aspect of language (eg use of pronouns), sometimes five minutes will be enough but sometimes much longer is required to get the necessary number of utterances demonstrating consistent use (or not) of the targeted behaviour.