CLASSROOM OBSERVATION
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Observation can serve a number of people in a number of contexts towards a number of different ends (fig.1.1). It is a multi-faceted tool for learning. Being in the classroom as an observer opens up a range of experiences and processes which can become part of the raw material of a teacher's professional growth. The experience of observing comprises more than the time actually spent in the classroom. It also includes preparation for the period in the classroom and follow-up from the time spent there. The preparation can include the selection of a focus and purpose and a method of data collection, as well as collaboration with others involved. The follow-up includes analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data and experiences acquired in the class and reflection on the whole experience. Observation is a skill that can be learned and can improve with practice.

- **Why observe?**

  When we teach, we are often so observed in the purpose, procedure and logistics of our lesson that we are not able to observe processes of learning and interaction as they occur through the lesson. Being the observer in the class, rather than the teacher, releases us from these concerns and affords us the freedom to look at the lesson from a range of different perspectives outside that of the actual lesson plan of the teacher. Developing the skill of observing serves a dual purpose: it helps teachers gain a better understanding of their teaching, while at the same time refines their ability to observe, analyze and interpret, an ability which can also be used to improve their own teaching.

- **What is at stake?**

  Observations are a familiar part of professional life for most EFL/ESL English teachers working in government schools, tertiary level institutional language programs, private language schools or British Council centers around the globe. However, is it always certain that the professional training of those empowered to conduct observations has fully equipped them for their role as evaluators of classroom teaching? Even though observers are normally experienced teachers, all too often the step up from teaching to observing others teach can unintentionally result in adopting behaviours and practices which are not always in the developmental interests of teachers.

  An awful lot is at stake when a director of studies or supervisor observes a teacher in a language teaching operation. No matter how informally or casually
the classroom visit is presented, the teacher is aware that his performance is under review.

Depending on how the lesson and discussions with the supervisor proceed, the observation experience is bound to have a considerable uplifting or demoralising impact in terms of the teacher’s self-image and his or her professional standing within that teaching community. A poor performance will inevitably affect not only the teacher’s confidence and relationship with the person who is observing the lesson, but also his/her more general reputation among the teaching staff and others in the organisation. On the other hand, a good performance can boost a teacher’s self image and confidence level, so he or she feels a valued, respected member of staff with all the motivational benefits that flow from such a feeling.

Given the importance of observations in the professional lives of teachers, it is vital that those who conduct observations should carry them out in as supportive and constructive a way as possible. Those who observe are (or should be!) teachers themselves, even though they may currently enjoy a more prestigious title! They need therefore to recall the damage that can be caused by the extremes of being overly critical of a teacher’s classroom performance, or an inability to focus on areas which might help a teacher grow and overcome difficulties. In this article, I will describe a number of key procedures and strategies that need to be adopted by observers to make the observation process meaningful, supportive and of practical use from a teacher’s perspective.

- **Some guiding principles for observing:**

1. Observers need to maintain a sensitive awareness of the potential for vulnerability that inevitably accompanies any observation of teaching. When a teacher opens the classroom door and extends a welcome to a visitor, a basic trust in motive and professional ethics accompanies that welcome. This must be respected.
2. The presence of a visitor inevitably affects the classroom dynamics. Observers should take every care to minimize the intrusion and allow for this factor in drawing conclusions from the data. Observers need to realize that the samples of data brought from the classroom are inevitably limited, and that sweeping generalizations should be avoided. We need to talk about *what happened in the lesson* (a particular observed lesson), and refrain from making the unwarranted leap to *what happens in lessons* (generally).
3. Sometimes the observation task may need collaboration and co-operation with the teacher who is going to be observed. For example, observing the skill of
'giving instructions', you will need to see in advance the lesson plan intended to be followed. At other times, it will be necessary not to alert the teacher to the central point of the observation for fear of 'contaminating' the data.

For example, if a teacher knows in advance that their 'echoes' are to be recorded, or that their questions will be under scrutiny, this knowledge may affect their language through the lesson.

4. While the above mentioned precautions are necessary for methodological validity, it is as important on the human and professional side, to be sure to share the observed teacher any follow-up discussions about the lesson. The question of 'ownership of the experience' is an important one and requires sensitive awareness. We need to remember that the experience has to be meaningful, rewarding and non-threatening to all involved: teacher, observer, learners, colleagues, tutors, etc.

- **The Pre-observation Discussion**

In most classroom observation situations, the observer simply drops in—either announced or unannounced—watches the class, writes up a summative evaluation, and/or meets briefly with the teacher to discuss the class session. While this approach is by all means better than no observation at all, it has been found that adding a pre-observation discussion to this format enhances the observation process for both the teacher and observer.

The pre-observation discussion between the observer (head of department/supervisor) and the teacher helps to alleviate anxiety and provides the observer with information about how the section is going and what the teacher would like to accomplish on the day of the visit. The pre-observation discussion also enables the teacher to identify areas that he or she would like feedback on. The collaborative nature of the pre-observation dialogue provides an opportunity for the teacher and observer to reflect upon and discuss teaching and learning and to experience the observation and feedback process as a means to improve teaching rather than simply as a form of evaluation. It is recommended that you meet with the teacher before the class and use the "Pre-observation Discussion Worksheet" (fig.1.2) to guide the pre-observation discussion.

1. **The importance of the pre-observation discussion**

   In a busy school or department, a pre-observation discussion or conference might seem something of a luxury. However, it can be just as important in some ways as the actual observation itself. It is a chance for the observer to hear and understand the teacher's story: to listen to the teacher talking about the class, the particular style of teaching which has been adopted and the problems that the students present from a classroom management
perspective. It is also an opportunity for the teacher to describe the activities planned for the lesson to be observed.

Giving the teacher the opportunity to talk about the class and teaching helps many teachers feel more relaxed about the visit because they sense that their own views and ideas are considered important. A better understanding of the teacher’s personality and his classroom approach is a great asset, too, to the observer in terms of feeling better able to provide feedback which is relevant and useful.

2. Finding an observation focus

It can be extremely beneficial for the teacher and supervisor to agree on a focus for the class observation visit. There are many areas that can be selected: the teacher’s instructions, amount of teacher talk, pacing of the lesson, attention given to weaker students, questioning techniques, reactions of the students to a communicative activity etc. Finding a focus helps all parties: The teacher realises that the observer is not intent on using a driving test style checklist of teacher competencies to seek out his minor weaknesses. The supervisor benefits from having an agreed focus because there is already an agreed starting point for looking meaningfully and developmentally at the teacher’s lesson, without the burden of assessing every single aspect of the teacher’s performance.

- The Class Visit

One of the most frequently asked questions by teachers when they arrange for a classroom observation is: "How should I explain the presence of the observer to my students? Being observed can give the impression that I am not doing a good job, and that someone is checking up on me." We suggest that the he/she inform his or her students that the it is a policy that teachers, in particular those teaching for the first time, should be observed in the classroom and receive feedback on their teaching. You may also wish to announce in class that you will be visiting sections on occasion to see how things are going. The observer should sit in the back or to the side and should not interrupt the flow of the class.

The observer should take narrative notes of what takes place during the class session. Feedback that is based on what specifically transpires in the class tends to be more constructive and less judgmental than feedback that only recounts general impressions. The observer might also find it helpful to draw a diagram of the classroom setup taking note of where students are sitting, who participates in the discussion, who is silent, etc. The observer should also consider whether the teaching methods used by the teacher are appropriate for the subject matter at hand, whether the he/she has command of the material, and
how the teacher is doing in the specific areas that he or she has identified as ones he or she would like feedback on.

After the class is over, the observer should thank the instructor and make sure that a time is set up to meet and discuss the class as soon as possible. Within 48 hours is optimal.

- **Collecting data**

Perhaps the biggest mistake an observer can make is to feel that his/her primary role is to identify the weaknesses of the teacher and make him/her aware of them. It is more realistic to see the role initially as recording data on the lesson with comments, so as to be able to help the teacher reflect on the lesson taught. The data collected can then be sifted through in order to see if there are significant patterns that are worth commenting on. For example, a review of the notes on the lesson might reveal that a teacher manages to include a variety of useful activities but regularly rushes through the instructions (or modeling) phase when introducing the activities, thereby disadvantaging the weaker students who get confused about what they are supposed to be doing. One method of recording data that many observers find useful is to go into observations with sheets of paper divided into three columns. In the first column the observer keeps notes on the main events or stages of the lesson along with a record of the times spent on different activities. The second column can be used to keep notes on students’ involvement in the class and their level of interaction, response to activities etc. The third column can then be used to record the observer’s subjective reactions to the lesson. These comments will naturally be informed by an awareness of generally recognised features of sound English language teaching e.g.; providing opportunities for students to practise/use language in meaningful contexts; giving feedback and encouragement to students; appropriate error correction strategies etc.

- **After the Class Visit**

The teacher should write down notes as to how he or she thought the class went, and questions he or she might have for the observer. One way to do this is for the teacher to answer the questions: "What worked well and why?" "What didn’t work well and why?" "What will I change the next time I teach this topic?" and "How did I do in the areas of teaching I was concerned about?"

The observer should review the notes he or she took during the class and consider what went well and what areas might need improvement. In reviewing his or her notes, the observer should also consider how the teacher has done in the areas that he/she has requested feedback on.
**Post-Observation Discussion**

The post-observation discussion should be a dialogue about how the class went, what worked well and why, and what areas of the teacher's teaching may need to be strengthened.

It is helpful if the observer and the teacher can approach this discussion not so much as an evaluation but rather as an opportunity for the teacher, in dialogue with the supervisor, to improve teaching. The observer should also respond to any questions the teacher might have and should give feedback on those areas of teaching that the teacher wanted feedback on.

As a way to summarize the discussion and utilize it to further improve teaching, we suggest that the teacher and the observer use the "Post-observation Goal-setting Sheet" (fig.1.3) to identify two or three areas of teaching that the teacher would like to work on. The teacher and the observer should brainstorm specific strategies or techniques that the GSI can use to improve these areas of teaching. Many teachers have found it helpful to tape this goal-setting sheet into their teaching notebooks as a reminder of the steps he or she can take to improve teaching.

**Feedback strategies**

Feedback based on the data collected needs to be managed very carefully in order to make the post-observation conference a constructive experience for the teacher (and supervisor!). Adoption of a few key strategies can have a very positive impact.

It is generally not a good idea to schedule the feedback conference on the same day as the observation, even though the teacher may be anxious to receive feedback immediately. The actual observation can be a stressful experience for many teachers and they will be too ‘close to’ the lesson just after teaching to be able to discuss it reasonably objectively. Also, the observer needs time to reflect on the lesson, review the observation notes and make a strategic decision about which points to bring up with the teacher. On the other hand, it is not a good idea to postpone the observation for more than a day or two since the memories of the lesson can fade fast, and then the discussion of events will not be so effective.

A collaborative spirit should be fostered by the observer throughout the observation process. In general, it is best, as Goldhammer (69) stresses, to avoid *critical dissection* of teaching. Too much criticism and advice giving will simply overwhelm a teacher.
A detailed analysis of all the data may throw up more areas for potential improvement than a teacher can actually deal with – probably most of us can only contemplate adapting our behaviour on one or two fronts at a time! If there are major problems in an observed class, then it is probably best for the supervisor mention just one of the general features of a sound lesson that was lacking, e.g. the need for opportunities for students to participate/use language interactively, and then move on to working together with the teacher to think of ways of achieving this outcome in future lessons.

A supervisor can very easily become over-critical (and underestimate the impact of their criticisms). It is crucial for a supervisor to highlight those aspects of the teacher’s performance that were strong or effective – teachers need good points to be appreciated too! In fact, the observer would be negligent if he or she did not try to reinforce good practice and build up a teacher’s confidence by mentioning positive points.

- **Appreciating the teacher’s perspective**

A final thought: In approaching the experience of observing another teacher for evaluative/developmental purposes, we are involved in a process of professional support, collaboration and dialogue. The shared experience of a class enables the observer to enter into a dialogue with a teacher. The observer can offer suggestions about strategies, but the main concern must be to understand the teacher’s personal outlook on teaching events. To achieve this requires a conscious effort by the supervisor to hold back on diagnosis and prescription. Listening to the teacher’s story in order to understand his or her skills, personality, potentials and stage of personal development as a language teacher is a pre-requisite for meaningful discussion of lesson events and teaching options.
Pre-observation Discussion Worksheet

1. Discuss with the teacher the purpose of the observation and what both of you would like to get out of it.
2. Establish confidentiality. Let the teacher know that you will not be discussing the classroom observation with other teachers, except when someone has an educational need to know.
3. Review the steps of the observation process.
   A. Pre-observation discussion (30 minutes)
   B. Class observation
   C. One-hour follow-up consultation with goal-setting

Questions to ask teacher in the pre-observation discussion:

1. Do you have any previous teaching experience?
2. How do you feel your section(s) is going?
3. What subject matter will you be covering on the day of the observation?
4. How will you specifically teach the subject matter, i.e., what techniques will you use?
5. Could you walk me step-by-step through your lesson plan?
6. What would you like the students to take away from this session?
7. Are there specific questions that you have about your teaching or the teaching and learning environment in your classroom that you would like me to focus on as I observe your class, for example, student participation, pacing, sequencing, chalkboard use, handling of student questions, summarizing discussion, interactions among students, group work, questioning techniques, command of content, explanation of concepts, appropriateness of teaching methods, etc.

A. .....................................................................................................................
B. .....................................................................................................................
C. .....................................................................................................................

8. How do you feel about being observed?
9. Any questions?
Post-observation Goal-setting Worksheet

1. Aspect of teaching you would like to improve:
   Specific steps you can take to improve this aspect of your teaching:

2. Aspect of teaching you would like to improve:
   Specific steps you can take to improve this aspect of your teaching:

3. Aspect of teaching you would like to improve:
   Specific steps you can take to improve this aspect of your teaching:

4. Aspect of teaching you would like to improve:
   Specific steps you can take to improve this aspect of your teaching:
Comments by the person being observed

This form has been developed for use in classroom evaluation of language classes.

Language Classroom Observation Form

Pre-Observation Questions for the Instructor

(Please write your answers to the following questions and give them to the observer before class begins.)

1. What are your objectives for today's lesson?
2. How do the objectives for today's lesson relate to the goals of the course?

Post Observation Questions

1. To what extent did you achieve your objectives?
2. Is there any thing that you would have done differently?
## Comments by the observer

### Language Classroom Observation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class: __________________</th>
<th>Section: __________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor: ______________</td>
<td># of students: ____________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observer: _______________</td>
<td>Date: ____________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Rating Scale

(4) Outstanding  (3) Good  (2) Fair  (1) Poor

### A. PREPARATION

1. The instructor had a clearly discernible lesson plan. 4 3 2 1

2. There was an appropriate balance of structured and open-ended/communicative activities. 4 3 2 1

3. The exercises and activities were introduced in context. 4 3 2 1

4. The plan was geared toward real/authentic language use. 4 3 2 1

### B. LANGUAGE USE

1. The instructor used the target-language in the classroom appropriately and effectively. 4 3 2 1 / NA

2. Use of English was appropriate to student needs. 4 3 2 1 / NA

### C. LESSON PRESENTATION

1. The lesson was presented effectively and clearly. 4 3 2 1

2. The activities/exercises chosen to achieve the objectives were effective. 4 3 2 1

3. There were smooth transitions between activities. 4 3 2 1

4. The time allotted for activities was appropriate. 4 3 2 1

5. The amount of teacher talk and student talk was appropriate. 4 3 2 1

6. The type and amount of teacher feedback was effective. 4 3 2 1

7. Cultural instruction was integrated into class activities. 4 3 2 1
D. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

1. The use of small groups/pair work during each activity was appropriate. 4 3 2 1
2. The seating arrangement facilitated learning. 4 3 2 1
3. The use of audio-visual & tech materials was effective. 4 3 2 1
4. The instructor divided his or her attention among students appropriately. 4 3 2 1
5. Student participation was on task. 4 3 2 1

E. CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

1. Student participation was active and lively. 4 3 2 1
2. The class atmosphere was warm, open and accepting. 4 3 2 1
3. The instructor was sensitive to students' difficulties and abilities. 4 3 2 1

F. USE OF TECHNOLOGY

1. Use of technology (video, audio, web materials) was appropriate given the material being presented. 4 3 2 1
2. Use of technology was particularly creative, i.e. it accomplished something that could not have been done as easily with other media. 4 3 2 1
3. Use of technology is limited in the classroom, but used appropriately outside the class (e.g. for email, drilling, background, etc.. 4 3 2 1

COMMENTS:

STRENGTHS:

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:
References


2. **George Murdoch**, *Classroom observations-making them useful for teachers, article* ([developingteachers.com](http://developingteachers.com)).

3. **Conducting classroom observation, article**. *Graduate student instructor, Teaching and resource Center, University of California –Berkeley.com*