

OBJECTIVE TEACHING OBSERVATIONS

Teacher trainers are tasked with many responsibilities, but none cause as much stress for teachers and teacher trainers as evaluative observations. Teachers can feel intimidated by the presence of an observer in their classrooms, particularly if that observer is judging their teaching. Teacher trainers might feel uncomfortable in their role as an observer and with a position of some authority. At times, observations can feel awkward and insincere for everyone involved. What if there was a way to make observations relevant and empowering for both teachers and teacher trainers? One possibility is conducting an observation that ends with a robust discussion on language teaching strategies and techniques.

In this Teacher's Corner, the teacher observation is presented as a more collaborative and less intimidating opportunity for teachers and teacher trainers to review a lesson by discussing what actually occurred in the lesson and what variations and adaptations could be made in other situations.

OBSERVATION PREPARATION

Before an observation ever takes place, a lot of goodwill can be created simply by the teacher trainer talking with teachers about the observation process. To begin, the teacher trainer should explain the purpose and structure of the observation to any teachers who will get observed. The purpose of observations will vary depending on the teaching situation, but the structure of the observations can follow what is outlined in this article. As teacher trainers talk with teachers about the process, they should also encourage any and all questions teachers might have. It is important to that both the teacher trainer and teacher feel comfortable with the process and have a clear understanding of how the observation will proceed.

Schedule the observation by contacting the teacher and offering a few possible times and days that would work for the teacher and the students. Conducting an observation unannounced or without the agreement of the teacher can start the process off badly and defeat the goal of having a collaborative process. Once again, explain the process and outline of the observation and ask for questions.

The day before the observation, confirm the time with the teacher and ask if there is anything the teacher would like the trainer to know ahead of time. Plan to arrive to the class shortly before it starts. Greet the teacher and take a seat in a spot that is unobtrusive but still gives a clear view of the teacher and students. Leave it up to the teacher as to whether to explain the presence of the observer.

CONDUCTING THE OBSERVATIONAL OBSERVATION

In this type of observation, the observer logs, or records, the lesson as it happens. The observer writes down what the teacher and students do and discuss during the class. It is also good practice for the observer to first note some information about the class and the context. For example, the observer might sketch the layout of the classroom, write down the number of students, or note any other information pertinent to the observation. Once class starts, the observer begins by logging the first thing the teacher or students do upon the start of class.

Time (minutes)	Teacher Tasks	Students' Tasks
0:00	<i>(Teacher has written class outline on the board)</i> Teacher greets students and asks them to take out their homework and review it with their partners	Students take their seats

1:00	Teacher readies handouts and circulates among students	Students find their partners and review the homework, comparing answers and discussing discrepancies
6:00	Teacher finds group for late arrival and then asks students to take one more minute to review their homework	
7:00	Teacher asks students to come back together as a large group by ringing a bell to get their attention	

Included in these purely observational notes, the observer might note any of the following:

- Details about any interactions between students or students and teachers
- Language the teacher uses to present information or give directions
- Descriptions of processes, such as group strategies or transitions between tasks
- Language used to make corrections and give feedback
- Use of the classroom space throughout lesson
- Teacher’s movements around the classroom
- Technology and tools used to deliver the lesson

Once the lesson ends, the observer should take some time to review his or her notes, make clarifications, or add observations that he or she made but did not have time to log during the lesson.

LESSON REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Ideally, the lesson discussion and reflection should be done immediately after the lesson or within an hour. This way the lesson and what occurred are fresh in the mind. After organizing his or her notes, the observer should try to make a copy of the notes for the teacher to reference throughout the discussion. In preparation for the discussion, the teacher can take a few minutes to reflect on the lesson and write down responses to the following questions:

- What went well in class for you??
- What was difficult about class today for you?

- What was normal about the lesson? (In the sense that something in class happens regularly and is a good example of a typical day in the class)
- What was unusual about the lesson?
- What two moments in the class would you like to discuss in greater detail?

Once the observer and teacher are prepared, they can begin to discuss the lesson. First, teachers and observers should go through the observation log, focusing only on reviewing the observable events of the class. Both the observer and teacher can make note of points they want to discuss as they review the lesson, but they should avoid making extra comments or giving opinions during this part of the process. Instead, they should focus on remembering the lesson as it progressed.

After reviewing the lesson, the observer can begin the reflection part of the discussion by asking the teacher for any reflective thoughts. The observer can encourage the teacher to review the notes he or she made on the lesson log and the answers to the questions he or she prepared earlier. After the teacher has had a chance to speak, the observer can begin discussing the aspects of the lesson that were important to both of them. For example, if something happened with a student during the class that required discipline, the observer and the teacher should talk through the moment. How was the teacher feeling? Has the teacher seen this before? How has it been handled in other classes? If the teacher were to have a similar incident occur, how would he or she handle it differently? The observer should be a part of this discussion rather than simply asking questions. In that respect, both the observer and teacher should talk about the lesson as it occurred and how things might go differently in another class, with a different group of students, or with a different level of learner. Reflective discussion can be a difficult skill for teachers and observers to master, but the whole process should be a collaborative reflection that encourages a conversation about best practices in language teaching. Both the observer and the teacher should ask questions and reflect on the questions asked. Other possible questions include the following:

- How can we present the same topic using different types of technology?
- What is the advantage of giving feedback to students as in this instance? If feedback was done differently, what might change on the part of the learners?
- The structure of the lesson started out like this... What additional techniques could be used for organizing this type of lesson?
- What other assessments can be used to achieve the same goal? What are the strengths about the assessment that was used?
- How are objectives usually communicated to students? In this class, how were the objectives communicated? What are other ideas for explaining the objectives?

Before concluding the discussion, the observer can take a few minutes to review some of what was discussed and to explain any next steps regarding the observation, such as if the observation will be part of the teacher's professional development file. It is also good practice for both the teacher and observer to finalize the lesson log and write a summary of the reflective discussion to share with one another. This way, both the teacher and observer have a written record and an understanding of how the conversation was perceived by their colleague.

At the end of this discussion and reflection, observers should feel that they achieved their purpose and carried out a successful observation of a colleague. Teachers should leave the discussion feeling as though the lesson was objectively observed and that they had an opportunity to share their teaching knowledge and skills. Both the observer and the teacher should feel as though they had participated in a fruitful exchange of language teaching practices and strategies.