

## Teaching Pre-service Teachers How to “See”: The Importance of Guided Observations

by **CARLEEN VELEZ**

For many years, I taught an English-teaching methodology course for pre-service language teachers. In addition to learning about language-teaching techniques, students were required to observe language classes and submit their observation notes to me. As I read through the observation notes, I noticed that the students did little more than write out a list of every activity they had observed, basically recreating the more experienced teacher’s lesson plan. While they had the opportunity to see effective teaching, this assignment did not allow them the opportunity to think more deeply about how the lessons were directly connected to the methodology. Therefore, through a process of trial and error, I devised a technique that helps pre-service teachers learn how to more systematically “see” the methodology when observing a more experienced teacher.

### **THE GUIDED OBSERVATION MODEL**

The model that I present here is called the “Guided Observation Model.” This model is flexible because it can be used with any curriculum in your pre-service teacher-training course. Below, I illustrate how it worked in my course and explain how it can be adapted to your context as well.

My ten-week course (see Figure 1) was based on selected chapters from the fourth edition of *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Snow 2014). However, you can include any topics in the “Theme(s)” column and use this model in the same way.

As you can see, the pre-service teachers were required to perform four observations throughout this ten-week course. After each observation, they submitted a written journal documenting what they saw. The journals were closely connected with the content of the curriculum. For example, for the Week 3 assignment, the pre-service teachers were required to observe and notice how listening and pronunciation, speaking, and/or reading were taught. They conducted their observation during either Week 2 or Week 3. Then, they drew upon the theory that they learned in the prior weeks’ lessons and noticed how it was used in practice when observing a language class. In their Journal 1 assignment, they documented what they noticed.

### **THE GUIDED OBSERVATION TOOL**

Before observations begin, I review the Observation Template (Figure 2) with

students. Helping pre-service teachers understand what they need to see will help them develop their understanding of language-teaching pedagogy. You can use this template as is, or you can adapt it to meet your educational context by removing any of these questions and/or adding your own. You may also need to modify the instructions if you require the students to submit their notes in a paper notebook or through email.

When introducing the Observation Template, I go over each section with students. Here are points that I emphasize:

**1. What is the objective of the lesson you are observing?**

All teachers should have an objective for the daily lesson (e.g., agreeing and disagreeing, practicing and producing simple past tense verbs). Observe carefully and try to identify

the objective. If you are not sure what the objective is, ask the teacher after the class.

**2. List the sequence of activities you observed and the time spent on each activity.**

This is a basic observational exercise. Keep a watch or timer handy so you can document the time at the start of each new activity.

**3. How did students respond to the lesson? What evidence of learning did you see?**

This should be done throughout the lesson. When the teacher is explaining grammar, are the students focused on the teacher, or are they chatting with each other? If they are chatting, do you notice that they are asking each other questions about the topic, or are they talking about something completely different? Being able to read your students'

Week	Theme(s)	Assignment Due Date
1	Overview of Language-Teaching Methods	
2	Syllabus and Curriculum Design Listening and Pronunciation	
3	Speaking Reading	Observation & Journal 1 (about topics from Weeks 2–3)
4	Writing Grammar	
5	Vocabulary Assessment	Observation & Journal 2 (about topics from Weeks 4–5)
6	Lesson Planning Tools and Techniques for Language Teaching	
7	Digital Technology Content-Based Teaching	Observation & Journal 3 (about topics from Weeks 6–7)
8	Task-Based Teaching English for Specific Purposes	
9	Teaching Young Learners Teaching Adult Learners	Observation & Journal 4 (about topics from Weeks 8–9)
10	Classroom Research Effective Professional Development for Language Teachers	

**Figure 1. Sample schedule of weekly themes in the methodology course**

cues is a crucial skill to develop as a teacher. Practice picking up on these cues and trying to understand their meaning.

**4. How do the activities you observed relate to this unit’s topic?**

This piece is essential. In our course, we are learning the theory of teaching. Now, it is your time to compare that theory with the classroom practice. For example, if we study the writing process as having three parts (pre-writing, writing, post-writing), what are you seeing during a writing lesson in the class you observe? How does the pre-writing assignment the teacher uses compare to the theory we studied? Can you notice a distinct pre-writing activity? As we study each topic in the course, you will need to notice different

aspects of the lessons you observe. Think deeply about our course content and look closely to see it during the lessons.

**5. Suggest an alternative the teacher could have used related to this unit’s topic.**

Using the example above about the pre-writing activity, let’s assume the teacher used a graphic organizer. You could consider the other examples we have discussed and propose that an alternative could be using a debate as a pre-writing activity. You could then explain how the idea of a debate could have also enriched the lesson. The idea here is to consider how a good lesson can be taught in multiple ways to achieve the same outcome.

Observation Template – ESL or Other Language Class	
Observer:	Class:
Teacher:	Date:
<b>Instructions:</b> Use this form to take notes during your observation. Then write up your observation (minimum of 300 words) and post it to the class discussion board.	
1. What is the objective of the lesson you are observing?	
2. List the sequence of activities you observed and the time spent on each activity.	
3. How did students respond to the lesson? What evidence of learning did you see?	
4. How do the activities you observed relate to this unit’s topic?	
5. Suggest an alternative the teacher could have used related to this unit’s topic.	
6. Alternatively, if there was no relation to this unit’s topic, how could the teacher have incorporated the unit’s topic?	
7. What other comments do you have about the lesson?	

**Figure 2. Observation template for English as a second language (ESL) or other language class**

**6. Alternatively, if there was no relation to this unit’s topic, how could the teacher have incorporated the unit’s topic?**

Let’s continue with the example of a pre-writing exercise. This objective may appear during the week we are studying methodology related to teaching vocabulary. Using the theory from class, propose an activity that the teacher could have used to expand the vocabulary the students might need for this pre-writing exercise. The purpose of this question is to help you practice developing activities that can be used as building blocks to meet an objective.

**7. What other comments do you have about the lesson?**

This question allows you to connect what you saw to your own personal experience. Here are possible questions to consider: Did the teacher you observed teach in the same way your secondary-school teacher(s) taught?

If so, did you respond well to this teaching style as a child? Did this teacher use a style you wish your former teachers had used? Do you relate well to this teacher’s style, or is this teacher more energetic (or calmer, more direct, etc.) than you imagine yourself to be? Did you learn something new from observing this teacher? Please be as reflective as possible. Good teachers are always reflecting on their own language-learning experience as they develop their own lessons.

**OBSERVATION GRADING AND FEEDBACK**

After the students completed their observation by answering the questions in the template, they submitted it to me for grading. I used a set grading rubric (Figure 3), which I clearly explained to the students before they began their observations. Setting expectations for students and clearly defining them in a rubric helps them work to meet the expectations you have as their teacher-trainer.

Grading Criteria	Points
<p><b>1. Lesson objective and summary of lesson activities (1 point)</b> Contains a clear statement of the lesson objective and a concise description of the lesson activities</p>	
<p><b>2. Student response to instruction (1 point)</b> Discusses students’ reaction to the lesson and any evidence of learning that was observed</p>	
<p><b>3. Relation to the course’s weekly topics (1 point)</b> Clearly describes the class activities that are related to the course’s weekly topics and makes connections with the course’s readings and discussions</p>	
<p><b>4. Alternative practice (1 point)</b> Suggests an alternative method from our current unit that could be used by the teacher and that fits the lesson content and objective</p>	
<p><b>5. Other comments (1 point)</b> Connects the observation to any of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall course content</li> <li>• Course content from other courses (past or present)</li> <li>• Personal teaching or learning experience</li> <li>• Theories of learning or outside reading</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Teacher comments:</b></p>	<p><b>TOTAL:</b></p>

**Figure 3. Grading criteria rubric**

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## Learning to notice students' responses is another essential component of teacher development.

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Note that if you adapt the Observation Template in Figure 2, you may also need to adjust the Grading Criteria in Figure 3.

Below, I offer a rationale for each item in the rubric.

**Item 1** requires the pre-service teachers to clearly articulate the objective of the lesson and describe the activities that took place.

*Context:* Before I used the Observation Template, I found that my pre-service teachers' observations stopped at this point. They were able to clearly document the activities but did not go beyond that observation.

**Item 2** requires the pre-service teachers to observe the student response to instruction.

*Context:* When pre-service teachers are observing lessons, their tendency is to focus on what the *teacher* is doing. However, pre-service teachers often do not make note of how students are responding. Item 2 directs the observers' attention to the students' responses. Learning to notice students' responses is another essential component of teacher development. Coincidentally, I found that my pre-service teachers did not clearly address this in their early journals. They needed additional coaching through my feedback to become more aware of students' responses.

**Item 3** requires the pre-service teachers to focus their attention on the course topics for that observation period. For example, if students observe a class during Week 3 of the course, they need to connect their observations back to the methodology they studied during Week 2 or 3 of the course. For the observation during Week 5, they need

to connect it back to the methodology they studied during Week 4 or 5, and so on.

*Context:* Students tend to connect back to the most obvious topic (e.g., grammar instruction during a grammar lesson). However, this will allow them to stretch their vision to "see" different aspects of your curriculum (e.g., speaking pedagogy or group work during a grammar lesson).

**Item 4** requires students to use the theory from the course and brainstorm an alternative practice that could have been used in the class they observed. For example, the pre-service teacher could propose how a whole-class exercise mentioned in Item 3 could have been accomplished using pair or group work.

*Context:* Since pre-service teachers generally have limited experience, most of their responses came from examples that I provided in the methodology course. If they respond, "The teacher was great. I can't think of an alternative," remind them of alternative activities that were discussed during the course. Some students, particularly highly motivated ones, can use this as an opportunity to create their own activities, but all students will benefit from answering this question, even if only matching up an activity that you discussed in class as an alternative practice in the actual lesson.

**Item 5** allows the pre-service teachers to connect the observation of the class to their own experience as a language learner or teacher.

*Context:* This item encourages pre-service teachers to become more reflective overall as they develop their profession. Thinking back to their past experiences demonstrates to them that they have more experience

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**In addition to commenting about the overall lesson, peers can practice connecting the lesson back to the course theory, brainstorming alternative practices, and connecting the lesson to their own experiences as a language learner.**

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with language teaching than they may have initially considered.

Observation notes can be exchanged back and forth with the teacher-trainer in a variety of ways:

*Low-Tech or Limited-Resource Environment:* In an environment with limited technology, I recommend using a low-tech method of exchanging observation notes. Students can get simple notebooks (or create their own with paper and staples) and keep all of their observation notes in the notebook. After they complete their first observation, I recommend putting students into groups so they can discuss their experience with their peers. Next, they turn in their notes to the teacher. The teacher comments in the journal and passes it back. If this technique is used, make sure students leave extra space after each section so that the teacher has a place to insert comments.

When the teacher passes back the journals, he or she provides overall feedback to the whole class, based on observations from Journal 1. This global feedback is repeated after each journal assignment to further assist the students in developing their observational skills.

*High-Tech Environment:* If you and your students have access to a classroom management system (e.g., Google Classroom or Canvas), you can have your students post their observation notes publicly. However, when I make comments, I send them privately to the students. I do not want students to be uncomfortable if a peer reads comments that I give directly to them. Alternatively, you and your students could exchange emails back and forth.

## **FEEDBACK**

Providing personalized feedback is the best way to continue to help students develop their sense of observation. Here is an example of the feedback I provided for a student. When you read the feedback for Journal 1 and then the feedback for Journal 4, you can see that my comments changed from questions (directing the student to “see” more) and became connections to the course content:

### ***Feedback to Journal 1 – The student was still developing her sense of observation.***

*You described the lesson in detail and allowed me to imagine the classroom setting. You especially did a great job showing just how the instructor kept the students engaged in such a large class.*

*Please make sure that you propose an alternative practice for the content of this lesson. Even if you liked the way the teacher carried out the lesson, what modifications could you make if it were your class? What additional elements (materials, activities, etc.) could have improved the lesson?*

*Also, please connect the observation to your knowledge or experience. This is an important step in trying to create your own philosophy of teaching.*

### ***Feedback to Journal 4 – The student was able to see many more details while observing.***

*Your journal was thorough. Not only did you pick up on key interactions during class, but you also noticed how the teacher organized her files! The students you observed seemed to do an amazing job on their presentations.*

*I especially liked your suggestion about using realia in the activity. It is great when you can find images or examples that speak directly to YOUR students.*

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*Finally, you really came to understand the personality of the teacher. When you go and teach your own class, you will have to decide what your own teaching personality is and what atmosphere you want to create! Well done.*

### **PEER RESPONSES**

Peer responses are another way of helping students connect theory and practice. They have the added advantage of allowing students to read about various classrooms and lessons and reflect on the concepts collectively. In a low-tech environment, students might follow this process: 1) pass their observation notes to a peer for comments, 2) have the peer pass it to the teacher-trainer for comments, and 3) read feedback from both peer and teacher. In a high-tech environment, students can post responses on a classroom discussion board directly under the original post. In my experience, I found that it was necessary to pair students for peer responses in order to ensure that all students received at least one response.

Since all students in the course are developing their skills and sharing their experiences, peer-to-peer responses should be supportive. (When I noticed that a student was commenting on, for example, how a peer failed to use parts of the Observation Template rather than commenting on the content of the lessons they observed, I quietly and privately reminded that student of the supportive nature of this activity.) In addition to commenting about the overall lesson, peers can practice connecting the lesson back to the course theory, brainstorming alternative practices, and connecting the lesson to their own experiences as a language learner.

### **CONCLUSION**

Pre-service teachers are eager to get into the classroom and are usually impressed with the often seamless lessons taught by more-experienced teachers. However, watching experienced teachers can also be overwhelming for pre-service teachers who are just beginning to develop their skills. By using this Guided Observation Model, pre-service teachers can begin to break down the tools and techniques used by experienced teachers into the theory and practice they are discussing in their methodology course. Additionally, they are able to think of alternative methods of carrying out activities, giving them confidence that they, too, are on their way to becoming strong language teachers.

### **REFERENCE**

Celce-Murcia, M., D. M. Brinton, and M. A. Snow, eds. 2014. *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. 4th ed. Boston: National Geographic Learning.

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