



an **elt**knowledge download

[www.eltknowledge.com](http://www.eltknowledge.com)



Pavilion Publishing and Media, Rayford House, School Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 5HX  
t: 0844 880 5061; e [info@eltknowledge.com](mailto:info@eltknowledge.com)

© Pavilion Publishing and Media Ltd 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher



# Eye on the classroom

A regular new series by **John Hughes**, with practical ideas for observing teachers in the classroom and an observation sheet to photocopy and use straight away.

## 1 Peer observation

Many language schools and their teachers would welcome more time for development and support. Teachers want new ideas, new ways of doing something or to reassure themselves that the old ways also still work really well. Typically, the school can offer training sessions with talks and workshops, but these take time and involve everyone coming together at the same time on the same day.

One form of training and development which bypasses these problems is peer observation. In its simplest form, two teachers team up and observe each other teaching. Their reasons for observing each other in the classroom will include:

### ● **Sharing ideas**

One of the best ways to get new ideas is to observe another teacher. Usually this is because you see an activity being used that you've never done before. Observing another teacher at work can also help you to consider fresh alternatives and new ways of doing things.

### ● **Promoting team spirit**

Many teachers feel isolated by working alone, but peer observation lets you work with others and helps you feel more like part of a team.

### ● **Developing skills**

Being an observer affords you time to consider problem areas of your teaching and gives you the chance to see how others might handle similar difficulties in the classroom.

### ● **Seeing students differently**

Observing lessons is as much about observing students as the teacher. Being freed up from the teaching role allows you to see students from another perspective.

## Questions and answers

Peer observation takes very little organisation and doesn't require hours of teachers' meetings. Surprisingly then, an amazing number of teachers don't take the opportunity to tap into this resource. Perhaps this is because of a list of

unanswered questions and concerns they have about observing other teachers. Here are some of those questions with, I hope, satisfactory answers.

### ● **What do I actually observe for?**

In general, observing a lesson isn't very helpful if the observer walks in with a pen and blank sheet of paper and takes notes on everything they notice. It's better to have a clear focus, which is why using a form like the one on page 9 is helpful. It guides your thinking and tries to limit your focus.

### ● **Do I talk to the teacher about the lesson beforehand?**

Not necessarily. It's helpful to know about the class and what the teacher has been doing with them in previous lessons, but it's sometimes better to reduce the need for lots of meetings and planning and just go in and sit at the back.

### ● **Do I talk to the teacher about the lesson afterwards?**

This is more likely than talking beforehand. In fact, sentence 5 on the form on page 9 encourages you to formulate a question for the teacher. How much you talk will depend on your situation, but keep it informal at first. Perhaps pick a time to go out for a coffee away from the school for your conversation. Even if you agree to have very little discussion after the lesson, you need to thank the teacher for letting you into the lesson and maybe photocopy your observation form for them to read.

### ● **What's my relationship with the students in the lesson?**

Even though you might be sitting quietly at the back of the classroom, it's no good assuming that the students will pretend you aren't there. You may even know some of the students, so say hello. The teacher needs to tell the students, preferably in the lesson beforehand, that there will be a visitor in the next lesson. They need to know that they are not being assessed (which is often a reaction) and that their teacher is not being assessed either (another common reaction).

### ● **Should I observe the whole lesson?**

It may not be practical (or advisable) to observe the entire lesson. It's useful to be able to see a whole cycle of work completed and often about 45 minutes to an hour is about right. If you are observing part of a lesson, discuss with the teacher the most unobtrusive moment to arrive and leave. For example, arriving during a boardwork presentation with all the students concentrating on the teacher is not a good moment. Leaving while students are all busy talking in pairs and groups is.

## Peer observation form

The form on the next page is easy to follow even if this is your first time observing a lesson. You simply react to the lesson by completing the five sentences. In this way, you are encouraged to think about what to look out for without the form being too prescriptive. It doesn't take too long to complete so you won't be spending more time note-taking during your observation than you are actually observing. In fact, you might find that you complete some of the sentences once the lesson has ended. The form is also designed to generate discussion with the observed teacher afterwards if you have time. You could talk through each of your sentences together and discuss your observations.

### Look out for the following amongst the topics in later articles in this series:

- establishing protocols between staff when observing
- personalised observation forms
- handling stress when being observed
- language for post-observation discussion



**John Hughes is a freelance teacher, trainer and author. He has worked in Austria, Poland, Italy and the UK.**

jnhghs@msn.com

