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Eye on the classroom

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

3 Observation by checklist

● Fulfilling criteria

Anyone who has taken a formal teaching qualification with assessed teaching practice will recall the stress of having an assessor at the back of the class, ticking and scoring a set of criteria. Alternatively, you might have had visits from your director of studies to check up on how your lessons are going. They will probably have had a form with a set of criteria that might have looked something like this:

(1 = excellent, 2 = good, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = not satisfactory)

The lesson ... Score

had clear aims and objectives. _____

had clear sub-aims. _____

had a variety of relevant activities. _____

had logical staging and progression. _____

fitted into the context of others lessons (before/after). _____

The teacher ...

achieved their stated aims. _____

was well prepared for the lesson. _____

used clear boardwork. _____

had a good rapport with the students. _____

dealt with errors appropriately. _____

managed the class effectively. _____

responded to individual needs. _____

used a variety of interaction patterns. _____

The danger with such forms is that this kind of 'observation by checklist' presents teachers with a set of hoops through which to jump; you're teaching to suit the score sheet rather than teaching the students. It's even possible to be able to leave a training course or a classroom with the feeling that you can 'do' all these things on the checklist and yet you still have a long way to go – teaching is so much more complex than our assessment forms might suggest.

Observation for assessment and development

Having said all that, observation for assessment can be beneficial when used alongside other criteria for measuring the success of a whole school. (For example, British Council validation includes many other forms of assessment when it assesses schools – not just teacher assessment.) Similarly, the teacher trainer or director of studies using a score sheet type form can also make the process developmental as well as an assessment.

● Less is more

First of all, it's important to consider how the form is designed and used. One tip is to keep this kind of observation form to a page, if possible, and certainly not more than two pages at most. One reason is that an observer will find it hard to observe whilst at the same time trying to find the relevant criteria on pages 3, 4 or 5! Then, when you come to give feedback, the process will become bogged down in paperwork and a system of scoring which can often fail to reach the heart of what really mattered in the lesson.

● Transparency

There's also the issue of whether teachers see the criteria by which they are measured. Even if they are allowed to see the form before teaching (which you would hope they would do), it might not be transparent. It is worth having a meeting with a teacher or group of teachers to study the form and discuss exactly what each criterion really means. This allows time for everyone to agree on what is meant by, for

example, *effective classroom management*. This process of pre-observation discussion also helps to demystify observation for assessment and gives a sense of teacher and observer working together.

An observation checklist

However, checklist observations don't have to be purely evaluative. They can also be highly developmental. For even greater joint-ownership in the process, you can use them for peer observation. There is an example form on page 51 which you can copy and use with another teacher. It bases the observation on five criteria.

Agreeing the criteria

The observer and teacher meet before the lesson, discuss what the five criteria will be and write them on the form. If the observer is experienced or has observed the teacher before, then some criteria should be at the prompting of the observer. However, the teacher should also think about areas they wish to work on or focus on with a particular class or type of lesson. Here is an example of five criteria developed by a teacher and observer before a lesson. The teacher wants to focus on presenting a new grammar item:

Agreed criteria

- 1 *The teacher engages the students with an interesting lead-in.*
- 2 *The teacher elicits the target language point from the lead-in task.*
- 3 *The teacher uses concept questions effectively to check understanding.*
- 4 *The teacher provides a variety of relevant practice activities after the clarification stage.*
- 5 *The teacher uses clear instructions, which include demonstrating a task as well as explaining it.*

This example shows how this kind of observation can work at a very detailed step-by-step level, as well as taking a broader, global view of the lesson.

Criteria can also be very personal to the individual lesson. Imagine, for example, that a teacher wonders if they are responding fully to all the students. Perhaps there are two students who are always sidelined by more demanding members of the class. In this case one of the criteria could read, *The teacher responds to individual needs with particular attention paid to Raul and Sonia.*

Defining your scores

Once the criteria have been defined on the form, the system of scoring can also be defined. In the section entitled *Definition of scores*, the observer and teacher decide on what 1 to 4 mean and write this in. They might decide that a standard system such as 1 = excellent, 2 = good, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = not satisfactory is fine. However, you can also define scores with a description like this:

- 1 = *You did this really well and there's nothing to worry about.*
- 2 = *This was fairly good, but let's keep working on it.*
- 3 = *This was OK, but let's keep this criterion for the next observation.*
- 4 = *Let's do some work on this outside of the lesson.*

With the criteria and scoring system agreed and written on the form, the teacher and observer are ready for the class. The observer scores the criteria and also makes comments at the bottom of the page, which should give further details on the reasons for the scores.

After the observation

After the lesson, teacher and observer meet to discuss the criteria. (Teachers

could also score themselves before such a meeting, based on what they thought of the lesson.) At the end of the feedback session, they draw up another set of criteria for the next observation using a similar form. If the teacher has scored 1 (high) then they can probably leave out this criterion and put in a new one. Any criteria that scored 3 or 4 (low) probably need to remain on the next form. In this way, the teacher sees a clear progression from one observation to the next and the checklist approach becomes a motivating developmental tool, instead of an ordeal by assessment.



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Observation checklist

Teacher: _____ Date/time of lesson: _____

Observer: _____ Details of class: _____

Agreed criteria:

Score

1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
4	_____	_____
5	_____	_____

Definition of scores:

- 1 = _____
- 2 = _____
- 3 = _____
- 4 = _____

Comments and explanation of scores for criteria 1-5:
