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t: 0844 880 5061; e [info@eltknowledge.com](mailto:info@eltknowledge.com)

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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.

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## Post-observation feedback

So far, this series of articles has been about why and how we can observe the classroom, with suggestions for ways to vary the observation process. However, in most contexts, giving feedback *after* the observation is an integral part of the process and needs careful consideration.

### Watch what you say

For many observations, feedback afterwards is not necessarily planned. For example, a trainee teacher may be asked to observe a lesson and have little or no further contact with the more experienced teacher. However, few observations occur where there is not some kind of feedback. Firstly, your body language during a lesson might indicate some kind of response to the lesson which can be interpreted (rightly or wrongly) by the teacher in a certain way. This is one reason why the best type of observer is the one you don't notice!

Then, after the lesson, the observer and the teacher will inevitably meet and the observer might say something like, 'Thanks for letting me observe, I really enjoyed your lesson.' This in itself is feedback. We can take this a step further with the observer then asking a question such as, 'Can I ask you why you chose to end that activity early?' A question like this, informally asked, can carry all sorts of meaning. From a trainee teacher, it means that they want to learn about the timing and pacing of an activity. From a teacher trainer to a less experienced teacher, it is asked to encourage the teacher to reflect on what happened in the lesson and perhaps look into how the lesson could be improved in some way. The point is that even a single comment or question at the end of a lesson constitutes feedback. If it is casually said as everyone is leaving, the teacher who was observed may be left with the feeling of things *unsaid* and this can be unsettling. For this reason, when observations are arranged, my advice is to make it 100 per cent clear whether any kind of feedback will take place or not and how it will be organised.

### Measure the time scale

Whether feedback follows on straight after the lesson or perhaps some time later will depend on a number of issues. It may be that the practicalities of timetabling may dictate when it happens. If a teacher is going to teach and be observed again the next day (for example on a training course), then feedback will need to happen immediately afterwards, and many teachers also prefer this: while the lesson is fresh in their minds. However, there is much to be said for allowing a little time between the lesson and the feedback. It is easy for the observer, who has been sitting still and making notes, to be ready to start feedback, but the teacher has been hard at work for the whole lesson and may need time for a break and then time to reflect and gather their thoughts. Even if the feedback has to start straight away, it's worth allowing ten minutes for the teacher to take time out and think about the lesson. One way to facilitate this is for the teacher to consider and make notes on a form similar to one shown on page 61. (Note that this one was designed for inexperienced teachers on a pre-service training course, so you may want to adapt it accordingly.)

### Watch how you say it

We began this article by seeing how even the most basic comment on a lesson constitutes feedback. Between two peers or colleagues observing each other, the language will tend to be a discussion between equals. However, if you are an observer helping and developing the skills of a less experienced teacher, then you will need to consider carefully the language you use. Just as we pitch our language at different levels to students of English, so, too, an observer needs to pitch the language of feedback at a level appropriate to the observed teacher's stage of development. Below are three things an observer might say in order to get a trainee to realise that there were problems with boardwork in the lesson and to find ways to improve it.

- 1 *There's a problem with your boardwork. It's very confusing for the students. Here's a way to organise it ...*
- 2 *Let's take a look at your boardwork. How could you improve it?*
- 3 *Tell me what you think about the lesson. What would you change next time?*

In comment 1, the observed teacher is inexperienced and possibly teaching for only the first or second time. The observer's role at this stage is to inform and take a 'one-way-works' strategy; in other words, there may be different ways in which to approach the problem, but at this stage of the training the new teacher can often only cope with the idea that there is one solution to apply to a similar situation next time.

In comment 2, the observer starts to draw on the trainee's prior knowledge and experience in order to lead them to a solution. The observer still needs to make the teacher aware of a problem, but rather than give the 'correct' answer or solution, the aim is elicit a similar solution or strategy from the trainee.

In 3, the comment is aimed at a much more experienced teacher. The observer assumes the teacher has greater self-awareness and is capable of reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses.

### Vary your routines

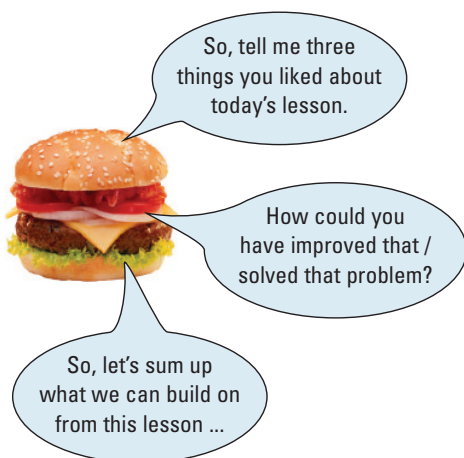
Finally, it's worth considering how to alter the *system* of feedback if you are the observer and in charge of leading the feedback session, especially if there are a group of you involved in feedback. Here are some ways to vary the process. You may simply choose to use them to add variety, but you'll also find that some work better than others according to the situation.

#### ● Chronological feedback

One of the easiest ways to begin feedback is to talk through the lesson in the order things happened. This helps the teacher refer to the lesson plan and assess how well it worked.

### ● Sandwich feedback

Quite simply, the idea of sandwich feedback is to begin with the strengths of the lesson, move on to talk about problem areas and possible solutions or points to focus on next time, and end with a summing up, which again should accentuate the positive. This suggests that the trainer may be doing much of the talking, but in fact much of the reflection and feedback can come through astute questioning.



### ● Mini-presentations

The observer begins the session by drawing two columns on the board, one with a plus and one a minus sign. The observee or observees are then asked to write things up that went well and things that didn't. For example:

+	-
- good boardwork	- didn't have time for the group activity
- The students used the language.	- couldn't answer a grammar question
- I enjoyed it for the first time!	- felt uncomfortable about when to correct
- They had a good time.	

Writing on the board like this works well with more than one teacher as it brings together feedback for the whole lesson without singling out an individual. Then the teachers involved begin feedback with a short mini-presentation of the points, which leads into a discussion of any issues raised.

### ● Read and think

Observers often give written feedback – and possibly evaluative grades – after oral feedback, but it can be helpful for the observee to read and consider this feedback before opening it up for discussion.

### ● Grade yourself

If the observation has involved assessment criteria (see ETP Issue 59), it can be helpful to give the observee the assessment criteria after the lesson and allow them some time to grade their own performance. Then compare their assessment with your own. This forms a useful basis for discussion and allows teachers to understand fully *how* they are being assessed.



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

jnhghs@msn.com

## How did my lesson go?

Now that the lesson is over I feel ...

I was surprised by ...

I feel pleased about ...

I don't feel so pleased about ...

If I were approaching this lesson again, I would ...

One question I have about the lesson for the observer is ...