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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.

6 Writing down your observations

In the previous article in this series, we looked at ways of giving verbal feedback. Giving written feedback follows many of the same guidelines, but it does also present an observer with some particular issues.

Written summaries of feedback are a requirement on many formal training courses and may appear in any log the trainee produces of their teaching practice. Written feedback should also provide the trainee with a useful reference point for any future lessons. During oral feedback, a trainee can't necessarily take in all the ideas and information that come up, so, as a minimum, the written feedback needs to be a summary of the key points.

Even if we are observing a peer, we tend to write down our observations while we observe a lesson. These notes are helpful to refer to and provide a useful focal point during verbal feedback. The form on the facing page is typical of the type of observation form that might be used. You follow the class chronologically and make notes on strengths and points to consider. Note that the 'Points to consider' column is often mistakenly interpreted as a euphemism for 'Things that went wrong'. It is certainly true that you use this column to comment on weaknesses, but it is also for questions to discuss afterwards or issues that came up to which there may not be an obvious answer.

Unlike some other observation forms from this series of articles, this form is quite open and allows the observer to write on any issue in the lesson. This has the advantage of flexibility, but it can encourage comments to be unfocused. In other words, the observer needs to write so that both the observer and the observee can follow the notes and comments.

Here are some general guidelines and ideas for written feedback:

Congratulate the teacher

With less experienced teachers, who are possible wracked by nerves, begin your feedback with phrases like *Well done*, *Great job*, *Good start*. At the same time, pinpoint the reasons for the success. For example:

It was a nice warmer to get the students interested.

You have a good welcoming manner with the arriving students.

You showed interest by asking the students about their weekend.

Reflect oral feedback

Don't include too many points that you don't intend to cover during your oral feedback as this can cause unnecessary anxiety or confusion.

Develop a visual code

Sometimes written feedback does not make it clear to a trainee what is being implied. For example, a comment might be a compliment, a requirement for the trainee to do something different or even simply a question, a point to consider. Some trainers use a visual code to clarify their meaning. Here are three examples:

! *Two students are still talking to each other while you are explaining the next task.*

? *What would have happened if you'd let students compare their answers first?*

☺ *Students are quietly working through the questions and you are monitoring.*

The trainer's visual code allows a simple description of what is happening, and encourages the trainee to reflect on this in a certain way. The exclamation mark symbol (!) tells the teacher something needs attention or needs to be changed. The question mark (?) indicates something to think about or a possible alternative – not that something is wrong or right. The smiley symbol (☺) says that this is what was happening in the lesson and that was a good thing – the teacher is doing well.

Include sketches and diagrams

Writing down your observations and feedback doesn't mean you can't also add sketches and drawings of what was happening in the classroom. This often illustrates an issue more quickly than trying to describe it.

Say how as well as why

It is easy to describe what was happening in a lesson and write down what the success or problem was but, where possible, suggest a strategy for how to build on success or solve a problem. For example, consider this example of written feedback from a training course for a new teacher.

Time	Stages of the lesson/Strengths	Points to consider
12.20	Nice idea for a roleplay	Be careful with your instructions at this point. It isn't clear what you want your students to do.

The feedback highlights a problem at a certain point in the lesson, but it does not offer a solution. It may be that a solution can be brainstormed or discussed in oral feedback, but we need to be sure that the teacher is also provided with a strategy in the written feedback to help resolve the issue. The observer could add comments like: *When you plan your lesson next time, rehearse your instructions with your peers beforehand. Record your lesson next time and listen to your instructions. Re-plan these instructions after the lesson to make them clearer.*

Summing up

At the end of the feedback, there need to be clear guidelines about areas to work on or develop and the list should be realistic (eg not too many areas – one is often enough for new teachers, two to three for the more experienced). Also mention in the same list any successes from the lesson which you want the teacher to continue using, building on and developing.



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. One of his current projects is developing online teacher trainer courses for Cactus TEFL. Find out more at www.cactustefl.com/ela-online-course.

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Writing down your observations

Teacher:

Date:

Observer:

Class:

Time	Stages of the lesson / Strengths	Points to consider