

Teaching Notes

Top 10 Things to Observe When Observing a Language Class *Laura Holland, University of Oregon*

In the program where I teach, instructors and student teachers spend a lot of time observing other teacher's classes. Below is one model for taking notes that can help guide the observation process and supply excellent material for a productive post observation conversation between visiting and visited teachers.

Part A: To be completed during the observation

Before printing out for use, add spaces to each question on this sheet to leave room for your notes. Note: this guide can be sent to the visited teacher before the observation so s/he knows what to expect.

The visited teacher can also ask the observing teacher to watch for particular areas for specific feedback on those questions, for example, "Please note how I am giving instructions. I feel like my students are always confused and I have to give them many times." The visiting teacher will then note what the teacher says and does while giving instructions, and after the class, discuss together what they both saw.

Make some "Facts-only" notes on each of the points below. "Facts-only" means not inserting your own judgments. Write what the teacher says and does and what the students say and do and what the lesson entails and the time the activities occurred. Avoid adjectives and be wary of adverbs as those

words are too open to interpretation, and try to use dynamic verbs.

1. What is the teacher doing during the 5 minutes before class starts? What are students doing? Are there any students (Ss) who are speaking in the target language together before class begins?

2. How does the teacher (T) begin class? What words (and gestures, etc.) does s/he use? Does the T state any expectations about class behavior (ex. putting cell phones away or speaking in English)?

3. What is the focus of the lesson? (There may be more than 1). Note each phase/step of the activities and what time they start and stop. Use time markers at the start of each new activity or step. Note if the T gave a rationale for any of the activities.

4. What different ways does the T pose questions to the students and what is their manner of responding? (calling on individual Ss, T poses question to all students and the Ss call out the answers, Ss raise hands, student volunteers, T calls on individual student, Think-Pair-Share, etc.)

5. How does the T group the Ss? If so, how? (how many Ss in a group? Does T count off, group by seat location, have groups premade before class, etc.)? Does T change groups during lesson observed? How? Note if the

teacher did not use any groups.

6. Note the kinds of feedback the teacher is giving to students, both formative and summative, if applicable.

7. What does the T do/say to deal with any problems that come up during class? Briefly describe what is said and done.

8. Draw where the T and Ss are during class time. Make as many drawings as necessary for different activities.

9. How are the last 5 minutes of class used? How does the T end the class? (What words are used?)

10. Note any other areas of interest from this observation.

Part B: Fill this part out after the observation is over, preferably within a day or two of the observation or together with the teacher you observed as part of your post observation discussion.

Go back through numbers 1-10 and come up with other possibilities the teacher might have used in this case. Keep in mind this is *not* a critique or criticism of what the teacher did, but simply a way to broaden our teaching toolboxes so that we explore the many alternate options to achieve our teaching objectives. Phrase your alternatives so that they reflect that mindset. For example, here are notes from an actual observation:

The teacher gives brief mini grammar lesson on using –s to create general statements using count nouns (She likes movies; he likes dogs). This is followed up with paired practice where Ss create new sentences of their own practicing this form. T walks around room and checks answers.

Alternative 1: Teacher posts several examples on the board using the rule. T asks students to discuss with their partners, and 1) notice the pattern and 2) decide what they think the rule is and present to class.

Alternative 2: After explaining the rule and giving examples, the T gives Ss 1 minute to come up with as many examples of their own within the time limit. Ss share their lists. The pair with the greatest number of correct examples wins.

Alternative 3: Students work alone to create as many example sentences as possible in the time frame. They get up and walk around the room sharing them and comparing how many they have in common with each other.

Alternative 4: Same as #3 but Ss post them on newsprint or the board and walk around and compare in pairs.

Part C: Fill this part out after the observation is over, preferably within a day or two of the observation or together with the teacher you observed as part of your post observation discussion.

Looking at your alternatives for Part B, now jot down or discuss some advantages and disadvantages for the various practices and activities you have noted. This is a time you might think about different learning styles, working in pairs/groups vs. alone, the focus of the course (Grammar/Writing vs. Oral Communication Skills for example), what level/age students are involved, Second Language or Foreign Language teaching context, physical space, and so on. For example:

The students walked around the room asking each other questions about personal likes and dislikes, for example, “Do

you like basketball? What kind of music do you like?" This works better if you have the space to move around and fewer than 30 students, so the teacher can monitor. A disadvantage is if you have chairs that don't move and no space to walk around. An alternative in that case might be to group students in 4s, 2 in the upper row and 2 in the row below to form a square. Students can share with each other in that way. Notes can also be passed down the rows to check in with other students.

Copies of these notes are shared in a post-observation discussion, or via email if that is preferable, between both observed and observing teacher and kept for their records. Noting as much dialogue as possible during the observation enables the visiting teacher to "hold up a mirror" on the teaching choices and behaviors being observed and allows the visited teacher to see her/his class in a way not always possible on our own.

Limiting our notes to "facts only" allows us to employ what John F. Fanselow (Fanselow, 1992) calls "a more common language" for visiting and visited teachers. This allows us to avoid language that is ambiguous or open to interpretation. It also encourages us to set aside our preconceived ideas and judgments of what "best practices" are and gives us the opportunity to explore together, both observing and observed teacher,

the many possibilities available for the context observed and the material presented.

Filming and transcribing portions of a class is, of course, always an excellent tool, but may not be a feasible option as it can change the dynamic of the class observed and appear more intrusive on the part of the observer. FERPA regulations may also prohibit such filming without extensive preparation to get necessary signatures, approval and ability for students to "opt out," so sketching and note-taking are often the best option.

Reference

Fanselow, J. F. (1992). *Contrasting conversations: Exploring our beliefs and teaching practices*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

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