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Educator Monthly

EF'S NEWSLETTER FOR TEACHERS



Issue 2

Welcome to EF's newsletter for teachers around the globe!

In this issue, we take an in-depth look at the complex topic of teaching observations. Ken Lackman, Academic Director at EF's International Language School in Toronto, shares his experience and explores innovative ways to improve this critical component of professional development. We hope you find useful ideas for your own practice.



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Do you dislike being observed?

I was one of those teachers who always hated being observed. Now that I am a Director of Studies and an observer I realize that there are many teachers who dislike observations and are often reluctant to admit it as they are always being told that observations are in their best interest. We try to convince teachers that as much as they may seem otherwise, observations are not inspections. The observer's main task is to help them improve as teachers and for that, they should be thankful. And if they accept that the observer is there to help them improve, they certainly cannot be blind to the fact that observers are not driven by altruism but the need to maintain and improve the quality of instruction at the institutions that employ them. The inescapable fact is that observations are usually done for two reasons, quality control and teacher development, but trying to effectively achieve both these aims in the same lesson is pointless.

Pre-Arranged Observations

Observations where the specific lesson to be observed is negotiated between teacher and observer involve the teachers' participation in the process and thus are more likely to be construed as cooperative, furthering the notion that the observation may be about teacher development. However, even if the observer promises that a written report will not be filed, the teacher will have difficulty not seeing the observer as a superior who is there to evaluate them as teachers. After all, even if the sole stated purpose is teacher development, the observer will have to evaluate the lesson in order to discuss it. And most relatively inexperienced teachers will have problems ignoring the possibility that a bad performance may warrant them being given the status of questionable instructors, even if it is only in the observers mind. Consequently, teachers will usually try to present the best lesson they can, preparation time will far exceed what occurs before a normal lesson and areas where the teacher may have difficulty (i.e., explaining grammar) will be avoided.

It makes sense that the optimum lesson for teacher evaluation is a lesson that is as close to a perceived notion of perfection as possible. If this can be achieved then the observer and the school will be delighted to have in their employ such a superb instructor, and that teacher may enjoy favourable status at that institution. The teacher, of course, should be ecstatic and could benefit professionally and personally from the vote of confidence from the observer.

The dilemma is that for teacher development the most desirable outcome is that the teacher presents his/her worst possible lesson. Rather than avoiding all the things he/she doesn't do well, all of them should be included in one lesson. This is the optimum for teacher development as



it gives the observer and teacher a chance to address the teacher's weaknesses and discuss strategies for improvement.

Obviously, an average lesson would feature neither all the strengths nor all the weaknesses of any teacher. An average lesson would be the best to observe because it should be a more balanced display of strengths and weaknesses and it would be most representative of what actually occurs daily in the classroom. However, as long as the notion remains that the teacher is going to be evaluated by the observer, it is unlikely that a pre-arranged observation would present the observer with anything other than that "special" lesson created just for his/her presence.

Unannounced Observations

Having an observer "drop in" to a class without prior notice has a distinct advantage as he/she would be in a position to observe what would likely be a teacher's typical lesson. Since very few teachers spend as much time planning lessons as they did on their training courses or for pre-arranged observations, the unannounced observation can help the teacher improve aspects of their lesson relative to the amount of time that realistically was (or should have been) spent on planning it. This is taking for granted the observer is realistic about how much time teachers can spend planning. Also, in day-to-day teaching, less planning means more reliance on in-class performance and the unannounced observation allows the observer to help the teacher focus on their in-class teaching techniques. For example, teachers who have trouble giving clear instructions can write them out beforehand but this is only a short-term solution as the ideal remedy is awareness of some

basic steps and techniques to implement when actually delivering instructions.

The huge disadvantage of unannounced observations is that they are by far the most intimidating. Although the observer may maintain otherwise, it is very hard for a teacher to regard a surprise visit by their supervisor as something other than an inspection. Not only is this likely to adversely affect many teachers, it is also likely to intimidate the students. Students in observed lessons often feel like they are the ones being observed and this will definitely impede their classroom performance. How many times has a teacher said after an observation, “I don’t know what was wrong with my students today. They are usually much more cooperative.”

Another issue with unannounced observations is the detrimental effect they may have on overall teacher morale. I remember the shock waves that went through a school where I worked after the first (and last!) round of unannounced observations, particularly when it leaked out that the Director of Studies had “caught” his assistant without even a shred of a written lesson plan.



Team-Teaching

Observations I believe that an ideal way to focus on teacher development rather than teacher evaluation is what I call the team-teaching observation. This idea came to me when I realized how unfair and unproductive it was to rip apart a teacher’s lesson plan AFTER they had taught the lesson. The observer is going to critique the lesson plan anyway, why not do it BEFORE the lesson is taught? It’s stressful enough having an observer glaring at you and furiously scribbling notes during the lesson, why be teaching from an inadequate lesson plan?

This brings me to the first type of teamteaching observation.

The Team-Planning Lesson

For this type of observation, the observer has input into the quality of the plan before the teacher teaches the lesson. Basically, it just requires that the teacher allows the observer to critique the plan beforehand and improvements that come to it either indirectly or directly from the observer can be implemented so that the teacher can at least feel like they are walking into the lesson with a quality plan. And an

added benefit of having a “pre-approved” plan is that if it has any flaws the teacher knows that the observer will have to accept some responsibility for them. This takes a huge load off the teacher. I’m sure all of us who have taught know that sinking feeling of being observed in the middle of a classroom activity which is obviously not working. Knowing that the observer will acknowledge responsibility for it should greatly lessen the teacher’s anxiety during that activity, which will more likely lead to the teacher being level headed enough to make an adequate on-the-spot adjustment.

However, a true team-planning approach has the observer and the teacher actually planning the whole lesson together. Although the observer is going to get less of an idea of the teacher’s lesson-planning capability, there is more opportunity for the observer to get involved in the basic structuring of the lesson. For example, if a teacher provides the observer with a completed plan written in PPP format (Presentation, Practice and Production stages), the observer will probably only try to improve the existing stages. Starting from scratch allows the observer to suggest other ways of structuring the lesson. This is particularly useful for teachers who get into one teaching mode and never leave it and a good observer will know that the best methodological approach depends on the learners and the material being taught. During team-planning sessions, observers should use the same approach with the teacher as they would with a student, trying to guide the teachers to ideas rather than just supplying them. However, as with teaching students, sometimes you have to know when to give up guiding and eliciting and simply tell them your idea.

Teachers who I have planned lessons with have said that they found the brainstorming that we did invaluable. We often come up with original and sometimes innovative ideas. And as suggested before, if anything didn’t work, it was a relief for the teacher when I acknowledged responsibility for either suggesting or agreeing to the idea.

Team-Teaching Lessons

The ultimate team-teaching lesson is one where the observer and teacher share not only the planning but also the actual teaching. The way I have always done this is to take the finished lesson plan and divide it up so that teacher and observer alternate teaching the stages in the lesson. This gives the two participants the opportunity to view the other’s style and techniques in the classroom. If the observer can accept the fact that he/she is not perfect then not only will he/she benefit from having the teacher comment on his/her performance but the observer can use self-criticism to diffuse anxiety the teacher may have about their own performance. For example, because one of my weaknesses is giving clear instructions, I frequently begin feedback sessions with my teachers by saying something like, “I really blew the instructions for that first activity, you could see how some of the students were confused.” This will usually prompt some positive feedback from the teacher (i.e., “It wasn’t that bad.”) and then it will encourage some criticism of their own performance. In the way that it promotes self-criticism and takes the edge off receiving criticism, I believe that the team-teaching observation is vastly superior to the standard observation. Once during a team-teaching lesson the teacher and I realized that our lesson plan was only going to cover about 60 minutes of a 90-minute lesson. While the students were doing an exercise,

we conferred and were able to come up with some activities to occupy the students for the last 30 minutes.

Afterwards, in the feedback session, we laughed about it. If this had happened in a standard observation, it’s easy to imagine the anxiety the teacher would have felt, not only during the lesson but in the feedback session afterwards. Another advantage of the team-teaching observation is that it allows the teacher to use the observer as a model for some aspect of teaching that they are having trouble with. For example, I happen to be pretty good at presenting grammar, and I have been asked by teachers, especially inexperienced ones, to take the grammar presentation stage so they could see how I did it.

One of the most pleasing aspects of teamteaching observations is to watch the students’ reaction to it. Generally students love having a different face up at the front of the class and the switching of teachers after every stage is something they regard as exciting. It emphasizes that a stage change is going to happen and they know that not only will they get a different activity but a different personality to lead it. Also, without the fear that they or their teacher are being “inspected”, students are bound to be more participatory in the lesson. The bottom line is that rather than being intimidating, for students, the teacher and the observer, teamteaching observations are fun.

As a Director of Studies, my approach to observations is to get the evaluative observation over with at the beginning of the teacher’s employment. In trying to remove as much stress as possible, I tell teachers before the observed lesson that I will be filing a written report but that if they express that they are unhappy with the lesson during the feedback session, I will tear up the report and we can reschedule the observation. Once I have a written report filed that I and the teacher are satisfied with, I see no reason to add any others and from that time on observations are strictly about teacher development. I usually leave it up to the teacher which type of observation they prefer. And if a teacher requests a standard observation, I will certainly do it, but so far nobody has ever asked for one!

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