

# A Guide to Continuing Professional Development – Peer observations



## Peer observations

Observing and being observed can be a powerful learning tool for teachers. It helps teachers to learn from each other, to develop a more reflective approach to their teaching and to identify development goals. A positive attitude to peer observation and a shared sense of collaboration will enhance the satisfaction and performance of individual teachers and the team.

Peer observations often work best when there is a specific focus for observation identified by the teacher herself. This could be to investigate an area the teacher wishes to explore in more detail, or a problem the teacher wants to try to solve,

The process involves the following stages:

1. Pre-observation discussion of the lesson and focus of observation
2. The lesson
3. Post-observation reflection on the lesson, learning points and action plans

Peer observations may involve the teacher

- being observed
- observing others
- observing him/herself via filming or evidence collection
- team teaching (which involves switching the observer/observed role during a class or series of classes)
- a combination of all of these

The relationship between observee and observer should be collaborative and open, with both able to challenge the other in a positive spirit.

Peer observation may be organised by group, for example among a group of teachers working with the same level of students or with the same experience. Alternatively, a group of teachers may be working with different groups or content, but may benefit from the different perspectives each brings.

### Observation tasks and documentation

Observation tasks will involve the collection of evidence upon which to reflect afterwards. How this will be done needs to be agreed before the observation takes place. The task format will therefore vary according to the focus of the observation. For example, tasks may involve:

- recording instances of specific behaviour (e.g. students' use of L1, teacher's correction strategies, instruction-giving, teacher's response to inappropriate behaviour, teacher questions, student participation, etc )

- recording actual events compared with planning events (e.g. actual timing compared with planned timing, student responses/levels of engagement regarding different learning activities, use of resources, etc)

The type of documentation varies according to the focus of the observation. However, it is important that documentation is kept (see Wajnryb, R., *Classroom Observation Tasks*, CUP 1992 for a variety of observation tasks that can be used or adapted. A generic task sheet appears at the end of this document that may also be used for recording observations).

### Some types of peer observation

#### Pop-in

This is short (usually about 10–20 minutes). It can focus on a particular aspect of teaching or particular focus of enquiry related to a particular group of students. This type of observation is useful for looking at a particular stage of the lesson or particular lesson activity, for example:

- beginning of class routines
- the language-focus stage
- role play
- pronunciation work

#### Unobserved observations

With this format, the teacher meets with the observer and talks through what he/she plans to do in the lesson. Then he/she teaches the lesson without the observer being physically present and meets up with the observer soon (24–48 hours) after the lesson to discuss how it went. This is useful if the teacher is experimenting with methodologies, particular task types or resources, and is a good way of developing reflection skills (it also has advantages if peer observation is problematic). Student feedback on the approach/technique is useful to complement this type of observation. For example, it can be used when:

- experimenting with a new approach (e.g. community language learning, Dogme language teaching)
- experimenting with a particular resource (e.g. IWB, interactivate buttons, mini whiteboards, phonemic charts)
- experimenting with a technique (e.g. dictogloss, mutual dictation, student presentations)

## Series of observations

Here the observations take place over a series of lessons. This allows the teacher to incorporate approaches discussed in feedback into subsequent lessons, for example, and for this then to be discussed. Or it could be used to collect data for action or classroom research. For example it could be used for:

- monitoring student response to different activities (motivation, behaviour issues)
- exploring classroom management issues
- monitoring student performance (e.g. effects of task repetition, learning strategies, language)
- trying out different approaches (e.g. product v process approaches to teaching writing)

## Recorded observation (video or audio)

In this format the teacher (or a colleague) films or records all or part of the lesson. Later the teacher watches or listens to the recording either alone or with the colleague and reflects on the lesson.

This gives a teacher a chance to see herself from her students' perspective. This type of observation is good for a focus on, for example:

- paralinguistic features of communication /interaction
- class dynamics, student participation, teacher attention
- instruction-giving
- teacher talk (questioning, language grading, amount and purpose of teacher talk)
- response times allowed to students

## Team teaching

Here the observer/teacher relationship alternates at different stages of the lesson. This involves joint lesson planning and collaborative post-lesson reflection. Team teaching can be useful when two teachers have a similar area of interest and when teachers are interested in seeing how a colleague deals with certain lesson activities. This could be useful in, for example:

- comparing approaches to teaching songs, storytelling, practising language in the primary class
- approaches to dealing with reading and listening texts, language focus, error correction
- exploring different ways of exploiting resources, e.g. IWB

## Observation etiquette

Agreeing behaviour in advance can make observations more relaxed and constructive for both observer and teacher

### Observer:

- Respect the confidentiality of what you observe and discuss.
- Be on time for the lesson.
- Ask the teacher where s/he would like you to sit.
- Observe carefully and make notes: remember, you are eyes and ears.
- Remember the agreed focus of the observation. Make observations and notes relating to it so that both you and the teacher get the most out of this experience.
- Don't join in the lesson or ask the teacher or students questions during the lesson unless you have agreed this before the lesson with the teacher.
- Leave at the time you have agreed with the teacher.
- Don't forget to set up a time for discussion and reflection with the teacher.
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- Remember to record the observation.

### Teacher:

- Tell your students beforehand that your observer will be coming, and introduce him or her to your class.
- Be on time for the lesson.
- Think about where you want your observer to sit, and prepare a chair/table for him or her.
- Don't forget to set up a time for discussion and reflection with your observer.
- Remember to record the observation.

## Peer observation record

<b>Name of teacher:</b>	<b>Name of observer:</b>
<b>Focus of observation:</b>	<b>Date:</b>
	<b>Level:</b>
	<b>Number of students present:</b>

**Observation notes (observer):**

**Post-observation discussion and reflection (teacher):**

<b>Teacher:</b>	<b>Observer:</b>
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