

# How to be seen: Taking the stress out of classroom observations

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As Chief Instructor at my school, I spend a significant amount of my time engaged in class observation. I try to approach these observations in as sensitive and encouraging a manner as possible, but it is painful sometimes to watch a well-balanced individual, who under ordinary circumstances I am sure is a capable teacher, reduced before my eyes to a perspiring bundle of nerves. Critics say that observations are a waste of time, create an unnatural situation in the classroom, produce anxiety for the teacher, and never give a true picture of a teacher's effectiveness from one visit. While there may be some truth in these criticisms, the fact remains that on-the-job feedback is a fact of life in many professions and should generally be welcomed by teachers. During teacher training we accept observations as a crucial part of the process, and such feedback continues to be useful, if not essential once training has been completed.

It is also not beyond the bounds of possibility that for some job applications, prospective employers might wish to observe you teaching a sample class or ask for a video recording of your teaching. And once they have landed the job, most teachers recognize that, within certain bounds, employers have a right to "know what is going on" in the classroom and to effect some quality control.

If we agree that observations are a necessary evil along the road to teacher superstardom, what can we do to make them more palatable? The first thing is to recognize the principal errors made by instructors during observations. In my experience these are as follows:

- a. being under-prepared or, in some cases, hardly prepared at all.
- b. rushing through material in a mad dash to get to the end of the hour as soon as possible.
- c. nervously taking over the class, making it too teacher-centered.
- d. relying on the strongest student to answer every question.
- e. panicking when something goes wrong.
- f. being defensive and making excuses during feedback.

With some careful thought and preparation, these pitfalls can be avoided by following the advice below.

## 1 Be prepared

I am often amazed that potentially effective instructors sabotage their own lessons by convincing themselves that they can "wing" it on the day and no one will notice. If a teacher tries to fly by the seat of his pants it will soon become painfully obvious. So, like a good scout, "be

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prepared.” This will give you confidence, help you relax and achieve your goals. Not only that, it is a matter of professional pride on your part to demonstrate competence in the classroom environment.

Your lesson should have a shape. In other words, a clear beginning, middle, and finish. Depending on the type of lesson you are teaching, you should generally be moving from controlled to more open practice. Observers will make allowances for inexperience, but don't wander aimlessly from one activity to another. The instructor who does this has not taken the observation seriously and is proclaiming to all and sundry, “I don't know what I'm doing, or why I'm doing it.” Try to finish your lesson with a “bang” and have your students leave the classroom in an upbeat mood. Have a filler activity ready in the eventuality that you achieve your lesson objectives earlier than planned.

## **2 Nice 'n' easy does it**

When teaching the class, do not be in a hurry to rush full steam ahead with your lesson plan. Begin this class as you would any other, with perhaps some introductory chitchat with your students and an enjoyable warm up activity. Allow the lesson to breathe and, within reason, permit your students to dictate the pace of the activities. In an observation situation, teacher anxiety can easily take over and the instructor tends to run through material far too quickly. Do not try to cover too much. The most successful lessons that I have observed have been those in which the instructor has a clear and limited set of goals on which he or she concentrates.

## **3 What should I teach?**

When deciding what to teach, tackle something familiar that you have taught before. Now is not the time to experiment. Play to your strengths. Be yourself. Remind yourself what successful lessons you have taught in the past and use some of those techniques during your observation. Ask yourself: Will this be an interesting lesson to watch? Am I teaching relevant, real English? Your job here is not to entertain your observers, but if they are bored or uninterested, chances are that your students will be too. Know your class and do not have them work with material which is way above or below their level. Generally, the most successful lesson for both student and observer is one in which communication is optimized and students have plenty of opportunities to interact. Set up the activities then stand back and let the students work. Remember: “being observed” does not equal “teacher-centered.” Monitor discreetly and resist the temptation to take over.

## **4 Nerves**

Do not allow nerves to work against you. Rather, see your nervousness as a source of creative tension. Keep a sense of perspective. It is one hour of your life in a language class – you're not being interrogated on national TV. Visualize success. Remind yourself of all the “bang up” lessons you have taught previously and of the students who have thanked and complimented you.

Your observers have been in your shoes and recognize that classroom observations create an unnatural and stressful situation for the teacher. They are on your side and want you to succeed. Likewise, your students will be keen to perform to the best of their abilities in order to display their skills, support you in your hour of need, and confirm in their own minds what a gifted teacher they have. By all means inform your students that there will be guests in the class that day, but tell them it is you, not them, who is being watched. Don't emphasize to your class how anxious you are. It will only work against you by making them nervous themselves. If anything, underplay the observation to your students.

## **5 Offer an Outline**

Before the class, offer observers a brief typewritten outline of your lesson or even a copy of the lesson plan itself, as well as copies of the materials you will be using. This will show them that you are an instructor with goals who puts a good amount of thought into his lessons and is taking this observation with the seriousness it deserves. Provide some context, indicating how this lesson fits in with what the class has previously been covering.

## **6 What if it goes wrong?**

Language teaching is not an exact science. If problems and questions arise, deal with them as per usual, even if it is “Sorry, I can’t answer that question right now, but I’ll find the answer and get back to you in the next class.” Remember Murphy’s Law – “If something can go wrong, it will.” Well, never has it been displayed more readily than in the class observation. Should something go wrong, deal with it humorously and keep the lesson moving. And after what I have said about being prepared, the following may come as a surprising statement: Do not be a victim of over-preparation. You do not want to come across as stiff and inflexible. On numerous occasions I have been astonished to hear a teacher proclaim with great alacrity, “O.K. We’ve finished that. Now let’s do this!” I have heard it said that a lesson plan is something like a stair banister: you do not always use it, but it is nice to know it is there. If necessary, be prepared to deviate somewhat from your lesson plan if the situation calls for it, however do not abandon it unless there are compelling reasons to do so.

## **7 Feedback**

Generally, there will be a feedback session following the observation. During feedback, do not be defensive. A good observer will firstly ask you for your feelings about the lesson. Give as honest and objective an assessment of your performance as you can. Sincere self-evaluation will take the sting out of any negative comments your observer makes. Generally you will find that observers endeavor to provide honest, constructive feedback. Even if, inwardly, you are seized by a compulsion to hurl yourself under a passing juggernaut, thank your observer for his or her comments and assure them that you will consider them seriously. Do not make feeble excuses for anything that went wrong during the class. Rather, explain what you learned from your mistakes. Observers are impressed by teachers who can accept criticism professionally and objectively.

For even the most seasoned instructor, being observed can be a nerve-racking experience. But if you can put into practice some of the aforementioned pointers, chances are you will be better able to survive your next observation, improve your teaching and bask contentedly in the ultimate student accolade, “You are the best teacher I have ever had!” It is a rare instructor who has not learned something useful from classroom observation, so even if things don’t go quite as you had hoped, fear not. You will live to fight another day. Good luck!