

# A workshop<sup>1</sup> on the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ to observe an English lesson to bring about student learning

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## Introduction

Improving something as complex and culturally embedded as teaching requires the efforts of all players... But teachers must be the primary driving force behind change. They are best positioned to understand the problems that students face and to generate possible solutions.

Stigler & Hiebert (1999, p.135)

To bring about positive impact on learning and teaching, classroom-based practice with focus on student outcomes should be ongoing. Lesson observation can extensively be used as a means of evaluation as well as professional development. Through lesson observation, students can give feedback to teachers on how they are learning. On the other hand, teachers can diagnose learning and teaching difficulties.

Although lesson observation is an important component to understand how students are learning, the nature and use of observation have to be duly considered. 'What kind of classroom observation are we going to do?' 'How are we giving feedback to learning and teaching?' 'What can be done to improve?' These questions are always in the mind of teachers, panel heads, principals or even inspectors. It is understood that the classroom has been an enclosed area and was regarded as 'private' in the past, and even once a 'secret garden' in England. However, classroom observation is now becoming far more common than it used to be. Continual conversations of what and how to observe an English lesson have become regular routines in English panels. Teachers collaborate in setting objectives, planning the lesson, teaching, peer-observing, revising, reflecting and sharing are frequent exercises. Parents at times may be invited into schools to see how their children are learning in schools. Some schools have open-classroom when visitors can watch what is happening in lessons.

<sup>1</sup> The number of participants in this workshop is limited to 30, split into 5 to 6 groups.



Lesson observation can be described along a continuum from a focus on accountability-oriented evaluation at one end to a focus on teachers' professional development at the other. It ranges from appraisal, diagnosis, feedback, incentive to research. Observers with different intents take a different role when entering a classroom. For example, the role of the principals may vary with the panel heads or curriculum coordinators who have different perceptions of what to look for in a lesson.

### **What could be seen in an English class?**

Classroom observation is a professional development which has a positive impact on learning and teaching. The prime aims of walking into a classroom and looking into how students are learning may be ongoing, comprehensive, collaborative, teacher-driven, classroom-based, subject-matter focused, active and hands-on. It should be grounded on the professional knowledge on teaching, in return to a focus on student outcomes and problems encountered in the process of learning and teaching.

Classroom interaction, questioning techniques, feedback and follow up are vital elements in an English lesson. Classroom interaction in terms of teacher's explanation, elicitation techniques and instruction giving is important since it is genuinely communicative. Questions can have different purposes in an English lesson in socializing, setting the scene, scaffolding and checking learning. Wajnryb (1992) considers the following as the common types of utterances in classroom discourse:

- close-ended questions                      e.g. Is this a pen?
- retrieval questions                          e.g. What is it made of?
- open-ended questions                      e.g. What would happen to Goldilocks?
- display/rhetorical questions              e.g. Is this what you can do?
- referential questions                      e.g. Which class are you in?

The feedback given by teachers to students such as encouraging remarks and negotiation of meaning is crucial in terms of motivational value. However, it is worth noting the linguistic and cognitive aspects of the feedback which influences and relates to students' process of learning.



The table below shows the features to be observed in an English lesson in terms of classroom interaction, questioning techniques, feedback and follow up.

Aspect	Evidence
<b>Learning Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have teaching focus reflecting various dimensions of learning e.g. macro skills, vocabulary, grammar</li> <li>• consider pre-requisites of student learning aligned with substantial learning content</li> </ul>
<b>Classroom Interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• respond to teacher instruction and interact with teacher/peers</li> <li>• express appropriate expressions to maintain routines</li> <li>• clarify information and seek corrections</li> </ul>
<b>Learning Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• show confidence in using English</li> <li>• demonstrate sensitivity towards language use</li> </ul>
<b>Questioning Techniques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• show confidence in using English</li> <li>• demonstrate sensitivity towards language use</li> <li>• check understanding and tap knowledge related to students' daily experience</li> <li>• ask a variety of questions ranging from easy to difficult</li> <li>• give prompts and rephrase questions to help students think further</li> <li>• give appropriate wait time</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meet learning needs of students and cater for students' learning capability               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• equal opportunities for student participation, particularly giving the diffident and slower students a chance to contribute and time to answer questions, yet challenging the most able</li> <li>• make use of flexible grouping</li> </ul> </li> <li>• strike a balance between teacher-led and learner-centred instruction</li> <li>• link between different learning activities with clear and logical sequence</li> <li>• create setting to provoke a print-rich environment</li> <li>• use non-verbal communication skills or paralinguistic features</li> </ul>
<b>Feedback and Follow Up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• access students' understanding and find out how to move them on</li> <li>• recap learning content and revisit difficult area</li> </ul>

In this workshop, the focus of 'what and how' to look at classroom learning is developmental but not judgemental. Different features of a lesson – what to look for when observing an English lesson – will be discussed. These observable features provide a clear focus for observation but can only be used for certain aspects of a lesson. However, the difficulty lies in what can or cannot be observed and ultimately how to help students. As Richards (1994) suggests, the teacher may be struggling mentally to maintain the flow of the lesson and may have realised that the lesson is delivered in a non-productive way. These aspects of the lesson are not directly observable but could be clarified through conversation and discussion in order to understand the meaning of what you have observed.



## How to identify the learning needs of students?

The participating schools have captured a number of classroom video-clips. Lessons of different levels are captured and used in the workshop. Some snap shots are specifically chosen to be used for discussion on classroom interaction, questioning technique, negotiation of meaning and feedback. During collaborative lesson preparation, the snap shots are used to understand how and why students could do or could not do something. It is important for teachers to see the interconnectedness between what has been delivered and received by students inside classroom practices which are neither discrete nor isolated. Teachers have to articulate the connectedness of input-output to generate contextual knowledge. Moreover, teachers' struggles in the use of the first language and the error corrections in English lessons make significant impact on student learning. Sometimes, we tend to jump into giving advice too quickly. Instead of leading students to learn from their mistakes in the process, immediate 'feedback' in terms of corrections is always given to students. By and by, students lose their incentives or even ability to solve problems, the less able students in particular.

Teachers involved will share how they develop strategies to check learning. More importantly, the 'practice in surgery', that is, the follow-up work done to help students make improvements in English language learning will be displayed. The captured video-clips are not intended to be good practices but serve the purpose of helping teachers to identify the needs of students in regular teaching process. The post-lesson observation discussion on how students are learning is the key to nurture the curriculum leadership of the observers as well as the observees.

## What's next?

If lesson observation has been established as routines in school practices, it is worth analyzing the outcomes of observation properly. According to Wragg (1994), it might serve merely little purpose if, after a lesson, "observers simply exude goodwill, mumble vaguely or appear to be uncertain" (p.2) of what they have to tell the observees. The outcomes of observation and the approach to lesson analysis should be made from the careful scrutiny of classroom events, each explaining why it happens. For example, feedback from students is as important as teacher feedback to students. Skilfully handled classroom observation can maximise the benefit to both the observer and the



person observed, serving to inform and enhance the professional skill of both. On the other hand, inappropriate handling can make it become counter-productive, at its worst arousing hostility, resistance and suspicion. Some major principles in the conduct of post-observation discussions are as follows:

- give feedback as soon as possible after observation;
- choose a private and quiet environment to share the views with the teacher observed;
- include specific episodes or events that happened in the class to start the dialogue;
- let the teacher pick significant events in the lesson that demonstrated student learning or identified problems; and
- throw questions to guide the teacher through exploration of various possible ways to solve the identified learning problem.

In the process of discussion, the participants will act as 'information seekers' instead of evaluators. It hopes to serve two main purposes in knowing more about how students learn as well as giving feedback to teachers who have been observed. The English panel heads of the participating schools will be facilitators or participants in different groups. A variety of lesson observation forms will be distributed. The design of the forms and the data to be collected will affect how teachers interpret a lesson. The key to the professional dialogue is to focus on 'how students are learning'.

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## References

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