

Widening the scope of effective observation and feedback

Psyche Kennett

Abstract

This paper explores observation and feedback from a number of points of view. The author examines it as an individual developmental tool and describes the ‘sandwich’ feedback approach, exploring its benefits and highlighting the disadvantages of less constructive methods of feedback. She also looks at it as a tool to improve teacher education more generally. She asks, ‘Are there observable patterns of teaching and learning that can be used to improve teaching standards in schools and colleges and improve training courses and materials development?’ This paper then explores not just the different ways to observe but the different purposes for observing in the first place, including for needs analyses, research and monitoring and evaluation at cohort, programme or institutional level. She argues that it is important to categorise observation and feedback into qualitative and quantitative teaching skills, to find ways of ‘quantifying’ the qualitative, and ways of analysing the results. She demonstrates how to do this using interpersonal skills as one example and breaking this down into measurable components and the behaviours teachers should be striving for. She argues that by giving teachers these detailed criteria we are giving them a structured set of options for their professional improvement. We are also ensuring that observers assess teachers in a transparent and evidence-based way. These criteria not only make qualitative judgements more objective; they create a means of quantifying the qualitative. She illustrates her paper with a concrete example of how this was done in a previous teacher education project.

Observation and Feedback – A reflection

For many teachers, observation and feedback from a colleague, supervisor or trainer is a rewarding experience and key to their professional development. For others it can be a worrisome and disempowering experience. What we observe and how we give feedback is a skill that we need to exercise sensitively and in a critically constructive way. We learn how to ‘sandwich’ feedback, starting with the good points we observed in order to give credit where credit is due, and build trust by proving that we have genuinely noticed and noted the teacher’s strengths. Then we add the filling to the sandwich: two or three points that the teacher can improve. Because we started with what was good, the teacher is prepared to listen to us because we have earned their respect. We do not read out a catalogue of ills. We limit the ‘can improve’ feedback to a few key points that relate to the expressed objectives of the lesson or the teaching practice assignment. We do not use past tenses to lock the criticism in the past (‘That didn’t work’; ‘Why didn’t you do something else?’) because past tenses create blame and disempower the teacher in what becomes an irretrievable situation. Instead we work from the principle that mistakes are learning steps that help us develop as teachers and learners. We use future tenses (‘Next

time you could try it this way') and we personalise the suggestion, sharing the responsibility of making things right ('I find that if I do it this way, I get a better result'). Finally, we close the sandwich with some more good points. We end on a 'high note', acknowledging further strengths, bolstering the teacher's self-esteem and laying the ground for productive self-reflection.

This is a far cry from the observation and feedback experience I had when I first started teacher training all those years ago! With no criteria-based observation tools and no knowledge of the sandwich, my judgement of the teacher was harsh. It was based on standards of what constituted good teaching in an ideal world, rather than evaluating the teacher in terms of where she should expect to be at that stage in the course, given the limited inputs of the sessions so far. In floods of tears she locked herself in the toilet and refused to open the door. I remember the school director telling me, 'You got her in there. It's your responsibility to get her out!' Thank goodness that in this day and age, what to observe and how to give feedback is something we train trainers to do more effectively!

Measuring teaching skills

But what do we do with the results? Since those early days I must have observed and given feedback to hundreds of teachers. Are there observable patterns of teaching and learning that can be used to improve teaching standards in schools and colleges and improve training courses and materials development? I believe there are. I remember a teacher trainer once telling me 'There are as many good teachers as there are ways to teach.' I disagree with that statement. I think there is the potential for an unlimited number of good teachers but thankfully a limited number of ways to teach effectively. Otherwise teacher training could not be structured in the practical programmes we teacher educators conduct. I believe it is more important to categorise observation and feedback into qualitative and quantitative teaching skills, find ways of 'quantifying' the qualitative, and ways of analysing the results.

Observing the teacher's interpersonal skills and their ability to reflect, the quality of interaction amongst the learners, the appropriateness of the classroom activities, and the affective factors in the learning environment are all examples of teaching skills which are difficult to observe and therefore difficult to measure. Perhaps the first principle of effective observation and feedback is that it extends beyond the class time to pre and post interviews with the teacher, and in some cases with the learners. Perhaps the second principle is that the devil is in the detail: only when feedback moves from the general to the specific can the teacher move to action. For example, we can define interpersonal skills through the following sub skills. Interpersonal skills are the teacher's ability to:

- include all learners in an equal way through setting up and monitoring participatory group work;
- employ encouraging and approachable body language and manner;
- use positive and constructive praise and correction;
- listen to and incorporate feedback from the observer;
- explore own solutions independently for professional development;
- demonstrate enthusiasm for preparation and incorporating lesson outcomes in preparing the next class.

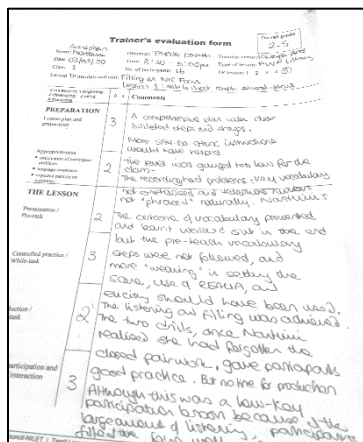
As soon as we do this, we break down interpersonal skills into measurable components and the behaviours teachers should be striving for. By giving teachers these detailed criteria, we are giving them a structured set of options for their professional improvement. We are also ensuring that observers assess teachers in a transparent and evidence-based way. These criteria not only make qualitative judgements more objective, they create a means of quantifying the qualitative. A useful way of quantifying classroom skills is to use a competency-based evaluation system based on the teachers' beginning, developing, using and mastering those skills. It helps if the observation form is considered as a live document that can be changed each time the teacher is observed. This prevents the sort of fixed judgements that make teachers seek tearful refuge in the toilet. Classroom skills

Classroom management competencies	
Use of audio-visual aids	●
Eliciting	⊙
Checking	⊗
Giving instructions	⊙
Correction	○
Work arrangement	⊗
Differentiating learning	○
Timing/pacing	●
Monitoring/facilitating	⊙
Ability to diverge from the lesson plan	○

develop at a different pace – some skills are mastered early on in a training course or in a teacher's professional development; other skills take a lot more practise to master.

A marking system that incorporates this principal of development is one that evolves. Teachers are evaluated against each target skill or criteria with the following scale: ○ - beginning, ⊙ - developing, ⊗ - using on a regular basis, ● mastering. Because the symbols can be overwritten, the observer can use the same form each time s/he observes. The goal, after

say three or four observations, is to see a majority of ⊙ and ⊗ symbols evolving on the observation sheet.

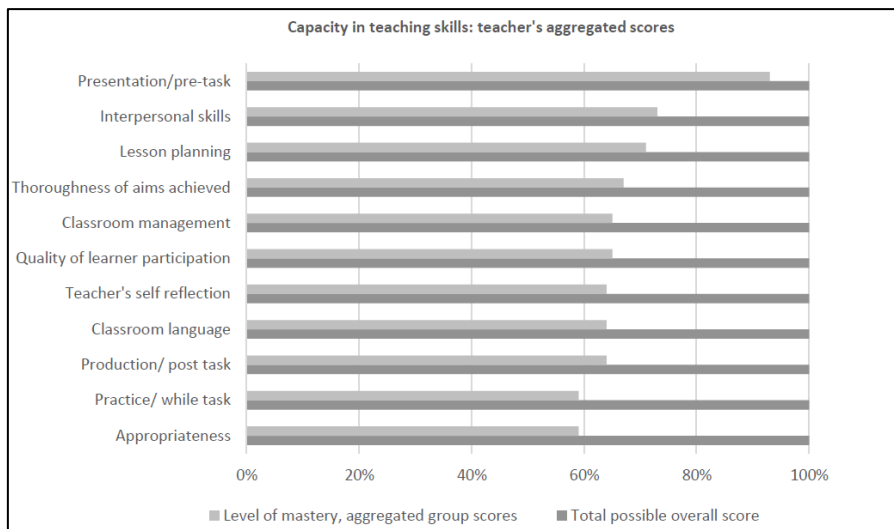


Numbers can be attributed to the final set of symbols each teacher achieves by the end of the evaluation period. ○ becomes 1, ⊙ becomes 2, ⊗ becomes 3, and ● becomes four. In this way, classroom skills can be quantified and collated across a whole group of in-service teachers, at the end of the college year for pre-service teachers, or all the participants within a teacher education project.

The numbers gained for each target skill are aggregated across the cohort and set in proportion to the total possible score for that skill. From this, a percentage can be calculated, and skills compared in relation to each other. The results go beyond the individual teacher to measure the effectiveness of the course itself and which skills need to be addressed differently in order to get an overall improvement of the cohort – either in a further training course, the redesign of the existing training course, or in the workplace in the real classroom.

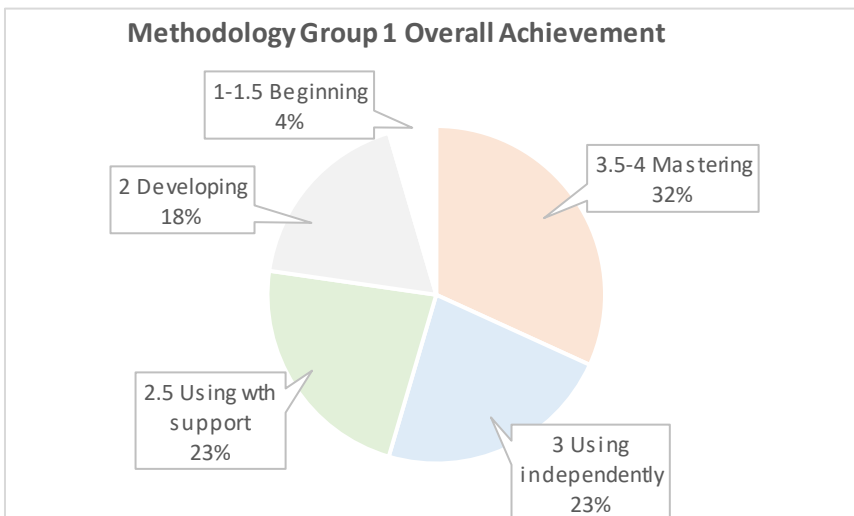
Teaching skills	Total possible score	Aggregated score	%
Appropriateness	188	110	59%
Practice/ while task	300	176	59%
Production/ post task	228	145	64%
Classroom language	332	213	64%
Teacher's self-reflection	300	193	64%
Quality of learner participation	320	207	65%
Classroom management	332	207	65%
Thoroughness of aims achieved	332	224	67%
Lesson planning	332	236	71%
Interpersonal skills	332	243	73%
Presentation/pre-task	252	234	93%

When the results are ranked it becomes clear which specific skills are strong and which need to be strengthened in the programme. In the example given below, two thirds of the group demonstrate effective planning, classroom management and language presentation skills. However they need more time or practice in the less teacher-centred skills of conducting effective practice and production. In short, they are focusing on teaching more than on learning – a typical result of a basic



methodology course. Either the course needs to put a stronger emphasis on learner centred objectives or there needs to be more teaching practice assignments for building teacher confidence. They can then move beyond focusing on ‘getting the

teaching steps right’ to spending more time on learner centred activities, perhaps diverging from the plan to provide more appropriate practice in what learners really need.



Another way of using classroom observation results to learn about the effectiveness of training on teachers is to calculate an overall final score for each teacher. This is done by taking an average of the specific skill scores for each teacher and then aggregating those results. In this

example of overall achievement, the average scores show that more than half the teachers trained in ‘Group 1’ are able to deliver the language courses themselves without supervision. These results prove the training course has been effective. Einstein is credited with saying, ‘Not everything worth counting is countable and not everything countable is worth counting.’ Observation and feedback, when done well, is a powerful tool for individual teachers’ professional development. But I think counting aggregated scores is worth counting too. Breaking down classroom skills into sub skills, making them quantifiable, and taking the long view over time or numbers, provides a cumulative, on-going way of monitoring and evaluating the training courses we run.

References

Tamil Language Teaching Methodology programme, EU – GIZ - British Council Supporting Reconciliation Processes, 2019