

Supporting and mentoring teachers

Mentor observation and feedback

Part 1

Teacher's reflection/Mentor's feedback

Below is a teacher's reflection on a recent lesson which was observed by their mentor. Read the teacher's reflection and the feedback comments which follow from the mentor. What are the similarities and differences?

Teacher Reflection

Some of my lesson did not go well. I didn't drill the stress and intonation; I didn't focus on the contracted form won't. The good thing is that I was able to elicit the meaning and the form, and the learners answered everything correctly, I didn't do feedback at this stage (I wanted learners to focus on the most common mistakes and correct them). We still did a feedback task at the next stage of the lesson but I did not feel comfortable. TTT: When I get nervous I start talking, and this is exactly what happened in my class. I was sometimes making irrelevant comments, wasting the time of the lesson. I should have spoken less and kept it all relevant to the lesson focus. My instructions were clear because I didn't have to repeat them, but they could have been shorter. The learners understood the instructions and all the exercises were done as planned but I felt that I was talking too much. For one exercise I gave the handouts before I explained the task and they started reading while I was talking. The timing was ok till the last feedback stage of the lesson. I knew I only had few minutes left but I let the learners go on too long. I think the lesson was quite learner-centred, although I was sometimes talking too much giving instructions, and attracting attention. The main form of activity was pair/group work, and the learners were able to do the tasks without me having to interfere. I sometimes had to help with new words and encourage quiet learners to speak. Energy level: I think the learners could feel that I was very nervous and it affected the energy level in class. It got better at the second half of the lesson, especially during the mingle activity, but in the beginning it was quite low. I believe the lesson aims were achieved. The learners were able to produce target language at all stages of the lesson, and at the final feedback stage they were able to remember the meaning and the structure of the First Conditional and to provide example sentences.

Now read the mentor's comments.

Mentor Feedback

The learners were not confident about the meanings of some of the words and more work in terms of preparation for the task was needed (for example the word "haunted") ... this troubled one or two of the weaker learners. At the beginning of the lesson you needed to concept check more, and to make sure that you had the attention of all the learners. Some of them were still completing the task during the open class stage and not listening to you. At the earlier stage they needed an instruction as to whether to write what was on the board or not. At one point in the lesson the learners were asked to tell their stories to each other and you asked them to try and speak and not read. You needed to adopt a more definite approach and insist that they turned the papers over, or exploit some other method whereby they were forced to speak rather than read aloud.

Strengths: Well organised and the learners enjoyed the lesson. They also found the interactive tasks and materials interesting and motivating. Your own language was appropriate and at the right level. The final activity worked very well indeed and it got them thinking about and using the language.

Areas to develop: You needed to obtain and keep their attention at open class phases, at some points they continued working on the task while you were presenting. You had a quiet laid back style of teaching and could have afforded to be more directive on occasions to keep them on task, particularly as you were dealing with a class of lively talkative teenagers. However, there was a good relationship between you and the learners at all times. Drilling and instructions needed attention at one or two points in the lesson (the instructions were quite long in places).

Teacher Reflection and Mentor Feedback: Similarities and differences

The teacher and the mentor both comment on drilling and instructions. Reference is made – in different ways - to the motivation of the learners (teacher: “I think the lesson was quite learner-centred”) (Mentor: “The learners enjoyed the lesson”). They also comment on the difficulties at the start of the lesson, compared with the end of the lesson: (Teacher: “It got better at the second half of the lesson, especially during the mingle activity, but in the beginning it was quite low”). (Mentor: “At the beginning of the lesson you needed to concept check more, and to make sure that you had the attention of all the learners.” “The final activity worked very well indeed”).

Otherwise, they both identified different points of focus.

Read the reflection and feedback again. Answer the questions below.	
How does the teacher feel about the lesson?	
How closely does what the teacher feels match the mentor’s feedback?	
Do you think the mentor’s feedback is developmental/judgemental or mixed?	
Do you think that the teacher is demonstrating effective critical awareness of their own teaching?	
As a mentor what development would you identify for the teacher?	
In your opinion, was the lesson successful? Give reasons.	

Commentary

The lesson appears to have been a **successful** one, with **some strengths and some areas for development**. The teacher starts their self-evaluation on a negative note: “some of my lesson did not go well”, and goes on to say that they did not feel comfortable at stage 2.

There are some **positive elements** within the self-evaluation; including timing, achievement of aims and further, that generally the instructions were clear.

There were **areas focused on by the mentor which were not articulated by the teacher**. One of these was in checking vocabulary and the meanings of new words. The mentor also focuses on instruction as an area to develop at one point, whereas the teacher mentions instruction as an area of strength. Classroom management was also listed for development, for example, making sure the students were on task and not reading when they were supposed to be listening. The teacher had not identified this.

One key factor the mentor observer needs to be absolutely clear on is the **distinction between supporting and mentoring a teacher and formal supervisory observations** which are used for performance assessment. Teachers can be demotivated by judgemental comments which then inhibit development, and where development is the aim then feedback should be constructive and supportive rather than evaluative.

In this example the tone of the feedback from the mentor reflects both **judgemental and developmental attitudes**. As a mentor the feedback should be wholly developmental. The mentor begins by saying “the learners were not confident about the meanings of some of the words and more work...was needed”. The term “you needed to” is mentioned twice by the mentor, referring to the adoption of a more definite approach and keeping their attention. The feedback is accurate in terms of content, but the way in which it is phrased, and particularly beginning with a negative, is more judgemental than developmental. This could discourage the teacher, particularly since the teacher was already fairly self-critical. **Confidence needs to be built** through encouragement and positively phrased messaging. A developmental point for the mentor is **constructive language**, i.e. phrasing comments in a more encouraging way, being less judgemental, more developmental, and being positive and sensitive.

The teacher demonstrates some critical awareness; however this is focused too much on the negative, and with some areas of strength and development missing. It is unlikely that there would ever be **an equal match between the feedback of the mentor and the reflection**; however it is a point to aim for.

Areas of development for this teacher relate to instructions, classroom management and checking understanding. In addition, the way in which the teacher articulates their self-assessment in the reflection is important in developing and reflecting levels of self-confidence. Therefore, future development should include a focus on developing a **constructive approach to self-evaluation**, for example, by using more **positive language**.

Part 2

Improving feedback

A technique for making feedback more effective is using questions which positively encourage and enable teachers to reflect constructively. The following are extracts from the mentor's feedback. Following the two given examples, change the comments into questions to make them more supportive.

Feedback comments	Suggested questions
The learners were not confident.	Is confidence an area you think the learners could develop?
More work in terms of preparation for the task was needed.	
You needed to concept check more.	
Some of them were.... not listening to you.	What techniques could you try to ensure you have all learners' attention?
They needed an instruction.	
You could have afforded to be more directive.	
The instructions were quite long at times.	

Part 3

Improving self-assessment

Look again at the teacher's reflection. Does the language used give a positive or negative impression?

The teacher is rather self-critical, suggesting a lack of confidence. Critical reflection involves not only identifying areas which could be improved, but also of exploring what the teacher may do differently in future. For example, consider this comment from the teacher's reflection:

"I didn't do feedback at this stage (I wanted learners to focus on the most common mistakes and correct them). We still did a feedback task at the next stage of the lesson, but I did not feel comfortable."

The teacher gives a reason for not covering the feedback at the earlier stage, but seems to feel that this was wrong. It is important that the teacher as well as the mentor use language which demonstrates the ability to analyse performance, identify strengths and constructively state areas for improvement. For example:

"As I wanted learners to focus on common mistakes, I decided not to do feedback on this stage. However, on reflection I feel that the learners would have benefited from some brief feedback

before moving on to the next stage as it would have given the activity more of a sense of completeness and linked nicely to the feedback in the next stage.”

Re-write the extracts below to make them more reflective and developmental.

Original comments	More reflective and developmental comments
Some of my lesson did not go well.	
I didn't drill ... I didn't focus.	
I was sometimes making irrelevant comments, wasting the time of the lesson.	
I think the lesson was quite learner-centred.	
I sometimes had to help with new words and encourage the quiet learners to speak.	

Suggested answers

Feedback comments	Suggested questions
The learners were not confident.	Is confidence an area you think the learners could develop?
More work in terms of preparation for the task was needed.	How do you think the preparation stage went?
You needed to concept check more.	How could you help learners to understand the language points?
Some of them were.... not listening to you.	What techniques could you try to ensure you have all learners' attention?
They needed an instruction.	Do you think the learners needed any more help understanding how to do the task?
You could have afforded to be more directive.	Do you think any other teacher styles might have been more effective here?
The instructions were quite long at times.	What techniques could you try when giving instructions?

Original comments	More reflective and developmental comments
Some of my lesson did not go well.	There are some things I could improve, for example ...
I didn't drill ... I didn't focus.	I could have drilled the stress and intonation – this would have helped the learners in the later stages. It would have been helpful to have a focus on the contracted form 'won't' as learners find this challenging.
I was sometimes making irrelevant comments, wasting the time of the lesson.	TTT is something I need to work on. I will keep my comments to a minimum and this will also help with time management.
I think the lesson was quite learner-centred.	I am working on developing a more learner-centred approach and on the whole I feel I achieved this.
I sometimes had to help with new words and encourage the quiet learners to speak.	I monitored effectively, helping learners with new words where needed and encouraging the quieter learners to speak.

