

Notes on Having Successful Observations

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Points from Ruth Wajnryb's *Classroom Observation Tasks*:

1. When you are given permission to observe, a teacher makes himself/herself vulnerable to you. This must be treated with a great deal of professional courtesy.
2. Observers affect classroom dynamics. Remember this fact when making observations. Minimize your intrusion. Allow the teacher the freedom to decide how to acknowledge you.
3. Sweeping generalization from observations need to be avoided. At all times, remember the principle of individual classroom cultures.
4. If you are actually conducting a specific task-based observation, make sure to consider the specifics of the situation (perhaps its limitations) before choosing a task. If a teacher wants to meet with you before and see your forms, you can't do a task that requires keeping information from the teacher.
5. Have a follow-up conversation with the teacher. Remember that ownership of the experience is not yours alone...once someone lets you into their classroom, you need to make sure that the experience is meaningful and rewarding for everyone.

Practical points:

1. Remember at all times that the teacher is doing you a favor by allowing you to observe (and, for interviews, that the interviewer is doing you a favor by granting you their time). So, don't *require* the teacher's involvement in your assignment. If you would like to ask them something after class or before class, always be considerate in how you ask and in your reaction to whatever their answer.
2. Ask to observe well in advance of the day. (Unless a teacher recommends it, don't ask for an observation that same week. Ask for *at least* one week in advance, if not more.) If a teacher or interviewer indicates that a certain day for observing or talking is not acceptable, do not react in any way other than being thankful for their helpfulness with other times and their willingness to let you observe. Again, *they* are granting *you* the favor. Your schedule is not their concern.
3. Volunteer to participate in class, but only if they would like for you to and in whatever capacity they define in advance. Let them know that you can be completely passive or active as they prefer. Let them know that you will leave it to them to manage the "intrusion" that your presence will be—and acknowledge that "intrusion." Thank them for their willingness to participate in your professional development.
4. If a teacher wants to see your notes, show them. Be willing to let the teacher have ownership of the observation.
5. Smile. Don't be found with an unintentional critical look on your face; be intentional about looking pleasant instead.
6. Take notes, but be as discreet as possible. As soon as you are alone after the observation, sit down and fill in your thoughts more thoroughly while the observation is on your mind. Don't expect to recall an observation correctly 4 weeks later. Take good notes.
7. Be early for your observation, by at least 10 minutes. Plan to be available for at least 20 afterwards. You should take a second, if there is one, to thank the teacher *then* for the experience, but *after* he/she is finished with student questions.
8. Whether or not you talk with the teacher after class, follow up the observation with a grateful email.

Suggestions from yet another perspective:

At all times, please remember that you are a guest during an observation, and that your presence in the classroom is an intrusion that you must actively seek to minimize. Sometimes we take it for granted that students have a basic understanding of how to minimize their presence when observing in a classroom. However, because of incidents that have occurred in other courses, we would like to make some specific points about "minimizing your intrusion" to the classroom that you are observing.

1. Do not come to class late. If you are late, do not go to the class. You are to arrive at the class early. Also, on a related note, do not leave the class early.
2. Do not walk around during the class, either within the classroom or to the front of the classroom. Stay in your seat, unless there is an emergency. Ask the teacher where you should sit.
3. Do not ask the teacher any questions during the class. Save any questions for after the class, if the teacher has time to talk with you.
4. Do not fall asleep in class.
5. Turn off your cell phone in class. Absolutely do not answer your cell phone in class.
6. Do not do other homework while you are observing classes. You should take notes about what you are observing, but be discreet even in that.
7. Do not make any demands of the teachers about the date of your observation. Make your appointments for observations early enough so that teachers can give you an idea of when a good day for visiting would be. Do not say something like, "I must come on Tuesday the 6th," or "I can only come on Wednesday the 9th." Not all days are particularly good for visitors to be present, and teachers need the freedom to set up an appointment that will work for you, them, and their class.
8. Do not make any demands of teachers regarding their time or participation. If you would like to speak with them before or after class, ask if they have a moment for a question first. And again, do not ask them questions during class.

Remember at all times that these ESL programs are cooperating with us for *your* benefit. Each of the cooperating teachers is showing you great kindness by letting you observe their teaching. Thus, please follow these basic guidelines regarding common courtesy and good observation protocol as you do your observations. You not only reflect on yourself as a professional with your actions, you are reflecting the quality of this program and are impacting the training of future teachers.