
Chapter 25

Giving Constructive Feedback

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Introduction

Supervisees (both student-teachers as well as more experienced practicing teachers) typically become nervous, irritable or strained when they know that they are to be visited by supervisors. This is because they see supervisors as examiners, inspectors or mistake hunters rather than people who are there to help them. These attitudes can be change if supervisors are genuinely skilled in helping their teachers. Constructive feedback aims at making supervision a helpful developmental process between supervisors and teachers. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to focus on how supervisors can provide constructive feedback to pre-service and in-service teachers of English.

How Can We Provide Feedback?

Regardless of the specific approach we use, a good overall procedure to include is the three-phase technique described more fully in Chapter 23: *Theory and Practice*. In brief, the three steps are:

The Pre-Lesson Conference. Here the supervisor previews the lesson plan and discusses with the teacher the objectives, the material, the procedures and the teaching aids before going into the class. It is a chance for the supervisor to get to know the teacher and something about the class.

The Observation. During the observation, the supervisor will gather evidence to present to the teacher in the feedback discussion.

The Post-Lesson Discussion. This discussion is the climax of the feedback process. In this step, the teacher and the supervisor evaluate what has been done and work together to set priorities for the future. During this step, the teacher can develop ideas either for a lesson in another class or for other lessons in other classes. Discussing the items of a good checklist or data and information collected in an organized way will make this step very effective and fruitful.

Tips for Constructive Feedback

Tips for giving feedback can be given at many different levels. General suggestions for feedback include the following:

1. Don't concentrate exclusively on the bad points of lessons. People appreciate positive comments and deserve a pat on the back or a word of praise. Support teachers and motivate them to act effectively, avoiding frustration and disappointment.
2. Always start with positive points, then move on to suggestions for improvement.
3. Make sure you listen to the teachers' views of the lesson. We always tell teachers to minimize teacher talk in order to maximize pupils' talking time. Similarly, when supervising teachers, you should try to listen to the teacher more and talk less.
4. Be specific in the advice you give, whether it is positive or negative. Vague observations and general remarks will not help the teacher at all. Your criticisms will not mean much to the teacher unless you support what you say by referring back to a clear record of what the teacher said or did. Don't say things such as "Your instructions were poor". Instead say, "I noticed some of the children did not seem to understand the instructions you gave. You might check your instructions by asking one of the children to rephrase them in Arabic". Comments should always be constructive rather than destructive. Remember to tell the teacher what you saw and heard throughout the lesson.
5. Own the advice. Use words such as "I noticed that..." "I saw.....". This acknowledges that you are giving the teacher your own version of events that may be different from that of another observer.
6. Keep a good record of the lesson observed. Make sure your record of the lesson enables you to give feedback in a comprehensible way. Don't rely entirely on memory.
7. Do not use terminology that may be unfamiliar to the teacher. Make sure you share an understanding of key terms.
8. Help the teacher to develop his/her teaching performance. Always remember the goal of a feedback session is to help the teacher improve, not to impress the teacher with what you are or how much you know.
9. Try to make the supervision process as non-threatening as possible. Make sure that the teacher understands that the main goal of supervision is to

improve the quality of the education provided to students and thereby raise educational standards.

While such general advice is helpful, especially for novice supervisors, there may be cases where it is inappropriate to follow these "rules." (See Chapter 27: *Tips for Novice Supervisors* for more information about dealing with difficult cases.) As a supervisor, you need to make sure that the teacher is ready to accept the advice you are giving. To do this you need to scaffold the advice you give.

Scaffolding Advice

The notion of scaffolding was developed by Vygotsky (1978) in relation to education and child development. According to Vygotsky, when children learn they internalize ideas that they are ready to assimilate at their particular stage of development. The child is engaged in a process that leads to new stages of development with the guidance of adults or more experienced "knowers". The challenge, then, for the adult, is to provide the context and conditions under which learning will take place, in other words to support or scaffold the learning. Learning takes place through interaction with a more knowledgeable other but will not take place until the child is ready.

Randall and Thornton (2001) apply Vygotsky's theories of learning to the process of learning to teach. Here, the role of supervisors is to scaffold the advice they give to ensure that learning about teaching takes place. Supervisors do this by providing feedback and advice that is just above the current developmental stage of the teacher. Supervisors, then, need to think not only about the content of the feedback and advice they give in terms of teacher competences but in terms of whether the teacher is, in developmental terms, ready to accept that advice. (See Chapter 26: *Approaches to Teacher Assessment* for more about teacher competencies.)

A Framework for Feedback

Below is one possible framework for giving feedback. It divides the feedback discussion into stages. The main feature of each stage is described in the box in the center of the page. On the left of the box is the person (supervisor or teacher) who takes the lead in the discussion and to the right is the function you as a supervisor need to perform.

Framework for Feedback		
Persons	Main Feature of the Stage	Function of Supervisor
1 Supervisor ↓	General open question	Start by finding out how the teacher feels about the lesson
2 Teacher	Strengths of Teaching ↓	Encourage the teacher to talk about the strengths of their teaching
3 Supervisor	Strengths of Teaching ↓	Add your perceptions of these strengths
4 Teacher	Possible improvements ↓	Ask the teacher to identify aspects of the teaching which could have been different and to look at alternative techniques.
5 Supervisor	Other possibilities ↓	Raise and discuss other aspects of teaching which you feel could usefully be changed
6 Supervisor and Teacher	Plans for the future	Decide together what the teacher should work on in the future

(Based on materials by Majer, J., Motteram, G. & Sargeant, D., 1997)

Stage 1: General open question. Begin by asking general open questions to get an idea of the teacher's feelings about the lesson. Use non-threatening questions and keep an open mind at this point of the discussion. For example, How do you feel about the lesson?

Stage 2: Strengths of teaching. Encourage the teacher to talk about the strengths of the lesson. Pointing out what worked well in a lesson can be as valuable as talking about what did not. Encourage teachers to build on their strengths as well as to overcome weaknesses in their teaching. Help teachers determine how well the learning objectives of the lesson were achieved. Use questions such as:

What do you think was the best part of the lesson?

Stage 3: Strengths of teaching. Comment on the strengths the teacher has identified and add other strengths that he or she has not noticed. This is also a good time to look back and comment on progress the teacher has made since the time of the last observation. Use phrases such as:

I particularly / really liked the way you.....

I can see you've been working on.....

I notice a big improvement in the way you...

Stage 4: Possible improvements. When things go wrong, encourage teachers to analyze the problems themselves. Have teachers suggest what they could have done differently, instead of simply telling them your view. By clever use of questioning, you can lead teachers to diagnose their own problems and solve them. For example:

If you were teaching this lesson again, are there any parts you would change? Which ones? What would you do differently?

Stage 5: Other possibilities. Teachers will only be able to suggest strategies that they know. At this stage, you can also share what you have learned from your own education and experience with the teachers to help them develop strategies that will promote learning in the classroom. Now is the time to raise topics that teachers have not commented on that you feel should be discussed e.g.

I noticed that the boy in the corner did not seem to be listening / was not writing etc. Why do you think that was? You did...
How else could you have done this?

Stage 6: Plans for the future. At this stage, with the teacher, set targets for the future. Make sure this does not become a long list of areas to work on - an ideal number of items is about three. Make a note of these items, so that you can refer to them when you see the teacher again.

Useful phrases for Stage 6:

What do you think we should work on for next time?

Next time I watch you I would like to see... Just remind me of the points we have agreed on so I can write them down

Useful Phrases

Finding out how the teacher feels about the lesson

So, how do you think it / the lesson went?

How do you feel about the lesson?

Did everything go as you intended?

Talk me through what you did in the lesson.

Eliciting the strengths of the lesson

What do you think was the best part of the lesson?

What were you particularly pleased with?

What did the children learn?

Adding your perceptions of the strengths

I particularly really liked the way in which you

I could see the children were really enjoying the lesson by the way they

I thought your manner with the children was very

I can see you've been working on

I notice a big improvement in the way you

Eliciting aspects of the teaching which could have been different

If you were teaching this lesson again, are there any parts you would change? Which ones?

What would you do differently?

Did you feel you achieved all your aims?

Remind me what the aims of your lesson were. How can you tell these were achieved?

What have you, yourself, learned from teaching this lesson?

Adding your perceptions and raising other possibilities

I noticed that the boy in the corner did not seem to be listening / was not writing etc. Why do you think that was?

You did How else could you have done this?

One thing I tried when I was a teacher was

Do you feel all the class was involved?

Do you think all the class followed your instructions?

Other useful phrases

Tell me more about that.

Keep up the good work

Is there anything else you would like to ask me?

Setting targets

What do you think we should work on for next time?

What would you like to concentrate on for next time?

Next time I watch you I would like to see

I'll make a note of the points to work on

Just remind me of the points we have agreed on so I can write them down

The Importance of Communication Skills

Whatever approach to supervision you take, communication skills will be important. For supervisors, communication skills typically involve:

- Giving information e.g. *Cupboard is pronounced like this by the way.*
- Giving advice e.g. *Another way of dividing the class is like this.....*
- Supporting and empathizing e.g. *It can be very hard to teach classes as big as this*
- Eliciting e.g. *How else could you have handled the activity*
- Goal setting e.g. *OK, next time I watch you I would like you to work on*
- Checking understanding. e.g. *What do you think is an example of that?*
- Checking for clarification. e.g. *If I understand you correctly, what you mean is....*
- Probing e.g. *What exactly do you mean by.....*
- Active listening

Of these skills, the most important and possibly the most neglected is listening. Listening is traditionally thought of as quite easy, but active listening requires concentration not only to understand the words the teacher is saying, but the meaning behind those words. It involves observing body language and holding back on giving your own opinion until you have checked that your own understanding is accurate and complete. Active listening typically forms a major part of supervisor training materials (Malderez and Bodoczky, 1999; Randall and Thornton, 2001, IELP-II, 2001).

Barriers to Effective Communication

There are a number of barriers to effective communication which have been identified in connection with supervisors in the Egyptian context (IELP-II, 1999). You may wish to consider whether any of these are true for you.

1. Do you mentally rehearse what you are going to say yourself while in discussion with others?
2. Do you allow yourself to daydream or think about other things such as what you have to do next while listening to others?
3. Do you let yourself get carried away by words which have an emotional trigger for you? (Buzan, 1999)

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4. Do you listen to the conversations of others around you at the same time as sitting and talking to a teacher?
 5. Do you give feedback to teachers in places where you may be overheard?
 6. Do you find yourself secretly criticizing teachers' English - thinking about how they are saying something rather than what they are saying?
 7. Do you find yourself thinking about one point a teacher has made in depth and not listening to what s/he is continuing to say?

If any of the above is true for you, then you may need to work on your communication skills.

Giving Written Feedback

The form in which you offer written feedback depends to an extent on the requirements of the faculty or Ministry. The situation is somewhat complicated by the fact that written feedback may have dual purposes:

1. The feedback may be given to teachers to give them a record of what has been discussed and the points to work on for next time. In this case, it should have the following characteristics:
 - a. Clearly signal points to work on. You might include a section entitled "Items for Action" at the end of the report.
 - b. Offer some encouragement to the teacher so that there will be a balance of positive and negative points.
2. The feedback may be used to evaluate the teacher. In this case you need to:
 - a. State clearly the competences the teacher has met and/or has failed to meet.
 - b. Give the reader of the feedback (the headteacher, your colleagues, the teacher him or herself) an indication of the level of the teacher. Make sure that any written feedback fulfills its purpose or purposes.

What Makes Feedback Effective and Fruitful?

Unfortunately, there is no magic recipe for providing effective feedback. Much depends on the teacher and the following variables:

- The career stage of the teacher. Is the teacher at the pre-service or in-service stage?

- The developmental stage of the teacher. Is the teacher a novice or an expert or somewhere in between? (See Chapter 26: *Approaches to Teacher Assessment* for more information on determining the stage of development of the teacher).
- The personal characteristics of the teacher and the supervisor. For example, if there is a large age or experience differential it may be possible to give feedback in a more directive way than if one is dealing with an equal. Similarly different interaction patterns may be appropriate in male-male interaction, female -female interaction, or male-female interactions.
- The relationship between the teacher and the supervisor. This will of course vary according to circumstances, but nothing can make the feedback process so effective or fruitful as a degree of trust by supervisees in the supervisors' honesty, dependability, insight and good intentions. The better the relationship between supervisees and supervisors, the more effective and fruitful the feedback will be.
- Past experience of supervision. Some teachers may have had negative experiences of being supervised in the past. This may affect their attitude to other supervisors. In this case, you will need to be patient
- The teacher's attitude and self-image. A teacher who is not confident will need to be dealt with in a different way from a teacher who is sure of him or herself. You may also come across teachers who are antagonistic, who do not care about their work or their pupils or who are unwilling to listen to advice. You will need to vary your approach to deal with these.
- Personal preference and learning style. Some teachers prefer to work in a very systematic way that is more appropriate to a clinical supervision approach (Cogan, 1973). In clinical supervision, supervisors give feedback based directly on observation in a detached way. Others prefer a more personalized approach that may be more appropriate to a mentoring approach to supervision. The emphasis here is more on relationships and provision of information based on the supervisor's experience. You may also find that some teachers particularly at the beginning level will welcome a more directive approach where you tell them things in a straightforward manner, whereas others will prefer feedback to be given more indirectly.

Because each teacher is affected differently by the above variables, no two will be alike. You will need to be eclectic in your approach, prepared to use a variety of strategies and styles of supervision chosen according to needs of the individual teacher.

What if There are Problems with the Teaching?

Most people do not take kindly to criticism even when it is offered as "constructive criticism". No matter how you sugarcoat criticism, it is evaluative and judgmental. When we offer constructive criticism, we want our message to be helpful to the other person, but our intentions are affected by the way that criticism can damage self-esteem and cause defensiveness on the part of our teachers.

Avoiding criticism does not mean that you should accept negative behaviors or performance. You obviously need to think of an effective solution when a teacher's behavior is not up to standard. The key to success is to look at the teacher as an individual and set him or her goals for improvement. When a person's performance is not up to standard, they may need information rather than criticism.

Should I Give Feedback in English or Arabic?

This depends. If you speak English a lot better than the teacher, using English for your discussion may make the teacher feel insecure about his or her own language level. On the other hand, if the teacher is comfortable in English, the conference might be an excellent opportunity to practice using the language in a high-level discussion.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have dealt with the importance of feedback between supervisors and supervisees. I want to stress the fact that feedback is as necessary for teachers as water is for plants. Feedback enables teachers to reflect, evaluate, and improve their work. Trust and honesty between supervisors and supervisees is essential because each role complements the other in working towards one goal: better teaching and learning. Co-operation, mutual understanding and patience constitute a sound basis for fruitful work for both supervisors and teachers. What can we learn?

*It's a very ancient saying
But a true and honest thought
That if you become a teacher*

*by your pupils you'll be taught.
(Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1956)*

(From "Getting to Know You," a song in the 1956 musical, The King and I.)

voices from the field

Supervisor's Feedback

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Trainees: Student-teachers, 3rd Year

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I am a supervisor from a Faculty of Education. This is what I did after one of my student teachers had finished teaching.

- I started by asking her what she liked about her performance and what she did not like. "How she felt about her lesson"
- I pointed out how she could improve her performance and make this technique workable in a large class.
- I asked her to write a full report about her performance and her plan for improving her performance next time (as they were told that each student-teacher will be given two chances to try one technique).
- I have noticed that the student teacher's performance has improved during the second time. She stressed more the good points her colleagues raised in their comments after the first session. She developed her technique by using cards on which she wrote questions and answers. Her voice showed increased confidence in herself.

Key Terminology

Active Listening

Listening with full attention in a very careful manner both to the words spoken and the meanings behind the words.

Clinical Supervision

A specific method of supervision which takes data from classroom observation and uses this to form the basis of feedback given to the teacher.

Eclectic

Not adopting one particular approach but rather taking what works from a number of different approaches.

Empathize

To feel what the teacher is feeling (contrast sympathize - to feel sorry for).

Open-ended Question

Questions with no one right answer, such as, *What can you say about.....?*
Tell me about.....

Scaffolding Advice

As used in this chapter, this relates to providing feedback to the teacher that is marginally ahead of his or her developmental stage.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Understanding Check

1. Look at the general tips for supervisors given in this chapter. Would you adapt or add anything to these tips?
2. What variables are involved in giving feedback to teachers?
3. Record a feedback session with one of your teachers. (Don't forget to ask the teacher's permission first). Evaluate your performance in the conference. Ask yourself:
How does the feedback session fit into the framework identified in the chapter?
Who speaks the most - you or the teacher?
Do you make any suggestions? What form do these take?

Resources

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Summary Handout for Chapter 25: Giving Constructive Feedback

Use the Three-Stage Approach

- Pre-lesson
- Lesson
- Feedback

General Tips

- Balance the positive and negative
- Always start with the positive
- Give specific advice
- Own the advice
- Keep a clear record
- Use familiar terminology

Remember: your goal is to help the teacher improve.

A FRAMEWORK FOR FEEDBACK

1. Supervisor asks general open questions
2. Encourages teacher to talk about strengths
3. Supervisor adds perception of strengths
4. Supervisor elicits possible improvements from teacher
5. Supervisor raises other possibilities
6. Supervisor and teacher come up with a plan for future action

THE PROVISION OF FEEDBACK DEPENDS ON....

1. The career stage of the teacher
2. The developmental stage of the teacher
3. Personal characteristics of teacher and supervisor
4. Relationship between teacher and supervisor
5. Past experience of supervision
6. The teacher's attitude and self-image
7. Personal preference and learning style

