Giving feedback on teaching practice

Anna Hasper

decides whether it is an art or a science.

As teacher educators a large part of our job is observing pre-service and in-service teachers delivering lessons and providing feedback on their plans and delivery. Feedback is a time to celebrate wins, but it is constructive feedback that truly moves teachers' development forward. While this process might sound simple, most teacher trainers or observers, if not all, know that even the most well-intended feedback may land differently at times. In other words, receiving feedback is not always easy, nor is giving feedback. In this article I will zoom in on oral post-lesson observation feedback (POFB), its challenges and some suggestions that may 'EASE' this process. I will explain this acronym in the course of the article.

The social nature of learning

Learning is a dynamic, social activity (Williams *et al.*, 2016) and in intensive initial training course (ITTC) like CELTA learning is indeed highly social: trainees observe each other's lessons and provide each other with feedback, with the trainer facilitating this process in a group context. This format may feel quite novel or even uncomfortable to some, since group feedback is uncommon in most other training contexts. Additionally, learning itself can already cause a sense of discomfort because it is all about doing what we did not know or were unable to do previously, thus pushing learners continuously beyond their comfort zone. Therefore, is not surprising that emotions such as self-doubt, fear, anxiousness and even a sense of feeling overwhelmed may surface during POFB sessions.

Why emotions matter

Emotions form an integral part of being human: we are, fundamentally, emotional beings, however, the way we experience and manage these emotions is unique for each of us. This may explain why there is no single definition of what emotions exactly are, so instead of viewing them as *good* or *bad*, which is common practice, it seems more helpful to regard emotions as desired or undesired, depending on the context (David, 2016). Being angry and walking away when you see a person wielding a knife keeps us safe, but walking away in a conversation because we feel emotionally attacked may not be so helpful in a learning conversation. The brain, however, does not distinguish between a real threat to our life and one at an emotional level, evoking among other things an emotional reaction. Over the years, research has shown that placing emotions and learning at oppositive sides of the learning spectrum is a false dichotomy: there is no separation of cognition and emotions (Jensen, 1995) they are intertwined. We only need to think of those who demonstrate their emotions through getting defensive during feedback – and this influences the way they engage in learning, or not.

As Krashen (1982) highlights in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, high levels of anxiety or stress prevent deep processing. Conversely, lowering the affective filter through creating supportive conditions

can help to create a calmer brain, which is essential to enable learning. In this sense, emotions are a critical element in learning (Karimi *et al.*, 2025) since they either facilitate or hinder development, depending on how they are managed. This seems equally true for teacher-learning where emotions not only influence what trainees hear, notice and learn but also the social interactions between the trainer and trainee.

Processing feedback

Effective feedback does not only seem cognitive (understanding what is being said) and behavioural (knowing what to do with it), but also emotional: learners must feel safe enough to be able to truly hear it and be willing to accept it. When what is being said in feedback is perceived as life-threatening, our emotional brain highjacks our thinking and a 'fight, flight or freeze' response is triggered, blocking the prefrontal cortex from being able to rationalise and think clearly (Goleman, 1995). This state makes it much harder, if not impossible, for trainees to process feedback and can lead to employing coping strategies aimed at keeping us safe (which is the brain's main job), for example, getting defensive. People react to feedback based on who they are, which is shaped by cultural values, norms, beliefs and emotional states (Lipnevich & Smith, 2022).

Ideally feedback is a dialogic event, however, there is a power dynamic, since trainers give feedback on trainees' development but often also grade the lesson. As Siegel (2012) notes, people can only learn, think and reflect when they feel safe enough to stay out of survival mode. Since emotions greatly influence how feedback is received, processed and responded to, trainers must take great care to frame their evaluative feedback in ways that reduces the perceived threat, so trainees can feel safe enough to be open to receiving it and using it for their development. In order words, the way feedback is conveyed is as important as the content of the feedback, because how it is conveyed could trigger a sense of 'danger'. Whilst trainers cannot control how our feedback is received, trainers can control their approach to giving feedback and how they respond to both trainees and their own emerging emotions. So how can we create conditions that best support openness and willingness to engage with POFB?

Creating emotionally managed conditions for feedback

Actively creating the right emotional conditions for TP feedback requires trainers to work on several dimensions. The EASE framework I'll introduce below provides some practical ideas that I've found helpful to ease feedback conversations and help balance the cognitive and emotional dimensions. It consists of four elements: '**E**xpectations' (establish them before you start giving feedback); '**A**ctively creating the conditions' (so feedback can be heard); '**S**ocial awareness' (be aware of the impact your feedback may have and be supportive); and '**E**motions (be prepared to deal with any reactions – including your own – that may emerge during feedback conversations).

Establish clear Expectations

Many initial teacher training contexts are multicultural, therefore, it may be a good idea to start with developing 'feedback literacy' (Carless & Boud, 2018). Discussing your purpose and expectations of feedback can help trainees better understand the role and value of feedback and enable them to learn from it. In a multicultural context, this seems helpful, since feedback is regarded differently in different cultures (Meyer, 2016). It is invaluable for trainers to have some awareness of common feedback styles and expectations in different educational contexts, since Race (2005) attests that feedback is not considered part of learning in *all* cultures. Here are some possible discussion questions to use with trainees:

- What do feel is the purpose of feedback on lessons?
- What do you expect from me [trainer] in feedback?
- What are your thoughts on effective / non-effective feedback?
- What qualities do you believe makes trainees good at providing feedback?
- What qualities do you believe makes trainees good at dealing with feedback?
- What do you expect from each other?
- What do you hope to take away from feedback?

Actively create the conditions

When trainees know the aim of feedback is to enhance learning – and these conversations are a psychologically safe space to share – feedback is more likely to be seen as supportive guidance rather than criticism. Creating a safe feedback environment allows the brain to feel calm enough to receive constructive feedback (from the trainer and other trainees) without fear, and so process it and act on it more productively. Building an environment of trust and empathy requires strong teacher–learner and learner–learner relationships. So, establishing agreement on what a psychologically safe climate entails, also called an 'emotional charter', can help demonstrate that everything you say in feedback comes from a position of care, which should be the same for comments from other trainees. Here are two key questions to raise:

- How do we all want to feel in POFB? (e.g. empowered, respected, heard)
- What can we as a team do to make sure we *all* feel like that? (e.g. using kind language, being open-minded, asking questions instead of contradicting: 'yes, but')

Social awareness and showing support

I've also found it helpful to keep in mind that, at times, feedback may come across in a way that upsets trainees. To avoid tension, I make it very clear at the start that all my feedback comes from a place of care; if trainees ever feel upset by it, I want to hear about it, as that is never my intention. In addition, being *aware* of the impact of the language we trainers use, and opting for more exploratory language (Figure 1), can also help shift feedback from being perceived as hurtful to it being regarded as helpful. This awareness proactively manages some of that potential defensiveness. Carl W. Buehner once said: 'They may forget what you said but they will never forget how you made them feel.'

Judgemental language	Exploratory language
Why don't you . . .?	What about . . .?
You should have . . .?	Did you notice how . . .?
Don't you think . . .?	What could be a more helpful way . . .?
Why did you . . .?	I noticed that you . . . , how could you . . .?

Figure 1: Choosing more exploratory language

In feedback, on a lesson that isn't the strongest, referring to your own experiences as a learner-teacher and disclosing some of your own challenges (thus showing some vulnerability) makes the process more relatable. Emotional reactions are completely understandable; we are all human, after all, and sharing that we have all had less-than-ideal lessons normalises those emotions. By showing empathy, acknowledging effort and framing feedback around the 3Ps (process, product and practice) rather than personal shortcomings can create a sense of 'we are in this together' and help trainees to remain open to feedback.

Be prepared to deal with Emotions

It is essential to be prepared for dealing with emotions (not only trainees' emotions but also our own) because it is only natural that emotions come into play during feedback. Step one is to ensure that trainers are truly present in the POFB session and are in a calm and positive emotional state. Shifting to desirable emotions before starting feedback is helpful, this can happen through listening to a happy song, watching some feel-good reels online or visualising a favourite place. Being emotionally calm and positive, or neutral, is particularly important because of emotional contagion (Hatfield *et al.*, 1993): our emotions can easily influence those of our learners or trainees. If we become frustrated or overly critical, trainees may mirror this and become less open to feedback.

Emotional agility, the ability to notice, name and respond to emotions with flexibility (David, 2016), is a key social-emotional competence for trainers, since it can help us respond to trainees emerging emotions in the most appropriate way, rather than react to them (Hasper & Pénton Herrera, 2024). Instead of reacting with visible frustration to a defensive trainee who is, for example, upset about your feedback on task-setting, ask questions, listen intentionally and stay calm before reframing. An example might be:

> 'I notice you care a lot about setting instructions well, so let's look together at one concrete way we can make them more effective for the next lesson.'

This shift helps regulate trainers' own emotions and also models constructive emotional management by depersonalising the issue and looking forward instead of back; by using the word 'we' you highlight that you are on their side.

Final thoughts

Giving feedback is never easy, nor is it something that comes naturally. It is a practice we strengthen over time. At its heart, feedback is relationship based, built on trust and respect. It is a shared responsibility, requiring both trainers and trainees to engage openly, which depends on a shared understanding of its purpose and the process. Most importantly, that effective feedback acknowledges both the *head* (the cognitive aspects) and the *heart* (the emotional responses) that shape how feedback is received and acted upon. I hope this EASE framework can help transform feedback from a source of stress and anxiety for trainees (and trainers) into an opportunity for connection and collective growth, something that makes the feedback experience a little bit easier on both trainers and trainees.

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Anna Hasper is a teacher and trainer based in Dubai and has a wide range of global contexts. She regularly provides training for publishers and is a resident blogger for *MET*. Anna runs www.teachertrain.org and is passionate about teacher educator professional learning and educational psychology, with an emphasis social emotional wellbeing.