

Excerpted from Chapter 4 of *User's Guide to the Early Language & Literacy Classroom Observation Pre–K Tool*, by Miriam W. Smith, Ed.D. Joanne P. Brady, M.Ed. & Louisa Anastasopoulos, M.P.P.

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## **GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVING IN CLASSROOMS**

### **Scheduling and Duration of Observations**

Prior to conducting an ELLCO Pre–K observation, contact the classroom teacher to explain the general purpose of your visit. Work with the teacher to choose a day for your visit in hopes of getting as typical a picture of the classroom as possible. For example, do not schedule your visit on a day when special activities or visitors are planned. You should also obtain information about the classroom schedule and time your observation accordingly. Allow at least 3.5 hours for your visit to ensure that you collect ample evidence to score all of the ELLCO Pre–K items. Plan to observe not only free–choice time and fullgroup book reading but also a variety of other activities, such as a mealtime, greeting or departing, and any other instructional time. It is important to see teachers interacting with children in various settings in order to get an accurate picture of the language environment and the types of conversations that take place between teachers and children and among children.

In addition to selecting the appropriate day and time for your visit, your initial telephone conversation with the teacher can also provide information needed to complete some items on the cover page and Observation Record page. Ask the teacher for information that will enable you to complete background information, such as the program, center, and teacher information; the duration of the classroom day; the age ranges of children and numbers of children with identified disabilities; the number of English language learners; the 4 primary language spoken in the classroom; and languages spoken by English language learners. The remaining items on the Observation Record page should be completed at the time of the observation.

### **Conducting Observations with Professionalism and Respect**

Classroom observations can be an anxiety–provoking experience for teachers. As the observer, you can help teachers feel more comfortable by taking care to treat them respectfully throughout the entire process. Remember that you are a guest in the classroom. Be sure to greet all teaching staff, introduce yourself, and thank them for

allowing you to observe. Remind them how long you plan on staying and indicate that you will do your best to keep out of their way.

Although you will need to position yourself in order to see and hear everything that goes on during your observation, make an effort to be as unobtrusive as possible. In order to ensure that you do not influence what you are trying to observe, you should minimize your impact on the classroom. After your initial greeting, do not interact with the children or the adults, and maintain a neutral facial expression regardless of what you might see or hear during the observation. Children may approach you with questions or comments, but a simple explanation that you are there to see what they are learning and are not able to play is usually enough to satisfy their curiosity.

### **Preparing for the Observation**

Before conducting an observation, you should carefully read through all of the ELLCO Pre–K items several times to familiarize yourself with the content and sequence of the items. Be sure that you thoroughly understand what evidence is needed to rate each item before your visit, so that you can focus your attention on the classroom activities during your observation. You may wish to highlight or circle key words and phrases to help you focus on the most important features of each item.

The ELLCO Pre–K is a sophisticated observation tool that requires you to use your judgment as a professional who is knowledgeable about preschools as well as early language and literacy practices. It is, therefore, strongly recommended that observers have a background in early childhood education and prior experience conducting classroom observations. Specific ELLCO Pre–K training also will help ensure that the tool is administered appropriately. For more information about available training, contact Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

## **TAKING EVIDENCE AND RATING ITEMS**

### **Focusing on the Evidence**

Rating each ELLCO Pre–K item is based on the evidence you note throughout your observation. What is evidence? Evidence is represented in the notes that describe what you saw and heard in relation to each item. Classrooms are inherently complex places, and recording evidence can be challenging due to the nonlinear nature of classroom life. Observers should be prepared to flip through the tool in order to record evidence in the correct places. To help you focus your observation and note taking, the ELLCO Pre–K provides summary phrases that are helpful reminders. For example, for Item 1, Organization of the Classroom, the evidence you should look for includes furnishings

and comfort, arrangement of interest areas, traffic flow, and independent access (see Figure 4.1).

There are several items for which evidence can and should be gathered at a time when children are not present in the classroom, either prior to their arrival or during outdoor play. These items all deal with classroom materials, and it will be both easier and less intrusive to examine them when the classroom is empty. The items are

- Item 2, Contents of the Classroom
- Item 12, Organization of Book Area
- Item 13, Characteristics of Books
- Item 14, Books for Learning
- Item 17, Early Writing Environment

### **Rating Strategies**

There are two main strategies that can help you in assigning ratings for the ELLCO Pre–K items. One tip that will add structure and focus to your scoring decisions is to start by reading the Level 5 anchor statements and descriptive indicators to determine if you can assign the highest possible score. If the evidence does not support a Level 5 rating, then move on to the Level 4 description. Continue to work your way down until you find the level that best matches the evidence you have noted.

A second strategy is useful when the evidence is mixed or uneven. There may be occasions when a classroom exhibits characteristics that fall under more than one level for a particular item. Using Item 2, Contents of the Classroom, as an example, a classroom may have an ample supply of materials that are organized in conceptually related groups, and children may be observed accessing materials independently (all consistent with Level 4 descriptive indicators), but the classroom's displays may be more teacher-generated than the Level 4 descriptive indicator suggests. In cases such as this one, revisit the anchor statements to guide your scoring. Does the classroom exhibit *sufficient* evidence that the materials are well organized, appealing, accessible, and coordinated with ongoing learning goals? *Some* evidence? *Limited* evidence? Step back from the descriptive indicators and focus on the qualitative anchor statement. Use the evidence you have noted to make your final score determination.

### **Avoiding Bias**

When taking evidence and scoring each particular item, it is important to remain focused on the evidence associated with that item. It is easy for scoring decisions to become clouded by overall impressions of the classroom. A well-stocked and smoothly managed classroom with pleasant teacher—child interactions may predispose an observer to assign higher scores for all of the items, even though there may not be sufficient evidence of effort to build children's vocabulary or engage in extended conversations. Conversely, a teacher with a disorganized classroom may do a wonderful job with book reading and supporting children's writing, but the observer's view may be negatively influenced by the haphazard classroom environment.

Another factor to guard against during scoring is personal bias. Everyone has opinions of what constitutes a good classroom or teacher. Some of these opinions may coincide with the research-based evidence represented in the ELLCO Pre-K items, but other opinions may be irrelevant and solely based on personal preference. The scoring of each item must be based on how the evidence compares with the rubric. It is the observer's job to guard against allowing personal bias to prejudice scoring decisions.

## **THE TEACHER INTERVIEW**

The Teacher Interview portion of the ELLCO Pre-K is designed to provide information to supplement your observation. Interviews should be conducted after you have concluded your observation and during a time when the teacher is free of teaching responsibilities. When you schedule your observation, ask the teacher to set aside time for this brief conversation.

The purpose of the Teacher Interview is twofold. First, the interview allows the observer to gain an understanding of whether the classroom day observed was typical, as indicated by the first question and its probes. This question may become important if the number of children present during the observation differs significantly from the number reported by the teacher prior to your observation. In this way, the observer could determine whether a second visit is required. Second, observers such as supervisors and coaches may be using the ELLCO Pre-K as part of an ongoing professional development initiative. In these cases, the additional teacher interview questions help to illuminate teachers' thinking and planning.

Since the interview provides only supplemental information, teacher responses should not be used as direct evidence for scoring determinations. During the interview, a teacher may confirm what you have already observed, thereby increasing your confidence in assigning a particular rating. On the other hand, if the teacher's interview responses contradict what you observed, you should rely on what you saw and noted during your observation to assign the score.

## COMPLETING THE SCORE FORM

The ELLCO Pre–K Score Form provides space to organize the scores for all 19 of the observed items, allows you to calculate subtotals for each section, and How to Conduct an ELLCO Pre–K Observation 29 enables you to create two overarching subscale scores, one for the general classroom environment and another specifically for language and literacy.

The 19 ELLCO Pre–K items are organized into five sections: Classroom Structure, Curriculum, The Language Environment, Books and Book Reading, and Print and Early Writing. After entering the scores for each item in the blank space provided, you can calculate each section's subtotal by taking the sum of all of the items in the section. The highest possible subtotal for each section is as follows:

- Section I: Classroom Structure (sum of Items 1-4) = 20 points
- Section II: Curriculum (sum of Items 5-7) = 15 points
- Section III: The Language Environment (sum of Items 8-11) = 20 points
- Section IV: Books and Book Reading (sum of Items 12-16) = 25 points
- Section V: Print and Early Writing (sum of Items 17-19) = 15 points

After calculating a subtotal for each of the five sections, you are ready to calculate the two ELLCO Pre–K subscales, the *General Classroom Environment* subscale and the *Language and Literacy* subscale. The subscales can be helpful both as a means of structuring feedback to classroom teachers regarding the results from classroom observations and also to measure changes in these two distinct areas. Subscales are arrived at by combining sections as follows:

- Section I: Classroom Structure + Section II: Curriculum = *General Classroom Environment* subscale (35 points total)
- Section III: The Language Environment + Section IV: Books and Book Reading + Section V: Print and Early Writing = *Language and Literacy Environment* subscale (60 points total)

In order to derive a level of proficiency for the classroom when tracking subscales, the observer simply needs to divide the total points assigned for the subscale by the number of items included in it (*General Classroom Environment* subscale = 7; *Language and Literacy Environment* subscale = 12). This will provide an average

rating between 1 and 5, generally corresponding to the rating level key words (e.g., Level 4, strong). For example, the *Language and Literacy Environment* subscale shown in Figure 4.2 received a total of 43 points of a possible score of 60 points, divided as follows:

The Language Environment Subtotal = 12 points

Books and Book Reading Subtotal = 21 points

Print and Early Writing Subtotal = 10 points

The subscale score (43) divided by number of items in the subscale (12) equals an average score of 3.58. This classroom at this point in time is solidly between *basic* and *strong* for *Language and Literacy Environment* items. By examining the components of the subscale, you can identify particular areas of strength and weakness. In this example, Books and Book Reading is a relative strength (4.2), whereas The Language Environment (3.0) and Print and Early Writing (3.3) are weaker. This type of score analysis allows the ability to track progress over time and to target professional development efforts.