

Peer observation and feedback sessions in a professional development programme

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教師教育プログラムにおける授業観察と フィードバックセッションについての考察

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at some trainees' experiences of feedback sessions in Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), a professional development programme, from a participant's viewpoint. Teaching practice and feedback sessions were significant components as the course focused on practical rather than theoretical aspect of teaching. However, the trainees in the examined programme were not informed of the purpose or method of feedback sessions, which may have been crucial for them to be useful in any way. In addition, the tutors' ability to provide and to facilitate may be crucial for efficient and effective sessions. Through interviews with five trainees, some consequences of this line of inquiry is examined. The paper concludes with implications for how the trainees would be able to gain more out of feedback sessions efficiently and effectively.

Key words: professional development, CELTA, peer observation, feedback, framework

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抄 録

本論は、Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) の受講者が教育実習後に行われるフィードバックセッションをどのように受け止めたのかを考察する。CELTA では、教授面において理論以上に実技に焦点を当てる。そのため、教育実習とフィードバックは重要となる。しかし、本論の対象となっているプログラムでは、フィードバックの意義あるいは方法の事前説明がなかった。また、より効果的で効率の良いフィードバックセッションのためには、講師の技能あるいは役割が重要となる。本論では5人の受講生とのインタビュー結果を考察し、その上で受講者がより効率良く、より効果的にフィードバックセッションを活用できる方向性を探っていく。

キーワード: 教師教育、CELTA、同僚観察、フィードバック、フレームワーク

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Overview of CELTA

The Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults, known as CELTA, is usually referred to as a professional development programme for pre-service teachers or teachers with little teaching experience. It is, also, taken by experienced teachers who are in search of ways to make changes to their teaching. The programme is offered both intensively full-time, held over four to five weeks, extensively, held over a few months to over a year. The course consists of input sessions and teaching practice sessions, written assignments, and a certain amount of hours of external observations of qualified teachers. The programme focuses on practical rather than theoretical aspects of teaching. The trainees are assessed on overall performance of their teaching practice and written assignments. Some areas that input sessions cover include being aware of the learners, language, classroom management, staging for lessons to develop reading, listening, speaking and writing skills, all of which are directly related to teaching, and a few sessions that are not directly related to teaching practice, such as possible careers in English teaching. Input sessions are usually conducted as demonstration lessons. For teaching practice, trainees are divided into two groups to teach the required six hours of practical teaching. The hours are divided up into several lessons which are observed by peers and which are also observed and assessed by a tutor.* Students attending these lessons are non-native English learners; in this case the students were all Japanese as the course was held in Japan.

The trainees spend about half the course teaching two levels of students: pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate. The trainees are assessed on planning of the lesson and their teaching and are observed and assessed by a different tutor when they switch students. After teaching, trainees are required to turn in a reflection paper, which asks for a “gut reaction” on what the trainee liked or did not like about the lesson, how the trainee has progressed and what the trainee would do differently if the trainee taught the lesson again. Feedback sessions follow each teaching session. All trainees are expected to contribute to the feedback using the notes that they took during the lessons that they observed.

Much research has been conducted on teacher education/professional development programmes. However, almost all of it has been conducted from either the programme facilitator's [Bailey (1996)], the trainers' view point [Lee(2007), Brandt(2008), Farrell(2008)] or researcher's view point [Jay & Johnson(2001), Gebhard (1990)]. Not much has been written from programme participants' point of view; one of the few exceptions is Carbullido (2002) who looked at the 'CELTA pedagogy' but focused on applying methods instead of critically examining the programme. Thus this paper looks at how some of the trainees experienced the feedback sessions in one extensive CELTA course that I attended as a participant. As we were divided into two different teaching groups, we experienced feedback sessions with two different tutors. Trainees were not “taught” how to conduct feedback and reacted to different

tutors' feedback in various, not always positive, ways. My hypothesis is twofold (a) trainees must be informed of the purpose and method of feedback sessions for them to be useful in any way, and (b) the quality of the feedback depends crucially upon the tutor's ability to provide it and to facilitate the feedback sessions. Even a *good* tutor in the classroom or in a lecture can fail to provide useful and supportive feedback. To explore this line of inquiry, I conducted structured interviews with five trainees of the twelve that attended the course. The paper will end with some suggestions on how the trainees can gain more out of feedback sessions efficiently and effectively.

The "Feedback"

In this paper, I refer to *feedback* as a process where a trainee is given information and is told the effect or impact his/her practice has/had on students. This follows what Brinko (1993, p. 1) notes that feedback as a process where "information about an instructor's teaching is collected, summarized and fed back." However, Cohen (1980) and Menges & Brinko (1986) found that the process has not been consistently successful without proper training and practice in how to give feedback (Cohen, as cited in Brinko, 1993, p. 1) (Menges & Brinko, as cited in Brinko 1993, p. 1). My interpretation of feedback sessions is that the sessions allow trainees to receive comments on their practice in the lesson. In addition, feedback sessions give trainees opportunities to reflect on their own teaching for further improvement. As mentioned earlier, in the specific training programme examined in this paper, the trainees were not told what constitutes "feedback" nor were they told the function of feedback sessions. They were just required to "do" feedback.

Peer observations in CELTA

When they were not teaching, trainees were required to observe their peers' lessons. As the set teaching practice lesson time was two hours per day, two to four trainees taught in a day, depending on the length of one lesson. Trainees usually sat at the back of the classroom where they could not be seen by the students, so as not to distract them. Trainees were usually set tasks by the tutors whilst observing. The tasks were related to what to focus on when observing each lesson. Some of tasks were focusing on the teacher, which included the amount of teacher talk time in several sections of the lesson, focusing on *successful* practices and *unsuccessful* practices in the lesson, focusing on how the teacher gave instructions and focusing on students. The trainees were expected to take notes and write comments while observing, *which were to be used in* the feedback session that followed afterwards.

Feedback sessions in CELTA

In this section, I will discuss how the feedback sessions were conducted. I want to first

note that the trainees were never informed about what the CELTA organizers meant by feedback or what the function of the feedback sessions were. Nor were they informed how the feedback sessions will proceed. Therefore, the trainees were not aware of what to expect from the session; direct feedback from the tutors or the group of trainees critiquing each other. This lack of information may have affected the trainees' expectations and outcomes of the feedback sessions.

After the trainees finished teaching, they had the opportunity to discuss the lessons they taught. They received feedback from both the tutor and peers who observed their lesson. The tutors for each group had their own ways of conducting feedback sessions. For example, sometimes trainees were put into pairs with one member who had taught and one who had not. Depending on the tutor, the trainee who taught would just listen to the feedback given without responding. With another tutor, the trainees were given opportunities to defend their choices or justify and explain their actions while listening to feedback.

On another occasion, each trainee was, in plenary, asked to give a comment on a good practice and a bad practice in each lesson that they observed. The tutor in this session acted as a facilitator and made sure that the trainees did not give comments that overlapped with what other trainees gave. The tutor also commented on the comments made by a trainee, which helped the others to determine the validity or the appropriateness of the trainee's comment.

In a more reflection-focused feedback sessions, there were times when the tutor divided the trainees into two groups of three in each, one group of trainees who had taught and the other that had not. Each group wrote on the whiteboard responses to prompts set by the tutor, for example, aspects of the lesson that they thought were *successful* and aspects that were not so *successful*. This gave trainees opportunities to reflect on their own lesson with focused tasks and also to compare whether their own reflections were similar to what the observers had thought. This seemed to be rather useful for some trainees, as it will be seen in some of the interviews. Giving accurate and precise feedback on lessons 'observed' was not so easy on the day that the trainees taught, and therefore, having the opportunity to share and confirm their observation with peers before giving the feedback seemed to raise quality of the feedback.

Regarding some of the feedback procedures above, Brinko (1993, p. 8) notes that feedback is more effective when it allows for response and interactions. Brandt (2008, p. 37) also mentions that feedback alone is insufficient and that feedback and reflection should be integrated in the form of reflective conversations. Had there been more opportunity of interaction between the trainees who taught and the ones who observed, it might have enabled more reflections and/or deeper discussion between the trainees. To better understand trainees' reactions to feedback sessions, as mentioned in the introduction, I conducted some interviews, which are reported upon in the next section.

How Trainees felt about the Feedback sessions in CELTA

I conducted five interviews following standard qualitative interviewing techniques as suggested by Seidman (1998), including informed participant consent and guaranteed anonymity. The subjects of these interviews will be referred to as trainees A, B, C, D, and E. The trainees had several years of in-service work experience ranging from four to ten years, at various institutions, such as language schools and senior high schools in Japan, before entering the programme, and had various motivations for taking the course. The interviews were recorded and conducted from one week to four weeks after the course. Trainees were individually interviewed for about two hours each following a set interview protocol, and were asked to reflect on various aspects of the course including the effectiveness of feedback sessions. They were also asked to recall on specific examples of why they felt so. Some were interviewed two or three times for clarification. (See appendix A) I used a convenience sample to select participants but I also made sure that trainees from both teaching practice groups were included. Trainees A and B were in one group and Trainees C, D, E were in the other. Trainees recalled the feedback sessions with various impressions. Differences in their impressions and experience may have arisen from what they expected from the feedback sessions, which of the two groups they belonged to and from what they perceived the purpose of the feedback sessions to be. The following paragraphs shed some light on how trainees felt about feedback from tutors and peers.

Tutor Feedback

Trainees received two kinds of feedback from the tutors. One was written form, which the tutors wrote on the lesson plans that the trainee submitted before the teaching practice. The tutors wrote comments on each teaching session as to whether it was relevant or not and how effective it was in the lesson. When the sessions were not relevant, the comments were sometimes written in a question form giving opportunities for the trainees to think more deeply. The written form of feedback was returned to the trainees either after the feedback sessions or at the end of the day. Consequently, there was not much chance for the trainees to communicate or clarify the feedback. This is also mentioned in Brinko (1993) "feedback is more effective when given as soon as possible after performance".

The other kind of feedback was in verbal form when the trainees that taught and/or observed discussed the lessons. Depending on the individual, tutors would act as facilitators or give direct feedback to the trainees that taught. Having two tutors enabled the trainees to be exposed to different ideas; however, trainee C felt that not all the feedback he received was consistent. He felt that the two tutors had different preferences and some things that were praised by one tutor (and incorporated in subsequent lessons) led him to receive negative comments from the other tutor. Because of this inconsistency, he was not sure if what he

did was a good practice or not. This may have been due to how far along we were in the course, related to what the trainees were expected to do at any given point in time, or it may have been due to tutor's preferences. Woods (1996) discusses this issue when pointing out the variable and problematic nature of the contextual factors in the assessment of second language teaching. One of these factors is the degree to which a tutor's subjective view of good teaching can impinge on the evaluation of the lesson. (Woods, as cited in Thaine, 2004, p. 336)

Or, the 'inconsistent' feedback may have evolved from the different interpretation of criteria by the tutors. Thaine (2004) addressed this in interview research with fourteen CELTA trainers at six different centres in New Zealand. The trainers only had a wide range of work experience. When asked about how they interpreted each criterion, Thaine found that of the sixteen criteria, the trainers only had consistent interpretation in only seven criteria. (See Appendix B for the sixteen criteria and the seven criteria that had consistent interpretation) Therefore, not only the tutors' preference of what is practice to be conducted or what a successful practice looks like in a lesson but also the tutors' different interpretation of the criteria may have resulted in the trainees receiving difficult feedback even for the same practice. In addition, Brandt (2006) found that having two tutors on the course created some problems for trainees. One of the problems was that the trainees felt the need to familiarize themselves with the new tutor's preferences, as they believed that there was a correlation between the frequency of demonstrating the tutors' favoured skills and the grade they would get.

Trainee B appreciated feedback sessions conducted by both of his tutors. He reported that tutors would ask the trainees who taught, one by one, the question "How do you feel?" and the trainees would say what/how they felt about the lesson they had taught. Then, their peers would add to what the trainee said. The tutors tried to include many aspects by asking about different stages of the lessons. Trainee B felt that both tutors acted as facilitators, which made the feedback sessions very effective and efficient.

Peer Feedback

All trainees agreed that the feedbacks they received from the peers was useful in general. However, for some there seemed to have been some negative aspects. Trainee B, at first, found it challenging to have his equals critiquing his teaching. But he came to feel it was a good experience rather than only having the tutor critique, and eventually felt it easier to accept comments from his peers. "Peers asking me questions like 'Why did you do that?' and that made me justify and think back carefully." (Trainee B). The questions from his peers made it easier for him to reflect on his teaching. He also mentioned that peer feedback sessions were interesting in that it showed individual personality and whether the trainees knew when to put

themselves in the spotlight and when to put the others in the spotlight. He thought that this was strongly related to the teaching attitudes in the classrooms.

Relating to personality issue, both Trainee A and Trainee E, though they were in different groups, mentioned that there were personality clashes and stubbornness that were difficult to avoid with both tutors and amongst the trainees. Personality clashes and stubbornness may have been caused from different expectations and perceptions of what constitutes feedback. Trainee E felt there were times when feedback comments from peers were not general and were rather subjective than objective. Trainee D mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to figure out whether some comments were a feedback or just a personal idea suggesting a different approach or activity. Trainee D did not appreciate this very much as it could just be a 'different style' of teaching, and if what she did worked well, she should be evaluated and given comment on what she had done, rather than given a suggestion as to how someone else might do the lesson. Receiving feedback which did not meet their expectations caused tensions amongst the trainees. Brinko (1993, p.6) writes "Feedback is effective when it creates cognitive dissonance." Indeed, different opinions encourage active discussions, allowing the trainees to have different perspectives from their own. However the level of dissonance and how each perceived the dissonance could vary. It may have made some trainees feel uneasy to give their frank feedback to their peers.

If one of the purposes of the feedback session is to encourage trainees to reflect on their teaching, trainees need to be open to all comments given both by their peer and tutors. Zeichner and Liston stress the importance of being open to comments and define "openmindedness as an active desire to listen to more sides than one, to give full attention to alternative possibilities, and to recognize the possibility of error even in beliefs that are dearest to us." (1995, p.10) The atmosphere, of trainees being open and willing to listen to comments, also encourages trainees to give free feedback with less pressure. Had the trainees been informed or instructed to be open-minded in feedback sessions, trainees might have tried more to accept various comments. It may have enabled the observers to be more comfortable in giving feedbacks. Trainee B recalls that in order to avoid 'conflicts', he was very careful in giving feedback comments; making the point but trying to make his point but at the same time trying not to annoy his partner or the group. This may have changed the content of the feedback from that which he had really wanted to give.

Trainee A, B and E noted that the quality of peer feedback depended on whom you worked with. They recalled that there were times when they received a vague, general comment and they felt that it did not help them in any way. This could be considered an example of what Brinko (1993) writes- feedback is more effective with specific details; vague general impressions offer little assistance to instructors and that specific information is crucial in providing feedback to teachers. Another example of feedback that trainees experienced in a

negative way was feedback from peers who could not see the whole picture of the lesson due to a lack of understanding of what needs to be done in a lesson. To be specific, I observed a lesson by Trainee E on language clarification, which usually requires a lot of explanation from the teacher to the students. In the feedback session, trainee E received feedback from a trainee with no experience of teaching that there was too much 'teacher talk time'. He remembered this incident very well and referred to it in the interview. He recalled that this was one of the occasions when he tried not to listen to everything being told from the peers (i.e. the amount of 'teacher talk time'), and not to take comments from peers too personally. But he tried to be open minded throughout the feedback sessions in the programme, because he believed that "there is always at least one truth in what people tell you." (Trainee E).

Challenges in feedback

Trainee C found the contrast between his own reflection on the lesson and comment from his peers after the lesson very interesting. Something he found that he did not do so well was, at times, commented as having worked out well. At other times, practices that he thought went well in his lesson were commented on as something he needed to put more work into, or as being not relevant to his lesson. He appreciated the feedback. However, not getting the tutor's opinion on the feedback left him to questioning whether what he did was right or not. He feels that he would have learned more if he always received direct feedback from the tutors and then reflected on his teaching because he feels that "peers do not know as much" and discussing amongst themselves would not always enable him to find the "right answer".

Observing lessons and giving feedback later on was sometimes not always easy for the trainees. Trainee A and Trainee C made a point that it was easy to give feedback on the days when they did not have to teach. However, on the days when the trainees had to teach, their minds were pre-occupied with how they would do their own lessons. They would be looking through their own lesson plans, which made them much less focused on observation. When they were observing after they taught, the trainees lacked concentration due to the exhaustion of teaching and from spending time on reflecting on their own teaching as required by the reflective paperwork.

Looking back at the feedback sessions and the discussions, there were a few occasions when the trainees and the tutor had conflicting opinions about certain practices in the trainees' lesson. The trainees agreed that the use of competition-encouraged activity lead students to be active seemed to have worked well when it was used, and was a relevant activity that could meet some lessons' aims. However, the tutor disagreed and suggested that a different activity, done in pairs, should have been implemented. Such incidents have raised a question of who decides what *successful* practices are in a lesson. This seemed rather difficult to judge without feedback comments from the students who actually took the lesson. If a

lesson proceeds without stumbling, can it be considered *successful*? Or should successful practices be determined solely by the tutors rather than successful for the students? The 'verdict' of whether a practice was *successful* or not was framed by the assumptions of the trainees and the tutor. Trainees not having the opportunity to hear direct feedback from students who were in the lessons made answering these questions very difficult. This may have led to the inconsistent feedback from the tutors, due to the tutors' preference of practices for certain stages. Brinko (1993) notes that if the students who were in the lessons were present, they would be able to provide data and would make the feedback sessions more effective for the trainees. However, for this to be effective, the student participants at the feedback sessions may need to be limited to higher proficient ones due to language proficiency issues.

Conclusion and Implications

Trainees with whom I took CELTA experienced the feedback sessions in different ways: some were satisfied whilst others were not. Although there were some positive aspects, it seems that trainees in both teaching groups had rather negative experiences regarding peer feedback. Trainees in both groups were not satisfied by the vague feedback they received and were cautious about the tense atmosphere created during some feedback sessions. These were related to prior experiences; the amount of teaching experience, being familiar with what kind of practices are required in each session, or individual personality, which may not be helped in any ways. The latter may have been relieved with clearer instructions, and some background information or a framework on the purpose of feedback sessions. With this information, the trainees may have been prepared as to what to expect. It may have enabled the sessions to proceed more effectively.

It also became clear that there were reported differences in satisfaction based on which group a trainee was in. Trainees C, D, and E were all in the same group and showed more dissatisfaction with the feedback from the tutors. Among their dissatisfaction were how the feedback sessions proceeded and the different interpretations of what constitutes a *successful* practice in teaching. As previously mentioned, allowing the student participants to be present at the feedback sessions may provide *fair* data to some extent. However, due to language proficiency, the issue of the limitation of students to be present at the session remains as an issue.

As this was qualitative research based on one extensive professional development programme, the findings may not be generalized to all feedback sessions in teacher-training programmes, not even in another CELTA. The experience and the interpretations will depend on the individual. However, this has raised the awareness of the importance of trainees to be provided a framework for feedback sessions and better preparing those experiencing feedback as it may result in difference of perceptions and experience.

Endnote

*For a full description of the CELTA requirements refer to:

<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/teaching-awards/celta.html>

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview protocol

1. What is your teaching experience of teaching before taking the CELTA? (teaching years, kind of institutions)
2. Have you attended any teacher training programme before CELTA?
3. What was your motivation/reason for taking CELTA?
4. Did you feel you had some challenges during the course?
If yes, what were they? Why were they challenging? Were you able to overcome them?
How did you manage to overcome them?
5. Have you applied what to you learnt in CELTA to your work?
If yes, what? If no, will you apply it in the future? What?
6. Have you done reflections on your own teaching prior to attending the course?
7. Do you think reflections are efficient/effective to improve your teaching? Why? Why not?
8. What/How did you think about the reflection in the course?
9. Did you have any difficulties in filling in the reflection paper? If Yes, What were they?
10. What did you mainly reflect on? (positive or negative practices?)
11. Was the reflection helpful for the next teaching practice?
12. Do you have any suggestions for improving the reflection process?
13. Will you continue reflection after the course?
14. What do you think about using self-recorded video for reflection?
15. Did you find the feedback sessions useful? Why? Why not?
16. What are some of the specific examples of useful/not useful feedback you received?
17. Do you have any suggestions for improving the feedback sessions?
18. Did you incorporate the feedback into the following teaching practice? Which feedbacks?
19. How did you feel about having feedback from two different tutors?

Appendix B

Cambridge CELTA Assessment Criteria (January 2000 draft)

Demonstrate classroom teaching skills by:

- 1 Establishing rapport and developing motivation
- 2 Adjusting their own language to meet the level and needs of the learners*
- 3 Giving clear instructions*
- 4 Providing accurate and appropriate models of language
- 5 Focusing on appropriate specific language and/or skills
- 6 Conveying the meaning of new language with clear and appropriate context*
- 7 Checking students' understanding of the new language*
- 8 Clarifying forms of language*
- 9 Identifying errors and sensitively correcting students' oral language*
- 10 Identifying errors and sensitively correcting students' written language
- 11 Monitoring and evaluating students' progress
- 12 Teaching a class with sensitivity to the needs, interest and background of the group
- 13 Organising the classroom to suite the learners and/or the activity
- 14 Setting up and managing pair, group, individual and plenary work
- 15 Adopting a teacher role appropriate to the stage of the lesson and the teaching context*
- 16 Teaching in a way which helps to develop learner self-awareness and autonomy

*Criteria showing consistency in interpretation

Modified from Thaine (2004, p. 345)