

SOME LESSON PLANNING PROBLEMS FOR NEW TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

Experience shows that many novice language teachers encounter difficulties when planning their lessons. Some of these difficulties are immediately evident in the lesson plans teacher trainees keep in their learning teaching portfolios, which is a requirement in many teaching qualification programmes. Some of the questions, which logically arise, are whether trainees are aware of their difficulties and needs in this area and if they are able to overcome their problems, so that they can continue to develop professionally.

The aims of this paper are to report the results of a survey conducted into teacher trainees' perceptions of their own strengths and difficulties in lesson planning during teaching practice on intensive teacher training courses. The data was collected during Cambridge CELTA training in Sofia. On the basis of interpretation of the results relating to the difficulties, implications for further work in the area are considered.

Context

The participants in this research are 23 teacher trainees and their teaching practice tutors from three five-week intensive CELTA courses, run from August 2007 to March 2008 by AVO-Bell, Sofia.

Cambridge CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults) is a Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. The qualification course is introductory and is aimed at people with little or no previous ELT experience, or some experience but little previous training. The participants in the courses under investigation were no exception - some candidates with relatively long teaching experience, as well as others, entirely new to the profession.

The syllabus, set by Cambridge ESOL, incorporates work in five course units, where, among dealing with learners and teachers, language analysis, language skills - reading, listening, speaking and writing, and developing teaching skills and professionalism, there is a separate unit, *4 Planning and resources for different teaching contexts*, with its own requirements. The overall assessment aims, which Cambridge ESOL (2007: 3) stipulates for Unit 4, are:

Candidates should be able to:

plan and prepare lessons designed to develop their learners' overall language competence.

To ensure achieving this, the syllabus (2007:7) requires work on the following:

4.1 Principles of planning; 4.2 Lesson planning for effective teaching of adult learners of English; 4.3 Evaluation of lesson planning; 4.4 The selection, adaptation and evaluation of materials and resources in planning; 4.5 Knowledge of commercially produced and non-published materials and classroom resources.

The course programme, developed by the individual centre, provides for work towards the different units aims in an integrated way - through structured participatory input sessions, supervised lesson planning (with more support at the initial stages), some non-assessed and a total of 6 hours assessed teaching practice (TP), regular oral and written feedback on teaching, peer observation, observation of experienced teachers, reading, research and assignment

preparation, and consultation with the tutors. A specially assigned TP tutor is responsible for each 5 to 6 teachers in the role of a mentor and assessor at different points in the course.

The specific assessment criteria relating to planning are quite numerous and demanding. Hence, teachers familiarise themselves with them gradually, so they do not feel intimidated by too many requirements early on the course, i.e. the criteria, 4a – 4n (see appendix), are not presented to them in detail at the very beginning.

Research design

The instruments used are two questionnaires, administered to the whole population of trainees. They aim at investigating the same categories at two different points in time. The first questionnaire was distributed at the beginning of each course, after the trainees had had the experience of planning and teaching their first two lessons, and the second – at the end of the course, after everyone had taught their last lesson.

Questionnaire 1 (see appendix) consists of three straightforward open-ended questions, so as not to influence trainees' thinking and feelings, not to disclose more of the course than they can handle at this early stage and not to burden them with a lot of terminology, either. A secondary aim here is to indirectly encourage learning teaching autonomy, i.e. stimulate trainees to look for various options themselves.

The rationale behind the design of Questionnaire 2 is that by the end of the course trainees are familiar with the course requirements and assessment procedures, are (presumably) more aware of their needs than at the beginning and the terminology will not present any difficulties at this final stage: hence - the more specific category questions (see appendix). The indirect encouragement of autonomy still continues to be a valid aim.

For triangulation of the data, the same questionnaires were completed by the TP tutors, who were asked their opinion about their respective trainees' problems and strengths and about what assistance they had provided for them.

Data collection

The return of questionnaire responses was almost 100%: all 23 trainees (100%) submitted responses to the first questionnaire and 22 (97%) – to the second. The data from Questionnaire 1 was collated by means of colour-coding the different categories which appeared in the respondents' answers to the open-ended questions. The numbers of responses from Questionnaire 2 were counted for each category. For the purposes of this paper, only results relating to difficulties are presented. Due to space limitations, the top six problems are reflected. For easier comparison, the results from the two questionnaires are organised in one table and the numbers of trainees who found the particular feature difficult have been transformed into percentages (see *Table 1* below).

Data interpretation and findings

It seems that by the end of the course, surprisingly, more trainees find lesson planning more difficult than at the beginning. In most categories numbers have increased, new categories have been added to the difficult ones and priorities have changed. This may be due to a variety of reasons: that the trainees' awareness has increased and they have become more demanding towards themselves, or that they have become more stressed by the approach of the final assessed lessons and the external moderation of the assessment, or that tuition and

assessment requirements have biased them towards a different way of thinking and evaluating priorities, and others.

Table 1: Difficulties

No	Difficulties at the beginning	Difficulties at the end
1	Timing - 39%	Timing - 68%
2	Staging - 22%	Anticipating problems – 45% + all 3 tutors
3	Sequencing activities – 22%	Thinking of relevant solutions – 18% + all 3 tutors
4	Aims – 17%	Formulating lesson aims -14% + 2 tutors
5	Anticipating problems/ level of Ss - 17%	Choosing appropriate contexts (for systems lessons) – 36% + none of tutors
6	Language analysis - 13%	Sequencing activities – 36% + none of tutors

The comparison of results also shows that teachers improve in most aspects of planning as they familiarise themselves with the CELTA planning requirements and receive support from tutors (especially overt in the first part of the course), and after gaining in experience and confidence through implementing the plans in their teaching.

Most of the teachers improve in deciding on lesson aims but still experience problems in formulating them: it is indicative that 95% find deciding on lesson aims easy at the end and only 14% find formulating the aims still difficult. Most teachers are aware of the former but unaware of the latter - perhaps they do not perceive the difference between setting the aims and formulating them. Tutors' responses show that, at the end, teachers still experience problems formulating their aims.

It appears that most teachers are preoccupied with some of the more 'technical' aspects of planning, like timing and sequencing activities, and underestimate some important aspects, like anticipating problems and planning relevant solutions, even at the final stage of the course. Timing, which has been rated as difficult initially by 39%, has increased to 68% at the end. Sequencing activities, which was a preoccupation for 22% initially, rose to 36%. With the advance of the course more teachers are aware of the importance of anticipating problems, which was initially rated as difficult by 17%, finally increasing to 45%. This is also born out by the TP tutors' responses, all of whom agree that teachers still find this aspect difficult. An interesting discrepancy between teachers and tutors can be observed in relation to thinking of relevant solutions to the problems. All tutors agree teachers still find this difficult at the final stages of the course, while only 18% of teachers perceive it as such. There is also a difference between the large percentage of teachers finding anticipating problems difficult – 45%, and only 18% finding thinking of solutions difficult. It is hard to explain how people who claim they find it difficult to anticipate problems can easily think of relevant solution to the same, presumably anticipated, problems.

The teachers appreciated their TP tutors' help and found it sufficient and relevant. They are generally aware of what options they can use to develop in the areas of difficulty that they have identified.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it can be pointed out that no definitive conclusions can be drawn on the basis only of trainees' perceptions of lesson planning and their tutors' opinions. The matter is in need of further investigation. For instance, investigation into the lesson plans themselves, the product of planning, could achieve better triangulation of the results. Nevertheless, this small scale research has pointed us in the way of better understanding teacher trainees' concerns about planning lessons. It has also raised more questions, which are interesting, and deserve exploration, like: *What is the relationship between the trainees' perceptions and their real difficulties?*, *How do we influence trainees through tuition and assessment on the course (so they feel planning is more difficult at the end)?*, *Is it the process of planning or the product, the lesson plan, that they find difficult?*, *What further support can be provided so the process of planning is better facilitated?*, etc., all questions which call for further research.

References:

Cambridge ESOL, *CELTA Syllabus and Assessment Guidelines*, www.cambridge-eft.org/teaching, (as of 2007)

Appendix:

Assessment criteria in relation to planning

By the end of the six hours' assessed teaching practice, successful candidates at pass level should show convincingly and consistently that they can:

➤ **prepare and plan for the effective teaching of adult ESOL learners by:**

4a identifying and stating appropriate aims/ outcomes for individual lessons;

4b ordering activities so that they achieve lesson aims/ outcomes;

4c selecting, adapting or designing materials, activities, resources and technical aids appropriate for the lesson;

4d presenting the materials for classroom use with a professional appearance, and with regard to copyright requirements;

4e describing the procedure of the lesson in sufficient detail;

4f including interaction patterns appropriate for the materials and activities used in the lesson;

4g ensuring balance, variety and a communicative focus in materials, tasks and activities

4h allocating appropriate timing for different stages in the lessons;

4i analysing language with attention to form, meaning and phonology and using correct terminology;

4j anticipating potential difficulties with language, materials and learners;

4k suggesting solutions to anticipated problems;

4l using terminology that relates to language skills and sub-skills correctly;

4m working constructively with colleagues in the planning of teaching practice sessions;

4n reflecting on and evaluating their plans in the light of the learning process and suggesting improvements for future plans.

(Cambridge ESOL, 2007:20-21)

Questionnaire 1

Aim: to help you become aware of your strengths and needs in the area of lesson planning at this stage of the CELTA course.

1. What do you find relatively easy in planning your CELTA lessons?
2. What do you find difficult? Why?
3. What can you do to help yourself in the areas of difficulty? What help can your tutors provide?

Thank you.

Questionnaire 2

Aim: to help you become aware of your strengths and needs in the area of lesson planning at this (final) stage of the CELTA course.

1. In planning your CELTA lessons which of the following do you find:

- relatively easy? Put a \surd .
- difficult? Put a x.

- a) deciding on lesson aims
- b) formulating lesson aims
- c) researching the target language (for system lessons)
- d) choosing appropriate contexts (for systems lessons)
- e) selecting classroom activities
- f) preparing appropriate materials
- g) anticipating problems
- h) thinking of relevant solutions
- i) outlining the procedure of the lesson
- j) providing the rationale for the activities (stage/ activity aims)
- k) sequencing activities
- l) estimating the time for each stage/ activity
- m) deciding on appropriate interaction patterns
- n) others (Please, specify!) _____

2. What can you do to improve in the areas of difficulty? What help could you ask from peer teachers? Please, be as specific as possible.

3. Add further comments in relation to lesson planning, if you have any.

Thank you.