# Investigating reflection in written assignments on CELTA courses

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Reflection is an important component of teacher education and forms part of the assessment of candidates on CELTA courses. However, questions remain regarding the level of reflection candidates can demonstrate on the CELTA and how best to assess such reflection. The current study analyses reflective assignments from full-time CELTA candidates in order to investigate the level of reflection they demonstrate. The study revealed varying degrees of reflectivity, which contradicts some of the existing research into reflection on pre-service teacher training courses. The study also developed a reflective framework which can be used to inform the assessment of reflection on such courses.

## Introduction

### The CELTA and the importance of reflection

The Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) is a pre-service teacher training course administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Certificate (UCLES). This course includes the planning and execution of six hours of assessed teaching practice (TP). It is this 'hands-on' (Borg, 2002: 384) component which trainee teachers tend to find most valuable, and which allows for reflection on actual teaching experiences. Given that reflectionhas become an important component of teacher education, the CELTA places a strong emphasis on this to the extent that it forms part of assessment by means of post TP evaluation forms and a "Lessons from the Classroom" written assignment (LFCA) of 750-1000 words (UCLES, 2014a).

### Lack of reflection

It is widely acknowledged that neophyte teachers struggle to engage in reflection, broadly defined here as 'deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement' (Hatton & Smith, 1995: 40), since their beliefs and values are significantly impacted by their own experience as students prior to entering the profession. In addition, several studies conclude that novice teachers lack the experience and knowledge considered necessary for in-depth reflection (e.g. Lai, 2008). As Watts and Lawson put it:

> For beginning teachers their relative newness to teaching may prevent theorizing at any significant level because their experience is too restricted by issues such as class management and pupil behaviour. (2009: 610)

Their study on the use of a reflection rubric in peer and self-assessment of TP highlights how the quality of reflection develops over time from the simple and routine to the more complex and in-depth. This, they argue, is partly due to certain teaching competencies becoming automatised, freeing up cognitive capacity.

Concerning the CELTA course specifically, Borg (2002) found that many CELTA candidates also lacked the terminology to be able to discuss their teaching in any depth and, in their desire to become part of the discourse community, referred to certain concepts before they had fully grasped their meaning.

Time constraints also impact the quality of reflection that can be expected of CELTA candidates. From its inception, the CELTA has aimed to meet the staffing needs of private language schools around the world, and as such the award is 'market driven' (Borg, ibid.: 425) and typically self-funded. Thus, even though it is widely acknowledged by both CELTA course providers and candidates that a longer course would be more beneficial, the full-time version is usually only four weeks long and requires candidates to have only 120 hours of contact time with course tutors (UCLES op.cit.). Due to these time constraints, it has been argued that CELTA courses place an emphasis on the acquisition of ´formulaic moves that are replicated through practice' (Stanley & Murray, 2013:112) necessary for survival in the classroom (Borg, ibid.). Indeed, with only an hour scheduled for TP feedback on taught lessons, time precludes a focus on anything else.

A growing body of research also demonstrates that meaningful reflection cannot be externally imposed (e.g. Mann & Walsh, 2013) since this is at odds with the idea of professional development as something voluntary (Borg, 2010), giving rise to 'strategic' or 'display' reflection (Hobbs, 2007a: 410). Indeed, by making reflection a course requirement which is assessed by tutors, there is a danger that the depth and quality of reflection will be reduced since candidates will be inclined to write or say what they think the tutors and the assessor expect to read or hear. As a consequence, some have questioned whether reflection should be assessed at all (Hobbs, 2007b).

## Purpose of study

Despite these shortcomings, reflection has assumed greater importance on the CELTA with the piloting of revised grade descriptors in 2014, and their formal introduction in 2015.

According to these descriptors the levels of reflection demonstrated by candidates depends on their ability to acknowledge "key strengths and weaknesses" in their practice and the extent to which they can use these insights to "develop their teaching skills" (All taken from UCLES, 2014b, p. 20).

While these new UCLES grade descriptors concur with our broad definition of reflection as 'deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement', conversations with fellow CELTA tutors during a piloting phase of this study revealed a

lack of consensus concerning the 'key strengths and weaknesses' that candidates are supposed to reflect on. The vaguely defined categories therefore risk rendering the descriptors inadequate as an assessment tool. Thus, a rubric enabling a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of reflection on CELTA courses is needed. The development of such a tool would not only inform the assessment of reflection on CELTA courses but would also raise awareness among course stakeholders of the importance of reflection on the CELTA. In addition, ascertaining whether candidates go beyond a reflection on 'formulaic moves', for example, thus demonstrating a more sophisticated level of reflection, would provide us with evidence to contradict some of the research conclusions and arguments presented above.

In order to explore these initial concerns, and to investigate further the issue of reflection on pre-service teacher education courses, this study therefore sought to ascertain whether CELTA candidates are capable of demonstrating "sophisticated" reflection.

# Methodology

## Participants

The LFCAs in the current study were all written by CELTA candidates on courses where the researcher was course tutor. The candidates were chosen because they represented a broad spectrum of CELTA candidates in terms of gender, age, L1 and achieved course grade.

Tab.1 gives an overview of the study's participants. Four of the participants trained in South America on three separate courses (Lily and Ricky took the same course), while John trained on a course in Europe. The researcher was the course tutor on all courses.

This paper reports on part of a larger study into issues reflected on by CELTA candidates, which was granted ethical approval from the Sheffield Hallam University.

**Table 1: Profile of participants**

## The LFCA

The LFCA is one of four written assignments that candidates must complete during the CELTA. As with the other three assignments on the course, it is marked by CELTA tutors and receives either a 'Pass', 'Pass on Resubmission' or a 'Fail on Resubmission grade' (UCLES, op.cit.: 18), which means candidates are given one opportunity to resubmit.

Candidates can fail one assignment and still obtain the CELTA, however a fail grade for two assignments results in a fail grade overall for the course. If a candidate fails one assignment, they cannot be considered for the Pass A grade for the course. A stipulated number of written assignments are double-marked and also constitute part

of trainees' portfolios, which, along with lesson plans and self-evaluation of taught lessons, are read by an external assessor sent by Cambridge to moderate the course.

The design of the pro forma for the LFCA are the responsibility of individual tutors and centres but must allow for:

- candidates' identification of their own teaching strengths and development needs
- reflections on their own teaching
- reflections on the implications for their own teaching from the observations of experienced ELT professionals and colleagues on the course

(UCLES, ibid.)

Table 2 below summarises the similarities and differences between the participants' LFCA pro forma used as prompts in the current study

**Table 2: Differences in LFCA pro forma**

In all cases, the researcher introduced the LFCAs during an input session on professional development in the third week of the CELTA course, which meant candidates typically had at least 5 days to complete the assignment. During this session, candidates read the LFCA pro forma and any doubts about how to complete the assignment were clarified.

## Data analysis

A reflective framework was developed (see below), which was used as a tool to guide the qualitative content analysis of the LFCAs. Another researcher carried out sample coding of the data in her office at Sheffield Hallam University, and approaches such as reflexivity and negative case analysis were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the coded categories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## The development of a reflective framework

Hatton and Smith's reflective model (op.cit.) has had a significant impact on subsequent reflective frameworks (e.g., Lai, 2008). This model identified different kinds of reflection, which were subsequently used to analyse writing by student teacherss. It describes four developmental stages starting with 'descriptive writing' (op.cit.: 45). Novice teachers move beyond this and towards different forms of 'reflection-on-action' including 'descriptive reflection' and 'dialogic reflection' (op.cit.:45). In progressing through these stages, the student teacher moves from a concern with the self to a concern with the impact of his/her actions on the learner.

Ward and McCotter's rubric (2004) has been used to measure reflection in many contexts. Derived from Hatton and Smith's research, it also describes four levels of reflection, each of which has three dimensions. At the initial level of 'routine reflection'

(op.cit.: 251), while giving reasons for occurrences, student teachers only hold external factors responsible for issues in their teaching and show little interest in changing their behaviour. The next stage of reflection in their model is 'technical' (op.cit.: 251), which is typified by low level enquiries but without reference to the views of students or colleagues. Here there is a desire to change but a lack of 'insight'. (op.cit.: 252). Ward and McCotter adopt Hatton and Smith's term 'dialogic' reflection for the third level of reflection in their rubric. Yet whereas the latter, drawing on reflection's constructivist origins, contend that this 'dialogue' is only with one's self, the former claim that 'dialogic' reflection involves the student teachertaking more account of the perspectives of peers and learners, and maintaining a constant questioning attitude to their practice.

What almost all reflective research tools share is the notion that "critical reflection" constitutes a sophisticated level of reflectivity. A lack of consensus concerning critical reflection, however, helps account for difficulties with the operationalization of reflection in research instruments. Taking into consideration that any rubric for the assessment of reflection should be as practical as possible, I therefore chose not to include critical reflection in my reflective framework.

### Summary

The table below summarises key reflective models in the literature in the form of a tentative reflection framework. This framework was used in the current study when attempting to establish levels of reflection demonstrated by CELTA candidates in their LFCAs.

**Table 3: Framework for the assessment of reflection on full-time CELTA courses**

## Results and discussion

According to the reflective framework outlined in Table3, which served as a guideline for ascertaining the levels of reflection achieved by CELTA candidates, the LFCAs show evidence of varying levels of reflectivity.

### Evidence of low levels of reflection

Many comments from the LFCAs reveal a focus on aspects of the course that candidates struggled with:

1. I've been told that it was a very intense course but I couldn't imagine that it would be so demanding (Miki)
2. <name of tutor> came up with concept checking questions so quickly and effectively that he made it look easy. It most definitely is not (Dave)
3. As I am in a training program my strengths have had their ups and downs (Lily)

The focus of the above quotes, which reveal a preoccupation with 'self-centered concerns such as…workload, personal emotion, and recognition for personal success' (Lai, op.cit.: 113), is on the self rather than the students. They therefore constitute examples of low-level or "routine" reflection (Ward & McCotter, op.cit.). Indeed, the UCLES grade descriptors make clear that where candidates reflect on strengths and weaknesses, these reflections should be used to develop their teaching skills. In the examples above, however, candidates make no mention of how their reflection will lead to improvement. Dave's comment is particularly interesting since, despite his prior experience as a teacher, he does not demonstrate in-depth reflection here. While this may seem to contradict Watts and Lawson's theory that reflection develops over time, it should also be pointed out that Dave was new to English language teaching, and was struggling on the course because of perceived conflict with one of the tutors. Dave's comment, then, as with Miki's, could be considered an example of "survival" reflection (Watts & Lawson, op.cit.).

The following quotes also demonstrate low-level reflection:

1 Imperatives should be used when giving instructions (Lily)
2 I´ve never thought about all the criteria and techniques that you are supposed to know as a teacher (Miki)
3 I will ask students what they have to do every time I set an activity (Lily)

The first two quotes here are noteworthy as both "should" and "supposed to" suggest obligation. The second quote is particularly interesting since Miki is claiming here that all teachers have an obligation to be familiar with the CELTA criteria and techniques even though there are doubtless a great number of successful EFL teachers who have never taken the award. Quote three is even more striking since Lily is asserting here that instructions be checked "every time" she sets an activity. In all these examples, no mention is made either of the appropriacy of such techniques in a particular context or of the reasons for their implementation. Nor do candidates show any evidence of questioning these practices. According to our reflective framework, they therefore demonstrate low level reflection.

## Evidence of high levels of reflection

Referring to the reflective framework, providing a rationale for classroom practices suggests at least a descriptive level of reflection (Hatton & Smith, op.cit.). However, what is interesting about the findings is not that candidates provide a justification for particular practices, but that they give the learner as justification:

1. Establishing rapport is an essential part for the setting and development of the activities in the classroom because this is the fuel for students to learn (Ricky)
2. The students appreciate when the teacher monitors them, especially at the elementary level, since they can see the teacher's interest regarding their progress (Lily)

Not only are these examples 'other-oriented' in that they involve a consideration of others' perspectives, but they are also 'student-oriented' (Lee, 2005: 710) as they consider the impact of teaching techniques on the learners. As such, they provide convincing evidence of sophisticated reflection.

Besides providing the learner as justification for particular techniques, candidates also referred to the appropriacy of certain techniques in specific contexts:

1 Depending on the level of students and the complexity of the task it is necessary to give an example in open class or demonstrate the exercise (Ricky)
2 Language should be graded depending on how much vocabulary and how many grammatical structures students know, otherwise getting the message across will be impossible (Lily)
3 After some tasks and mainly after the controlled practice I find it really important to check if they understood the lesson and also try to clarify doubts (Miki)

According to our reflective framework, low-level reflection tends to be restricted to a consideration of how to develop one's ability in a set of discrete teaching techniques or micro-skills whereas in-depth reflection involves a consideration of the context. Thus, these instances further indicate in-depth reflection.

## Evidence for varying levels of reflectivity

There is a considerable body of research in support of the view that in-depth reflection rarely, if ever, occurs on short-term intensive second language teacher education courses (e.g. Watkins, 2011 not least because candidates reflect on the implementation of 'non-negotiable techniques' (Hobbs, op.cit.: 4) rather than on their appropriacy or purpose. Participants' use of the language of obligation tends to confirm such criticisms as this indicates that trainees see certain behavior as 'non-negotiable'. However, it is possible that some instances of low-level reflection (or high-level reflection for that matter) might be examples of "strategic" reflection since reducing reflection to a course requirement can lead candidates to write or say whatever they think the tutor will approve of in order to pass the course (Borg, op.cit.). These findings raise some interesting questions about the evaluation of observed lessons in general and the assessment of TP on CELTA courses specifically. How can tutors distinguish between "strategic reflection" and "authentic reflection", for example? What responsibility do tutors bear for candidates viewing the techniques they are applying as non-negotiable? And is it possible (or even necessary) to ascertain whether candidates are merely *demonstrating* reflection, or are *actually* reflecting?

At the same time, though, by considering the appropriacy of techniques from learners' perspectives, or in light of contextual factors, the CELTA candidates in this study demonstrate an awareness of the fact that these techniques are, in fact, negotiable. As

such, there is evidence to suggest that, although we find many examples of low-level reflection, sophisticated reflection does occur on CELTA courses. The fact that many instances of both low and high levels of reflection can be found within the same assignment might suggest that the development of reflection is ongoing. Interestingly, however, there appears to be no correlation between the amount of pre-course or pre-service ELT experience and the ability of candidates to undertake "in-depth reflection". This might suggest that neither time nor experience facilitates more in-depth reflection.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This study developed a framework to evaluate teacher reflection on full-time CELTA courses. Using this framework, the study identified varying levels of reflectivity.

While references by participants to difficulties and challenges on the CELTA suggest a low level of reflection, by considering the value of teaching techniques in light of contextual factors and providing the learners as the justification for their use, candidates also show evidence of sophisticated reflection. This finding is at odds with previous research which suggests that in-depth reflection does not occur on CELTA courses. However, further research is needed to support this conclusion, especially in light of the small sample size, which is clearly not representative. Moreover, as four of the five research participants had previous teaching experience, it remains unclear whether novice teachers are capable of such reflection.

While the assessment of reflection on second language teacher education courses such as the CELTA is unlikely to change in the near future, some suggestions to improve the quality of reflective thought demonstrated by student teachers might include using a different LFCA pro forma. One LFCA pro forma I have come across required candidates to write from the perspective of a student in their class. Doing so might encourage student teachers to give the learner as justification for any practice or technique that they have used. Alternatively, candidates could write a reflective account to their future self. Such reflective tasks require student teachers to 'step back from' and 'mull over' (Hatton & Smith, op.cit.: 42) their own teaching. Specifying a different audience or "tenor" for reflective writing by having students teachers write the assignment from another perspective may yield differences in the quality of reflection. Deeper reflection could also be fostered by encouraging candidates to reflect on the appropriacy of any technique or practice they have used in a particular situation for other learner(s) in different learning and teaching contexts. This might help wean candidates off the notion of a universally applicable "way" to teach that involves using certain "non-negotiable" techniques.

Indeed, when engaging in reflection, the importance of a consideration of other contexts and other perspectives (especially the learners' perspectives) is of relevance

not just for CELTA candidates but for all practicing ELT teachers. As such, the reflective framework in Table 3 (which could be amended to include the learner as justification for practice as an additional criterion for high-level reflection) could prove useful for stimulating in-depth reflection on in-service teacher development programmes.

In terms of avenues for further research, longitudinal studies which investigate the development of either pre-service or in-service teachers' reflective abilities using the framework in this study are also clearly required to ascertain how successful this framework is in fostering reflection. It is important to bear in mind, though, that the assessment of any reflective move should take account of context since, as we have seen, reflection could change depending not only on what is being reflected on but also depending on the person or audience of the reflection.

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