Helter CELTA: Do short courses equal ‘best practice’ in teacher training?
Sarah KANOWSKI, Institute of TESOL and Continuing Education, University of Queensland

Whether the popular one-month pre-service teacher training courses constitute the ‘optimal route’ into ELT is under growing critical debate. The results of a survey conducted at two university ESL institutions reveal that teachers themselves assess these courses very positively. It is suggested that current concerns about pre-service short courses may be a misdirection of the attention that needs to be paid to in-service teacher training.

INTRODUCTION

One-month pre-service teacher training courses (the Cambridge CELTA, the Trinity CertTESOL and, to a growing extent, the S.I.T. TESOL Certificate) are the quickest and most common way for native-speakers to enter ELT. In a survey of teachers at the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education, University of Queensland (ICTE), and the Griffith University English Language Institute (GUELI), 61% of respondents had a CELTA or a Trinity CertTESOL as their primary ELT qualification (for international statistics see Ferguson and Donno, 2003:26).

CURRENT CONCERNS

The criticisms made of short-courses can be summarized into three areas (based on Ferguson & Donno, 2003 and O’Byrne, 2001). It is argued that their brevity results in:

• An emphasis on practical classroom techniques over pedagogical principles. It is contended that a grounding in pedagogical principles is particularly important given that teachers now operate in a ‘post-method’ age, with no theoretical consensus for any one methodology.

• A lack of training in explicit language knowledge. A widely-perceived problem with short courses is that graduates leave with an inadequate understanding of the field they’re about to teach: English language. This lack reflects an anachronistic privileging of the native-speakers teacher.

• An undermining of the ‘professionalisation’ of the ELT industry. The apparent ease with which anyone can become an English language teacher prevents ELT from being seen as a legitimate ‘profession’, keeping it a relatively low-paid and low-status occupation.

SURVEY RESULTS

Survey Sample

41 survey responses were considered (22 from ICTE and 18 from GUELI). All surveys were anonymous. Length of ELT experience ranged from 9 months to 45 years, with the majority of respondents (20) having between 4 and 10 years ESL experience. 61% (25 teachers) had
graduated from a CELTA or Trinity CertTESOL (none had a S.I.T TESOL Certificate, though 2 had S.I.T Masters). 43% (18) had more than one teaching-related qualification.

The questionnaire included 13 questions about training and teaching, which are summarized under the following sections:

**To what extent did your ESL course prepare you for the classroom?**

The response from the short course graduates was overwhelmingly (72%) positive. Comments on the CELTA included the following:

- ‘Fantastic introduction. Very hands on and useful for immediate classroom practice.’
- ‘Extraordinarily well’
- ‘The CELTA was awesome’
- ‘The best, most practical, most-focused course I’ve ever done’

A number of respondents contrasted their CELTA with other teaching qualifications, each time to the CELTA’s favour:

- ‘The CELTA was very helpful and prepared me for the classroom. The Dip ED was less helpful. Too much theory and too little practical help’

Graduates who only had experience of the longer certificates and higher degrees made similar comments about the ‘impractical’ nature of their course of study:

- ‘Too theoretical’ (Grad Diploma Applied Linguistics)
- ‘No. Discussed why things happened not how’ (Masters of Education (TESOL))

Three graduates of postgraduate courses (none of whom had any prior teaching qualifications) said their course was not intended for practical application. The most positive comments about postgraduate courses were about the S.I.T. Masters.

**What did you want more of/less of in your course?**

Generally, teachers were aware of the gaps in their pre-service training. Short-course graduates nominated the areas of current concern: grammar, methodology, and syllabus design. A high proportion of graduates from longer courses wanted a more ‘practical’ course: greater connection with the classroom and with lesson planning, and for teaching observation.

Overall there were significantly fewer responses to the question, ‘What did you want less of?’, which reflects what every teacher knows (including graduates of the 3-year-long Bachelor of Educations): no course completely prepares you for the experience of the classroom. The only common response to ‘what do you want less of’ was among the longer-course graduates and again related to theory: trainees wanted less of it.
Which areas are the most important in ESL teaching?

Respondents overwhelmingly (61%) nominated ‘preparation and planning’ as the most important element in ELT. The second highest-rated aspect was ‘classroom management’ (44%). When asked to rate how well their courses had prepared them for specific areas of teaching, the CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL out-performed the longer graduate qualifications in both areas:  

Figure 1. Perceived course success in specific areas

Who / what has taught you most about ESL teaching since the completion of your training?’

To this question 65.5 % nominated other teachers and/or students. Eight respondents mentioned experience and 5 the value of good ESL resources. Of the 18 respondents with more than one teaching qualification, only 2 mentioned further study as important, and even then it was listed among other influences.

What is the most important ingredient in your being an effective ESL teacher?

This question again evoked clear results. The three most commonly listed areas were personality/ experience/ training and these were nominated across the board, by graduates of short and longer courses:
WHAT DO THE RESULTS TELL US?

These results might seem to feed the fears of short-course critics: ELT is populated by poorly-trained teachers who place personality above knowledge. Thankfully, it is not that simple.

Knowledge

The value ascribed to ‘personality’ in ELT coupled with the shortness of initial training constructs an image of a craft dependent on personality rather than a profession built on knowledge (Donno & Ferguson, 2003:28; O’Byrne 2001:2). This argument misinterprets what teachers mean by personality. The survey respondents did not list nebulous qualities (e.g. ‘niceness’) but concrete features of the self that allow students to learn, identified variously as:


A paper presented at the 2000 EA conference revealed that it’s not just teachers who value ‘personality’ (in this broad sense) over ‘knowledge’, but also the hirers of teachers and students (Rosen & Wajnryb, 2000:195, 196, 202).

O’Byrne states that qualities of personality ‘should be regarded as ‘necessary but not sufficient’’ (2001:3). The same could surely be argued of knowledge: knowledge is useless if one can’t communicate it. Yet, as Freeman has noticed, at a graduate level the misapprehension that ‘knowledge of these areas alone will necessarily enable or equip people to teach’ is particularly prevalent (1989:29).

But can any training course provide trainees with good ‘teaching personalities’? The attitude of one survey respondent is not uncommon:

‘I believe that good teachers are born not made, and an attitude of enthusiasm and creativity and the ability to be self-critical are qualities of personality than make for great teachers and cannot be taught in a teacher training curriculum’ (CELTA)

To an extent this is born out by comparing the number of teachers who worked in another teaching field before moving into ESL (14), with the number who moved from a study of language into teaching it (2). Nevertheless, my personal experience is that the CELTA can shift personality, at least as it relates to methodology.

Methodology

A very clear result from the survey was the import teachers place on ‘practicality’ – they value a course that is intimately related to the classroom.

At the heart of all three widely-recognized short-courses (the CELTA, the Trinity CertTESOL, and the SIT T. C.) is the practicum, an intensely-monitored teaching practice that begins for all trainees on the second day of the course. This practicum focuses on and foregrounds teacher reflection: trainees quickly discover that the real goal is not to practice teaching so much as to practice thinking about teaching.
Is this not theory of the very best kind? Theory that is intimately informed by practice and which immediately directs it? It is too simplistic to argue that 4-week courses are practical rather than theoretical. Rather, their theory – in the sense of critical self-reflection - is embedded in the teaching practice.

This kind of self-reflection can affect the teaching personality, as I discovered. I did the course after graduating from a 2 years-Masters program in English Literature at Oxford University. After my experience in Oxford, what I found most challenging about the CELTA was its emphasis on student-centred learning: ‘how could this be teaching?’ I kept asking myself. What convinced me was witnessing the success of the experienced teachers and my own failures when attempting Oxford-style teacher-centred lessons. Without the intensity of that 4-week course where student-centred learning was constantly demonstrated (to language students and to the teacher-trainees) any move to student-centred learning would have been very difficult for me to achieve, and I would be a lesser teacher as a result.

Finally, the short course focus on the practicum establishes the nuts and bolts of teaching: the skills of classroom management and preparation and planning which survey respondents identified as central. This is vitally important because many are new to both teaching and ESL. In the survey 34% had a prior teaching qualification and 12% had prior ESL experience, but the majority, 54%, had neither.

**Professionalism**

A distinction needs to be made between ‘professionalisation’ and professionalism. The former is a sociological project, concerned with the status and pay of the ‘teaching profession’; the latter is a pedagogical project, ‘concerned with the internal quality of teaching’ (Englund, 1996:75).

If we consider ‘professionalisation’ first: unlike most of the cultures in our classroom, many native-English-speakers are in agreement with Dr Johnson’s adage that teaching is the refuge of those who can’t ‘do’. In Australia teachers generally – including those in mainstream education with 3-year long B.Eds or 2-year PG Dips - don’t enjoy particularly high pay or status: that is what recent strikes in NSW, Victoria and S.A. have been about.

Secondly, ‘professionalism’. In terms of pre-service training the results of the survey reveal that short courses are meeting the professional needs of teachers much better than longer courses. Furthermore, each of the CELTA and CertTESOL courses are rigorously assessed by outside assessors in accordance with the strict standards of their accrediting bodies – Trinity College, London, and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. This stringency compares favorably with a significant proportion of Graduate Certificates, Diplomas and Masters, which are increasingly bent to fit the preferences of the graduate market. Finally, a slavish attachment to the ‘status’ of graduate courses is actively detrimental to professional excellence when they such courses allow entrants with minimal or no teaching experience and do not insist on a core of observed teaching.

A final note on professionalism. Critics of the short courses claim that the length of training encourages entrants whose motivation is to work and travel abroad. Such an impetus does not necessarily equate with a lack of professionalism and is, moreover, likely to be a mark of the kind of kind of personality teachers, DOS’, and students all say they value in a teacher – open, sensitive to other cultures and possessed by a love of learning:

‘I chose this industry to be able to travel and work. Now I choose to stay because my learning curve is still moving and I’m challenged in all sorts of ways by the job’ (Trinity CertTESOL)
SURVEY CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the survey results do not support the call by ‘best practice’ advocates to extend the length and rigour of pre-service training courses (Donno & Ferguson 2003:31; O’Byrne 2001:8). Teachers consider the short courses to prepare them well – most extremely well - for the ESL classroom (which is what they want from their training). The CELTA remains an excellent pre-service qualification.

Does that mean then that short-course graduates have reached the zenith of their teaching practice? That they know it all, or even know it most?

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As the CELTA certificate makes explicit, the qualification is intended as the first step in a career of continued professional development. However, Donno and Ferguson argue, this does not occur in practice, estimating that only 10% of CELTA graduates go on to the Diploma and so for the majority of those who stay in the industry, initial training is the only training they will ever receive (2003:30) (in my survey, 22% of short course graduates have gone on to further study in ESL, either the Diploma or a Masters).

But is further formal study the only avenue for further training – and given that survey respondents commonly found their Masters, Certificates and Diplomas too theoretical and impractical – is it, in fact, the best avenue? Consider again that statistic: of 43% who have more than one teaching qualification, only 4% (2) identified further study as important in teaching them about teaching, while 65.5% nominated other teachers and students.

‘[A] one month training course, followed by an induction period involving constructive supervision, support, and mentoring, would conform nicely with current theorizing about best practice in initial teacher education’, write Donno and Ferguson (2003:31, my italics). But this is dismissed by critics of the short courses as an ‘ideal’ scenario with the ‘reality’ being that teachers receive ‘patchy’ professional support in their first post (Donno & Ferguson, 2003:31; O’Byrne, 2001:7).

But why must this remain a ‘reality of the industry’? It is more realistic and productive to look at the development of industry in-service training than to demand extensive changes to courses that are deemed by graduates as highly successful.
HOW CAN SCHOOLS CONTRIBUTE TO TEACHER TRAINING?

Mentoring is perhaps the most obvious avenue open to institutions in continuing the training of their staff. Teachers depend on other teachers (one survey respondent nominated ‘a supportive teacher’s room’ as the most important element in being an effective teacher); teachers learn from other teachers (as the survey statistics show). However, the kind of relationship I am envisaging is more specific and formal than ‘support’, it is about dedicated time for the sharing of knowledge and experience: a regular meeting, paid at non-teaching rates, to discuss planning, problem students, methods of assessment, problematic language points etc. Experienced teachers are often generous with their expertise but they are also usually incredibly busy – it’s not fair to keep asking them informally, and there’s always more to ask, as is noted by O’Byrne (2001:8). It is therefore essential that mentoring is both paid and reflected in a lessened teaching-load. As has been widely-noted (e.g. Rosen & Wajnryb, 2000:201), the benefits of mentoring go both ways and so experienced teachers would also gain from such an initiative.

A mentoring program, along with a developed program of induction and professional development, would aid greatly in both ‘professionalisation’ and ‘professionalism’. As in every occupation, there are staff who lack a ‘professional’ commitment, and this is indeed unfair for the students. If it’s up to the individually-motivated new teacher to go and seek out an experienced member of staff then in-service training won’t happen with the teachers who need it the most. Furthermore, while an institution can only go a limited way in changing the mentality of individual teachers it can have a huge effect on the mentality of a workplace.

The alternative is outlined by Barbara Skinner, who suggests that the supportive peer-orientated relationship that predominates in training contrasts so sharply with the culture of the workplace that courses should change in order to better prepare trainees for the ‘lack of collegiality and support’ they are likely to encounter (2002:268-69). This is no ‘solution’. If, as Skinner argues - and as I and many respondents experienced - short courses create an incredible enthusiasm for ELT and an eagerness to continue developing, then institutions should nurture this for their own benefits, as well as for that of their teachers. To not do so is false economy of the most short-sighted kind. Good teachers have a deep responsibility and commitment to their students; good ESL schools must have a corresponding responsibility and a commitment to their staff.

CONCLUSION

In this response to the critics of short courses, teaching institutions are placed in a pivotal role. In imagining and establishing this role university ESL centers should be leading the field: their students pay more, they pay their staff more, they have excellent resources (staff and materials). The question of ‘best practice’ in teacher-training needs to be addressed as it effects everyone: teachers, would-be teachers choosing a course, senior staff responsible for hiring teachers, and of course that group whose existence is the reason for us doing any training at all – the students.

skanowski@ozemail.com.au

REFERENCES


