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## **REFLECTING IN AND ON POST-OBSERVATION FEEDBACK IN INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING ON CERTIFICATE COURSES**

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### **Introduction**

This article examines evidence from two studies that concern the nature of post-observation feedback in certificate courses for teaching English to speakers of other languages. It uncovers the main characteristics of these meetings and asks whether there is evidence of reflection in these contexts. In considering reasons why making space for reflection is potentially difficult, the paper also examines the relationship and the role of assessment criteria and how these may impact on opportunities for reflection. The final part of the paper considers how a more reflective approach could be promoted in feedback conferences.

There is often much at stake in the post-observation feedback conference and it is a challenging speech event to manage. There is a difficult tension between the role of assessor or 'gate keeper' (Erickson and Schulz, 1982; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999) and the role of developer. In the role of gate keeper, the trainer must ensure that the assessment criteria laid down by awarding bodies are met by trainees. This means, in practice, that particular features of a trainee's performances are explicitly criticized in the feedback conference. At the same time there is often an explicit goal, again in the assessment criteria, to encourage autonomy and reflective practice. In this paper we will show how the assessment criteria related to teaching performance dominate in feedback, tending to squeeze out the focus on reflection.

In order to support trainers in providing space for both kinds of talk in feedback, we believe that awareness-raising activities, in which trainers explore a range of feedback possibilities, should be encouraged. In particular, it is important to consider if the assessor role (an evaluative one) can be managed alongside a more nurturing role (a developmental one). The assessor role needs to keep one eye on the performance criteria. The nurturing role needs to keep the other eye on the development of the trainees' ability to reflect on and articulate features of their teaching in the interests of the trainees' long term professional development.

### **Two teacher-training contexts**

Ma (2009) features trainers and trainees who are working on a Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) course at a language school in South Africa. Copland (2010) features research carried out in a college of adult education in the United Kingdom where trainers and trainees were engaged in a Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA). This is a course endorsed by Cambridge ESOL. Both courses are for pre-service teachers and both courses are short but intensive. In both contexts, as well as input sessions and observations of experienced teachers, there are 6 hours of teaching practice (TP).

Although there are some significant differences in geographical location, course design and delivery between the two programmes, in terms of teaching practice, there are some important similarities. Both courses feature a post-observation conference referred to as 'a feedback meeting'. There is almost always only one trainer and three or four trainees in the meeting and previous to the meeting, the trainer has observed the trainees teaching a lesson. The feedback meeting is, then, a group event. The meetings last for between forty-five minutes and an hour. (Slight differences occur between the CELTA and TESOL courses in the types of lessons taught. In CELTA teaching practice, trainees usually teach different sections of one lesson, whereas TESOL trainees teach separate lessons.) The meetings typically feature:

- Self-evaluation - trainees are generally invited to talk about their lessons and identify strengths and weaknesses
- Peer evaluation – part of the rationale is that trainees are expected to provide some comment on each other's teaching;
- Trainer evaluation - trainers will offer positive and negative evaluation of the teaching as well as suggestions for improvement.

In this article we will be focusing on self-evaluation and trainer evaluation.

The research objectives of the two projects were rather different. Copland's (2008a) is essentially a descriptive study and ethnographic in nature. It features two CELTA programmes: an intensive four-week course and a part-time ten-week course. Ma's (2009) is a small-scale, context-specific needs analysis intended to feed into the professional development of trainers and it is therefore more interventionist in design. However, both studies use recording and transcription and established key generic features of this speech event (Hymes, 1974).

In Copland's study, trainers were interviewed before and after the courses and trainees were interviewed after the courses. Interviews were also recorded. Methodologically, Copland's study was situated within linguistic ethnography (Creese, 2007; Rampton et al., 2004; Tusting and Maybin, 2007) and brings together 'tools of ethnomethodological and interactionist sociolinguistics with tools of ethnography' (Heller and Martin-Jones, 2001:12) in order to produce detailed and nuanced descriptions of talk in the context in which it occurs. Ma's study was primarily qualitative in nature but quantitative data was also collected and analysed. Recording and transcription of post-observation feedback was supported by questionnaires and a reflective writing task. Ma's research was informed by a constructivist perspective; seeking to understand 'not the essence of a real world but the richness of a world that is socially determined' (Richards, 2003: 39). Following the belief that meaning is socially constructed, the constructivist perspective 'prioritises interaction over meaning and, therefore, prefers to look at what people do without any necessary reference to what they are thinking or feeling' (Silverman, 2005: 10).

### The research focus of this article

This article looks at features of the interaction in both contexts and considers four main questions:

- What are the main characteristics of the post-observation feedback meeting?
- What kind of space is provided for trainees to reflect on their teaching?
- What gets in the way of reflection?
- How can opportunities for reflection be built in to the feedback meeting?

The intention of this article is to use evidence from both studies to consider important features of post-observation feedback of initial teacher training certificate courses. The article aims to

identify issues in relation to feedback which will prompt further research into this area.

### Reflection

In the last 20 years, the term 'reflection' has become increasingly important in teacher education contexts. A cursory glance through a teacher education bookshelf would quickly establish this 'reflection' has a widespread currency. Mann (2005) provides an overview of 'reflective literature', where we have a 'reflective approach' (Wallace 1991); 'reflective teaching' (Bailey 1997); 'reflective coaching' (Basile & Olsen 2003); 'reflective practice' (Griffiths & Tann 1992); 'reflexive inquiry' (Cole & Knowles 2000); 'critical reflection' (Yost et al. 2000) and 'structured reflection' (Borg 2003) and even 'reflecting on reflections' (Farr 2006). It might be argued that reflection is not appropriate for pre-service teachers, however. Indeed, Akbari (2007) suggests that a reflective model might not always be in the best interests of trainees as they are in the beginning stages of their careers are so are more concerned with self-image and approbation than they are with improving students' learning. Nevertheless, certificate criteria contain explicit mention of reflection: CELTA expects trainers to 'encourage trainees to reflect on their planning and on strengths and weaknesses in teaching', for example.

Because of the range of interpretations provided in the literature, reflection is not an easy process to describe. It can also seem a vague concept with few guidelines for implementation. For most practitioners, nonetheless, a central tenet of reflection is the ability to analyse an action systematically and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the action in order to improve practice. It is this definition that we use throughout this discussion.

### Characteristics of the post-observation meeting

Most of the talk in the post-observation meetings in this study centres on the pedagogy of teaching, that is what to do and how to do it. Often this talk can be linked to the assessment criteria by which the trainees are assessed. In Certificate courses, the assessment criteria are there to ensure objectivity and neutrality and trainees know that they need to meet the criteria in order to enter into the profession (Brandt, 2006). These criteria are published by the awarding bodies (e.g. Cambridge ESOL) and the trainees have access to them. An example of a pedagogic assessment criterion would be to give clear instructions and this is a

subject that features in many of the meetings recorded, as in the following example from Copland's data:

Trainer: I think you did rush the instructions and that they weren't clear.

And in this from Ma's:

Trainer: When you're talking students through something (.) especially your instructions or your feedback (.) I found this a lot with feedback (.) I found that you're speaking too fast.

Other pedagogies that featured extensively in the data which are related to assessment criteria are 'lesson aims', 'monitoring students', and 'error correction'.

As well as talk that relates to the explicit assessment criteria, there is also a good deal of other pedagogic talk. This talk tends to relate to trainers' personal sets of assessment criteria. We might consider these part of Bernstein's 'invisible pedagogies' (2000: 109) or what Copland calls a 'hidden curriculum' (2008b; 34). An example of this hidden curriculum would be reducing teacher talking time (or "TTT"). Creating 'a student-centred classroom' features in the Cambridge ESOL assessment criteria but there is no explicit mention of teacher talking time. However, trainers in both studies focus on this issue as in the following example from Copland's (2008a) data:

Trainer: The amount of talk that took place; I don't know how you how you felt. It seemed to me that there was a lot of you talking in that lesson, more than I've seen up till now. I don't know whether that was just my impression or did you feel that as well?

Simon, the trainee to whom this question is directed, seems taken aback by the criticism implied in the question.

Simon: (.) I don't I don't I don't (.) well I can't (.) it's not something I focused on (.) so I don't can't really comment but I'll take your word for it (.) I think possibly yeah

Equivocation is clear in this response and the trainee seems confused by the criticism of his teacher talk, which does not feature in any of the published assessment criteria. In an interview with Simon, he confirmed that this was the case; as a primary school teacher, his opinion of teacher talking time was very different to those of his trainers.

The dissonance between the explicit criteria and the more local or interpreted criteria can, then, be a source of confusion. It can also be a source of tension, in two ways. Ma (2009) shows that trainees perceive inconsistency between their trainers' assessments of teaching practice.

Trainers, trainees believed, rated teaching behaviours differently, depending on their personal views about language learning and teaching (that is, their hidden curricula). Copland (2008a) suggests that trainers prioritise their hidden curricula in feedback, so that trainees are unsure about what aspects of their practice they should develop.

Another significant feature of the post-observation feedback meeting is amount of trainer talk which directs the trainees to different teaching behaviours through giving advice, offering suggestions or redirecting the trainee to think differently about their teaching practice. In order to illustrate this point, we introduce another piece of data from Copland's (2008a) study. In this feedback meeting, the trainer (I) and trainees are discussing a lesson in which the trainee (H) has asked students to think about what meals they could cook given certain ingredients (the lesson is modeled on the television show 'Ready, Steady, Cook'):

- T: But as I said what effect do you think that might have on students (.) so they've got this thing where I:: <you know> we discuss what we'd like to cook with it or we discuss wha- whether we like to watch these programmes or we've discussed which one we'd like to eat =
- H: [ I think (inaudible)
- T: =and why and and and and there's no (.) opportunity to tell anyone about=
- H: [ yeah
- T: =that (.) or or there's nothing
- H: [ they might think that they're not interested in finding out about what their personal opinion is
- T: [ yeah
- T: Yeah it might be like that (.) mightn't it (.) it might
- H: [ but I did go round and I asked them questions because they just said oh (.) this just one and I said=
- T: [ sure [ mm
- H: = why (.) so I tried to sort of um get but them to speak more about why:: =
- T: [ mhm
- H: =that they would choose this particular um chef's foods why they liked it =
- T: [ mhm
- H: =what they liked about it (.) so I was going round asking them when I was=
- T: [ mhm
- H: =monitoring but I suppose I could have done it as a class but I was=
- T: [ ((inaudible))
- H: =just um (.) worried that people would not want to say (.) they'd not want to speak out
- T: [ ((with a long fall on would)) they wou::ld (.) I think they wou::ld you know (.) why no:t (.) I mean I think people would (.) especially given the chance to talk about it together and it's quite a lively class and a class that cooperates really well actually I think they would

In this extract, the trainer describes the lesson she saw and then asks the trainee how the students might have felt about not being given the chance to discuss their answers. The trainee gives the answer the trainer wants ('they might think that they're not interested in finding out about what their personal opinion is'). However, then the trainee contests the trainer's version of what she saw ('I did go round..') and explains why she did not ask the students for an opinion ('they'd not want to speak out'). At this point, the trainer forcibly interrupts and strongly disagrees with the trainee. She says the students would have enjoyed the opportunity to talk together and draws on her own epistemological knowledge of the class to substantiate the claim ('it's quite a lively class and a class that cooperates well actually'). In other words, the trainer strongly undermines the trainee's own analysis of the lesson and replaces it with her own.

What this extract shows is that it is the trainer's knowledge and understanding which are valued. The trainee is allowed to contribute as long as she is acquiescent. When the trainee suggests an interpretation which differs from the trainer's, the contribution is cut short.

A good deal of Ma and Copland's data show similar patterns of talk within a directive model of feedback (see Gebhard, 1990). While trainees' opinions are elicited, if they do not chime with those of the trainer, then they tend to be devalued. The trainer has the pedagogical high ground and the trainees, despite being the ones teaching the lessons, must accept the trainer's views.

To answer to our first question, then, feedback meetings are dominated by talk about teaching in which the trainer's role is to highlight strengths, but mostly weaknesses, in the trainees' lessons, and to offer advice and suggestions about how to do things better. We would now like to move on

to our second question, what kind of space is provided to reflect on teaching?

### Reflection on practice

As we discuss above, certificate guidelines state that trainees should reflect on their teaching. What is more, from data provided in questionnaires and interviews this seems to be a view shared by trainers. In Copland's data (2010) when asked what the purpose of feedback was, one trainer stated:

... just to help encourage them really to think about to just think about what happened in the classroom and to notice what's happening in the classroom so it's kind of an encouragement to them to take in in

And a trainer in Ma's data (2009) shows how she attempts to put reflection into practice:

I hope that they have realised their own errors, in which case there's little use in me harping on about them. This is why I give them an opportunity to identify the problems first.

From examining the data, however, it seems that many apparently reflective opportunities do not lead to genuine reflection which we define above as the ability to analyse an action systematically and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the action in order to improve practice. Trainees are often invited to comment on their teaching, through elicitation moves from the trainer, which can be a first step in developing an analysis of the lesson. However, promising beginnings rarely lead to reflective talk, as we can see in the discussion between H and T in the extract presented above. This leads us to ask why reflective talk is so often curtailed.

Copland (2010) found that trainees either did not know how to reflect or did not want to reflect, a view shared to some extent by Korthagen (2004). Ma (2009) found that the motivation for eliciting trainees' views was in order that their own agendas in terms of teaching pedagogy could be addressed, as this trainer acknowledges:

I hope that they have realised their own errors, in which case there's little use in me harping on about them. This is why I give them an opportunity to identify the problems first.

Another reason, and one which we feel is apparent in the data presented here, is that trainers believe that their primary role is to develop trainees' teaching skills in a palpable way so that they can join the profession of English language teachers. This position is developed by Ma in her study in which she identifies the factors which get in the way of reflective talk (question 3). In her study,

questionnaires and reflective writing were analysed to establish trainers' views of the range of different purposes and roles of post-observation feedback. In order of importance trainers' saw the purpose of post-observation feedback as:

- to identify, draw attention to and give feedback on strengths and weaknesses;
- to give guidance or direction;
- to ensure good practice;
- to give encouragement;
- to encourage awareness

As one trainer succinctly put it:

The main objective is to identify points of strength on which the trainee can build as well as points of weakness which need to be corrected. It is essential that this is constructive in providing concrete guidelines which the trainee can use to correct any problems with his / her teaching.

Given the shortness of the feedback meeting (up to an hour) and the number of lessons to be discussed (up to four) it is hardly surprising that 'to give opportunities to reflect on practice' is not a priority. This is not to say that there is no reflective talk in feedback meetings (see Copland and Mann, forthcoming) but rather that there is not as much as we might expect given both trainers' views and the number of questions that trainers ask. Again, it is not that reflective practice is not important; rather, it is not as important as other considerations.

### A more dialogic approach

We turn now to our final question: how can opportunities for reflection be built in to the feedback meeting? We have a number of suggestions to make, again based on the research projects. The first calls for trainers to take a dialogic approach in feedback. This is in-line with other researchers such as Brandt (2006: 362), who argues that post-observation feedback should move away from a directive or transfer approach which is 'expert-directed, subordinating, replicating, dependent' towards a non-directive or exploratory approach, that 'builds on existing knowledge, allows for different learning styles, provides opportunities for problem solving, encourages autonomy and is reflective'. Mann (2004) too argues that it is important to create space for forms of talk that support 'dialogic understanding'.

What do we mean by dialogic talk? Alexander states that dialogic talk should be a 'purposeful and productive dialogue where questions, answers, feedback... progressively build into coherent and

expanding chains of enquiry and understanding' (2005: 3). In such talk, trainers and trainees are equal participants, developing knowledge together and building on each other's turns. Dialogic talk is characterized by a large proportion of trainee talk, peer contributions, the trainer working with and valuing trainee contributions, and a lack of 'display questions'.

Dialogic feedback creates an environment in which all trainees feel able to participate (note that the extracts presented so far have been between the trainer and one other trainee, although at least two other trainees are available to take part in the talk). The following example illustrates dialogic talk in action. The group is discussing Hannah's lesson. Hannah is, we believe, reflecting on her lesson, expanding on how it might have been improved and giving a possible reason for her failure to make her instructions clear. Although Eileen is the trainer, she relinquishes her turn to Frank when he interrupts to develop the points Hannah has made:

- Hannah: Um no I don't think they were (.) they could have been clearer (.) I was just a bit worried bout time and I was like 'oh' time's running out what shall I do um (.) so that's possibly why ((laughs))
- Eileen: What you feel  
[
- Frank: I was just going to say that sort of the distinction between the two last activities wasn't really very clear at all one sort of ran in to the other one and they didn't really kind of know what was going on and things until you=  
[ [
- Hannah: mm mm
- Frank: =started going round sort of explaining and things like that =

Hannah's self evaluation is in response to a fairly agenda driven question from the trainer (Eileen). However, in allowing Frank to take the floor a possible dialogic space is opened up. In their forthcoming chapter, Copland and Mann expand on how talk in feedback can become more dialogic and they argue that talking dialogically also enables reflection.

#### Further suggestions for developing reflection in feedback

Ma (2009) suggests five features of post-observation feedback could be improved or developed. These features are approach, talk, reflection, structure and content. In particular Ma argues that trainers should reduce the amount they talk and take fewer turns. They should also be less directive so that space for reflection is created. In order to develop these features and skills, Ma suggests that trainers should receive training in observing and giving feedback. In addition to observer training, Ma proposes that training on the importance of reflection, how to reflect and how to participate in observation feedback be built into the initial teacher training course for the trainees. Other ideas for promoting reflection are:

Developing awareness of feedback processes among the trainers: this should focus on interaction in the feedback session. Development of increased awareness might happen through discussion, peer-observation, or critical incident analysis.

Dealing explicitly with reflection before feedback sessions begin (Copland, 2010): Show examples of how reflecting can be useful. How do professional teachers 'do reflection'? What are the stages and how can we know if we are successful? Make it clear that there are not always 'right' answers. The orthodoxy provided by both the published

assessment criteria and the trainers' hidden curricula are open to challenge and discussion. It might be useful to include a workshop on reflection, participating in and dealing with post-observation feedback for the trainees, with the intention of improving the quality and quantity of trainee participation.

Making space for reflection: Elicitation is not the same as reflection. Neither is beginning with an opening gambit like 'tell me one thing that was bad/good about your lesson'. De Bono (1992) deliberately opened up a third category for critical thinking and called it 'interesting' (as well as plus and minus). This PMI (plus, minus, interesting) thinking skill avoids the black and white characterisation of classroom events. Such dichotomous orthodoxies are not helpful and reduce the complexities of the classroom to simplistic rules.

Redirecting the focus: away from the trainee and on to the students through asking questions such as 'what did the students learn today?'

Developing trainers' group awareness: Trainers need to be aware of their 'hidden curricula' and how these might differ from the published assessment criteria. Use transcriptions from feedback sessions to help trainers to uncover their hidden curricula.

Varying the framework for post-observation feedback: One possibility to allow space for different sorts of talk is outlined by Edge (1993: 3) where there are four distinct stages: 1) pre-observation stage, where the observer and trainee have an agreed focus for the observation; 2) trainee report stage, where the trainee describes the lesson from their point of view and the observer listens non-evaluatively; 3) alternatives

stage, where observer and trainee discuss different alternatives and their outcomes; and 4) directive stage, where the observer takes on the explicit role of 'someone who has specific responsibilities for formative evaluation.'

Using video or audio recording of TP: This enables trainees and trainers to see the teaching practice in a different way, through an 'objectifying' lens. Video and audio recordings also provide participants with opportunities to identify critical incidents for later discussion.

Building in an element of cooperative development: Mann (1995) and Brandt (2006) argue that it would be helpful for trainers to take up different roles. They suggest that one of the trainer team should have a different relationship with the trainees. Based on the principles of cooperative development (see Edge 1992, 2002), one trainer could have a non-evaluative and supportive role to balance the assessment of the other trainer. (Although see Copland (2010) for a critique of this approach within a CELTA framework).

Going beyond the teaching practice diary: We believe that reflection can be encouraged in journals or diaries (e.g. Farrell 2008) and that it can be more than an individual and written pursuit. Where written journals exist, they can be integrated into the rest of the programme, providing a basis for discussion between trainers and trainees.

Working with what trainees bring to the session: trainees have had many years of education, albeit as students rather than as teachers. They bring a good deal of knowledge and experience to the classroom. This knowledge and experience can be valued by trainers who can draw this out in feedback meetings.

## Conclusions

The data in both studies show that trainers are committed to developing trainees' skills and that they provide useful and supportive advice about how to teach English to speakers of other languages. However, it is also clear that the majority of talk in feedback meetings focuses on developing best practice rather than in providing trainees with tools to develop their reflective skills. Given certificate guidelines regarding reflective practice, and the value of reflective practice in the continuing professional development of teachers, we would argue that more space needs to be

devoted to it in certificate programmes, particularly in the post-observation feedback meeting.

However, trainers cannot be expected to develop the space for reflective talk in feedback without support. Ma (2009) suggests that trainers experienced difficulties in managing their roles and that a lack of training contributed to this. Trainer training on certificate courses at present tends to be done through mentoring with a focus on inducting new trainers into an existing community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). If trainers are not exposed to models of feedback which include, for example, dialogic talk, how are they to introduce reflective practice into their own training practices?

We have argued that exploration and reflection by trainers would be helpful in establishing a balance between directive feedback and more exploratory and reflective talk. As Gebhard says:

Unless we are willing to explore and use new behaviours in our supervisory efforts, we will never know the consequences that these behaviours can have on the professional development of teachers (Gebhard 1984:512).

However, for this to happen, awarding bodies, certificate providers and training organisations must all acknowledge the need for change and provide resources to support this change. Given the enthusiasm and dedication of the trainers in Ma's and Copland's studies, small steps at the institutional level will result in leaps forward in the training room.

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