
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trainees' Challenges in English Teacher Development Courses

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| ABSTRACT

CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL are the two English teacher training programmes receiving growing popularity worldwide. The two programmes are characterised by onerous workloads and rigorous training. However, very few attempts have been made to explore how trainee teachers are challenged and how they address the challenges in these programmes. Therefore, the research aimed to explore how trainee teachers perceive their challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. The research has recruited six trainee teachers who have received CELTA/CertTESOL training. They were given interviews that focused on their experience of being challenged in CELTA/CertTESOL courses. Following interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview data, the study has identified various challenges encountered by CELTA/CertTESOL trainees, potential ways of overcoming these challenges, as well as the benefits of undergoing such challenges. The research has empirical implications for prospective trainee teachers who are concerned about potential challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes and need suggestions to address such challenges.

| KEYWORDS

CELTA, Trinity CertTESOL, trainee teachers, interpretative phenomenological analysis

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

English teacher training courses are extensively favoured by prospective teachers who intend to enter the field of English language teaching. Two of the most renowned courses in this regard might be CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL, which are both accredited at level five on the UK Regulated Qualifications Framework (Anderson, 2016). The two courses are often taken intensively for at least four weeks, and 'require at least 120 contact hours of instruction and six hours of observed and assessed teaching practice.' (Anderson, 2018, p.37). Around the world, there are over 350 centres offering CELTA courses (Cambridge English, 2023) and more than 100 institutes providing CertTESOL courses (Trinity College London, 2023). Despite the popularity of the two courses, trainee teachers could encounter various challenges in the two courses (Anderson, 2018; Copland, 2010), while there remains a scarcity of research focusing on how trainee teachers comment on the challenges met in the two courses. The present research sets out to fill this study gap.

2. Literature Review

Trainee teachers frequently comment on the large amount of skills/knowledge that they have acquired from CELTA and CertTESOL courses (Copland, 2010). In the two programmes, trainees are required to attend lessons delivered by their tutors, complete various written assignments and undertake at least six hours of teaching practice under experienced teachers' supervision, amongst many other tasks (Cambridge English, 2022; Trinity College London, 2016). As noted by Anderson (2016, p.269), CELTA/CertTESOL programmes might help trainees acquire considerable personal practical knowledge that informs trainees' beliefs 'about teaching and learning alongside personalised, habitual procedures in their teaching. Later, Anderson (2018) studied trainee teachers' comments on CELTA and CertTESOL programmes, and identified how trainees could practically benefit from the teaching practice, lesson planning and post-lesson feedback in these programmes. On the other hand, Anderson (2016; 2018) has also reported several challenges trainee teachers faced in CELTA/CertTESOL courses, for examples, trainees' unfamiliarity with linguistic knowledge (taught by tutors), and experienced teachers' difficulty in internalising pedagogical changes or overcoming improper

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habits of teaching. Apart from that, Copland (2010, p.467) has indicated the huge pressure of six-hour teaching practice in these programmes, noting that the teaching practice 'is rigorously adhered to by Course Directors in the interests of equal opportunities, and trainees rarely have the opportunity to re-teach lessons that go wrong. The pressure on trainees in the teaching practice component, then, is intense.'

Challenges could influence learners' attitudes. Learners might demonstrate an unsatisfactory level of engagement when the learning activities are overly difficult or easy (Jones, 2018). On the contrary, an appropriate extent of challenge might ensure learners' confidence. As noted by Keller (2016, p.4), learners might become more confident when they perceive the expectancies for success and attribute the success to their own abilities 'rather than to luck or to task challenge levels that are too easy or difficult.' In this sense, desirable learning tasks might not be easily overcome by learners but ultimately manageable and within learners' reach. Despite this, in the case of CELTA/CertTESOL training, trainee teachers might not necessarily feel at ease given the heavy workloads in such training. However, there remains the scarcity of research detailing how trainee teachers are challenged in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes and how trainees approach such challenges. Although scholars (see Anderson, 2016; 2018; Copland, 2010) have briefly mentioned CELTA/CertTESOL trainees' challenges, they did not place the research foci on such challenges, thus demonstrating the lack of in-depth discussion on these issues.

In addition, there are potential benefits to overcoming challenges. By tackling the challenges, learners might 'have reflective insights, discoveries, and realisations about themselves and their capabilities' (Orson et al., 2020, p.11). Furthermore, the instrumental benefits of challenges or specific learning tasks, in turn, serve to motivate learners. As noted by Ryan and Deci (2020), when a person recognises the value of an activity, he/she could experience a high degree of volition or willingness to undertake the activity. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain as to whether trainee teachers could perceive the benefits of challenges encountered in CELTA/CertTESOL training. To motivate trainees in CELTA/CertTESOL courses, it might be necessary to make them realise how they could benefit from these courses.

The aforementioned research gaps have practical implications for prospective CELTA/CertTESOL trainees. If not properly understanding the CELTA/CertTESOL-related challenges, corresponding solutions and potential benefits of the courses, prospective course participants might fail to make informed decisions on whether CELTA and CertTESOL are appropriate choices for them and what preparatory actions (e.g. review of literature on teaching methodology) could be taken prior to the courses. In an effort to narrow the research gaps concerning challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL training, this study sets out to investigate how trainee teachers perceive the challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. To do this, the study needs to address two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How are trainee teachers challenged in CELTA and CertTESOL courses?

RQ2: How do trainee teachers respond to the challenges in CELTA and CertTESOL courses?

In this study, trainee teachers were interviewed about their experience in CELTA and CertTESOL training. The interview data were subject to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which created themes relevant to the RQs. The IPA results were then discussed in detail by reference to their implications.

3. Methods

The author has obtained consent from a CELTA director and CertTESOL director to recruit participants from their courses. Email invitations were then sent to trainee teachers doing the two courses. The study has recruited six trainee teachers, along with ethical compliance collected from the research participants. Trainees 01-03 were recruited from the CELTA course, while trainees 04-06 from the CertTESOL course. The research participants were given questionnaires investigating their genders, linguistic backgrounds and English teaching experience.

According to questionnaire feedback, trainees 01 and 06 were males, while the other trainees were females. Apart from that, the research participants demonstrated a variety of linguistic backgrounds (see Table 1). Trainees 01, 02, 04 and 05 were non-native English speakers with different L1. Trainees 03 and 06 both spoke English as their L1 but they differed in L2 and L3.

Table 1. Trainees' linguistic backgrounds

Trainee	L1	L2	L3
01	Hindi	English	
02	Italian	English	
03	English	Spanish	Portuguese
04	Cantonese	English	Mandarin
05	Persian	English	Italian
06	English	Japanese	Korean

Trainees also differed from each other in terms of English teaching experience (see Table 2). Trainees 01, 02, 05 and 06 have taught English before, while trainees 03 and 04 have not. Trainees 01, 02, 05 and 06 also had rather different English teaching experiences with regard to the length of teaching, teaching contents and students' profiles.

Table 2. Trainees' English teaching experience

Trainee	Length of Teaching Experience	Students' Profiles
01	Two months	Secondary school students of Indian nationality
02	Two years	Primary/secondary school students of Italian nationality
05	Four years	Students of various age groups and nationalities
06	Five years	Japanese/ Korean/ Arabic students of various age groups

After filling in the questionnaire, each trainee attended a one-to-one online interview with the author. Each trainee was interviewed in the week right after they had finished their respective courses. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The interviews focused on participants' challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL training as well as their corresponding solutions. The interviews were semi-structured, with the use of open-ended questions to allow interviewees to give unrestrained responses and in-depth information. Each interview was conducted at a time convenient for the interviewee and audio-recorded with the interviewee's consent.

Trainees' interview data were examined by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is underpinned by three philosophical principles: 1) phenomenology that involves the detailed examination of participants' lived experience; 2) hermeneutics that focuses on how researchers and participants make sense of the lived experience; and 3) idiography that examines the particularity of each participant's lived experience (Smith & Larkin, 2021). In IPA interviews, participants should tell their stories in their own words, with a focus on participants' sense-making for their common experience in a particular context (Smith & Larkin, *ibid.*). IPA is highly applicable to this research, in view of the author's aim to explore each trainee teacher's perceptions towards his/her experience of being challenged in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. The procedures of IPA are outlined in Table 3:

Table 3. Phases of IPA (Tomkins, 2017)

Phase	Activity
1. Reading and re-reading	The author gets immersed in the data by frequently reviewing the interview recording of a participant.
2. Initial noting	The author reflects and note points of interest, what he thinks the participant is expressing, and what associations this might trigger.
3. Developing emergent themes	The author converts the notes into initial themes that should be clearly traceable back to the raw data.
4. Searching for connections across themes (within-participant patterning)	The author refines the themes by identifying the most significant aspects of the participant's experience
5. Moving to the next case	The author moves on to analyse the next participant's recording and repeats Phases 1-4.
6. Seeking patterns across cases	The author identifies the patterns for all interviewees by analysing participants' similarities and differences

7. Making deeper interpretation	The author reviews the raw data and themes created, as well as making several iterations of phases 1 to 6 above, in order to draw on different interpretative resources and inspirations.
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4. Findings

Following IPA on interview data, the author has created two superordinate themes: 1) challenges in training and 2) responses to challenges, with each superordinate theme associated with several sub-themes. The author has also identified participants' narrative extracts relevant to each theme.

4.1. Challenges in Training

The participants have encountered various challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. Four types of challenges have been identified by the author: 1) students' accents, 2) individual differences in English levels, 3) lack of attentiveness and 4) intensiveness of training.

4.1.1. Students' Accents

In each lesson delivered by trainee teachers, students vastly diverged from each other in their accents. Trainees 01-04 have reported their difficulties in understanding unfamiliar accents spoken by their students. Trainees' relevant comments are transcribed as follows:

Trainee 01: I was fine with the Punjabi accent (spoken by her Pakistani students), because that language (Punjabi) is commonly used in my country (India)...I really struggled to understand the Portuguese and Spanish accents. Fortunately, the accents got less challenging as the course moved on...Maybe I just got used to their accents.

Trainee 03: The students spoke different accents...I felt good when I spoke with the Brazilian students, because I could understand their accents, but it was a challenge for me to communicate with Pakistani students.

4.1.2. Individual Difference in English Levels

The trainee teachers were supposed to teach students who represented two English levels within the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) framework: A2 and B2 levels. The reality, however, has run counter to participants' expectations. Trainees were notified (by their tutors) of students' general English proficiency level in an upcoming lesson, but the information could be misleading since the students actually diverged from each other within the same class, with some students surpassing or failing to reach the reported English level. Participants' relevant comments are outlined as below:

Trainee 02: According to the course handbook, I would teach the A2-level students in the following three lessons, but the Brazilian lady (one of the students in the A2 class) was definitely above the A2 level. She could fluently explain in English what subjunctive mood was...It was the wrong class for her, I would say...The Brazilian kept her poker face throughout the lesson. I guess she was a bit bored. She was then absent in the following lesson.

Trainee 06: In the B2-level class, the student from Syria might be less proficient than his classmates in speaking and listening. The student later told me that he's rather good at reading and writing, and that was why he was allocated to the B2-level class, which did not make sense to me, I am afraid...He obviously lagged behind his classmates in class. And if I slowed my pace of talking, I might risk boring other students (45 minutes).

4.1.3. Lack of Attentiveness

As reported by the six participants, students might not be attentive to their instruction. Participants have pointed out potential reasons (e.g. divergence in English levels and personal interests) for this phenomenon, with their relevant comments cited as below:

Trainee 04: Some students were obviously less attentive than others in a class...I frequently saw some students secretly speaking their own language or swiping their phones in the A2 class. These students, as I noticed, might not be at the A2 level. They were rather beginners or intermediate learners...It was a big challenge to satisfy all students who were quite different from each other.

Trainee 06: It was impractical to meet all students' needs. Some students were interested in football while others were in cooking...In my first lesson, I found that most students favoured the topic of football, so I tried to add some football elements to my teaching. The case was totally different in my second lesson. Many new faces appeared in that lesson...When some students find the topic not that interesting, they might get distracted.

4.1.4. Intensiveness of Training

According to the six participants, the training courses were highly intensive, with little time for resting, causing them to be exhausted. They needed to attend lessons (focusing on teaching methodology and English linguistics) taught by their tutors, complete assignments, design and deliver their own lessons, teaching practice, as well as auditing course mates' teaching practice. Participants' corresponding comments are cited as follows:

Trainee 03: I was extremely tired, honestly. I had little experience in teaching. How could I design a good lesson within just a few days?...I was given a template for lesson planning, but that was a bit vague. The template did not clarify in detail what exactly should be done...It took me nearly five to six hours to create my first ever lesson plan, and I could only sleep four hours on that day. I could barely keep my eyes open in my tutor's lessons...I was also panicked in my first lesson.

Trainee 05: I was fine with anything but the lessons (delivered by tutors) on sounds (phonemes). I've never learned or taught sounds before. That was a big challenge to me...It was impossible to remember all the sounds because I needed to do many other things as well, like lesson planning, assignments...

4.2. Responses to Challenges

Participants have explained potential solutions to approach the challenges deriving from 1) students' individual differences (e.g. divergences in English levels and personal interests) and 2) training intensiveness (Note: the six participants have presented the author their tutors' feedback that recognised the effectiveness of trainees' measures in overcoming the two challenges). Additionally, participants have expressed deep satisfaction with how much they have learned from the challenges posed by CELTA/CertTESOL training.

4.2.1. Pedagogical Measures Addressing Learners' Differences

Despite students' individual differences, trainee teachers have used a variety of pedagogical measures to meet students' needs and arouse their learning motivation. Participants' relevant comments are cited as below:

Trainee 02: In the same class, some students were obviously weaker (in English level) than others...To make them all understand my instruction, I needed something beyond language, something common to most people, like funny pictures, hand gestures, eye contacts...I was very serious about my teaching materials, I would say. I have used quite a lot of pictures, animations and symbols like arrows in my PowerPoint presentation, with very few words in the slides... Students would be more motivated if they saw your dedication.

Trainee 05: I was asked by my tutor to give a lesson with lots of political elements, that is, a celebratory event of the British royal family. Students from outside the Commonwealth might not be interested in this event...To make this topic a bit funnier, I presented some pictures showing two scenarios. One scenario showed my birthday party where my friends got drunk and made faces, while another one was the royal event which was apparently more elegant and formal...When the students saw the contrast, they burst into laughter. I think that's when I got their attention in that lesson.

4.2.2. Stress-alleviating Measures

In CELTA/CertTESOL programmes, trainee teachers' pressure could derive from the lack of teaching experience as well as the heavy workload. To reduce such pressure, they have put forward corresponding solutions. Participants' relevant comments are cited as below:

Trainee 03: I think my anxiety had something to do with my teaching experience. I was a novice in English teaching, so I had no idea of what would happen in my teaching practice...But then I changed my mindset. I did not regard myself as a teacher. Instead, I saw myself as someone who was trying to help her friends learn English...In my fourth lesson, I just sat at the right centre of the classroom, surrounded by all the students, and talked to them in a less formal way. I could feel the rapport, which made me less nervous (Note: trainee 03 has presented to the author her tutor's feedback recognising that specific teaching measures have helped the trainee build rapport in the fourth lesson).

Trainee 04: When I felt that the workload was beyond my limit, I would identify which assignment challenged me the most. Then I would discuss with my tutor whether it was possible to move the deadline back. And it worked...I had better not be too ambitious in your lesson planning. It is impossible to do everything I want in the actual lesson. I just need to make progress and let your tutor see your progress. That is more practical for me as a novice teacher.

4.2.3. Learning from Challenges

Through the training courses, some experienced teachers have realised the imperfections of their English teaching. Additionally, some trainee teachers were not familiar with English linguistics. Despite a large amount of time in acquiring or memorising linguistic knowledge, such knowledge was deemed by participants to be necessary for their teaching careers.

Trainee 06: Before doing the course, I did not have a clear picture of my own teaching quality. Now I can see many areas that I need to improve. I should reduce my talking time and let students speak more in class. I also have to grade my language to make them more understandable to beginners.

Trainee 02: I have never learned sounds before. For me, it was not a small challenge to remember the pronunciation and category of each sound...Four weeks were definitely not enough. I will still work on these tricky things even when the course ended...I have got a job offer from China. I know sounds are commonly taught in that country, so I might teach them sooner or later.

5. Discussions

The IPA has created two major themes in relevance to the RQs. The first superordinate theme (i.e. challenges in training) helps to address RQ1 while the second one (i.e. responses to challenges) serves to answer RQ2. Trainee teachers' challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL courses could derive from the onerous workloads required by the programmes and from the teaching practice characterised by students' confusing accents, uncertain English level and insufficient attentiveness. Apart from that, trainee teachers have adopted various measures to address students' individual differences and their onerous study loads, as well as demonstrating positive attitudes towards the challenges posed by CELTA/CertTESOL courses.

5.1. Issue of Accent

The teacher-student communication could be affected by students' accents that were unfamiliar to the trainee teachers. Trainee 01 (a native Hindi user) was challenged by Portuguese and Spanish accents but not by the Punjabi accent. Punjabi is prevalently spoken in the trainee's home country, which might make him advantaged in understanding the relevant accent. In contrast, trainee 03 who has learned Portuguese before, reported her easiness of talking with Brazilian students (speaking Portuguese as L1), but she was troubled by the communication with Pakistani students. Additionally, although trainee 01 has indicated the possibility of getting used to unfamiliar accents naturally, the participants have not given concrete advice on how to address the accent-related issue.

In addition, the issue of accent was not necessarily mentioned by all participants, which stands in contrast with other challenges (i.e. course workloads, students' English levels and attentiveness) that were reported by the six trainee teachers. The accent-related challenge was reported by trainees 01-04 only, but not by trainees 05 and 06. Trainees 05 and 06 were more advantaged than other participants in English teaching experience, as exemplified by their lengths of teaching experience and the diversity of students being taught in their careers (see Table 2). In particular, unlike trainees 01-04, trainees 05 and 06 had the experience in teaching students of various linguistic backgrounds, which might explain why the accent-related issue was absent from the two trainees' narratives.

5.2. Analysis of Students

Before each lesson of the teaching practice, participants might not be able to anticipate which students might attend the lesson given the possibility of students' absence (reported by trainee 02) and the presence of new students (reported by trainee 06). Even if trainee teachers might fortunately teach the same students as in their previous lessons or access students' profiles before a lesson, uncertainty remains as to whether they could appropriately analyse their students in light of their pre-existing workloads and novice teachers' inexperience in this regard. Under this circumstance, trainee teachers might need to identify the pedagogical measures that are applicable to a variety of teaching situations, as exemplified by the paralinguistic measures (e.g. eye contacts and hand gestures) that help to convey meanings across language barriers.

In addition, participants might not be notified beforehand of the situation where students could vastly differ from each other in their English levels and personal interests. As a result, trainee teachers might not be mentally or practically prepared for students' individual differences, failing to meet students' needs in class. Therefore, it might be necessary to inform trainee teachers of potential inter-student differences before they engage in teaching practice.

When discussing the challenges relating to students' individual differences, some participants exhibited the student-oriented thinking, as exemplified by trainee 02's comment on how learners' motivation could be enhanced by teachers' dedication, trainee 05's consideration of how her students might respond to a lesson containing political elements, and trainee 06's awareness of how students might be demotivated by uninteresting topics. These phenomena have echoed Mackenzie's (2019) finding that student-centred thinking could take place in trainee teachers.

5.3. Trainee Teachers' Pressure

Unlike previous studies on CELTA/CertTESOL training (e.g. Anderson, 2016; 2018), this research identified how CELTA/CertTESOL trainees could be pressured by the course workloads and insufficient experience in teaching, as demonstrated by trainee 05's lack

of time in acquiring linguistic knowledge and trainee 03's anxiety deriving from her inexperience. Potential solutions have also been clarified by trainees. As advised by trainee 04, it is possible to alleviate work pressure by talking with tutors and rescheduling the tasks, but it is unclear as to whether such adjustments would be allowed by all CELTA/CertTESOL trainers. In terms of how to deal with mental stress caused by inexperience, trainee 03 has suggested the need to build rapport in class. To do this, trainee 03 has adjusted her self-awareness and saw herself as a friend to the students.

5.4. Signs of Motivation in Trainee Teachers

Although Anderson's (2018) study reported experienced teachers' difficulty in tackling their inappropriate habits of teaching, this issue is not necessarily considered a major challenge for participants in this study. Following a CertTESOL course, trainee 06 has recognised his remaining difficulties in grading his language and reducing his in-class talking time, but such difficulties were regarded by him as an indicator of how he benefitted from the course, demonstrating a sign of learning motivation. Similarly, trainee 02 has realised the need to continue learning phonemes and the potential of benefitting from such knowledge, despite her existing unfamiliarity with phonemes. These findings could complement the existing understanding of pedagogical practitioners' reflective thinking (i.e. teachers' critical examination of their own ideas and practices in order to improve their teaching performance) which has gained considerable attention from 'both mainstream and ELT teacher education' (Moradkhani, 2019, p.61).

6. Conclusion

The study helps to bridge the research gaps concerning how trainee teachers perceive their challenges in CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. Additionally, the study could benefit prospective CELTA/CertTESOL applicants by helping them identify beforehand how difficult the courses are, whether the courses suit them, and how to address the upcoming challenges in the courses.

However, the study is not without its limitations. Participants were recruited from one CELTA course and one CertTESOL course, while the situation might vary among CELTA/CertTESOL programmes. Additionally, the study has focused on merely two types of English teacher training programmes (i.e. CELTA and CertTESOL). These issues could limit the generalisability of research findings. Hopefully, future research will be conducted to investigate trainee teachers' challenges across various programmes.

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