

Adapting the CELTA Pedagogy to the Japanese College Environment

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Abstract:

One of the most sought-after teaching credentials employers look for in potential English conversation instructor candidates, as one might notice upon examining job-listings in, for example, the "Ohayosensei," is the Cambridge CELTA. The CELTA, or Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults, is an entry-level certification into the world of English language teaching issued upon completion of a rigorous training program and approved by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). There are numerous variations of the CELTA (such as the Trinity Certificate), but the CELTA is often regarded as the most widely recognized qualification.

Japanese university employers often favor CELTA graduates without knowing what exactly a CELTA (from here on, referring to a person with the qualification) is capable of doing, not to mention not knowing what a CELTA's limitations might be. Some of the ideology taught to CELTAs are not applicable to or do not work very well in the Japanese classroom. This paper will examine the CELTA and its applicability to the Japanese university classroom environment.

Those who would find this paper most useful are college-level educators in Japan who teach oral communications-type courses and who often feel frustrated with large class sizes, large gaps in students' abilities, unmotivated students, and poor student attendance.

The aims of this paper are three: 1) to give a description of CELTA; 2) to point out CELTA's limitations in the Japanese college-setting; and 3) to show several ways the unique pedagogy of CELTA can be adapted to college teaching in Japan based.

Key Words: CELTA, large classroom management, ELT pedagogy, communicative approach

INTRODUCTION

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The aims of this paper are three: 1) to give a description of CELTA; 2) to point out CELTA's limitations in the Japanese college-setting; and 3) to show several ways the unique pedagogy of CELTA can be adapted to college teaching in Japan based on my experiences.

WHAT IS CELTA ?

Defined in Cambridge EFL Online:

"CELTA is the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults, one of the world's foremost initial qualifications for people who wish to become professional teachers of the English language. It is accepted throughout the world by organisations which employ English language teachers. CELTA is also recognised by the British Institute of English Language Teaching (BIELT). Cambridge English Language Teaching is working with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) towards approval of all its qualifications for state support. Cambridge also works with international ELT organisations to ensure the acceptance of CELTA globally. More than 7,000 candidates complete a CELTA course each year."

(http://www.cambridge-eft.org/teaching/celta/celta_info.cfm#01)

This practical teacher-training program, which includes about 160 hours of practical teacher-training, has its standards rigorously monitored by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), the well-known philanthropic English organization and promoter of a refined society.

The curriculum of the CELTA program is standardized and offered throughout many institutions globally. I earned my CELTA at the International House Teachers Training Institute in Portland, Oregon, and the program there varied slightly from that of other institutions qualified in offering the CELTA. Table 1 gives a partial listing of the standard offerings, while Table 2 shows some of the more popular English teacher credentials currently being offered around the world.

In short, a CELTA holder is expected to have a strong awareness of:

- the communicative-approach to teaching
- student-centered lessons
- the "facilitator" vs. the "teacher" role
- the inductive learning approach
- L2 immersion (the "English Only" rule)
- efficient classroom management
- learner autonomy

Along with these current pedagogical ideals, what makes the Cambridge CELTA (and DELTA, the diploma version) the most revered among the various others is per-

Table 1 Typical CELTA Curriculum

Analyzing language	Pitching to various levels
Understanding phonology	Using authentic materials
Understanding the foreign language learner	Teaching vocabulary
Balancing the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing	Analyzing students' errors
Analyzing learners needs	Teaching language in a monolingual vs. multilingual class
Understanding how to assess students	Using technology/computer-aided instructions (CAI)
Choosing course books	Using communicative techniques
Designing a syllabus	Using drama techniques
Making lesson plans	Observing seasoned EFL professionals and
Studying various ways of presenting new language	Evaluating teaching performances
Using eliciting techniques	Surveying the EFL career landscape

Table 2 Comparable English Language Teaching Programs

Entry-level
CELTA (RSA/CTEFLA or the RSA Prep Cert)
· CTEFL
· WLS Certificate in TEFL
· TEFL certification
· TESOL certificate
· Trinity College Certificate TESOL
Advanced-level
· DELTA
· DTEFLA
· DOTE
· TESOL Diploma
· Cert TEBESOL
· Trinity College London Licentiate Diploma
· Diploma/MA/PhD in TEFL/TESOL/TESL

haps its sheer number of holders worldwide coupled with its affiliation with the Royal Society of Arts.

Regarding employment, it is estimated that 70-80 percent of CELTA holders partake immediately in the field of English language teaching while the remainder find work in fields either indirectly or completely outside this field.

CELTA VS. THE JAPANESE UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Though the CELTA training program is highly acclaimed by those in the EFL profession, through my experience, I believe that some of the pedagogical assumptions in its program inadequately prepare its trainees for ELT in the Japanese university classroom. Some of the most problematic assumptions of the program that we had to focus our development on were:

1. teaching to new immigrant students
2. teaching to small classes
3. keeping a balanced four-skills curriculum

Multi-ethnic classes were the primary teaching environment in which we were trained in. Perhaps the assumption was that upon completing our training, the majority of us would begin working in our respective countries (i.e. my working in the USA) teaching English to classes comprised of a diverse groups of immigrants. Thus, our teaching-practice classes consisted of a mix of new immigrant students from various countries such as Hungary,

Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Mexico, and Russia.

Because we practice-taught in this type of environment, we, trainees, gained a false sense of teaching confidence and were easily led to believe that: 1) having an L2-only policy is in the best interest of the students; and 2) that our future students would be just as highly motivated to learn as the ones we were practicing with (who were highly motivated to learn in order to become more functional in their new country).

Needless to say, the Japanese university's homogeneous environment gives strong argument against having an "L2-only" policy. Students are unlikely to stay in the target language once they realize that speaking to their peers in L1 is a more efficient means of understanding the instructor's babble. In a heterogeneous learning environment, students cannot as easily depend on one another since each student may speak a different mother tongue. Particularly in Japan in classes where a large class size is common (class sizes of over 30 students), the need to facilitate instructions often takes priority over one's strong belief in language immersion.

Another false sense of confidence-building arising from this multi-ethnic class environment is that trainees work with mainly learners with high motivation levels. Immigrant students need English for success in their new society, but a majority of Japanese students have no real sense of urgency for improving their skills. The Japanese

university environment may have similar classes at the higher levels of an English major program, but by far, the majority of English classes for 1st and 2nd year students are required courses in which the Japanese students are less motivated to study for personal benefit than they are for university credit.

One of the biggest drawbacks of the CELTA training program for a trainee intent on teaching at the university level in Japan is that the program gives little regard to large classroom theory and management. We were trained to manage classes with a maximum size of 12 students while the average size of the Japanese classroom for 1st year students, I would later face, would be almost four times that number. Related problems stemming from large class sizes that further perplex the CELTA-trained are: 1) the problem of wide gaps in English abilities; and 2) the tendency to view students as "a class member" rather than as an "individual" learner.

Finally, though the CELTA pedagogy is founded on a balanced approach to language learning, specifically with its regard to the four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, the program fails to address the problematic teaching situations in Japan such as overcoming the lopsided English abilities of the Japanese university student who is well-schooled during his or her junior/senior high school years in English reading and writing (with particular emphasis on grammar studies in preparation for entrance exams), but underdeveloped in the areas of listening and speaking.

From my teaching experience at the university level, I have found that, in general, most students' motivation level drops dramatically the moment a grammar explanation begins, no matter how creatively or concisely I try to approach it.

These are some of the major problems many freshly-indoctrinated CELTA teachers face when teaching in the Japanese university classroom.

The following describes how I have modified my CELTA philosophy to better fit my teaching situation in the Japanese university classroom.

MODIFYING MY CELTA APPROACH

My Teaching Environment

On average, I teach ten 90-minute courses ("koma" in Japanese) per week. I teach general oral communication courses that can be either an elective or a required course for graduation to non-English majors. The general goal of these courses is to help students develop their English aural skills (listening and speaking). The average class size is between 30 to 50 students.

According to questionnaires given to these students, more than 25% of my students state that their main reason for taking the course is to earn credit towards their graduation. This alerts me to the large percentage of students who are in my class for superficial reasons.

Modifying the CELTA Pedagogy

Focus on Fluency, Not Accuracy

The preponderance of an exam-based English curriculum in Japan, with grammar-teaching the focal point of the lessons at the expense of listening and speaking skills development of the Japanese university students, has instilled a fear in them towards making grammatical errors, a fear likened to a "headlights on a deer" phenomenon when asked a question in English.

I have adopted a "substance over form" philosophy in my approach to my classes where substance represents the "message" one wants to communicate and form means the "grammatical rules of the language." I teach my students how to take risks again and make great efforts, while trying to create a supportive learning environment where the students can gain more confidence and overcome their fears of being reprimanded for a grammatical mistake.

Nevertheless, when a grammar lesson cannot be avoided, I ensure, as a confidence-builder, that the students first have an intuitive feel for a particular pattern or rule before giving a grammar explanation. More commonly known as the TTT (test, teach, test) method, it is somewhat the anti-thesis of the much more prevalent PPP (presentation, practice, production) approach, also commonly known as the "communicative approach." The rationale for taking this approach is that I assume that they have already been exposed to the particular grammar

pattern some time during their 6 years of grammar-based learning. Doing this gives them a chance to demonstrate their knowledge as well as gain some confidence.

Be Flexible Over the Use L1 in the Classroom

Contrary to the major consensus among the foreigner university educators in my area, I take the stance that L1 (the first language of the students) can be used in the classroom to fulfill several purposes:

- to economize on time-consuming instructions
- to vary the flow of the lesson
- to build a bridge to shy learners
- to clarify important points such as homework, grading policy, reports, etc...
- to demonstrate that I am also a language-learner willing to take risks in using the language

Of course, I try to stay in L2 (the language being taught) as much as I can to maximize the students' exposure to my native English, but I also make sure that staying in L2 does not limit other potentially rewarding classroom experiences such as fully comprehending an important cultural message behind a listening segment, for example.

Exploit Their Drive Towards Learner Autonomy

Monitoring students' in-class performance is a very important skill taught to CELTA trainees, yet this very important part of teaching is next to impossible in large classes. The natural way to deal with this in the large classroom is to introduce the students to peer work evaluation where the instructor relegates evaluation powers to the students themselves.

The problem with doing this though is the handful of students who try to take advantage of the system in a classroom with an overextended instructor. This is where I try to motivate students to become autonomous learners, emphasizing that they have to take responsibility for their own learning endeavors.

Emphasizing learning autonomy has a "two birds with one stone" effect: I have more time to plan and conduct better student-centered lessons, and the student becomes a more responsible learner.

My students practice learner autonomy through their

using peer- or self-evaluation forms after each lesson. I use this form, which is similar to a diary, but with quantifiable criteria as well, when evaluating their final grades.

Standardizing Class Procedures

I have experimented with many types of programs and textbooks, but the approach which seems to give the greatest satisfaction to both the students and me is a "student-created content syllabus." This approach consists of assigning homework where the students create content for generally based topics such as "friendship", "shopping", "the news", etc... This content is then used for some controlled speaking practice, and later for more freer conversation activities.

Admittedly, I cannot evaluate every single one of the students' work simply due to the magnitude of checking over 300 students' work a week, so I depend a lot on self- and peer-evaluation, of course, only after giving some in-depth guidelines.

A standardized class procedure is taught at the beginning so that the students develop a comfortable sense of the class' rhythm. A typical class routine for my lessons is:

1. warming up (activities to activate "whole-brain" processing)
2. case study (create interest, elicit typical solutions and resulting effects)
3. present a target skill (such as "clarifying", "asking for directions")
4. give some class drills (using the students' own work)
5. free conversation based on their homework
6. peer and self evaluation
7. review key points & discuss the following lesson

One might argue against standardizing the routine of the course because it might cause the onset of boredom. Yet in my experience with a student created content curriculum, I have found most students very motivated in their English-learning experience.

In addition to a standardized teaching routine, I keep a detailed account of each of my lessons using a specially designed spreadsheet which helps minimize my class journal record-keeping time to just 5 minutes per lesson. In it, I am able to record attendance, bonus points, penalty

points, absences, lates, student-class ranking, and lesson plans. It has been invaluable to me in analyzing not only the needs of the class as a whole, but also more importantly the individual needs of each student.

Summary of Some Specific Examples of Modifying CELTA

1. Addressing Individual Needs

a. The Student Profile

Imagine knowing the names and faces of more than half of your 300+ students. Not only that but you are able to instantly find their motivation for studying English, their contact information, and their date of birth.

I am able to do this by making extensive use of student profile questionnaires, class pictures, and a computer database. Without taking the time to do this each semester, I relinquish the very important CELTA taught philosophy of addressing students as individuals.

b. Student-created Content Curriculum (for higher level students)

Students are motivated to talk on topics of their choice in accordance with a general theme. Assigning homework is the biggest drawback, but if the assignment is clear, ample examples are given, and the homework time kept under 30 minutes a week, the students will be motivated to do them. In addition to talking on the topics of their choice, they are motivated to listen to the topics of their peers' choosing.

c. Level-Ranking Content Curriculum (for lower level students)

This curriculum is designed to make Japanese students comfortable with a class structure that is familiar to them.

Specifically, I created an "A and B" dialog booklet containing 30 8-line dialogs that incorporate target common English expressions. Each lesson entails the student

observing the dialog in use, memorizing it, and performing it with a partner for credit.

Upon completing all three dialogs successfully, the student earns a stamp on their booklet's cover from me indicating that they have achieved a certain level of ability. It is similar to the ranking system in the martial arts and many other content-based learning programs in Japan.

A student is rewarded with extra points if he or she can express his or her individuality by modifying the skit in any manner they like, whether through changes in the content or through the expressions in their non-verbal performance.

2. Eliciting Responses

Almost any westerner English teacher in Japan will attest to an almost "zombie-like" reaction of the class when asking for a response to a question.

I am able to get responses by exploiting my participation point grading system and my assigned seating chart journal sheet for each lesson. Before each lesson, students are shown a class ranking where they are able to find where they rank among their peers in points. Through this system, a competitive class nature is sure to evolve even in the most lifeless of classes.

3. Concept-checking

How does one check that everyone in a class of 40 understands a certain concept or lesson?

Here, I used the "air-headed" teacher approach by giving students the opportunity to earn 20 points if they find a mistake in my lesson. Then some time during a particular lesson, I will intentionally make a mistake in an important concept and wait to see if someone has caught my error. I will then ask the successful student to explain — in Japanese if he or she prefers (to reduce his or her fear of making mistakes in front of others) — why what I said or wrote was wrong.

If no one finds my mistake, I know that the

students have missed the important concept I have been trying to teach and try again. If all fails, I will break the rule of "L2 Only" and resort to using Japanese.

4. Encouraging Learner Autonomy

A win-win task for both instructor and student in that the teacher's time is freed from the enormous task of evaluating everyone and that the student gains more satisfaction in knowing that he or she is responsible for his or her own progress.

I achieve this by teaching the importance of learning autonomy at the beginning of the semester and then issuing each student a self-evaluation and progress form that they have to fill out at the end of each lesson. Setting up the evaluation criteria so that it can be quantifiable (such as "Rate between 0 and 5 the amount of Japanese you used in class today.") enables them to create graphs or visual clue of the direction of their progress.

CONCLUSION

I highly recommend the CELTA training program for anyone interested in improving their general skills as an English teacher because it instills a sound pedagogy in trainees and perhaps covers a wide spectrum of English language teaching issues.

However, it does fall short of being applicable to the university teaching situation here in Japan. Though the CELTA pedagogy is more appropriate for teaching to immigrant learners of English than to Japanese university students, keeping some of its ideals intact, or just slightly modifying them, allows the English instructor to raise the standard and quality of teaching English here in Japanese universities, particularly in oral communication courses with large class sizes.

The prolonged economic crisis in Japan has deeply impacted the Japanese university system causing inefficient institutions to go under and surviving ones to merge with others, meanwhile cutting corners by means of increasing class sizes and placing more teaching burden on the instructors. The decline in quality of the Japanese university

of recent has remained steady.

These unique problems in the Japanese university English classroom need to be more aggressively addressed, with more relevant training in English teacher-training programs in issues specific to Japan university ELT setting. Perhaps now is the time for a CELTIJU program to be developed — a certificate in English language teaching in Japanese universities.

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