

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# 7 things I learned about my teaching from the Cambridge Delta

by Aileen Donegan (Academic Coordinator, DCU Language Services)

A year ago, in February 2017, I had been teaching for just a year and a half, and I already knew that I loved being an English Language Teacher – much more than my previous roles in retail, journalism and advocacy. It was time to commit to this role, but what to do? Distance Delta? MA? Online course? Weighing up the pros and cons and the many ways one could undertake this course, I decided on the intensive Delta i.e. the 12-week version of the course. In the space of three months I would be tested on my knowledge of terminology, I would improve my knowledge of advanced methodology in the classroom and finally, the course would give me an opportunity to specialise in Business English.

There are three reasons why I chose the 12-week course over the longer online and blending learning version of the course; It was in a classroom, not online; I could immerse myself into the course full-time (I'm lucky, I know); I could do all the modules together. I also, luckily, knew I could count on my school to support my journey.

So, with the deadline approaching, one hastily made application was sent off. In March I set off for London to undertake my 8 week intensive Delta course at IH London – the last four weeks would be spent at home in Dublin working on my specialism. Some say you should wait until your third year of teaching to move on to the next level, while others – like those on my course – waited up to 10 years to do it. During my course, I did worry that perhaps it was all going to be over my head. A year later, this is what I learned about my teaching and how I approach my lesson...the good AND the bad.

## I couldn't deal with emerging language

The first thing one of my tutors noticed in observation was that I wasn't really doing anything with student language; I'd leave it all for delayed error correction at the end of the class, an activity often relegated if I ran out of time. I learned how to make the most out of speaking opportunities by boarding student contributions. The result? My students appreciate it and always have pen and paper to hand so they can jot down what others are saying, incorporating it into their own language use.

**“Is it not offensive to upgrade what students have said? Wouldn't they be disappointed or think I was telling them they were wrong?”**

### I was afraid to upgrade and reformulate language

Once I got used to listening in for some emerging language to deal with, I was taught to board it in order to upgrade and reformulate. This was news to me: Is it not offensive to upgrade what students have said? Wouldn't they be disappointed or think I was telling them they were wrong? I thought. After experimenting with my board work, I've seen major improvements. A year on, it's become easier to hone in on student conversations. My students are eager to learn other ways to say the same thing – especially if it's colloquial.

### Monitoring for 'appearance' sake

Ingrained into my teaching from my CELTA days, I proudly monitor students during their activities. On the course, I diligently looked at them. In a post-feedback session, my tutor asked me to explain why I was monitoring. My mind went blank. Somewhere in my 18 months of teaching I forgot; among other things, you monitor to find out what students need feedback on. Are they still on task or are they checking their phones, or chatting? I used to monitor to appear focused; now I do it to see where my students are at. Taking the time to reflect helps

Student and teacher reflection is now a major part of my lessons. I'd never engaged in it before. On the Delta there was ample time to critically examine how classes went. In fact



Words of wisdom:  
Further training helps you understand what they mean.

Pic from google image labelled for reuse

the Professional Development Assignment (PDA) was a huge part of the passing grade and one I feel, mostly stuck with me post-Delta. Now I ask how class went for the students, what they liked/disliked, do they find it easy to apply new items out in the 'real' world and how do they see themselves improving. My students are more motivated to learn because of the time spent in reflection at the end of class.

There's so much more I can do with a listening lesson!

Pre-Delta I thought listening lessons could be boring and something both teacher and student just had to get through. It all seemed repetitive: gist, specific, repeat, gist, specific, repeat. On my course I was fascinated to learn about bottom up processing and decoding. It's completely changed my approach to a listening lesson. The result? My students are challenged in the classroom and way more focused on connected speech in their lessons – something that helps them deal with spoken language day-to-day.

**“Pre-Delta I thought listening lessons could be boring and something both teacher and student just had to get through.”**

### **Observations are still terrifying**

On my course I was observed by peers and trainers on about 14 lessons, four of which were assessed. Three of those assessed by trainers, and the final observation was assessed by an external Cambridge assessor. No matter how much I sincerely tell myself that observations are a force for good, and that constructive feedback has a transformative power to add to your teaching... observations are still pretty nerve-wracking. And after the onslaught of over a dozen observed lessons in quick succession, I guess they always will be. Imposter syndrome strikes again!

It didn't take doing a Delta course to make me realise that I can be self-conscious when I teach. I second-guess myself a lot. Leading up to my observations, I would find myself thinking about when my tutors and my peers would notice that I couldn't teach, that I was fooling myself. All very harsh stuff, but it's not the first time I've heard teachers say this. I wondered whether my course would put an end to these insidious thoughts, and it has to an extent. With time, does it cease altogether?



The paper to prove it:  
The author with her  
DELTA diploma/.

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Pic by author

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### **Development**

So these are some of the things I've learned about myself and my teaching post-Delta. However, you don't need to fork out cash to develop as a teacher.

For new teachers, reflecting on what's gone right and what's gone wrong in the classroom and asking yourself why, are useful ways to reflect and grow in your teaching.

For the more experienced teacher: Do you make time for reflection in your classroom? How is your teaching different today compared to when you started teaching? What courses have you undertaken that have changed your approach? Have you changed? How?

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