

CASE STUDY / PROJECT:

Quality Issues in Foreign Language Teacher Education: Mismatched needs and content and pedagogical knowledge in FL teacher education

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

SOME PROBLEMS TO FOCUS ON:

At the outset our group found it difficult to find common ground for discussion, but started with an exploration of our different contexts. Our topic was teacher education, and we started to discuss our experiences of theory and practice in FL education, or to be more precise, the lack of any systematic connection between them. Theory can be understood here as content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge – what to teach, on the one hand, and how to teach it, on the other. The main problem is that theory all-too-often doesn't fit the actual needs of Foreign Language teachers. Among the other problems mentioned is that educators in some countries experience a lack of connection between school levels, between primary and lower or between lower and upper secondary school. This is reflected not only in the syllabi but in teacher education as well. Finally, we decided to focus on the needs of Foreign Language teachers, on mismatch between the knowledge and skills they need to function effectively as teachers as opposed to what they actually get in teacher education. This will be outlined in more detail below.

DESCRIPTION OF CONTEXT

Our context is, as mentioned above, a situation where the skills and knowledge of teacher students, and of all too many practising teachers for that matter, do not match the actual needs of the FL classroom. This involves the following areas:

- Inadequate FL proficiency, that is to say, in general, language proficiency – on the one hand, and knowing classroom management language – on the other.
- Knowing the wrong “kind” of grammar, that is to say sentence level grammar only, but not text level grammar.
- Little knowledge of special languages – Language for Specific Purposes
- Knowing their classics, not young peoples' literature.
- All too many lack the ability/pedagogical content knowledge needed to teach the language. Examples are the inability to handle multilingual situations or pupils with special needs. The student teachers' training in classroom management is often weak as well.

MAIN PURPOSE (WHAT WE WANT TO ACHIEVE)

Our goal is to modernise foreign language components in the teacher education programmes. In practice it will be necessary to focus efforts on key aspects of the many issues involved, e.g. improving the teaching of literature to include work texts for children and young people as well as the canon, or of text grammar in addition to sentence level grammar.

ACTION TO BE TAKEN

We have to begin by analyzing teachers' and students' needs at the national and the European level. It is also important to visualize future language needs. It is important to define pupils' needs, such as student interest in acquiring knowledge for a basic conversation for more elaborated purposes, such as language for special purposes. Research on what foreign language teachers will need is, of course, the first step.

Implementation will be a key challenge in the face of vested interests at universities and teacher colleges. A systematic approach for bringing innovation (on national and European level) to teacher training institutions will be necessary. It will also be necessary to prepare student teachers for plurilingual education, for example by shared seminars for language teachers of related languages. As mentioned, it will be necessary to focus efforts on selected issues.

Developing a partner-school system to enhance practice periods for teacher trainees in combination with teacher and school development.

An effort should also be made to better utilize teacher and student mobility schemes to ensure all have had opportunities for longer stays in areas where the target language is spoken.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

The needs analysis should result in a description of the knowledge and competencies FL language teachers need. This should, hopefully, lead to new and revised programs for FL teachers, comprising both content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. This should also be coupled with strong emphasis in ensuring all students stay in the target language countries. Another outcome would be improved practice periods for teacher trainees based on the use of partner schools.

Last but not least, would it be an idea to organize ECML workshops on some of the many issues involved?