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An evaluation of the school-based teaching practice in the training of EFL teachers by the English department of the Faculty of arts in Ljubljana

Summary

In the introduction, the article outlines the context of the practical EFL teacher training at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana and provides the general rationale for this component of teacher education programs. The article then focuses on the results of an ongoing evaluation of the school-based teaching practice program for future EFL teachers (which included over 500 participants) from its inception to the present. The instruments used in the evaluation were questionnaires filled in by all the participating students and their mentors, and essay reports written by the students after each of the two obligatory practice weeks. The quantitative and qualitative data complement each other and confirm that school-based teaching practice is of key importance for shaping future language teachers. The large majority of students and mentors judge their practice teaching experience as positive. An active encounter with their future professional reality is also a major milestone in the students' process of professional identification. The study also points out some aspects of the school-based teaching practice which should be further developed. Unfortunately, as can be seen from the conclusion, the current promises / the reality of the Bologna reform do not provide much cause for optimism.

Key words: school-based teaching practice, practical EFL teacher training, students, mentors

Ovrednotenje pedagoške prakse na Oddelku za anglistiko in amerikanistiko Filozofske fakultete v Ljubljani

Povzetek

Članek uvodoma predstavi kontekst praktičnega usposabljanja učiteljev angleščine na Filozofski fakulteti v Ljubljani ter na splošno utemelji pomen te sestavine študijskih programov izobraževanja učiteljev. V nadaljevanju so predstavljeni rezultati evalvacije sistematičnega izvajanja pedagoške prakse za bodoče učitelje angleščine od njegove uvedbe dalje, s preko 500 udeleženci. Evalvacija je potekala v obliki vprašalnikov, ki so jih izpolnili vsi študentje in njihovi mentorji, ter prostih esejskih poročil študentov po vsakem od dveh tednov obvezne pedagoške prakse. Kvantitativni in kvalitativni podatki se medsebojno dopolnjujejo in potrjujejo izreden pomen praktičnega usposabljanja za oblikovanje bodočih učiteljev angleščine. Velika večina študentov in mentorjev svoje izkušnje namreč ocenjuje pozitivno, za študente pa je vodeno soočenje s poklicno realnostjo tudi ključen mejnik v procesu identifikacije s svojim bodočim poklicem. Evalvacija je pokazala tudi na nekatere vidike pedagoške prakse, ki bi jih kazalo v prihodnosti še razviti in izboljšati, vendar, kot je razvidno iz zaključka, 'bolonjski' obeti žal niso velik razlog za optimizem.

Ključne besede: pedagoška praksa, praktično usposabljanje učiteljev angleščine, študentje, mentorji, evalvacija

An evaluation of the school-based teaching practice in the training of EFL teachers by the English department of the Faculty of arts in Ljubljana

1. Introduction

The article presents, discusses, and evaluates one of the most important components of the pre-service training of EFL teachers, i.e. the teaching practice.

The field of second language learning and teaching has seen in recent years frequent and at times drastic changes to which both pre- and in-service teacher training should conform. However, research findings show that in Slovenia this is not the case, as there is a huge discrepancy between education programmes for future EFL teachers and their actual needs (see Cvetek 2005b).

As we live in an age of information overkill it is increasingly difficult to keep up to date with methodological claims and counterclaims calling teachers to follow them. As a consequence of all this, there is much understandable confusion. For some teachers this steady bombardment of information is depressing; for others, however, is a stimulating challenge. Whatever our response, this is most likely the climate in which the next generation of language teachers will learn their trade. Emphasis in both pre-service and in-service teacher training should therefore be on helping equip the prospective and/or practising teacher as effectively as possible to survive and succeed in that climate.

A step towards more practical pre-service training of EFL teachers was made in the academic year 2000/01, when the teaching practice at the *English department of the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana* was introduced for the first time. The insiders would agree that, for the Faculty of Arts, that was a historic turning point, an event of such importance that it could have been accompanied by a rephrased Armstrong's famous utterance he used when stepping on the Moon: "That's one small step for a future teacher, one giant step for the teaching profession". Thereby, an important step was made in the direction of integrating the two basic ingredients of professionalism – theory and practice.

Developing professional competence involves teachers in examining and developing their "experiential knowledge" (their opinions and beliefs about learning and teaching based on their own experience of language classrooms), and extending their "received knowledge" (for example, their knowledge of theories of language, of the psychology of language learning, and of opinions, beliefs and practices which are different from their own).

For two decades or so teacher training has been under a strong influence of the so-called reflective model which encourages teachers to explore their teaching in order to gain awareness of their beliefs and practices. Today, practically all (pre- and in-service) teacher training models take a holistic approach to teacher development built on the notion of the teacher as critical and

reflective thinker. The usual argument is that teacher education needs to engage teachers not merely in the mastery of techniques, but in an exploration of the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that underlie their teaching practices: self-reflection as the route to self-development.

Teachers do more than decide on the content and structure of teaching. They also decide on how the second language will be taught. They provide a methodology. It is by means of their chosen methodology that teachers seek to manage the process of language learning.

All teachers have a theory of language learning. That is, they act in accordance with a set of principles about the way language learners behave. This theory, however, may not be explicit. In many cases the teacher's views about language learning will be covert and will only be implicit in what she/he does. The teaching practice helps future teachers make their theory of language learning explicit. It is based on the conviction that teachers will be better off with an explicit set of ideas about language learning. It is only when principles are made explicit that they can be examined with a view to amending or replacing them. Teachers who operate in accordance with implicit beliefs may be not only uncritical but also resistant to change. Teachers who make explicit the principles by which they teach are able to examine those principles critically.

Language teaching has always had a theoretical side and a practical side. *Theory* can be considered from two perspectives: it can mean the collective theoretical knowledge of the profession, which we can call *Theory*, with a capital *T*. It can also mean the personal constructed theories of the individual which we can call *theory*, with a small *t* (Malderez and Bodoczky 1999, 13). In English language teacher education, this *Theory* (i.e. knowledge of and about the subject, and some theoretical pedagogy) is mainly taught at universities. It is assumed that this capital *T* Theory can then be transferred into practice which will be learnt on the job, often only after graduation. The problem is that this transfer very often fails to occur, as the connections between the Theory and the realities of classroom practice are unclear.

Discussions about the optimal ratio between *Theory* (and *theories* with a small *t*) and practice will never cease, and there can be no simple answer to this question. A teacher's expertise, without doubt, consists of both *Theory* (and *theories* with a small *t*) and *practice*, as they are both integral parts of the same skill. This means that classroom events will inform personal theories, and *theories* and *Theory* will inform classroom practice. In this view of initial teacher education, the carefully designed practicum has a vital part to play when it comes to the dynamic interplay of practice and theory.

The teaching practice is, then, a pedagogic framework that helps student-teachers develop the capacity to self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate their teaching – the so called *reflective ability.* It is during the teaching practice period that student-teachers need to establish a reflective habit. Establishing reflection as a habit means learning the skills of reviewing which include noticing, interpreting and evaluating, as well as developing the subsequent skills of planning and selecting. All these skills depend on consciously linking interpretations of classroom events with personally constructed theories. In this view, the teaching practice within pre-service

teacher training represents the central link between theory and practice as it is only here that the principle of "theorizing practice or practising theory" can be applied (Kumaravadivelu 1999; Trappes-Lomax and McGrath 1999, 33).

2. Evaluation

2.1 Aim of the Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the organization and implementation of the two-week school-based teaching practice at the Department of English and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana) between 2002 and 2006. The evaluation tried to determine how satisfied the students and the mentors are with respect to the school-based teaching practice within the pre-service language teacher training framework and how the outcomes of the experience are viewed upon. The evaluation was based on qualitative and quantitative data.

2.2 Respondents

The evaluation comprised all students of both single and double major teacher training tracks, who followed their fourth year of English Language and Literature Study Programme at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana) and participated in their two-week school-based teaching practice between 2002 and 2006. Additionally, the evaluation included all their mentors. The final evaluation sample consisted of 290 students and 325 mentors. The mentors' sample consisted of those mentors who participated in the training seminar for mentors as well as those who did not attend the seminar.

2.3 Instruments

The data were collected by means of questionnaires filled in by all participating students and their mentors, and by means of essay reports written by the students after each of the two obligatory practice weeks. The quantitative part of the evaluation was based on the analysis of two different questionnaires designed for the students and the mentors respectively (Cencič and Cencič 1994). Both questionnaires included questions related to the students' and mentors' experience with respect to the implementation of the school-based teaching practice. Also, in the questionnaires students and mentors were given an opportunity to make comments and suggestions for the improvement of the practice. The questionnaires mainly comprised closed-ended questions (dichotomous questions, multiple choice questions, rating, Likart scale). In each questionnaire, the last question was open-ended.

2.3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The evaluation questionnaires were filled in immediately after the practice. The students handed in their questionnaires together with their teaching practice portfolios. The same applied to essay reports. The data were collected between 2002 and 2006, and statistically processed (descriptive statistics).

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of Students' Responses

According to the course requirements, each student is to complete a two-week, school-based teaching practice, one week in a primary school and another in a secondary school. The majority of the students (60%) believe the length of the practice is adequate. However, there is still a high proportion of the students that feels the practice is too short (37%). Although it seems the students are satisfied with the length of the practice, it should be pointed out that Slovenia lags behind the modern development in this field in Europe and the world (see Cvetek 2005a).

The student's teaching practice can take place at any time during their 4th year of studies in agreement with their mentor. The teaching practice represents an additional workload and is not adjusted to the student's timetable at the department. Thus, in order to fulfil the teaching practice requirement, students miss out some of their regular lectures, seminars and practical language classes. Despite this, it seems that that the majority of the students (75%) manage to integrate the practice in the rest of their study requirements. The majority of the students complete the practice during their winter holidays, during a time when there are no examinations or even later, in their graduation year.

One of the main aims of the teaching practice is to progressively introduce and prepare students for their future work in the classroom and enable them to understand a wider context of their future professional career. For students the practice also represents an ideal opportunity to critically reflect upon their future profession. Only on the basis of experience (practice) and reflection on that experience can students decide whether they want to perform the job of a teacher or not. The practice made the majority of the students (65%) passionate and enthusiastic about the teaching profession. However, one third of the students (34%) still wonder whether they want to become language teachers.

Mentors play a key role in the implementation of the teaching practice. Students choose their mentors on their own or ask their former English language teachers to act as mentors. The results of the questionnaires show the students are highly satisfied with their teacher mentors (87%). Mentors are experienced teachers and usually represent the students' first contact with real teaching. At such work, experience, knowledge, patience, sensitivity, and, above all, enthusiasm to work with students are expected from a mentor. During the teaching practice the mentor's main roles are to guide, encourage, observe, analyse and help the student, listen and talk to him/her, plan and execute model lessons, etc. The majority of the students (64%) believe their mentors helped them, but did not limit their autonomy. Also, one third of the students (31%) feel their mentors encouraged and guided them. In some cases it can be observed that the students were left to their own, were in want of help and were not provided the right kind of assistance, feedback or guidance. A mentor's work is highly demanding and complex. It is thus of utmost importance for him/her to be properly trained and ready and willing to perform the work of a mentor.

The teaching practice met the expectations of more than a half of the students (52%). Nevertheless, it can be noted that 47% of the students think the practice only partly answered their expectations. The majority of the students (65%) experienced no problems during their teaching practice. Less than a third of the students (29%) confronted minor problems and 6% of the students faced complicated problems. Minor problems involved mentor's disorganization, scheduling the mentor's and the student's commitments, lack of feedback, problems with timing, problems with the adaptation to the pupils' level of knowledge, portfolio design, variety of methods, filling out forms, lesson planning, ICT use, and so on. Among the major problems identified are scheduling the mentor's and the student's commitments, mentor's lack of understanding, lack of feedback, administration load and handling discipline.

Students complete their teaching practice in two parts, one week at a primary school and another at a secondary school, but usually not successively. The majority of the students (61%) believe the first week of their practice strongly influences the second week; 23% of the students think this influence is profound. On the basis of a mentor's average weekly teaching load (which is 20 lessons), the minimum teaching practice requirement for a student amounts to 13 lessons (see Skela et al. 2003). The majority of the students (73%) feel such a practice load is tiring and demanding, but manageable. Only 11% of the students believe they were overloaded and experienced a very tiring teaching practice. The latter can be ascribed to the problems related to scheduling the mentor's and the student's commitments.

During their teaching practice, the students were given several opportunities to get to know and familiarize themselves with different school characteristics and activities. The majority of the students became acquainted with the organization of instruction, paper work and class leadership. Also, the mentors introduced the students into the ability grouping classes and enabled them to participate in special excursions/days (e.g. fieldwork day, sports day). Some of the students also gained insights into additional and remedial classes, various extra-curricular activities, competitions, consultation hours, school newspapers, working with children with special needs, school concerts and other projects, testing and assessment, etc.

The students feel that the teaching practice focuses too much on portfolio design (e.g. filling out various forms), scheduling the mentor's and the student's commitments, writing detailed lesson plans, lesson observation and, occasionally, depends too much on the mentor. Also, students believe there was not enough teaching, time for discussions, time for thorough reflection about planning and execution of the lessons, observation of different lessons and several teachers, contact with other teachers, practical advice from the mentors, feedback, etc. In addition, some students encountered problems, for which they had not been prepared (e.g. integration of children with special needs, discipline problems, ICT use).

An open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire invited the students to write comments and provide suggestions for further improvement of teaching practice. The majority of students praised and spoke highly of the necessity and usefulness of the practice. The suggestions for improvements were the following:

- teaching practice should last longer and should be extended over several years of studies,
- teaching practice should gain the status of the 'obligatory/compulsory' part in the pre-service teacher training track,
- paper work (e.g. filling out forms, writing essays, reports) should be reduced to a minimum,
- teaching practice could be carried out in pairs,
- teaching practice could be carried out with more than one English language teacher, i.e. more than one mentor could be affiliated with one student,
- the pre-service teacher training staff at the English Department should provide more information about planning lessons, up-to-date changes occurring in schools (e.g. ability grouping, integration of children with special needs, paper work), and
- the English Department should organize several debates and devote more time to reflection upon the practice when the students return from the two-week school-based practice.

3.2 Analysis of Mentors' Responses

At the Department students choose their own mentors for the teaching practice. These are usually their former English language teachers in primary and secondary schools. Every year, the department organizes mentor training courses. In the course of the evaluation, it was considered important to seek mentors' opinion as well. In this part of the paper, the analysis of the mentors' questionnaires is presented.

Regarding the length of the teaching practice, the mentors share their opinion with the students. The majority of the mentors (73%) believe that the length of the practice is adequate. 26% of the mentors feel it is too short. Also, 99% of the mentors consider the teaching practice necessary and useful.

A mentor's work is highly demanding and complex. A trainee linked to an experienced mentor represents an additional commitment for the mentor. That is why the mentors were asked to evaluate how successful they were in scheduling the mentor's and the student's commitments. More than a half of the mentors (51%) answered that they experienced some problems which were not of major importance. 40% of the mentors had no problems at all, however, 9% of the mentors feel the trainee required a lot of additional commitment and their free time.

The mentors tried to involve the students into every day school life. The main aim of this was to make students acquainted with school work and extra curricular activities. The majority of the mentors familiarized their trainees with additional and remedial classes, consultation hours and parent-teacher meetings. Less than a third of the students (29%) did not have a chance to familiarize themselves with any of the activities. Additionally, some of the students were given the opportunity to participate in class hours, various competition preparations, ability grouping classes, assessment period meetings, project work, etc.

One of the key mentor roles is to advise the student and guide them through their individual teaching (e.g. telling the trainee what to teach, commenting on their lesson plan, suggesting changes, ironing out problems). The majority of the mentors (53%) told the students what to teach and gave them the material to teach. Only a minority of the mentors allowed students to choose their own topics/themes for the lesson. The latter situation results in the fact that teachers/mentors have to follow a prescribed syllabus through the year and cannot deviate from the plan too much.

Before the actual teaching, the mentor gives considerable help and support to the student by advising them what and how to teach and providing feedback after the teaching. The time during planning and feedback is critical for the students since they can reflect on the planning and teaching experience. The majority of the mentors allocated on average at least half an hour time to the trainee before their individual teaching. Only a small percentage (3%) of the mentors devoted each student less than ten minutes prior to their individual teaching. A similar result can be observed with the time allocated after each individual teaching, i.e. during the feedback session.

The mentors believe that the students feel highly motivated and enthusiastic about the teaching practice and are aware of its importance for their future professional career. 83% of the mentors believe the students to be greatly interested in all the activities performed at school. Nevertheless, 17% of the students only showed interest in their minimum requirements. The latter can be ascribed to the fact that some of the students do not demonstrate interest for the teaching profession or the teaching practice, as it is considered an unofficial part of the studies. The practice may also represent too heavy a work load for them.

The relationship between the teacher and the mentor is of utmost importance and it affects the student's process of professional identification and their ultimate choice about their future professional career. The majority of the mentors (87%) believe they had very good, close and solid relationships with the students. None of the mentors assessed the relationship with their trainee as bad or impersonal.

The mentors believe that the students are qualified and trained for teaching. The majority of the mentors (92%) feel the students have adequate knowledge and skills to perform teaching duties. 8% of the mentors believe the students have adequate knowledge and skills, but lack practice. Regarding the elements of teacher training, the mentors believe that the students feel highly confident and competent as far as the content of instruction (i.e. language) and communication and interaction with pupils are concerned. However, the mentors are convinced that the students lack knowledge and skills in the field of pedagogy/psychology (43%) and teaching (40%). The latter two components are given least attention in the English study programme. Additionally, the mentors believe the students should improve in handling discipline, dealing with children with special needs and the use of ICT. Despite all these weaknesses, the majority of the mentors (85%) felt that the students made considerable progress.

The mentors evaluate the two-week school-based teaching practice as positive. They are also willing to work with additional trainees in the future. It seems that the practice exerts positive influence on the mentors and the students. The majority of the mentors (84%) feel the trainee and the trainee's practice itself influenced their work. The mentors believe that due to this experience they critically examine and reflect upon their work more often and more thoroughly, they become more critical towards their teaching, they are given a chance to see new methods/ approaches, they are able to exchange experiences, views and reflections, and they can make improvements with regard to better organization of their own commitments and work.

Despite the considerable impact of the practice on mentors, they think there is still room for improvement. The mentors believe they lack time for guidance in the planning period and feedback sessions after the teaching. They also feel overloaded with regard to administration during the practice and feel that their work is not fairly evaluated and rewarded/remunerated. In order to improve the teaching practice at the Department the mentors made some comments and suggestions. They believe the department could extend the teaching practice, minimise administration, enable students to become attached to more than one mentor and properly evaluate the mentors' work.

3.3 Analysis of essay reports

The reflection essays / essay reports that students were required to produce after their teaching practice were not guided in terms of content – students could choose any aspect of their experience to reflect on and discuss. The first aim of analysing their reports was thus to establish which aspects of teaching practice were chosen for discussion the most frequently at the level of the entire research population. In addition to finding out which aspects of teaching practice students find the most important we obtained information on the effects and success of the teaching practice which significantly complements the findings of the quantitative part of the evaluation.

The most prominent theme in the essay reports was the student's personal experiencing and evaluation of the experience as a whole. It is obvious that a student's first practical encounter with their future profession is a very emotional experience. Sabina's essay contains a typical testimony to this as she writes that after her first lesson and discussing it with her mentor "The teaching practice continued in approximately the same pattern, with a feeling of victory at the end of each lesson, and disappointment and puzzlement following shortly after". Many essays begin with descriptions of fear and insecurity before the teaching practice week, and later describe moments of relief and excitement when experiencing success, and occasionally also sadness when experiencing failure. The major role of emotion in the first teaching practice is evident also from the titles that students give their essays, such as "It's challenging!", "A pleasant surprise", "A week in purgatory". A second major theme is closely related to the emotional aspect of the trainee's experience: a shift of identity set into motion by moving from the role of a learner into the role of a teacher. Many students wrote something like Maja, who did her teaching practice at her old high school: "At the beginning I did not feel comfortable in this new situation. Sitting in a staff room having a cup of coffee with all those awe-inspiring faces from only a couple of years ago

required a new perspective on my side. For the first couple of days I had a feeling I am stuck in a limbo, not a student and not a teacher". This transitional period is an inevitable and crucial part of the development of a future teacher, but the initial feeling of "split identity" must sooner or later develop into a sense described very nicely by Martina: "I was standing in front of the class realizing that I am transforming into someone who is able to teach others".

In the formation of a future teacher's professional and also personal self-image a key role is played by the individual's mentor. Many students at least mention their mentor in their essays, and some chose the relationship with their mentor or the analysis of the mentor as a role model as the main topic of their essay. Most of the reported experiences are positive; the mentor was a model for the student in terms of the apprenticeship model of professional training (imitation of the mentor's techniques and behaviours). Mentors also provided valuable instructions and feedback, and some students reported that they saw their mentors as a source of motivation and inspiration.

Many students state that despite having observed their teachers from the perspective of a learner for years, they now saw their mentors / the teacher in a new light. They became aware of the scope of a teacher's professional activities; mostly students noted that a teacher's work is much harder and time-consuming than they had previously thought. They also became aware of the scope of knowledge and competences a good teacher needs, and how important personality qualities are to good teaching. Davor, for example, gave his essay the telling title "Being interesting is a tough gig". Many students wondered what the role of a teacher is in the first place. Some for example realized that nowadays a teacher is no longer the main source of knowledge, as was the case in the past, but should be more like a guide to a learner in the search for knowledge. One of the students describes an excellent example of cognitive conflict, which is crucial to effective learning, and can only be triggered (and overcome) when a learner is faced with practice. She writes that while working with learners she realized that the teacher cannot possibly know the answers to all questions, and that, what is more, that is not even necessary. (Many essays show that students tend to ascribe to the traditional belief that the teacher as an expert should be able to immediately answer any question learners might have or else they have failed in their professional role.) Different students formed somewhat different conceptions of the teacher's role during their practice, but it is interesting that many of them focus on the role of the teacher as shaper of learners' personalities. They find this goal more important than making sure that the learners learn to speak English. Katja, for example, says: "Being a teacher you do have a great impact on your students' lives. You can motivate them to become the best person they can be. On the other hand you can make their lives miserable and have the power to hurt them quite a lot."

It is true that such in-depth reflection is only found in a small number of the essay reports, which is understandable since in their first two weeks in the role of a teacher trainees mostly spend all their energy on executing lessons. Only a few manage to realize already within the first week that they should gradually focus less on themselves (their performance and the many cognitive constraints of executing a lesson) and more on the learners, their responses and needs. Many essays show that students, especially at the beginning of their teaching practice, feel the need to be in complete control of the lesson. This is understandable since they are in a challenging new situation and

control gives them a sense of security. Some students, however, wrote that they realized through the week that complete control is neither possible nor obligatory – it is more important to be flexible. For a young teacher to fully develop this quality, much longer is needed, of course. It is nevertheless encouraging that several students report having made considerable progress even within one week. Špela, for example, says: "With the help of my mentor's instructions I gradually improved some weaknesses in my teaching from one lesson to another". Some students even seem to have made progress independently, without particular guidance from the mentor.

There are also other fairly prominent topics in the essay reports, such as the problem of establishing authority in the classroom, the problem of learner motivation (existing motivation and how a teacher can create / increase it) and discipline. Students mostly relate motivation to the teacher's methodological approach (type of learning activities and motivational value of classroom materials), while authority and discipline are related to the teacher's personality. Another issue is the level of difficulty. It is understandable that an absolute beginner needs experience and time to pinpoint the level of English vocabulary appropriate for a certain grade of primary school, how to ensure that learners will understand the teacher's target language talk, what it takes for them to comprehend a certain grammatical rule, etc. Mostly students are aware of this problem even before the beginning of their practice and employ certain strategies to solve the problem (they describe, for example, how they focused on the mentor's talk during lesson observation so they could later imitate it, or learning through trial and error).

In terms of content and didactics, students mostly reflected on the planning and execution of lessons, focusing on methods, with very little mention of learning aims or content. There is practically no discussion in the essay reports on English as a language system or different aspects of language use, but there is much mention of the student's practical target language competence and the teacher's target language use in the classroom. The problems students cite are mostly in the area of adapting teacher talk to learner level (this is a challenge both when learners' English is lower and when it is higher (!) than that of the trainee), the ratio between Slovenian and English and code-switching in the classroom, and communicative functions specific to language teaching (vocabulary explanation, elicitation etc.)

In terms of general educational issues some students write about how the school was organized and equipped, the state of the Slovenian school system and school reforms. The most frequently mentioned novelties are ability streaming, the introduction of the 9-year primary school and integration of students with special needs (these are topics that are not dealt with in their pre-service courses). Since students take one week of teaching practice at a primary school and another at a secondary school, they of course often compare the two contexts. This, admittedly, mostly resulted in some degree of over-generalizing their experience, but is positive nevertheless since it encouraged the students to consider their career plans (which level would they be more suited to teach at).

A very frequent theme overall was: "Am I a suitable person for the teaching profession?" or "Is teaching a profession for me?". Irena entitled her essay: "Me – a teacher?", and another student concluded her essay with: "Now my doubts are gone." Regardless of whether the essay begins

with "I have always wanted to be a teacher", most students conclude it with the conviction that this is the right profession for them. This is a key function of the teaching practice within a pre-service teacher education program. In fact it leads to the question: if the encounter with practice is the experience that forces each and every student to consider whether they are on the right study/career track, would it not make sense to ensure that this happens at least in a minimal form in their 1st year of studies, when they can still opt easily for another field, and not as late as in their 4th year or even after that? It is encouraging to see, however, that after the teaching practice many students understand how much learning still lies ahead ("I have a lot more to learn", "I know that this is just the beginning", "I hope I will be able to attend training events when I get a full time job", and similar statements.).

The analysis of over 400 essay reports in which students reflected on their first practical encounter with the reality of their future profession can be concluded by saying that this experience is very important and encouraging for most students. Despite the fact that students have very different personalities and do their teaching practice under sometimes very different circumstances, some general effects inevitably take place. Each and every student gains certain realizations and skills, and also transforms as a person in ways that university studies cannot make possible. Even a superbly designed and learner-centred university course can only simulate reality at best, but it can never have the cognitive and affective potential needed for experiential learning that is inherent to a real situation in practice.

4. Conclusion

The results stemming from the ongoing evaluation study of the teaching practice in the English Department at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana show its overwhelmingly positive impact on student-teachers' professional development. It can be concluded that both the student-teachers and the mentors are satisfied with the teaching practice, and that they firmly believe it is an indispensable ingredient of pre-service teacher education as it gives the student teachers good opportunities for practical applications of what they have learnt during their theoretical studies, and thus developing their capacity "to theorise from practice and practise what they theorise". The teaching practice has, according to the results, a positive impact on the work of the mentors as well. We can establish that the carefully designed teaching practice contributes significantly to the quality of foreign language teaching in schools in general.

The world seems to be shrinking very rapidly as international barriers break down and people can more easily come into contact with other cultures and languages through travel, communication or new technology. This globalization of the world is a modern and sometimes controversial trend which looks as though it may be here to stay. Europe is the meeting point for a variety of multicultural and multilingual societies. This diversity creates a special need for communication, mutual understanding and tolerance between people. Effective foreign language learning and teaching is, therefore, at the heart of current thinking and discussion in Europe about foreign language teaching at school. Governments are keen to encourage their citizens to have foreign language competence for their country's economic benefit. In Slovenia, too, this surge of interest

in and need for foreign language learning has led to the many reforms carried out in this area over a period of the last two decades or so. Although these changes (e.g. introducing early foreign language learning) bear witness to the steadily increasing importance attached by the national policy to the teaching of foreign languages, an accompanying pre-service teacher education has been largely missing. In other words, university pre-service teacher training programmes do not take any of these changes into account. In Slovenia, teacher training has not yet been given special priority by the Government and Ministry of Education.

The analyses we have been carrying out within the practicum reveal that most student-teachers emphasize the importance of linking *curricular areas* (i.e. the traditional "professional subject" disciplines of the English language and literature) with the *Theory and Practice of Teaching and Learning*, i.e. the educational or teacher-training subjects. Student-teacher often criticize the "professional subject" courses for being, in terms of content, irrelevant, for their future career and often for being carried out in a boring way as the traditional lecture mode is still the prevailing way of teaching.

Unfortunately, the reality of the Bologna reform does not provide much cause for optimism. The new English Language Study Programme (pedagogical route) that has undergone the Bologna educational reform, is still based primarily on the traditional "professional subject" or "scientific" disciplines (i.e. the study of language and the study of literature), without taking into account the actual nature and needs of the profession for which it has been established. This is not surprising if we know that the new programme is not based on any (thorough) analysis of foreign language teachers' needs in contemporary society.

During the last fifteen years or so, there has been a strong shift in teacher training from the traditional *applied science model* to the so-called *reflective model* which encourages teachers to explore their teaching in order to gain awareness of their beliefs and practices. This implies experiential learning and action research within the environment where learning and teaching is actually happening, i.e. in the classroom. In this view, the aim of a pre-service teacher education programme is not only to gain (theoretical) knowledge in curricular areas, but to help student-teachers develop their teaching skills, knowledge and attitudes so that they can become more effective and professional teachers. The main emphasis in a training programme for language teachers, whose influence will continue for several decades should, therefore, be placed on the *Theory and Practice of Teaching and Learning*, as this would open up new vistas for their *reflective* approach to classroom learning and teaching.

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