

LOOKING AHEAD: TRAINING PROSPECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHERS FOR LIFELONG PROFESSIONAL SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Angela, STANESCU

Valahia University of Târgoviște, Târgoviște, Romania, angelastanescu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The present paper examines the relevance of both graduate-tracking and a prognostic view on graduate employability for the development of more targeted professional training programmes for prospective modern language teachers. Although the discussion is specifically concerned with future EFL teachers, its scope can easily be extended to the field of language education in general. We start from the premise that, at least for a sizeable section of foreign language undergraduates, going into teaching remains a definite career option, and student-tracking data tend to support this view. Hence the obvious necessity of adapting both curricular and relevant course programme content to these identifiable professional needs. Several interconnected issues are brought into discussion – the expediency of a more focused needs-analysis approach to curriculum design and development; in the case of language education, the need of a rapport between the relevant department and the Department for the Training of Teaching Personnel, currently in charge of all pre-service teacher-training programmes; the allocation of ampler curriculum space to the study of applied linguistics, language teaching methodology and pre-service training in general; the creation of profession-oriented master programmes in these subject areas; the need for formal or informal career counselling services; the necessity of developing long-term strategies that will ensure not only the graduates' successful integration into the profession, but also their efficient orientation in the workplace ethos and the various opportunities it opens for formal and informal professional (self)development. The core argument of the present paper is that only by an efficiently managed, far-reaching pre-service training programme, both at undergraduate and graduate levels, can we ensure our graduates' success in a teaching career, as well as their insertion into the continuum of in-service professional education and development.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The current situation

In the domain of humanities in general and modern languages in particular, Romanian undergraduates benefit from optional courses in general pedagogy and teaching methodology, provided by the respective faculty in conjunction with the Department for the Training and Development of Teaching Personnel (DTDTP). This specialized department of the university has in recent years taken over the area of pedagogical and methodological instruction and training, formerly provided as part of the academic curriculum by each faculty whose students were likely to contemplate a career in pre-university education. Thus, the previously obligatory one-year courses in General Pedagogy and Specialty Methodology have been transferred to this relatively new university structure to administer as a comprehensive three-year teacher training programme covering the entire duration of the undergraduate course.

Even though the Department's intended mission is, to all intents and purposes, similar to that of the teacher training colleges in Britain and other European countries, there are a number of significant differences in terms of timing, duration and curricular design. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the teacher training programmes provided by Higher Education Institutions address graduates pursuing a teaching career, who can acquire a qualified teacher status by obtaining a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at the end of a one-year course, consisting of both theoretical instruction and in-school teaching practice. This postgraduate course is extended to two years in the case of part-time or long distance students. Besides, there are related, quite flexible programmes specially tailored for a wide variety of training needs, including training-on-the-job options, provided by the Graduate Training Programmes [1].

By contrast, the Teacher Training Departments of Higher Education Institutions in Romania provide professional training to undergraduates and graduates alike. The undergraduate route consists in a three-year modular course adjacent to the faculty's academic curriculum. The graduate programme resides in a two-year course or even an intensive one-year course. While this more encompassing addressability to both undergraduate and graduate levels diversifies and offers flexibility to the range of the Department's professional training services, it also overextends its professional training mission and programme to educational contexts which should require differentiated treatment. In terms of both course content and duration, as well as of the ratio between its theoretical and practical components, the current format of the programme needs rethinking and restructuring.

2. PROBLEMATIC ISSUES

The undergraduate training programme, extending throughout the three years of the undergraduate degree course, is meant to operate a partition between academic instruction and professional education, whose underlying principle seems to be that of an early formulated career choice and an opportunity for the students to obtain a specific professional qualification at the moment of graduation. But the efficiency of these joint programmes of study – academic and pedagogical – remains highly questionable, even if many HEI's have accepted it as a given, considering that teacher training issues are the exclusive concern of the DTDTP. There are, however, institutions which have formulated pertinent critical analyses of the current initial training programmes. These warn that the present teacher training module, undertaken in parallel with the degree programme, interferes with the students' academic study, thus producing 'a series of dysfunctional points/vulnerabilities with negative repercussions on the teaching career' [2]. While obviously addressing those students already considering a teaching career from the very outset, the option of undertaking the training modules does not necessarily reflect an informed

choice or a genuine professional motivation. The above mentioned document sees it as 'a formal option, meant to ensure a an alternative chance of employment – in the last resort – in the event of failing to be employed in one's speciality' [3]. Even if their decision to take this course may provide the respective HEI with an early, informal prognosis of the students' career plans, and a useful basis for subsequent graduate tracking data, some students take the course not due to an informed career choice, but out of the need to pursue and secure a sort of professional certification in parallel with their undergraduate studies. The issue of certification is itself a tenuous one, since the completion of the module, attested by the final pass grades, does not confer the graduates with an actual teaching diploma or certificate in education. And yet, a recent survey presenting the perspective on initial teacher training of Higher Education Institutions in countries in South-Eastern Europe, including Romania, shows that the common perception equates this kind of degree-embedded training programmes with a 'fundamental' or 'traditional qualification for the teaching profession' [4]. At the same time, among the curriculum changes or improvements projected by the institutions polled, the upgrading of fundamental didactic knowledge and teaching skills ranked highest in the list [5]. This indicates that, while this joint arrangement presents the advantage of offering our students a qualified teacher status on graduation, its efficiency can be called into question for several reasons.

2.1. Overloading

Undertaking virtually two courses of study at the same time involves a double study load for students, and consequently requires that they put in a doubled effort and longer hours in order to cope efficiently with the requirements and tasks of both programmes. In addition to overloading, the double pull of combined academic and professional foci and workloads may cause a dispersion of attention and focus which can prove detrimental to the students' performance in both areas. For example, undergraduates studying two related subjects, i.e. Romanian and English, are also trained in both specialties, and have a schedule of lesson observation and teaching practice for these subjects throughout their final year, which sometimes interferes with their academic activities and timetable, especially at a time when they also have to write their graduation paper and prepare for their finals. Obviously, each of the two areas is likely to be a distraction from the other. Another counterproductive aspect concerns the students' attitude towards the parallel training module. This indicates a 'marginal positioning...of the psycho-pedagogical and didactic disciplines in relation with the speciality subjects', and a secondary status conferred to the training for the teaching career, this being 'a marginal option and preoccupation of the students', who, having to 'balance between their specialist and psycho-pedagogical instruction', fail 'to focus adequately on the didactic concerns and to understand their importance' [6]. The inadequate status of the pedagogical training is also reflected at organizational and administrative level, as indicated by 'the marginal placement of psycho-pedagogical modules in the faculty timetable, demonstrating disinterest and inadequate valorisation' [7].

2.2. Subject distribution across the curriculum

The initial training programme comprises a set of theoretical disciplines in the domain of general pedagogy and speciality methodology, sequentially distributed during the three years of undergraduate study. The modules in educational pedagogical

psychology and general pedagogy occupy the first three semesters, to the detriment of speciality methodology disciplines, which, in the case of a double specialisation, are studied alternatively in the fourth and fifth semesters. Especially in the case of language teaching methodology, such as TEFL, a one-semester course is insufficient for dealing with the theoretical and practical complexities of the domain. A solid theoretical background in TEFL methodology involves an introduction to applied linguistics and theories of second language acquisition, complemented with the presentation and demonstration of a whole array of teaching methods and techniques. Dealing with all these in the course of only one semester can be a daunting task for both teacher and students, as acquiring an in-depth knowledge of the subject and sound teaching skills requires more time and curricular space. Another critical aspect refers to the 'dissipation and fragmentation' of the didactic training over the three years of study, and the ensuing 'diminishing of its impact, of its formative power' [8]. Since both time and curricular space are at a premium, and the general and specialised methodology subjects cannot be studied concomitantly, as this would overstretch an already busy timetable, not much can be done to solve the problem.

2.3. The quality of teaching practice

The teaching practice module, which resides in lesson observation activities and at least one assessed demonstrative lesson, is done in one semester, usually twelve weeks. During this time, the trainee students are supposed to observe a number of fifteen lessons, get acquainted with the relevant school documents, such as the subject syllabus and lesson planning formats. They are assessed on the basis of their teaching performance during a final demonstrative lesson, and a portfolio consisting of lesson observation task-sheets, class evaluation documents and the lesson plan for the demonstrative lesson. Even if the number of observed lessons may be considered sufficient, one problem is that the time for direct contact sessions for discussion between mentors and trainees are limited by busy schedules on both sides, which can affect the quality of both mentoring and learning. The 'inefficiency of the teaching practice', which, 'due to the current organizational conditions and limitations of the DTDTP, is allotted insufficient time' [9], is one of the most invoked drawbacks of the present initial training system. The teaching practice period often results in the students' having to shuttle between the university and the school, which cannot but affect their learning and performance on both fronts.

2.4. Institutional liaison and coordination

From the empirical observations of the present author, the communication and cooperation between the relevant institutions involved in the initial teacher training programs is yet to be improved in both the administrative and scientific realms. As is often the case, each institution tends to focus on its specific role and targets, without establishing the necessary correlations with the other key partners involved in the training. An effective training programme should harness the combined expertise of the Higher Education Institution, represented by the university methodologist and teaching practice co-ordinator, accredited training schools, mentors, teacher trainers, and the local educational authorities – local Schools' Inspectorates, Didactic Personnel Offices. But in reality not many HEI's confirm such a co-operation [10]. So far there has been no official accreditation of teaching practice schools, and no consistent criteria concerning qualifications,

expertise or experience have been developed for acquiring the quality of mentor. Practically, all senior ('first degree') teachers willing to assume the task can act as mentors, just as their schools automatically become training schools. The need arises for an institutionalised system of certification and accreditation for both mentors and schools involved in the initial teacher training, for a joint specialist body including the university department and all the relevant local educational authorities and specialists.

2.5. 2.5. Career guidance and counselling.

Continuing in-service training

Any higher education institution with an encompassing vision of its mission and concern for the quality of its educational services should invest in this sector, vital in securing a successful transition between the academia and the world of work. Such exigencies should be even more pressing for departments actively involved in professional training. In the case of teacher training departments, such a service should also provide the link between the stage of initial or pre-service teacher training and the realm of in-service professional training and development open to the future practitioners. It is a well-known fact that, in the realm of teaching, most of the actual professional learning and development takes place on the job, and prospective teachers should be informed of the continuing education and further in-service training opportunities available to them. Formal counselling should be offered about relevant possibilities of continuing professional education at postgraduate level, such as Master programmes in specialty didactics or other further training routes. For instance, there European programmes which young teachers usually discover on the job, via informal channels such as colleagues or friends, and which should be publicised primarily by the training department of the university. For instance, not enough publicity is made to the Comenius Sectorial Programme, which offers final-year students or graduates individual mobility stages for initial teacher training in schools from EU countries, where the so-called Comenius Assistants work in close cooperation with experienced teachers, by assisting them in day-to-day teaching activities. This programme, part of the larger framework of the Program for Lifelong Learning, administered by ANPCDEFP (The National Agency for European Programs in the Domain of Education and Professional Training) [11], offers our students an excellent opportunity for consolidating their methodological knowledge and teaching skills through a hands-on learning experience of intensive teaching practice, which can only boost self-confidence and eagerness to develop professionally. Students should be informed of the benefits of applying for the in-service scholarships offered by the Socrates-Comenius programmes to practising teachers who want to take short-term training or refresher courses abroad. Consequently, a career office should be a must in any institution responsible for professional training, as its essential mission is to prepare our students for the challenges of the work market and the workplace, and to help them identify the post-graduation professional routes and development programmes at their disposal. In short, it should ensure a promising transition between the formalised, institutionally regulated programme of initial teacher training to the ongoing, self-assumed and rather

informal programme of lifelong learning and professional self-development.

3. PROJECTED CHANGES TO INITIAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES

In the light of the potential problems and practical inconveniences identified above, it is obvious that the present teacher training programmes in the Arts, managed by the teacher training departments within our universities, can benefit from a re-thinking of such aspects as forms of continuing education, curriculum design, course content, teaching practice management and inter-institutional cooperation of all relevant educational authorities and decision-makers – all this with a view to optimising the quality of initial training programmes and to enhancing their influencing role in the future professional development of our graduates.

The new National Education Act, recently come into operation, contains a number of provisions regarding significant changes in the organisation of initial teacher training within higher education institutions. One projected change regards moving the initial training programmes to graduate level, under the form of specialised Master programmes in education. The so-called 'didactic master courses' would be responsible for providing the initial teacher training and the qualified teacher status. The law also stipulates measures for the accreditation of training-school status, for the certification of mentors and for the strengthening of institutional cooperation in the domain [12]. Of course, much remains to be done in the area of establishing clear criteria of performance at each level, and especially with regard to the decentralising of employment procedures, no longer managed at the level of the national system, but handed over to the authority of the school and other local educational bodies. Thus, employability routes and selection criteria are yet to be clarified by ministry-elaborated methodologies, hopefully for the better. But the task of enhancing our students' employability prospects and chances of professional success is incumbent on the university, after all, the first and most important link in the chain of professional education and continuing development.

REFERENCES

1. <<http://www.internationalgraduate.net/ukteachtrain.htm>>
2. Formarea inițială a cadrelor didactice. Document cadru. <<http://www.unibuc.ro/ro/ficd>>
3. Ibidem
4. Zgaga, Pavel. Formarea cadrelor didactice în Europa de Sud-Est. O perspectivă regională. <http://www.see-educoop.net/education_in/pdf/workshop/tesee/dokumenti/Reg_Overview_Ro_final.pdf>, p. 9
5. Ibidem, p. 11
6. Formarea inițială a cadrelor didactice. Document cadru. <<http://www.unibuc.ro/ro/ficd>>
7. Ibidem
8. Ibidem
9. Ibidem
10. Zgaga, op.cit. p. 10
11. <http://www.anpcdefp.ro>
12. Legea Educației Naționale. Proiect. <<http://www.gov.ro/upload/articles/106509/legea-educatiei-nationale.pdf>>, p.66-67