Obstacles to Change in Teacher Education

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Abstract

In his paper, the author points to the well-known fact that the key obstacle to quality improvement in many traditional teacher education institutions is the prevailing philosophy which gives priority to traditional academic disciplines and specialist subject knowledge at the expense of practical and professional knowledge that teachers need. He then presents some of the findings of his research, a rational end empirical evaluation of the study programme for future English language teachers at the Faculty of Education, University of Maribor in which he investigated, among other things, the beliefs of the academic staff about the role of theory and practice in the curriculum and, specifically, their beliefs about the relevance of their respective subjects (academic disciplines) for the programme as such. The findings suggest that many of the academic staff, while formally recognising the role of practical knowledge for the profession of the teacher, show little awareness of the purposes of contemporary teacher education and hold rather idealised views about the relevance of their respective subjects (academic disciplines) for the study programme as such. For comparison, some findings of an empirical study conducted among students are also given.

Keywords: language teacher education; programme evaluation; teacher beliefs; process of change; theory and practice

Introduction: Different conceptions of teacher education

In recent decades, the conception of teaching as a knowledge-based profession and teachers as committed professionals and reflective practitioners has become firmly embedded in many teacher education institutions (TEI) in Europe and the world. According to this conception, the ultimate aim of study programmes for future teachers is that students acquire both disciplinary (subject-related) knowledge and professional (pedagogical-didactical) knowledge through research-oriented study and in a process of structured reflection and interpersonal interaction. In this process of integrated academic (subject/discipline oriented) and professional (teaching/learning oriented) study (curriculum) the students obtain necessary competences, which allow them to live and work in complex and changing professional environments.

The structure of study programmes for future teachers that are based on the above conception reflects the radical change in the role of higher (university) education in Europe that has taken place in recent decades and which can be characterised as the move of focus from discipline specific capabilities and general intellectual capacities to profession-specific competencies and transferable personal abilities (Barnett 1992). Concepts such as reflexive society (Beck 1992), reflective practice and teacher as reflective practitioner (Schön 1983, 1987), critical reflection (Brookfield 1995), classroom research and problem-solving (Kansanen 1999), competences and learning outcomes (the Bologna process, TUNING Project), and many others have entered both educational theory and practice. In the field of second or foreign language teaching, concepts such as the paradigm shift (Woodward 1996), the post-method condition (Kumaravadivelu 1994), the reflective approach (Wallace, 1991, Freeman in Richards, 1996), language awareness, noticing and consciousness raising (Harmer 1991),
task-based learning (Willis 1996) and many others have become standard elements of second/foreign language teaching methodology syllabuses and are increasingly entering the professional discourse of many practising teachers.

Despite the high level of consensus among educationalists and researchers as regards the conceptual basis of teacher education programmes, many of these lack the above characteristics, which is especially true for those programmes for future teachers which are “embedded” in traditional higher education institutions which, “show little interest in wider educational concerns”, whose staff “show little awareness and understanding of what the contemporary role of a teacher educator might be (let alone having the capability of practising it)” and whose “dominant philosophy […] accords little value to the practical knowledge required by competent teachers, focusing instead on general education (traditional), specialist subject content (higher education teaching) or social science research to the exclusion of other types of knowledge” (Eraut 2000: 566). In his analysis of structural aspects of teacher education in Germany, for example, Sander (year not given) finds the reason for the fact that the formal system of teacher education places little importance to the professional preparation of teachers in the characteristics of teacher education in Germany which, besides the traditional distinctions between academic and non-academic forms of teacher education, include the merging of the profession-related subjects into the academic departments of the corresponding disciplines, and the dominance of subject studies in the curriculum for future teachers. As the author states:

“there is a widespread tendency of university teaching staff to believe firmly in the virtues of a solid academic preparation through thorough study of a subject (or two) as the best form of teacher preparation, while a pedagogical and methodological preparation could not contribute much to enhancing competence, anyway” (Sander, year not given).

The above characteristics of the German system of teacher education seem to be also true for the system of teacher education in Slovenia, which has been in the last two decades criticised by several Slovene educationalists and researchers (e.g. Marentič Požarnik 2000, Razdevšek Pučko 1995, Zgaga, 1997, Skela 2000, Cvetek 2002) for its inefficiency to provide students, future teachers, with the knowledge and skills that would allow their successful start as teachers. Based on her extensive comparative analysis of teacher education systems in Europe Marentič Požarnik (2000: 5) concludes that »in order to efficiently improve teacher education we have to change, not only the study programmes for future teachers, but also the views and philosophy on which they are based.” Several Slovene authors (e.g. Zgaga, 1997, Skela 2000, Cvetek 2002) find a reason for this inefficiency also in the nature of teacher education institutions “whose epistemological and organisational development has led towards the structure which is in our circumstances characteristic for traditional faculties: from training in the ‘disciplines’ and the ‘subject’ to more or less successful research endeavours in the field, but not also towards ensuring ‘professional competence” Zgaga (1997: 51).

The above views were recently confirmed by empirical evidence. In 1999, an external peer evaluation was undertaken at the Faculty of Education, University of Maribor. In their report (Hogbin, J.W.G. 2000) the Peer Review Committee pointed to numerous obstacles to effective teacher preparation at FEUM, especially the gap between subject/discipline-based and professional/pedagogical part of the curricula and the inadequate practical training in schools. The Committee raised their special concern about the lack of recognition among academic staff of the importance of applied studies and the relevance of their work to professional contexts.
“It was significant that discussions with the faculty’s staff in [name of department], while demonstrating strong academic qualities, revealed a lack of knowledge and awareness of the broad educational context relevant to their work, pedagogical issues or the ways their work raised relevant issues in a professional context. All these aspects were either implicitly or explicitly attributed to the responsibility of other university tutors or not part of their responsibilities. Not least, their own approaches to teaching and learning were not perceived as potential models for students intending to be teachers. The sharp division between those responsible for subjects as academic disciplines and tutors responsible for pedagogy is an issue that could usefully be addressed by the faculty.” (ibid.: 11).

The remaining part of this paper presents some findings of the evaluative research of the current study programme for English language teachers at the Faculty of Education, University of Maribor. The focus of the evaluation were three key aspects of the programme: its conceptual basis (philosophy), its internal logic (structure and organization), and the academic context in which it takes place. Methods of inquiry included context and document analysis, questionnaires (students, staff, teachers-mentors) and interviews (staff). The results of the evaluation confirmed our previous assumptions about the mismatch between the intentions of the programme as expressed in its formal aims and the Faculty’s mission statement, and its structure, organization and implementation.

As part of the evaluation, which included several empirical studies, one study specifically addressed the conceptions of the academic staff about the study programme and its implementation, particularly about the relationship between the subject/discipline- and teaching/profession-related elements of the study programme (curriculum). Below are some of the study’s findings.

Beliefs of the academic staff about some aspects of the study programme for English language teachers – findings of empirical study

Aims
The study aimed to investigate the attitudes and opinions of the academic staff about some aspects of the study programme, especially about programme aims and their achievement, programme relevance for the teaching profession, the relationship between theoretical and practical part of the curriculum, the importance of teaching practice, etc.

Subjects
The subjects of the study were 14 university teachers who participated in the study programme for English language teachers in the academic year 2000/01. Of these, 9 teachers (of total 10) were from the Department of English and American Studies, and 5 teachers were from other faculty departments.

Method
The data were obtained by using a standardised semi-structured interview with indirect probing (Sagadin, 1995) combined with a written questionnaire. Altogether, 14 interviews were conducted each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Each interview began with a short introduction in which the interviewer explained the aim of the study and dealt with eventual technicalities. In an interview, the respondent first answered a closed-type question by choosing one of the given answers or stating his/her preference on a 4 or 5-item scale. This was followed by the interviewer’s asking for clarification or interpretation, expressing
surprise or interest in a statement or opinion, prompting further comments or opinions, etc. The interview ended with the respondent’s answering a short written questionnaire asking for their opinions about the future development of teacher education at FEUM. The interviews were conducted in June (and partly in October) 2001, audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed. For the purpose of this paper 12 of 14 transcriptions (two respondents are native speakers of English) were translated from Slovene.

Results
Below are some of the findings of the study presented as statistically processed (descriptive statistics) responses to the initial closed-type questions in the interview followed by excerpts from the transcribed audio recordings obtained in the interviews. Regarding the purpose and scope of this paper, only those statements and opinions were included which provide additional information on the issues addressed and contribute to better and clearer understanding of the respondents’ attitudes/positions regarding these issues.

Achievement of programme aims
Half of the respondents do not know if and to what extent are the aims of the programme achieved. Typically, many respondents were not very clear about what they think of the achievement of the programme aims, for example:

- 3: I’d say that maybe the aims are being achieved as regards the content and the topics that will be lectured […] because there is no doubt that scientific aims are achieved but I cannot generalise […] As regards the content, what is written in the aims, this is being realised, but whether this is the most suitable and pedagogically advanced way I cannot say yes or no.
- 4: Our programme is very general and prepares the student according to what is written, not only for pedagogical work but also for some other work related with knowing a language […] Relatively speaking, there is little pedagogical in it.
- 5: I’ve been doing my best to achieve all aims and they have been implemented and realised and I would like to believe that all this is happening.
- 7: I don’t know, I believe that the aim is to educate English teachers but I don’t know the aims of other subjects except… .

Importance of the respondents’ subjects/courses for the study programme as a whole
All respondents except one believe that the subjects/courses they teach are important or very important for the study programme as a whole. The only exception is the subject Introduction to Research Methodology; the teacher in question thinks that the subject is important only for those students who intend to do scientific research in English linguistics.

Achievement of aims of respective subjects/courses
Most respondents (78%) believe that the aims of the subjects they teach are ‘very well’ of ‘fully’ achieved. When answering the interviewer’s ‘indirect probing’ questions, however, the ‘achievement’ of subject/course aims is not so clear. Some illustrative examples:

- 6: I follow the aims very closely and I try to achieve them completely. If it happens that some aim is not fully achieved this is an exception and there must be a reason for this. […] But I would never want to lecture some year only a half of the subject or to fully depart from these aims.
- 10: If I say ‘very badly’ I’ll spit on my own plate […] Somewhere in the middle, between ‘rather badly’ and ‘quite well’ […] a compromise between what we are trying to give and
what the students are willing to do [...] They are ‘quite well’ achieved, students get the knowledge, this happens more with those who have interest and less with those who don’t’.

- 14: Quite well. [...] It is written what they need to know and how much but there is another problem that we do not evaluate in practice if this happens. [...] They know the theory very well. [...] what mostly matters is that you pass the exam”.

Relevance of the subjects/courses for teaching

All respondents except one (93%) believe that the subjects they teach are ‘highly relevant’ or ‘fully relevant’ for the teaching profession. The only respondent who does not think so is the already mentioned teacher of the subject Introduction to Research Methodology; who says that “there is a significant difference between methods of research and methods of teaching, so that what we’re trying to teach are the methods of research and I’m not familiar enough with pedagogical literature and do not see how these two could be directly related”.

For comparison, what students think …

The table below shows statistically processed answers to a questionnaire which was conducted as part of the same evaluative research (an evaluation of the study programme for future English teachers) and in which 57 3rd-year students (86% of all students currently enrolled in that year) and 48 4th-year students (92% of all students enrolled in that year) expressed their opinions about the relevance of individual subjects/courses for the teaching profession. The following scale was used: 1=mostly or totally irrelevant, 2=rather irrelevant, 3=considerably relevant, 4=very or totally relevant. As we can see, most subjects/courses were not found particularly relevant for the profession of a teacher.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
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<tr>
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<td>99</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Language I</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Phonetics</td>
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<td>Pedagogics</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3.48</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Didactics (general)</td>
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<td>2.08</td>
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Importance attributed to the theoretical and practical knowledge in the study programme (curriculum)

Almost all respondents think that theoretical and practical knowledge are equally important (93%) for students’ preparedness for the teaching profession. As regards the proportion of practical knowledge in the study programme (curriculum), more than half of the respondents (64%) think that the programme does not include enough practical knowledge (two think it does and three can’t decide).

Importance attributed to the theoretical and practical knowledge in individual subjects/courses

Here, the respondents answers were more equally distributed. Four respondents think that their subjects/courses do not include any practical knowledge at all, three respondents say ‘a little’, six say ‘quite a lot’ and one ‘very much’. Below are some comments and explanations given by the respondents:

- 2 (general education): Almost nothing, I teach basic general theory, and at this point we deliberately stop so that we don’t go into some quasi practising in subject-related fields because this could harm the students in some way.
- 3 (linguistics): Quite a lot [...] it’s about the use of certain structures in texts which students produce [...] deeper understanding is also a part of practice, this is hard difficult to define.
- 4 (literature): Nothing, it is not a part of the study programme [...] I try to stimulate them but they take it on some academic level which I don’t think is right.
- 8 (general education): This subject is about theoretical knowledge, how to do research and about practical knowledge how to use this knowledge in doing research, but not about knowledge how to use these theories in teaching.
- 13 (linguistics): Very little. [...] I point out that they will need this but I deal more with theory than with how they would use this.

Appropriateness of the study programme and individual subjects for the preparation of students for the teaching profession

The respondents’ opinions considerably vary: 28% think that the study programme is inappropriate, 36% that it is appropriate and 36% ‘don’t know’. Those who think it is inappropriate usually argue that it is too general, that it doesn’t prepare the students for the teaching profession, and that it contains too much theory and too little practice. Those who think it is appropriate are often not very clear in their arguing. Some examples:

- 2: Appropriate, partly I don’t know. [...] Appropriate in terms of what is achievable. [...] This basic structure of teacher preparation is fixed and I think it is unreal to try to achieve more. If it was realistic, if it depended on individual teachers then I’d say it is inappropriate
- 6: Our study programme is very appropriate for preparing teachers. [...] It does not differ from the programme at the Faculty of Arts (University of Ljubljana). [...] The programme is appropriate, partly appropriate because it is not totally inappropriate, here you’d need one more category, I think.
- 11: Appropriate. [...] There is a structural weakness as regards the content and methods of teaching [...] . There is a lot to be done to be satisfied.”

One of the respondents who are ‘unsure’ continued:

- 3: I don’t know, I am not enough informed about the number of hours in didactics, teaching practice, classroom observations. [...] I’d be willing to say ‘appropriate’ because it has to be appropriate because we are the Faculty of Education. [...] It would be more correct to say ‘don’t know’ because I don’t know enough. [...] Because of the importance that is now generally attributed to this it is now almost inappropriate but I will nevertheless say that I don’t know”.

Instead of conclusion

In the document titled *European Profile for language teacher education in the 21st century* (Kelly 2004), which was prepared in consultation experts in the field and includes case studies of eleven participating European teacher education institutions and which represents, according to the authors, a frame of reference for language education policy makers and language teacher educators in Europe, the first of 40 elements, characteristics of modern language teacher education programmes in the 21st century is “a curriculum that integrates academic study and the practical experience of teaching”. The element/characteristic is further explained as follows:

- In language teacher education, the academic study of the teacher’s specific discipline and the practical experience of teaching in the classroom interact to enhance one another.
- Language teacher education treats subject knowledge, practical experience in schools and pedagogical theories holistically and relationally, so that the teacher does not think of them as being in distinct categories.
- Through the integration of their academic learning with their classroom-based teaching experience, trainee teachers develop a critical awareness about their own learning processes that they are able to put into practice in the language classroom (ibid.: 22)

In the subsequent elaboration – this is followed by exemplifications from case studies and suggestions for practical implementation, the following points seem to bear specific relevance to the issues addressed in this paper:

- In relation to education theories, areas dealing with linguistic and cognitive dimensions can be taught alongside the humanistic and affective implications of real learning situations. Trainee teachers can synthesise these areas through peer observation and self-evaluation.
- Closer cooperation between foreign languages departments and teacher education units is crucial in achieving the integration of academic subject and practical experience.
- Integration of the academic subject and practical experience of teaching is more effective if teacher educators teach them in parallel, with bridging activities such as workshops and group work.

In the light of this paper, the beliefs of teacher educators seem to present a serious obstacle to further development of teacher education. If we are to provide the best quality possible to our students, future teachers, the institutions responsible for their preparation will need to change.
Changing the institutions, however, necessarily means changing the attitudes of those who work in them. This yet needs to be done.

Change in the professional bureaucracy (like universities) does not sweep in from new administrators taking office to announce major reforms, nor from government technostructures intent on bringing the professionals under their control. Rather, change seeps in by the slow process of changing the professionals (Vroeijenstijn (1995: 9).

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