Challenges in Teacher Development: Learner Autonomy and Intercultural Competence
Introduction

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There is no doubt that our world has become more complex and international than ever before. The adequate preparation of young people for such complexity and globalisation requires more than passing on an agreed body of knowledge. Teachers can never teach “all there is to know”, since new knowledge is created daily. Foreign language teachers also cannot foresee the many intercultural situations in which their learners may find themselves in the course of their lives. Therefore, what people need in order to be able to maintain their ground in a rapidly changing world are skills that allow them to independently address new questions and new situations, integrate already acquired and new information, developing new. They need to be able to improve their foreign language skills autonomously and acquire a certain level of proficiency with relative ease, read and understand texts with new knowledge and new vocabulary in a foreign language, and handle intercultural contact situations, where people meet others who have different cultural backgrounds and different ways of understanding particular concepts or ways of behaving.

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From this, two major challenges result now facing today’s foreign language education. For one thing, it needs to empower language learners to use the foreign language they are learning in intercultural contact situations, since communicative ability in a foreign language is now understood as incorporating also intercultural competence. For another, it needs to empower learners for continued growth in a life-long learning perspective.
This vision of future foreign language teaching and learning requires most teachers to rethink their own practice, to construct new classroom roles and expectations about student outcomes, and to teach in ways they have never taught before—and probably never experienced as students. The success of this agenda ultimately turns on teachers' success in accomplishing the serious and difficult tasks of learning the skills and perspectives assumed by these new visions of practice and unlearning the practices and beliefs about students and instruction that have dominated their professional lives to date.

This is a book about empowering teachers to cope with the educational reform agenda, which we have outlined above. The major assumption underlying this book is that teacher education needs to assist teachers to reconsider their beliefs. As research has shown, this is notoriously difficult. Though teachers may support the general vision outlined, they may not manage to also actually change their approach to teaching. When designing their approach to teaching, teachers depart from a set of beliefs regarding what constitutes good teaching and makes for efficient learning. Research of teachers’ beliefs has shown that beliefs directly affect teaching practice and that teaching practice reflects teachers’ beliefs (Calderhead, 1996; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). These beliefs determine which contents teachers select and how they approach the micro level of teaching in the classroom. This body of research also suggests that it is very difficult to influence the conceptions or the practices of either experienced or beginning teachers. General and context-specific conceptions are largely implicit and arise primarily from a teacher’s experience as both a student and a teacher. Moreover, teachers with considerable experience teaching in a particular class have developed routines for many common aspects of instruction and no longer give instructional decisions much conscious thought. Teachers’ conceptions can be expected to be quite deep-rooted and strongly influence their evaluation of new instructional goals and techniques.

Teacher training versus teacher development

To empower teachers for change, teachers will need support to reconsider their deeply rooted beliefs. We believe traditional prescriptive approaches to in-service teacher education, in which a teacher trainer typically presents new models for teaching particular aspects of a foreign language or updates teachers on cultural information regarding the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language the teacher teaches in a short course, will not lead to the desired changes in education. This kind of training is well suited to the presentation of skills, techniques, and routines, particularly those that require a relatively low
level of planning and reflection, such as when a group of teachers in a school request a demonstration or workshop on the use of new computer software for the teaching of, say, writing. But despite its usefulness in this respect, this kind of training is also limited in the sense that it can only address those aspects of teaching that are trainable and does not normally address more subtle and, indeed, more fundamental aspects of teaching, such as how the teacher’s beliefs, values and attitudes shape his or her response to classroom events or innovations. The changes in education now called for are radical, not superficial, and they require a change in teacher beliefs, attitudes and values. Therefore, teacher education needs to be approached from the perspective of teacher development, not teacher training.

Lange (1983) describes the term “teacher development” as describing a process of continual, intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth. He distinguishes it from training as being more encompassing and allowing for continued growth both prior to and throughout a career. This distinction between training and education is not new in teacher education and dates back at least to Dewey’s influence on education at the turn of the century (Dewey, 1933), but in actual teacher education, it seems that training and not educational approaches continue to abound.

Richards (1989) identifies four major characteristics of educational approaches, as opposed to teacher training approaches:

1. Teachers are not viewed as entering the programme with deficiencies. Emphasis is placed mainly on what teachers know, do, believe in, can achieve, and on empowering teachers to become autonomous learners.
2. Educational and methodological theories serve as a starting point for reconsidering one’s teaching practice, not as a doctrine to be adhered to. Such theories may help teachers explore, define, and clarify their own classroom practices and processes, and their individual theories of teaching and learning, but are used non-prescriptively.
3. The programmes do not depart from the idea that teachers must discard current practices. They help teachers see particular aspects of their teaching, which fit in well with the required innovation in education and build on them to find ways to redirect their teaching. The focus is on expanding and deepening awareness, on discovery and inquiry.
4. The programmes are experiential and work bottom-up. Teacher input is fundamental. Areas for development are directly related to the teacher’s own teaching practices and their different teacher roles.

Various kinds of learning experiences have been proposed for teacher development. They include values clarification activities that engage teachers in examining their own values, attitudes and beliefs systems; observation activities, in
which teachers observe themselves when recorded on video, in association with activities that are designed to help teachers focus on particular aspects of their teaching; self-reflective accounts, written down in a journal or diary; self-reports, in which teachers record information on what worked and didn’t work during a lesson or activity; and, finally, action research, i.e. small-scale classroom based “research” projects in which teachers identify an aspect of their own classroom that they want to learn more about and then develop an action research programme. Lately, face-to-face meetings and documentation of the learning process on paper have been complemented with virtual meetings and e-learning formats.

Teacher development for fostering intercultural competence and autonomous learning in foreign language education: contents of the book

This book focuses on the potential of action research, self-reflection and self-report activities to teacher development, offering a number of more theoretically oriented chapters on teacher beliefs, intercultural competence, learner autonomy, action research and e-learning, and documenting a number of case studies in which teacher educators have tried to support teachers in exploring and, possibly, developing their own attitudes and beliefs regarding autonomy and intercultural competence in foreign language education, and regarding ways to achieve autonomous language learning and foster intercultural competence amongst their students.

The book is organised in 3 sections, with section 1 focusing on teacher development and teacher beliefs, section 2 on teacher development and action research and section 3 on e-learning for teacher development. These sections are preceded by an introductory chapter in which Adri Elsen and Oliver St.-John define the central constructs of this book, namely learner autonomy and intercultural competence. They provide reasons for including both concepts in teaching and outline a pedagogical framework for developing learner autonomy and intercultural competence simultaneously, arguing that learning processes towards both capacities not only complement each other closely, but require each other’s aid for successful development.

Section 1, then, focuses on teacher development and teacher beliefs. The first chapter by Lies Sercu and Oliver St.-John reports on the major results obtained from research on teacher beliefs and shows that a reasonably close relationship has been shown to exist between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practice. In view of this, the chapter argues that changing teachers’ beliefs is prerequisite for achieving success in innovational processes in education, thus setting the major line of thought of the book.
The next two chapters in this first section report on an investigation of teachers’ beliefs regarding intercultural competence (chapter 3) and learner autonomy (chapter 4) in foreign language education. In chapter 3, Lies Sercu reports on an investigation carried out amongst teachers of foreign languages in Belgium, Sweden, Mexico, Poland, Bulgaria, Spain and Greece, inquiring into teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices regarding intercultural competence teaching in/through a foreign language. Her findings suggest that the larger part of the participating teachers are clearly willing to teach intercultural competence in their classrooms, but that this overall positive disposition is conditioned by a number of convictions regarding the best way to teach intercultural communicative competence. In addition, the findings show that, despite differences in national teaching circumstances, teachers in different countries share a number of these convictions. In the concluding part of the chapter, it is shown how research of teacher beliefs can be used as a point of departure for reflective teacher development activities.

In chapter 4, Antoinette Camilleri-Grima reports on an investigation carried out amongst Maltese trained teachers and teacher trainees on two occasions (1998 and 2005), demonstrating that teachers’ beliefs regarding a pedagogy for learner autonomy have developed in parallel with an evolution of the educational system in Malta and that areas where teachers’ attitudes towards pedagogy for learner autonomy are more positive in 2005 when compared to 1998 correlate with those areas where reform has been successfully carried out. In her conclusion, she argues that institutional changes must be considered as important as teacher development if a pedagogy for learner autonomy at the classroom level is to be successful.

Whereas the first section of the book focused on teacher beliefs and their impact on teaching practice, the second section, chapters 5, 6 and 7, concentrate on teachers and action research. In chapter 5, Enrica Flamini and Manuel Jiménez Raya describe action research in some detail, thus setting the framework for the two case-studies reporting on the use of action research to help teachers develop their understanding of learner autonomy and intercultural competence, presented in chapters 6 and 7.

In chapter 6, Ragnard Aagard, Helga Deeg, Kees van Esch and Adri Elsen report on a Comenius project, in which small groups of teachers in different countries cooperated in the development and execution of an action research project. The chapter lends voice to the teachers but also to their coaches, and thus provides an interesting perspective on the developments that are needed on the teacher educator’s side as well when choosing teacher development approaches to teacher education instead of teacher training approaches.

The central theme of chapter 7, by Flávia Vieira, is changing the nature of postgraduate teacher education by enhancing pedagogical inquiry. She reports on
her personal experience of a curricular innovation conducted in the second semester of 2002 with a group of thirteen experienced English teachers, in a course on Pedagogical Supervision in ELT that is part of a Masters Degree programme at the University Of Minho (Portugal), arguing that the innovation involved changes at two interrelated levels: the teachers' pedagogy and her own pedagogy as a teacher educator. She shows that teachers and teacher educators can become a community of inquiry where professional learning enhances professional empowerment, pedagogical innovation and the democratisation of knowledge.

Section 3 focuses on elearning and teacher development. In chapter 8, Angela McFarlane, Anton Bradburn, Agnes McMahon and Nel Roche provide a checklist of criteria which elearning teacher development courses should meet and which teacher educators can use when they want to develop such a course.

In chapter 9, Richard Fay and Leah Davcheva demonstrate what effect a distance-learning course has had on the professional development of teachers. The course, Intercultural Studies for Language Teachers, was the outcome of a British Council Bulgaria project (1999-2001), which was itself part of a series of projects that started in 1993. The course was designed to empower teachers to become interculturally competent foreign language teachers themselves as well as professionals in intercultural teaching methodology. After a description of changes in the way in which cultural studies and intercultural language education have been conceptualized in the course over the years (1993-2001), the authors provide a detailed description of the teachers' developmental process, which very well captures the participants' sense of their individual and collective/collaborative intercultural communicative competence development through and with the community of colleague learners.

Finally, in chapter 10, Diane Slaouti explores the experiences of a group of teachers participating in a course about online learning through online learning within the setting of a Masters in Education. Her chapter sets out the various principles that underpin the thinking behind the design of the course and then explores how teachers engaged with the learning opportunities. It considers how the characteristics of the e-context both facilitate and pose challenges to the development of professional autonomy with respect to online learning. It also reflects on teachers' developing understanding of learner autonomy through working on tasks which are typically part of learner autonomy approaches in pupil classrooms.

We conclude this book with reflections on ways in which existing arrangements for teacher education can be rethought or redesigned to support teachers' professional growth. We consider aspects of the larger educational policy context that foster or impede teachers' incentives and ability to acquire new knowledge, skills, and conceptions of practice. We hope this book can thus be a source of
inspiration, not only to teacher educators and teachers, but also to policy makers in teacher education.

References


