

Theory and Practice in EFL Teacher Education

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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Theory and Practice in EFL Teacher Education

Bridging the Gap

Edited by

**Julia Hüttner, Barbara Mehlmauer-Larcher,
Susanne Reichl and Barbara Schiftner**

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Introduction

Julia Hüttner, Barbara
Mehlmauer-Larcher, Susanne Reichl
and Barbara Schiffner

Language teaching is a profession that has been under considerable public pressure of identifying itself as such. The widely held belief that good teachers are ‘naturals’, requiring no specific training or education, is detrimental to creating an image of language teachers as ‘true’ professionals, on a par with, say, lawyers or doctors. Pressure also comes from stakeholders closely involved in education, who criticise that teacher education does not prepare teachers adequately for their future practice, and even within teacher education, frequent complaints are made about the lack of impact that it has on teacher learning and teacher behaviour. This situation has led David Nunan (2001) to address the question of what constitutes a profession in the first place and apply this to language teaching. He identifies four main characteristics of a profession, namely ‘advanced education and training’, ‘standards of practice and certification’, ‘a disciplinary base’ and ‘advocacy’ (Nunan, 2001: 4–5), and notes that in all of these areas, language teaching faces a number of challenges. On a practical level, these are due to very diverse situations in private language teaching institutions and state-run schools and to a general lack of legislation to prevent untrained teachers from working; on a more conceptual level, these challenges are often caused by problems to ‘define, refine and articulate [the] disciplinary basis [of language teaching]’ (Nunan, 2001: 5). In addition, we would argue that teacher education programmes need to provide the conditions for future language teachers to develop knowledge from such a disciplinary basis, as well as autonomy and responsibility, three dimensions identified as key elements of professionalism in teacher education by Furlong *et al.* (2000: 4).

In line with the considerable progress made in the understanding of effective learning and teaching and the learning of teachers in general education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005: vii), language teacher education (LTE) has rapidly developed in finding its position as ‘advanced education’ and its ‘disciplinary base’, following intensive work on theories of LTE towards the end of the last century (Crandall, 2000: 34). Of paramount importance in a theory of LTE has been the

realisation that developing relevant teacher knowledge from subject matter knowledge is neither a simple nor a straightforward process. Indeed, with Shulman's (1987) introduction of the concept of 'pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)' as the focal point of teacher knowledge, research interest has moved towards the means and the contexts of transforming subject matter knowledge into such PCK. This also means that teachers are no longer considered to be merely applying theory to practice, but rather as professionals constructing theory and theorising their practice. Underlying such a view of teachers as active mediators of knowledge and as constructors of new knowledge is a social-constructivist perspective of teacher learning (Johnson, 2009: 98). This learning takes place at various points in a teacher's development and requires collaboration, on the part of teacher educators and mentors, but also of peers or students. By definition, teacher learning is situated and contextual, and part of the development of teacher expertise lies in making use of the diverse contexts and situations for learning. All this is conceived of as a possible response to continued demands for improving LTE in order to address the complaints of practitioners and stakeholders who perceive novice language teachers as ill-prepared for their professional practice by existing programmes.

From a social-constructivist viewpoint, questions of how such collaborations should be devised for these diverse contexts in order to foster the development of teacher knowledge are of prime importance. Operating both on a theoretical and a practical level, the role of teacher educators is conceived in this paradigm as that of mediators between both theory and practice of language teaching and the sometimes diverse worlds of academia and school. Sharing this view, we consider the role of teacher educators as primary facilitators and initiators of teacher learning, with a strong focus on coaching and supervision when assisting student teachers in their developmental process of becoming professional language teachers.

The way in which such situated teacher learning fosters the development of professionalism has been the focus of LTE research over the last decades and also underpins the contributions in this volume. Dominant among these is the increased interest in the knowledge base of teachers, both general and experiential, and the ways in which this is built up, addressing both the development of PCK and the disciplinary base from which knowledge can be transformed. This correlates with the rising concern for fostering the professional development of teachers by means of guided and focused reflection of their own learning process and their actions in the classroom, and thus their construction of knowledge and expertise. The important role of critical reflection, which recurs in the contributions

to this volume, also touches on issues such as teacher beliefs, teacher cognition and teacher identities. In addition, topics from language learning and teaching that contribute fundamentally to teachers' knowledge base, cognition and expertise are important issues in teacher education as well. To name both long-established and fairly recent developments in language teaching, we mention grammar teaching, the role of literature in the classroom, assessment and testing or multilingualism. All these can be seen to contribute to the body of theory developing in language teacher education. On the 'practice' side, we are looking at the actual collaborative partners: at teacher educators and student teachers in university-based pre-service teacher education, at in-service teachers who manage projects and thereby disseminate the insights gained from theory and practice and at a whole range of teachers, novice and expert, with a focus on the multifactorial development of their identities as teachers.

Using theory and practice as a binary opposition for the conceptualisation of this book may create the impression that these are clear-cut notions. As our contributions show, matters are much more complex than this. Practice, especially, has been interpreted and conceived of as a whole range of states or activities, including the actual teaching of language lessons in the classroom, critical reflection as part of pre- and in-service education, project work on a local or national level or the provision of effective practice opportunities in pre-service teacher education. Relevant theoretical knowledge informs these practices in a variety of ways, developing teacher cognition and raising the potential for reflective practice. Such a diverse perception of practice and theory is clearly contingent on the roles that individuals perform in a given teacher education context. What these conceptualisations do, very much in line with the outlook of this volume, is an advancement of theory formation through a contextualised rethinking of the relationship of theory and practice.

The key concern of this book is the more precise nature of this relationship, which, for demonstrative purposes, we conceived of as a gap to be bridged. The obvious assumption would be that such a divide can be overcome if the diverse research results feed into the daily work of language teaching, but our contributions point towards a more complex relationship: the bridge from theory to practice is not unidirectional, it is a two-way road, and, much in the same way that research results find their way into classrooms, the insights gained in practice do impact on the theory formation in LTE. It is not just academics who produce results for teachers or student teachers who then, in turn, translate them into practice; it is also teachers who produce theory while reflecting upon the circumstances and rationales of their practice. Some of the contributions in our volume reflect