

English-as-a-foreign-language teacher-training programs: An overview

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ABSTRACT: Considerable attention has been given to the process of training English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers all over the world. Points such as teacher background and competence, content of teacher training, political influences, cultural appropriateness, as well as processes and methodologies of training programs, have been broadly discussed. In most parts of the world, the main emphasis in English language teaching (ELT) is on methodology and the language level of the future teacher. Language competence has, indeed, been rated the most essential characteristic of a good teacher. Research has shown, however, that only a few teacher-training courses are capable of achieving the objective of improving the communicative command of the target language. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the processes mentioned above, as well as some methodological approaches involved in EFL teacher-training programs.

RESUMO: O processo de treinamento de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira tem recebido uma atenção especial em vários programas de formação de professores, no Brasil e no exterior. Tópicos tais como conhecimento e competência dos participantes destes programas, conteúdo programático, abordagens metodológicas, entre outras coisas, são discutidos constantemente pelos especialistas e estudiosos do assunto. Na maior parte dos programas, uma ênfase maior tem sido dada à parte metodológica e ao aprimoramento do nível lingüístico do aluno. Na realidade, a capacidade de domínio da língua tem sido a característica mais importante de um bom professor de inglês. No entanto, as pesquisas têm indicado que apenas alguns

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programas de formação de professores de língua estrangeira têm conseguido alcançar este objetivo. Este trabalho discute alguns tópicos relacionados com a natureza dos programas de formação de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira, bem como algumas abordagens, metodológicas e paradigmas utilizados nestes programas.

KEYWORDS: teacher training, foreign languages, ELT, EFL

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: formação de professores, línguas estrangeiras, língua inglesa

INTRODUCTION

Due to the international nature of the English language, English-language teacher (ELT) training programs are being implemented all over the world. Considerable attention has been given to the process of training English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers. Topics such as the nature of teacher-training courses, different approaches to language-teacher training and several paradigms of teacher-training methodology have been discussed at conferences throughout the world. Williams (1994) mentions the diversity of these teacher-training programs (which vary considerably in terms of length and qualifications) and discusses the nature of the ELT-training discipline in terms of its uniqueness. Further, he discusses factors that should be accounted for in a teacher-training model, e.g., cultural appropriateness, political influences, teacher background and competence, expectations from students, cost, and accountability. In addition, much concern has been expressed in the literature regarding the content of teacher training and the processes and methodologies of training programs.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the above processes and methodologies involved in EFL teacher-training programs.

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CONTENT OF EFL TEACHER-TRAINING PROGRAMS

Generally speaking, most EFL teacher-training programs around the world consist of several components. There is a methodological/pedagogical component, a linguistic component, and a literature component (Cullen, 1994). Although in most parts of the world the main emphasis in ELT is on methodology, there have been situations in which emphasis was placed on raising the language level of the future teacher. Hundleby and Breet (1988) and Berry (1990) report that, in China, teacher-training programs virtually exclude the methodological aspect and concentrate on the improvement of the language level per se. In such a case, attention is given to linguistic knowledge of the language rather than the ability to use the language for real communication. Cullen (1994) states that only a few teacher-training courses are able to achieve the objective of improving the communicative command of the language rather than knowledge of it. Cullen, however, recognizes that in most regions of the world, especially where English is not a medium of instruction, the main interest of English teachers is

the need to improve their own command of the language so that they can use it more fluently, and above all, more confidently, in the classroom. An in-service teacher training course which fails to take this into account is arguably failing to meet the needs or respond to the wishes of the teachers themselves (p. 164).

Language proficiency has indeed constituted the bedrock of the professional confidence of non-native English teachers. Language competence has been rated as the most essential characteristic of a good teacher (Lange, 1990). Berry (1990) conducted a study of two groups of English teachers teaching at the secondary level in Poland. He wished to discern which of three components (methodology, theory of language teaching, or language improvement) they needed most. Language improvement was ranked as the most important for both groups, and methodology was second, while the two groups ranked theory a poor third. The results did not surprise the researcher, who noted the limited contact with native speakers of English and their culture. The author points out that, for the most part, opportunities for

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travel are few and the only English heard is that of students in the classroom. This is the case not only in Poland but in many other countries with similar conditions. For instance, contact with native speakers of English was seen as one of the most pressing needs among 53 teachers of EFL in Russia and the Ukraine in a survey by Schotta (1973) of their perceived needs and concerns. The EFL teachers also indicated a desire to improve their teaching methodology and to increase contact with colleagues both locally and nationally.

Fahmy and Bilton (1992) examined the undergraduate, teaching-English-as-a-foreign-language (TEFL) education program at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. The authors found that students there were aware of their need to improve their English language skills, and they recommended language support in the program for as long as needed.

Berry (1990) discusses the dual functions of language improvement. He says that the first function is obvious, i.e., raising the teacher's level of proficiency. The second function is very subtle and consists of providing effective teaching models when changes are desired in teaching practices.

Murdoch (1994) has suggested that teacher-training programs should think more in terms of activities that will help develop both the pedagogical skills of the trainee and his or her language competencies. The author cites the need to reduce the hours of study of other subjects in the curriculum (e.g., educational psychology and principles of education) in order to reserve more time for language study. Extracurricular reading programs that can have a significant impact on the level of competency achieved are another alternative suggested. Murdoch's suggestions are based on the results of a survey administered to 208 students in two English teachers' colleges in Sri Lanka, where he addressed issues related to training components in the curriculum.

The results of the survey demonstrated clearly that training for language proficiency should be the foundation of the trainee's ability to fulfill his/her professional role. In addition, the survey suggested that in order to produce more competent teachers, training programs should place more emphasis on language training, primarily at the beginning of the training program.

According to Doff (1987), a teacher's confidence in the classroom is undermined by a poor command of the English language.

Poor command of the language through lack of use can affect the self-esteem and professional status of the teacher and interfere with simple teacher procedures. Furthermore, it can keep the teacher from fulfilling the pedagogical requirements of a more communicative approach to language teaching. Buchmann (1984) claims that knowledge gives the teacher both social and epistemic control of the classroom environment and helps facilitate control of management problems. A foreign-language teacher's lack of proficiency leads students to believe that learning a foreign language consists of the completion of textbook activities rather than learning the language for the purpose of communication.

Those involved in planning teachers' programs should be concerned with the low level of English proficiency among prospective EFL teachers and should adopt approaches that will overcome the problem. Schrier (1994) states that teacher-preparation programs usually divide their preparation in three ways: general, specialist, and professional education. Foreign language departments have the most influence in the area of specialist education because of the content-knowledge preparation or simply the knowledge base.

KNOWLEDGE BASE OF EFL TEACHER EDUCATION

Knowledge base is described by Valli and Tom (1988) as the "entire repertoire of skills, information, attitudes, etc., that teachers need to carry out their classroom responsibility" (p. 5). Controversy exists, however, concerning the concept of knowledge base, mainly when it is pertinent to teacher-education programs. In this sense, knowledge base can be conceptualized in many ways, depending on the approach. Investigations have been made in attempts to specify clearly the knowledge that teachers should have. Several categories have been generated, ranging from knowledge of educational contexts, content, curriculum, and educational goals and values, to familiarity with new technology, knowledge of statistics, research methods, and insights into cultural influences on learning (Shulman, 1987). Several other variables must also be taken into account in order to change, and thus improve, the education process. Such variables, according to Reilly (1989), would include "the mission of schools, the organization of

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schools, the programs offered by schools, the means by which content is taught to students, and required changes in teacher education curricula" (p. 9). The variables mentioned above, although important and essential ingredients of the teacher learning process, should, by no means, be considered the core knowledge base of education. In fact, Shulman (1987) states that "a knowledge base for teaching is not fixed and final. . . . It will, however, become abundantly clear that much, if not most, of the proposed knowledge base remains to be discovered, invented, and redefined" (p. 12).

In the field of teacher education, content is usually the component that receives the least attention, according to Lafayette (1993). He illustrates his statement by saying that among the forty-eight chapters in the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* by Houston (1990), only one chapter deals with subject matter in teacher preparation. Lafayette goes on to say that this lack of attention to subject matter for teacher preparation is due to the fact that content knowledge seems to be so obvious that there is not a need to justify it. Nevertheless, in terms of a foreign language, subject matter content has always been a concern. Lafayette (1993) reports that, in an article published more than fifty years ago, Stephen A. Freeman (1941) stated that even if a student has a bachelor's degree with a major in the foreign language, it does not necessarily mean that the student has acquired the skills necessary to become a successful teacher. "There is a vast amount of downright bad teaching going on nowadays right before our eyes; and those teachers are theoretically innocent because they comply with all requirements" (p. 295). What is important is that Freeman's observations, although made more than half a century ago, differ little from those expressed by contemporary scholars in the field of foreign-language teacher (FLT) education.

Language proficiency is the most important component of content knowledge. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' provisional program guidelines for FLT education, in the area of specialist development, state that the FLT education program should provide students with opportunities to develop competence in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

The guidelines further attest that training programs should be examined progressively and continually, in terms of language

proficiency development, in order to ensure that the following are included in their guidelines:

1. The presence of written goals for each level of language study and accurate placement instruments.
2. Opportunities to hear, speak, read, and write authentic language in all foreign language courses.
3. The presence of language courses which focus on the totality of communication in addition to those which focus specifically on culture, grammar, literature and pronunciation.
4. A clearly articulated sequence of courses that balances culture, grammar, language use and literature throughout the major's course of study.
5. Opportunity for intensive language experiences in this country and/or through study or living abroad programs.
6. Use of appropriate evaluative instruments to measure candidate performance. An example of such would be the Oral Proficiency Interview to measure the speaking component.
7. Effective use of available technology for providing authentic language models and efficient learning (p. 225).

Morain (1990), however, points out that educating the foreign-language teacher is not the responsibility of a single segment of academe, (language proficiency for example) but rather the combination of four components, which are (1) required language courses, (2) courses in the content area, (3) courses in pedagogy, and (4) in-school experience. Schrier (1994), on the other hand, outlines four characteristics desirable in future foreign-language teachers. These are: (1) proficiency in the foreign language and its cultures, (2) proficiency in the language and culture of the school's community, (3) expertise in curricular design and its implementation, and (4) technological sophistication. The author suggests that influences on teacher development, as well as the extent to which teachers present their knowledge to others, can be traced by examining these four characteristics. Schrier goes on to say that "the role that the foreign

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language community plays in this process goes beyond providing content knowledge. It is the way professors organize and deliver this knowledge that provides future teachers with the scripts for understanding the structure and process of learning a language" (p. 71).

The most important and thorough document known to professionals in the field of teaching English as a foreign/second language is the *Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Guidelines*. This document, which is the foundation of the required principles of teacher-preparation programs, came together through the contributions of several TESOL experts. Gradman (1971), for one, proposed the following as ideal components of teacher-preparation programs: knowledge of language, language acquisition, historical and current methods of language teaching, materials and error analyses, measurement and testing, and the prerequisite of competence in English for ESL teachers who are non-native speakers of the language. In addition, Gradman suggests including culture, as well as literature and research techniques.

The acquisition of subject matter knowledge is fundamental to the teaching of a foreign language. However, research has shown that trainees at teacher institutions spend a great deal of their time studying subjects other than the foreign language they should be learning to teach. Brickel and Paul (1981) conducted a survey of secondary schools in eighty school districts in ten states, as well as twenty teacher institutions. Teachers at the secondary schools reported that during their FLT preparation they spent more than 50% of their time studying literature. The majority of these teachers taught levels 1 and 2, in which literature was not emphasized but rather language and culture. A similar study of FLT preparation programs was conducted by Schrier (1989) in four-year colleges and universities. The study revealed that 56% of the 500 institutions surveyed still place great emphasis on the study of literature. Morain (1990) reports that, at the University of Georgia, three out of six courses in education are devoted to the teaching of foreign language and culture, while thirteen courses are in language specialization. The problem, however, is that "the number of courses taken has no predictable correlation to the linguistic and cultural proficiency attained by the takers. Those shabby but endearing old curricular pals -- grammar and composition, phonetics, the history of the language, and conversation -- are not producing students who are

linguistically proficient" (p. 21). Morain suggests that we need courses designed to increase oral fluency, such as the art of story telling, or a course in role playing and dramatics. The teaching of discussion and persuasion are other techniques that could benefit students.

CONCLUSION

Considerable attention has been given to the process of training EFL teachers all over the world. Points such as teacher background and competence, content of teacher training, political influences, cultural appropriateness, as well as processes and methodologies of training programs, have been broadly discussed.

In most parts of the world, the main emphasis in ELT is on methodology and the language level of the future teacher. Language competence has, indeed, been rated the most essential characteristic of a good teacher. Research has shown, however, that only a few teacher-training courses are capable of achieving the objective of improving the communicative command of the target language. In-service teacher-training programs have to take into consideration the need to improve the language command of their trainees in order to meet their needs and to respond to their wishes.

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