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Trends in modern foreign language initial teacher education – the role of higher education

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This article considers three possible directions the Initial Teacher Training in England might follow in the coming period and seeks to make the case for a more theoretically based preparation for teaching. It is argued that 'Reflective Practice' is an insufficient basis for teacher professional development in that it does not provide for the transformation of subjective experience. Pilot empirical research is drawn on, comparing student teachers' perceptions of their training experience on the PGCE modern foreign languages course and the dual certification PGCE/Maîtrise Français Langue Etrangère programme to suggest that a more academic, theoretically-orientated preparation for teaching is in the best interests of teachers and the teaching profession as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to consider some of the issues and concerns surrounding teacher training at the present time, to raise a debate about the future of teacher education and to provoke a response from colleagues working in the field. Teacher *education* has largely been replaced by the term *training,* certainly when applied to current competence-based programmes, and this signifies a fundamental shift in the way professional preparation for teaching is currently perceived. We *train* teachers to be skilled classroom technicians, albeit reflective; we *educate* them to be equally reflective, critical, autonomous professionals with sound theoretical knowledge.

It is possible to relate developments in teacher education and training to three distinct periods of post-war education policy. The term *First Way* is used to describe the post-Second World War period characterised by meritocratic education based around the grammar school, the comprehensive experiment and the expansion of higher education. The *Second Way* relates to the policies of the Conservative government of the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher. The *Third Way* describes the policy orientation of the current New Labour government.

In the 1980s educational policy shifted towards work-related education and competence-based training schemes. The broad consensus that had existed in the preceding period, the so-called 'golden age' of education, was destroyed. The influence of 'New Right' thinking (see, for example, O'Hear (1988) and Lawlor (1990)) on education is well documented. One important consequence of the Thatcherite S*econd Way* agenda for education was the introduction of a competence-based model of professional training for teachers. Since then, the almost total orientation towards a skills-based training system is clearly exemplified by the introduction of a 'national curriculum for initial teacher training', *High Standards, High Status* (DfEE, 1998) that sets out competence-based standards. This technicist approach to initial teacher training (ITT) is firmly established and criticisms of it are now very familiar.

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Teacher educators have frequently expressed concern about the elevation of practice over theory in teacher training. Whether this amounts to no more than a romantic attachment to their experience in the 60s and 70s of a more disengaged 'ivory tower' teacher education in which the 'four disciplines' of educational philosophy, history, sociology and psychology featured prominently, or whether it is based on a sound understanding of the need for and the nature of educational theory, is uncertain. One way of examining this is to look at current responses that emerge under the broad umbrella of New Labour's *Third Way* approach to education that attempts to make new social connections in a depoliticised and deeply individuated climate.

In the modern foreign languages (MFL) field two types of response to the issue of theory emerge, characterised notably by Mike Grenfell (1998; 2000) and Norbert Pachler and Kit Field (2001). Grenfell favours total *separation* of theory and practice by placing teacher training entirely in schools. Pachler and Field argue for a *convergence* of mentor and tutor roles while retaining higher education (HE) participation. They propose the development of a 'co-tutor' role in which HE tutors share the responsibility of

developing theoretical knowledge with their counterparts in school. In this article I will briefly consider these two perspectives and their possible consequences and then present a third response based on research and the experience of running a dual certification PGCE/Maîtrise Français Langue Etrangère (FLE) programme where there is a strong applied theory element.

THEORY IN THE THIRD WAY

The question of what is meant by theory cannot be answered in detail here. However, what the reader should take it to mean is both general educational theory which involves the 'four disciplines' of philosophy, history, sociology and psychology as well as, most importantly, the applied theory of modern foreign language teaching and learning.

Grenfell, in his review of the Nuffield Inquiry Report, puts forward the idea that in the future a new type of institution might be needed in order to better facilitate the partnership between schools, colleges, higher education institutions (HEIs) and local education authorities (LEAs). Grenfell suggests that the logic of present government policy is

> that training might indeed best be carried out in training colleges separate from research bases in HEIs. In that way, both pre- and in-service provision could deliver centrally prescribed programmes and procedures unencumbered by a research mission. What can happen currently is a clash between what research suggests and what is required by statutory bodies leading to unreconcilable tensions for all concerned. (2000: 3)

He goes on to assert that schools should hold the main responsibility for training, that education departments in HEIs might cease to exist and that subject specialist teacher educators might be integrated into subject departments.

This response would represent a complete separation of theory and practice because, although Grenfell goes on to suggest that school-based training centres would have input from higher education-based tutors, the whole theory base and identity of teacher education would be sacrificed. Elsewhere, Grenfell questions what research, theory and academic literature can offer teachers in training, but at the same time points to the dangers of 'abandoning this side of the equation and adopting a common-sense, a theoretical view of teachers' developing professional competence' (Grenfell, 1998: 177). This is a legitimate, critical position to take but it does not seem to be consistent with a *separation* argument. What Grenfell argues for is perhaps not so much a *Third Way*, but an abandonment of any hope of resolving the theory/practice question which presents itself more as a sort of latter-day Thatcherism. It is reminiscent in its conclusion, if not motive, of the New Right in the late 1980s and early 1990s although, significantly, not inconsistent with the trajectory of current education policy.

The idea that the job of the academic would be to focus on serious research and at the same time contribute in a minor way to the work of training centres may sound inviting to teacher educators who are hard-pressed to find time for research and writing. It is difficult to see, however, how classroom practice in modern foreign languages could be advanced and developed, and at the same time, theory would essentially lose its practice base, running the risk of reverting to the more detached approach of former times where theory was worked out by academics and put into practice by teachers. Nevertheless, the *separation* argument is a pragmatic response that would indeed resolve some tensions. It is possible, however, that new tensions might be created not least in terms of whether theory is really necessary in modern foreign language teaching, ultimately leading to the rejection of any higher education involvement. In the present climate, this would seem a very real danger and too high a price to pay.

Pachler and Field present a very persuasive and coherent argument for the *convergence* of tutor and mentor roles towards a model of co-tutoring 'rather than a partnership characterised, among other things, by complementary duties and responsibilities'. They call for 'a reconfigured model of partnership' in which 'both school-based and HEI-based partners are vital players in the ITE process' (2001: 23). They do not argue for a school-based model of ITT, rather, they rightly celebrate the achievements of the partnership model and assert that teaching needs to be seen as an intellectual activity. They are critical of a skills-based approach which they see as 'at best misguided and at worst counter-productive' and are mindful of the direction in which new training initiatives such as the Graduate and Registered Teachers Programme (GRTP) are moving. This 'on-the-job' training follows an apprenticeship model where trainees are recruited by schools, required to teach virtually full-time and are paid a salary. Essentially, HEIs perform only a monitoring and 'quality assurance' role. While such training programmes contribute to solving the problems of recruitment to teaching, it is doubtful that they provide anything like adequate professional preparation.

Pachler and Field's conception of the role of a school-based 'co-tutor' rather than mentor is one in which he/she is able to take part in 'focused investigative engagement at metacognitive and systemic levels' (2001: 23). This would not only raise the quality of their contribution to ITT, but would also greatly contribute to their personal and profession growth. Pachler and Field confirm that the co-tutor would need to re-orientate their work in school, which is currently focused more on day-to-day school life. They draw on the work of Arthur

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et al. (1997), who advocate what they call 'discursive mentoring', which aims to encourage student teachers to engage with more theoretical aspects of education appropriate to school-based training. They take this position in response to what they see as an inevitable trend, that is, that in the future, schools are likely to be more heavily involved in teacher training. Their *convergence* approach aims to ensure that schools are able to respond effectively to new demands and that higher education retains a significant stake in what new arrangements develop. This position is quite understandable at the present time and many would not argue against the principle of further developing training expertise in schools.

However, one might raise two objections. Firstly, by converging HEI tutor and school-based mentor roles, the distinctive nature of the role of higher education would be lost. What is distinct about HE is that it represents objectivity, the distancing from the workplace. It is not an ivory tower, but seeks to promote independent critical thought, which is developed through an engagement with practice. A *convergence* of roles would necessarily lose much of that objectivity and distance.

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Secondly, the 'reconceptualisation' of the role of the mentor that Pachler and Field envisage is founded on the current orthodoxy of reflective practice. However, reflective practice has weak theoretical credentials since it provides only subjective explanations, and the ability to reflect subjectively is context-dependent and not open to objective theoretical generalisation. Theory, on the other hand, does not necessarily apply in any direct form to practice. Moreover, although 'reflective practitioners' may draw on and refer to theory, they are not contributing to its development except, possibly, in a personal way. Therefore, even if Pachler and Field's version of reflective practice relates to externally constructed theory, the nature and purpose of reflection remains context-bound and largely subjective and, as it stands, is not susceptible to generalisation.

Reflective practice has become the guiding principle of the majority of PGCE courses but has been criticised by some teacher educators (see for example Wilkin, 1999; Grenfell, 1998). As Furlong (1996: 155) confirms, referring to his 1994 Modes of Teacher Education (MOTE) project (1994) 'within the vast majority of teacher-education programmes, notions of "theorising", "theory as process" and particularly "reflection" largely displaced the teaching of theory as propositional knowledge'. Reflective practice, therefore, is orientated entirely around practice and applies a subjective definition of knowledge and theoretical understanding.

Both *separation* and *convergence* are responses to the problems currently experienced in teacher education that result from the imposition of a highly prescriptive craft model of training. These *Third Way* responses operate, naturally enough, within the *status quo*. They may well be alternatives that fit into present circumstances. If, on the other hand, we ask the question, what is the *best* preparation that student teachers might have for their future career, we might come up with a different answer. It is in response to this question that I will examine a third alternative.

A 'NON-THIRD WAY' RESPONSE: A *DUAL* APPROACH

What distinguishes this *dual* approach from those considered above is that it is neither a defence of the traditional academic role nor an attempt to connect with what presently exists. It is not a pragmatic response, rather, it is a response based on what is actually *needed*, regardless of expense, although in fact, given the huge sums of money being spent on attracting new entrants to the profession, this does not appear to be such an issue.

This approach to teacher education also looks at how it could develop more positively in the future. It is based on the premise that substantial theoretical knowledge both in terms of the applied theory of modern foreign languages and general educational theory is an essential prerequisite of sound professional practice. Theory is an important element in teaching as it is in other professions. A *dual* approach would require a complete reappraisal of teacher education and, specifically, for the purposes of this argument, secondary Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in modern foreign languages. For that reason, I shall not dwell on the school experience component of professional preparation, but present some of the initial findings of pilot empirical research recently undertaken as part of a study into the decline of theory in MFL initial teacher education, comparing the attitudes and perceptions of student teachers on the PGCE/ Maîtrise FLE programme and the PGCE course in one higher education institution.

Some background information is perhaps useful here. The eleven-month dual certification of the PGCE/Maîtrise Français Langue Etrangère programme for which, until recently, I was responsible, was developed with one single French university and recruited mainly French native speakers (although similar programmes which are run in other universities try to recruit equal numbers of French and English native speakers and are partnered with a consortium of French universities). Essentially, recruits to the programme gain two qualifications and complete two courses. Student teachers begin the academic year at the end of August and spend a five-week period in the English HE institution, including a short period of school experience. Between October and the end of January they transfer to the French university where they complete the Maîtrise FLE, finishing with final examinations at the end of January. In February they return to

England and complete the PGCE, finishing at the very end of the summer term. The requirements of the PGCE are met in full and both parts of the programme are assessed independently.

The Maîtrise FLE, while a vocationally orientated course, takes a more theoretical approach to teaching and learning, language and communication, the didactics of French as a foreign language, French grammar and new technologies in MFL learning, as well as a module on Cultural anthropology, which includes intercultural issues, French post-war history and literature.

The course is normally run over one year, but the dual-certification course is condensed into one, very intensive semester. The compulsory *stage* is undertaken as part of PGCE school experience.

The motivation to establish the joint programme was three-fold. In the first place, although perhaps least importantly, meeting government recruitment targets in PGCE modern foreign languages has become more difficult as the supply of young people studying modern foreign languages at degree level is diminishing year by year. Since the start of the programme, recruitment in modern foreign languages ITT has become an even greater problem. At the same time the dual-certification programme has been hardly less popular.

In second place was the concern that those MFL graduates who do apply for ITT places often have below-average degree classifications and increasingly have a joint honours qualification, which means that they may not have the linguistic fluency and level of knowledge required for future teachers of modern foreign languages. To recruit more French nationals to a programme which offers them a career in England at a time when entering teaching in France is difficult due to the competitive nature of the CAPES, while at the same time offering a higher French degree qualification seemed a sound idea.

But more important than these two concerns was the fact that on PGCE courses student teachers gain only a fairly superficial knowledge of any sort of theory, be it language learning theory, adolescent development or language teaching methodology. Philosophy of education has been sacrificed to better classroom management skills; curriculum theory has become learning how to implement the National Curriculum. Time does not permit much other than the immediately relevant or functional during the very intensive nine-month period which, of necessity, has to focus on achievement of the standards required for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

While this joint programme as it stands is not offered here as a future model of teacher education, both my experience of developing and running the course and pilot research with student teachers suggest that the greater theoretical component that the Maîtrise FLE provided made a significant impact on the knowledge and practical expertise of student teachers. It should be noted, however, that this theory broadly relates to MFL teaching and learning, and general educational theory is not included.

By working in close co-operation with French colleagues it was possible to identify links and common themes so that the more distanced, theoretical perspectives of the Maîtrise FLE were drawn on and contextualised within the PGCE course (Lawes & Barbot, 2001). If we take, for example, new technologies in education, the Maîtrise FLE engaged the students in critical debate about the value and place of ICT in the MFL curriculum backed up by reading. They also spent time working on autonomy and independent learning. Students were required to write an assignment in which they explored some of the wider issues as well as engaging in some practical applications such as creating learning materials and a website. The PGCE focus was much more of a practical concern of 'hands on' experience in the classroom and developing ICT skills to meet government requirements. The end-of-course 'Mémoire de Stage', a 10,000-word dissertation, requires student teachers to examine critically an aspect of their PGCE experience. Subjects chosen included: the communicative approach to MFL teaching, the National Curriculum for MFL, and 'languages for all' policies and principles.

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This additional work had a marked effect on the way that the student teachers approached their PGCE experience and engaged with the subject studies PGCE curriculum. External examiner feedback at the end of the PGCE part of the course over a three year period confirmed the tutor's assessment that the PGCE/Maîtrise FLE student teachers' written work was generally of a higher academic standard than that of student teachers on the PGCE programme.

As part of my study, I recently conducted some in-depth interviews with student teachers from both the PGCE and PGCE/Maîtrise FLE programmes in order to discover and compare how they viewed and understood theory. It is not possible here to discuss in detail the range of issues covered, but one of the key questions was the reading that student teachers had been undertaking during the courses. Both sets of students had the same reading lists of 'Related Reading' and 'Further Reading'.

The research revealed that reading by the dual-qualification student teachers for PGCE assignments was very similar to that of their PGCE counterparts, although there was some evidence that PGCE /Maîtrise FLE student teachers expected to read more than the basic texts, which was not the case with the PGCE sample. Reading undertaken in both groups tended to be practice-based, since the nature of the course in this particular institution requires student teachers to choose issues of concern to them that arise out of their school experience but also to draw on

appropriate 'theoretical perspectives'.

However, where the two groups differed was that the Maîtrise FLE student teachers had just completed a period of academic study in France where a substantial amount of theoretical reading related to the teaching of modern languages had been undertaken. This group was therefore able to draw on both practice-based texts and theoretical works for their PGCE assignments and demonstrate a deeper understanding of principles through explicit reference to theory. One PGCE/Maîtrise FLE student teacher, an English native-speaker named Helen, was particularly appreciative of the experience of the course in France, saying, 'If I hadn't done the Maîtrise, I might never have read Vygotsky or Piaget or Bruner'. When asked what authors they had found most interesting, responses included Barthes, Bourdieu, Porcher, Holec, Riley and Little.

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A common complaint of students interviewed was that they wanted to do more reading but that there was just not enough time. Mike, a student teacher in the PGCE-only group, gave the example of an assignment that he found very interesting, but he became frustrated because he could not study the subject in enough depth and was unable to produce a piece of work of the academic quality he knew himself to be capable of – although what he did produce was of a good enough standard for the course. All students in both groups reported that they had read far more in preparation for and at the beginning of the course, but that when they got immersed in school-life there was no time for anything other than preparation for the coursework assignments. There was some evidence that there was a difference in the type of reading student teachers would have liked to engage in between the groups. PGCE student teachers said they would like to do more theoretical reading, while some of the Maîtrise FLE group were more interested in texts that provided more practical tips.

The content of reading lists for PGCE reflects the recognition on the part of teacher trainers that students are *obliged* to be instrumental in their approach to the academic part of their course. Moreover, current ITT literature, both general and subject specific, is understandably aimed at supporting students in achieving 'the standards'. That is not to say that student teachers are not encouraged by their tutors to read more widely! What is in question here is the type of course that *requires* such an approach, and the effect on student teachers' intellectual as well as professional development.

As a PGCE tutor in modern foreign languages, I have noticed over a number of years that PGCE student teachers appear to be much more pragmatic and functional in their approach to the course than their dual-certification counterparts: they appear to have adopted a 'training approach' across their entire experience, which is detrimental to academic study. These students expect theory to act as a sort of 'manual' and they fail to appreciate that theoretical knowledge is intended to develop their ability to think and move away from limitations of practice. This has been true of some PGCE/Maîtrise FLE student teachers on some occasions as they become immersed in what, on this particular course, is essentially a five-month block of school experience.

On the other hand, most PGCE/Maîtrise FLE student teachers are conscious of how their academic course has enabled them to think more critically about aspects of classroom practice and has made them more able to make confident professional judgements. They point to their greater ability to think objectively about their teaching and 'question myself' as one student put it. One of the student teachers, Sandrine, summed up the main difference in theoretical frameworks and perspectives between the two parts of the programme as follows:

> 'The essential difference is that the PGCE takes as its point of departure the established institution of the British secondary school (including the constraints imposed on the system such as the National Curriculum, etc.) and aims to shape student teachers to fit that existing system. The Maîtrise FLE, however, takes the student as its point of departure and seeks to prepare him/her for the situation of teaching languages – whatever or wherever that may be. The Maîtrise FLE course is therefore freer of institutional norms (although making the student aware that these will shape his workplace) and the Maîtrise course is therefore less rigid and allows the student to be freer thinking and more adaptable.'

Student teachers' accounts of their experiences of the Maîtrise FLE element provide useful insights into what they learned, how they valued that learning and how they perceived it in relation to the PGCE element. The majority of the group valued the opportunity to brush up on their history and literature studies as an extension of their general education. The intercultural studies module was universally welcomed, not just because of its future use in teaching, but, as one student put it, 'It was quite theoretical, it gave me a greater awareness of stereotypes, race, identity. It made me think'. Another commented, 'I enjoyed reading Zarate and Bourdieu because they taught me a lot about culture and anthropology.' Didactics was equally well received: 'There is a continuous "va-et-vient" between theory and teaching methods: didactique helps us to consider theoretical research and to apply it in the classroom. We also considered a lot of resources we can use in schools', was one of Brigitte's observations. Comments on 'new technologies' illustrate the importance of developing a critical perspective of this area. 'We talked and thought a lot about ICT theoretically', was one student's response. Others focused on the opportunities to develop skills in designing learning materials on the web as being important to them. There were criticisms too. One or two

students found some parts of the course too esoteric and were anxious to make links with practical teaching in a direct way. They complained of not having enough time to think and reflect on their course or to do as much reading as they would have liked.

However, the general mood of these comments was positive and the following observation is characteristic of others:

> 'In general I have learned a lot on the Maîtrise programme and have now the feeling I am someone else: I am much more knowledgeable about theory. I hope it will help me a lot in my work in school…. I gained knowledge and confidence. The PGCE will focus more on practice and in school I will be able to carry on developing my skills'. (Chantal)

The next phase of my research will involve a larger sample of student teachers and tutors from other institutions. It should be stressed that the sample is drawn from one course and the results should be seen in this light. However, this study will extend to research in other HEIs running similar parallel courses in the academic year 2001/2.

CONCLUSION

The above extract from a much larger research project is used here to support the view, firstly, that more theoretical content is beneficial to student teachers; secondly, that higher education institutions are in a unique position to provide that theory; and, thirdly, that a longer initial training period is needed if student teachers are going to get the professional preparation they *need.*

Numerous academics (see notably Pring (1996), Smith (1996), Furlong (1996), Grenfell (1998), and Moon (1998)) have shown their concern for the need for theory. In his consideration of research and theory in relation to modern foreign languages, Moon takes a partial perspective. He argues that there is a need for 'a more strongly intellectual exploration of comparative traditions in didactics and pedagogy [that] could contribute to a clearer articulation of what constitutes subject knowledge and subject knowledge applications…' (1998: 22). While this takes the applied theory of MFL beyond its present level in ITT, it still focuses narrowly on pedagogic rather than wider social, political and philosophical issues upon which pedagogic questions are predicated.

Wilkin is representative of a growing unease about the present low status that theory has on ITT courses. She summarises the value of theory in the following way:

> Theorising is therefore inextricably associated with the development of practical wisdom, of which it is a cornerstone. Students whose preparation for teaching is undertaken within the tradition of higher education should be enlightened if not transformed by this experience. In recognising the impact of their own educational experience on their perceptions of teaching, they are enabled to become critically aware of the legacy of teaching which they inherit within the school and of their ability to remould this inheritance creatively and constructively. (1999: 17)

The transformation of subjective experience is the key role of theory in teacher education. It is only through theory that real professionalism is possible. Theoretical understanding may not offer much in the way of 'tips for teachers', but there is a more important outcome: a far deeper understanding of our practice. Sound theoretical knowledge ultimately improves the quality of practice, although the relationship between the two is by no means straightforward. However, the current situation in ITT militates strongly against theory, not just as a result of the imposition of a competence-based regime, but because the discussions of theory at the present time are actually discussions of practice. Reflective practice has led to a redefinition of practice as theory. A *dual* approach would require us to consign 'reflective practices' firmly to the classroom and reintroduce real theory as the foundation of initial teacher education. This is what is needed if we are really serious about the quality of modern foreign languages teaching and learning.

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