



VIRTEACH

*A Virtual Solution for a comprehensive and coordinated
training for Foreign Language Teachers in Europe*

Recommendations for Foreign Language Teacher
Education Convergence in Europe

WHITE PAPER

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the VIRTEACH project, A VIRtual Solution for a comprehensive and coordinated training for foreign language TEACHERs in Europe, co-funded by the European Commission.

The aim of the project is to create a digital tool to improve foreign language teacher education at a European level, and to provide teachers, researchers, student teachers and policy makers with open-source tools and resources.

To achieve these goals, the VIRTEACH team worked to implement language training activities at a pre-service stage, authored and disseminated academic articles to foster the convergence of the national curricular formats at a European level, designed and created an online course lodged in a virtual learning environment with a friendly and easy-to-use digital tool for monitoring student teachers during their internship at their in-service stage, and compiled and disseminated coordinated policy actions and strategies for engaging policy makers and public administrators.

The VIRTEACH project started in September 2018 and it had a duration of three years. This document compiles the final recommendations and policy actions resulting from the work carried out during that time. This report is aimed at decision makers and teacher educators, and offers pathways to improve foreign language teacher education in Europe. First, it offers a state-of-the-art section where legal and practical contexts situate the departing point of this study. Second, it detects critical aspects of foreign language teacher education and explores a selection of key issues such as the promotion of internationalisation and convergence of national format curricula, the implementation of digital tools, the enhancement of a greater coherence between the training and practice stages, and the inclusion of dialogue, critical thinking and transparency among the actors involved. Third, it suggests new paths for development and advancement in quality language teacher education.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

This section offers a brief overview of the current situation of language teacher education in Europe. It considers both legislation and the perception of language teacher education among practitioners and students. The consideration of these two focal points serves as an optimal point of departure for a more in-depth analysis of weaknesses and opportunities in language teacher education at a European level.

2.1. LEGISLATION

According to the reports from the European Commission (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015), migratory fluxes between European countries have been increasing in the last years. At a European level, the labour mobility of the teaching and learning collective is in continuous growth. This is clearly detected in the Eurydice report on teacher mobility:

In half of the education systems surveyed, less than a third of all teachers appear to be transnationally mobile. In the EU, Executive Summary 13 12.4 % of respondents reported that they had gone abroad solely when they were already practising teachers, whereas 5.9 % had done so only during their Initial Teacher Training (hereinafter ITT), and 3.6 % only in both cases. In all countries surveyed except Iceland, modern foreign language teachers are the most transnationally mobile, compared to teachers of four other main subjects (pp. 12-13)

Many factors contribute to this situation, among which we can point to a constant increase in opportunities for university study abroad, which contributes to the internationalisation of teacher training, and a static labour market resulting from the last years of economic crisis (ET2020), which impels graduated students to seek jobs beyond their frontiers. Data indicate that the labour mobility of this sector is in continuous growth, but there is no unified format for teacher training at a European level, despite the Bologna process has mobility as one of its key issues (Zgaga, 2008). Initial Teacher Education (hereinafter ITE) is, indeed, a key issue of the Bologna process. However, twenty years since its implementation, the results are not the expected ones and there is still

a lack of consensus in the European educational institutions (Vögtle, 2019).

Moreover, there are no platforms in which university trainers can share and learn specific successful teaching formulas for this field of higher education. There are also no digital platforms that favor this confluence, nor unified digital tools that cover the supervision and tutoring needs of students in their internship phase. In terms of educational policy, national agencies combine their lines of work on teacher training in each country separately.

The evident unbalance between nationally-oriented training and international practice demands urgent action towards the internationalization of the teaching profession as a whole. Within the European Higher Education Area, this may be facilitated thanks to the possibility of homologation of university degrees. However, so far there is no unified format for teacher training at the international level. At the level of educational policies, there is also a need to converge towards a more unified and coherent set of principles among the different European countries, particularly in terms of curricular content and experiences of internships.

In general terms, ITE in Europe suffers from an excessively local projection that limits the future teaching exercise of teacher students beyond their borders. As pointed out by Townsend and Bates (2007), it is a set of tensions and pressures, inherent in an unstoppable process of globalization, that makes a dent in the quality of teaching. This issue becomes more acute, if possible, in the training of language teachers, whose orientation towards communicative teaching requires the implementation of a series of strategies and predisposition to interaction and mutual understanding. Teacher's students develop their professional skills during their ITE stage. In a supporting environment, students are supposed to learn, analyse, question and put in practice all their knowledge, promoting their collaborative and communicative skills, as well as creativity and critical thinking. This requires a great effort by all parties of the learning process, as pupils need to be supported and mentored by professionals who enhance them to reach those skills. As a result of this combined effort a more effective and equitable education shall be possible, recognizing teachers as the most powerful influences on their pupils' development (Hattie, 2003).

In the case of Europe, foreign language ITE qualifications within higher education contexts are regulated in the form of a one/two-year Master's degree offered by universities, in addition, the previous specific formation on languages, which usually consist of a four/five-year university degree (Eurydice, 2013, Karatsiori, 2014). After these certifications, formal induction is present in seventeen countries, according to Caena (2014). Induction consists of a mentorship period, carried out in schools with experienced teachers, which usually have a specific formation for this task. During this period, novice teachers and experienced ones have meetings, job shadowing, seminars, courses or workshops, not to mention advice about lesson planning.

All those models, offer students a scientific-disciplinary training in their area of specialization and practical training oriented towards professional practice. The Practicum stage has been acknowledged as an essential and meaningful form of teacher training that provides student teachers with real classroom experiences and allows them to translate into practice the skills and knowledge they learned during the teacher education program (Hobson et al. 2009; Kemmis et al. 2014; Zabalza 2011; Canh 2014). The resulting certificate is usually a requirement to enter the teaching profession in secondary education.

Despite the mentioned differences, ITE curriculums across Europe, present the same key features, a bound of union to overcome those differences in order to achieve the desired global education, according to Caena's (2014) research. Karatsiori (2014), demonstrates foreign language ITE curriculums in Europe match the same key elements. In her article "A common curriculum for the initial training of TEFL teachers in Europe: Utopia versus reality", she proposed 40 key elements that should be implanted to achieve a global and comprehensive formation. Studying the current European ITE programmes, almost all those issues are covered in one way or another –not always explicit-, demonstrating that the entreated common curriculum among Europe is not a utopia, but a possible reality with the effort and teamwork of policy administrators of the European countries.

The European Council (2019) seems to be aware of this reality, proposing the guidelines for a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages. In the mentioned report, members propose a number of measures to improve the learning of foreign languages, orientating it to a communicative approach that allows students to enhance a multilingual competence required for the 21st

century global society. Among the recommendations, it is worth highlighting the importance given to the role of teachers, who shall be supported by investing in their continuing formation, promoting cooperation with other professionals, by means of mobility programmes –such as e-Twinning- and encouraging them to implement innovative pedagogies.

It is necessary, therefore, the development of a multinational dynamic and lasting over time environment that offers useful tools for the training of future teachers of languages. In the light of these reflections, a communicative approach seems a mandatory element to infuse in the training of 21st century language teachers. For this to happen, prospective teachers must acquire a reflective and critical training (Barros-del Río, 2019), oriented towards social commitment (Yogev and Michaeli, 2011). This implies the construction of a critical teaching identity among the candidates during their training process (Dvir & Avissar, 2014). Added to that, the critical pedagogy received must be closely linked to a culturally receptive teaching practice (Abednia, 2011; Jiménez & Rose, 2010), especially in the multinational contexts in which future professionals of the teaching of languages will have to move. Finally, in a changing and global reality, future language teachers must know how to manage and apply to their teaching the digital technologies that best adapt to their teaching-learning objectives. Hence, a greater degree of internationalization and convergence of the training of future language teachers is an urgent need within European borders.

Education, therefore, must evolve and be adapted to the 21st century requirements. As Karatsiori claims, “within a globalized context, [...] it is believed that teacher education has a key role to play in successfully meeting the challenges of the changing demands of fast evolving societies” (2014, 60). The requirements of the European Council (2019) to overcome these issues can be summarized as:

- Exchange schemes with countries where the target language is spoken, as part of the initial education and/or further professional development. Authors as Walters, Garii and Walters (2009) highlight the benefits of exchange programmes during the pre-service stage for the development of intercultural skills on student teachers, which are vital in the name of a global education. Students who take part in these programmes also

show improvement in their mastery of the language spoken on their countries of residence.

- The inclusion of language assistants in language teaching, using the opportunities provided by exchange schemes between Member States. Language assistants are a resource to develop language skills on student teachers, giving a real input of the studied language.
- Accessibility to continuing professional development opportunities through networks, communities of practice, massive online language courses, centres of expertise, cooperative online learning, collaborative action research, etc., in order to keep them up to date with latest pedagogical innovations and to upskill them. Life-long learning is the hallmark of the 21st century education and the opportunities to develop this skill are continuously growing, as different public institutions, from cultural associations to research centres, are offering courses, resources and tools to promote innovation in teaching practice.
- Encouragement of cross-border partnerships between education and training institutions in border regions. Mobility of students, teachers, trainers and administrative staff, as well as doctoral candidates and researchers could be facilitated by offering information and courses in the languages spoken in the neighbouring country. Promotion of multilingualism within these cross-border partnerships can prepare graduates to enter the labour market in both sides of the border.
- Promotion of cooperation between teacher education institutions. The European Commission shows its compromise to enhance fluent collaboration between teacher education institutions from all European countries. A common framework between different institutions is vital for foreign language ITE programmes, with shared objectives and clear goals for student teachers.

2.2. THE EUROPEAN PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFESSION

It is essential to visualize the perception of the teacher training programs in Europe from the perspective of the stakeholders involved in the formative process, i.e., teacher students and graduated as teachers of foreign languages, foreign language teachers and

practitioners, researchers at secondary schools and higher education institutions, and education policy makers and public administrators. To meet these needs, in 2019 the team of the VIRTEACH Erasmus+ project designed a survey oriented to assess the current state of foreign language teacher training and to detect strategic lines for improvement of methodological approaches, materials and resources.

The survey was disseminated among the mentioned stakeholders, with great diversity in terms of gender, ages, and countries of residence or professional experience, which ensured the heterogeneity of the sample. With over 500 responses from 13 European countries, the sample offers an updated picture of the social perception of foreign language teacher training, its voids and the improvements it must undertake to meet the needs of the profession in the 21st century. The results confirmed that ITE is an essential step for language education in Europe and it needs urgent improvement from several fronts, particularly in terms of curricula homogenization, internationalization, adaptability, mobility and gender balance (Barros-del Río & Mediavilla-Martínez, 2019).

Analysing the results obtained, a significant feature can be found in terms of genre (see fig. 1). Despite the effort on getting a heterogeneous sample, almost the 85% of the respondents are female, which indicates a feminization of the teaching profession. It must be mentioned, however, that these differences are lower among the teacher student's profiles, whose proportion of male/female tends to level.

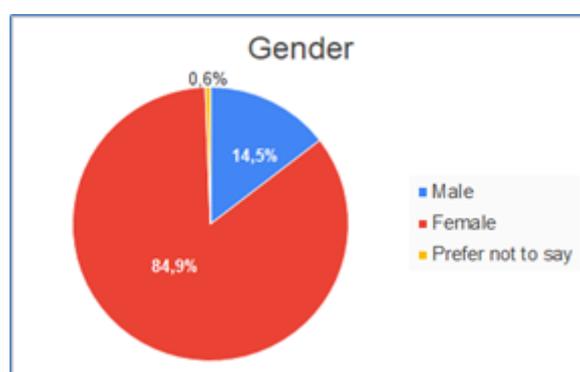


Figure 1. Gender distribution.

According to Drudy (2008), the feminization of teacher profession, results in low status and unappealing salaries. To fight this situation, gender needs to be embedded in policy thinking on teaching and teacher education. Greater investments by government institutions and universities are required to attract high quality people into the profession, irrespective of their sex/gender. In the medium term, these measures should impact on gender balance in teaching and learning.

Asking about their motivation to become teachers of foreign language, both students and teachers agreed on their genuine love for languages and their teaching vocation; economy is not a key factor on the election of this profession. Their views on the social perception of their profession matched these ideals, pointing its specialization and prestige as defining elements. Nevertheless, they also highlight how society consider teaching profession as an easy task, a feminine one. In other words, their personal inclination for a task they regard as inspiring, exciting and rewarding, seems to be colliding with a socially belittled profession they have not entered yet.

Regarding teacher training content during both the pre-service and in-service stage, teacher students and nearly graduated generally show a high degree of satisfaction (see fig. 2), although they suggest that more communicative and innovative approaches could be beneficial for language teacher training.

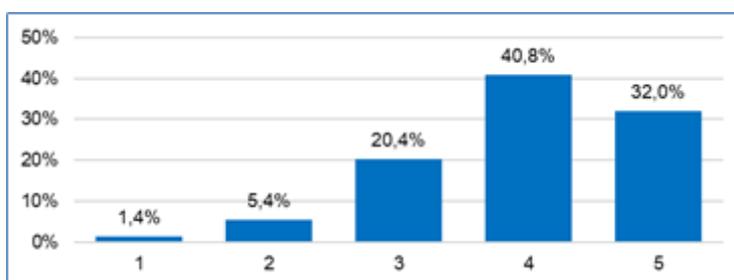


Figure 2. Degree of satisfaction with the training received

Some of the items they consider that could be beneficial to improve their training are the need for peer exchange and freedom for innovation, which could be achieved using ITCs for monitoring purposes. They also demand a more international format of language teacher training, in tune with the need to acquire intercultural skills.

In the case of experienced teachers, they highlight the importance of mentorship during the in-service stage, pointing it as very positive and important phase for teacher training, despite the fact that it can also be very exhausting or a chaotic experience (see Fig. 3).

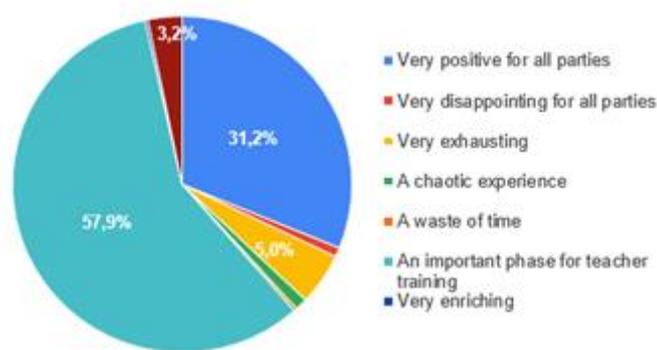


Figure 3. Opinion of experienced teachers about mentoring teacher students.

Consequently, they indicate that more effort should be invested in follow-up support and building up autonomy, critical reflection and research orientation. These choices project an ideal model for future teachers of languages who should be independent, autonomous and innovative. In order to pursue these goals, training programmes should orientate their contents towards communicative and reflective teaching strategies, paying special attention to ITCs for pedagogical use so that trainees are able to manage classrooms smoothly and paying attention to intercultural awareness.

As mentioned before, one relevant field of interest was the current state of the Practicum phase performance in order to suggest strategies for its improvement. All stakeholders were asked to rate a range of options that could improve the in-service phase. In the case of teacher students

or newly graduated as teachers of foreign languages (see Fig. 4), the most highly valued items included “Freedom to implement activities and methodologies”, “An online system to connect student, school mentor and university tutor”, and “Time/space to exchange in-service experiences among teacher students”. Also, a longer guided teaching practice and international exchange programmes were selected as key positive actions.

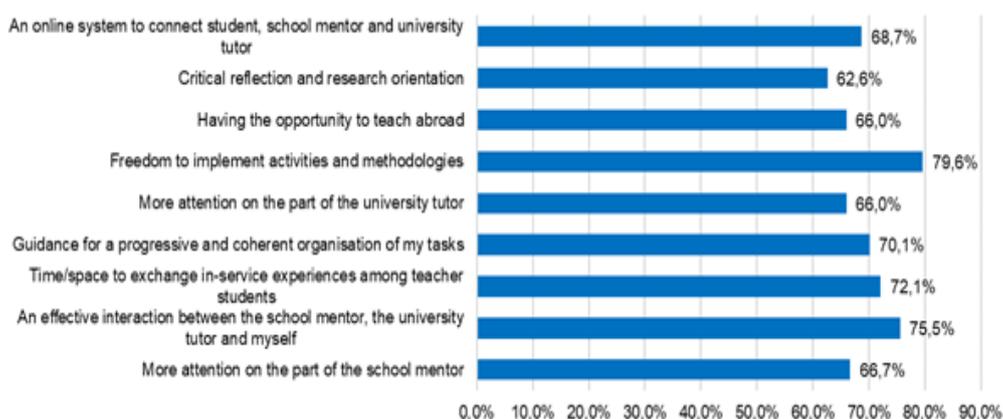


Figure 4. Most rated items to improve Practicum for teacher students and novice teaches.

This outcome suggests that currently the Practicum phase in foreign language teacher training programmes lacks flexibility and room for innovation. Communication among students, instructor and supervisor came out as a challenge too. These outcomes suggest that currently the Practicum phase in foreign language teacher training programmes lacks flexibility and room for innovation. As Williamson et al. (2015) demonstrate, these are key factors that may enhance an emancipatory process for teacher students who tend to be keen on receiving critical feedback and constructive comments on the part of supervisors. This, in turn, may foster their willingness to address challenging issues. Similarly, more freedom during this phase should incorporate a critical reflection on the Practicum process (Smith and Agate 2004). All in all, these are key perspectives to consider in the design of any tool.

On their side, experienced teachers and researchers claim the need of more effort aimed at follow-up support and feedback for teacher students during the Practicum stage. Mentorship should help them to become autonomous, promote critical thinking and have a research orientation (see Fig. 5). Accordingly, on the part of experienced teachers, this phase would also improve with a more flexible format and more interaction among the stakeholders.

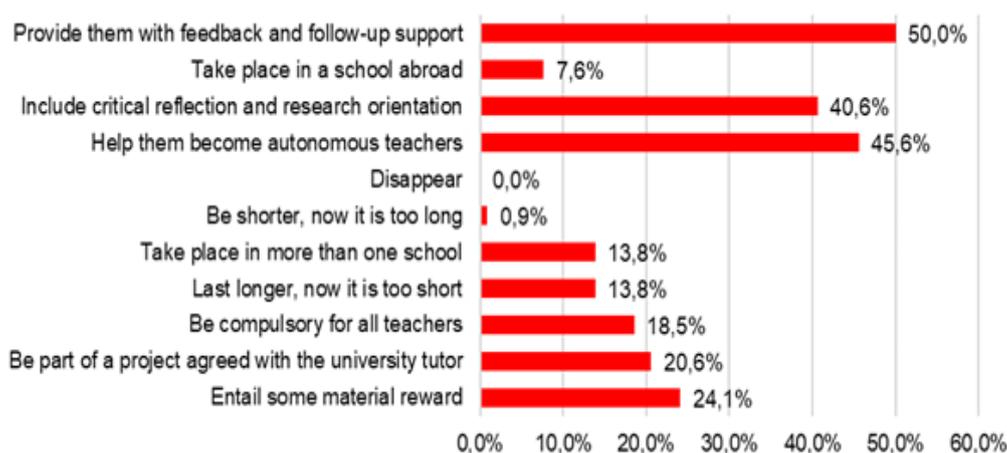


Figure 5. Teachers and researchers' opinion about mentorship.

Those choices project an ideal model for future teachers of languages who should be independent, autonomous and innovative. To achieve those objectives, training programmes should orientate their learning strategies towards more communicative and reflecting approaches. The implementation of ICT for pedagogical purposes must be a resource to take into consideration, as they have demonstrated being able to demolish barriers, enhancing intercultural awareness. In this regard, the VIRTEACH project developed a Digital Internship Notepad (hereinafter DIN), embedded in a Virtual Learning Environment (hereinafter VLE), to foster communication, interaction and innovation during the Practicum phase. This article focuses on its principles, objectives, structure and expected outcomes, in the hope that it becomes an optimal tool for the upgrading of the Practicum phase in foreign language teacher training programmes.

Finally, policy makers and public administrators were asked the measures they deem necessary to improve language teacher training programmes. Internationalization is a key issue for them, emphasising on the importance of mobility and the need to implement intercultural approaches in the training of future language teachers (see fig. 6).

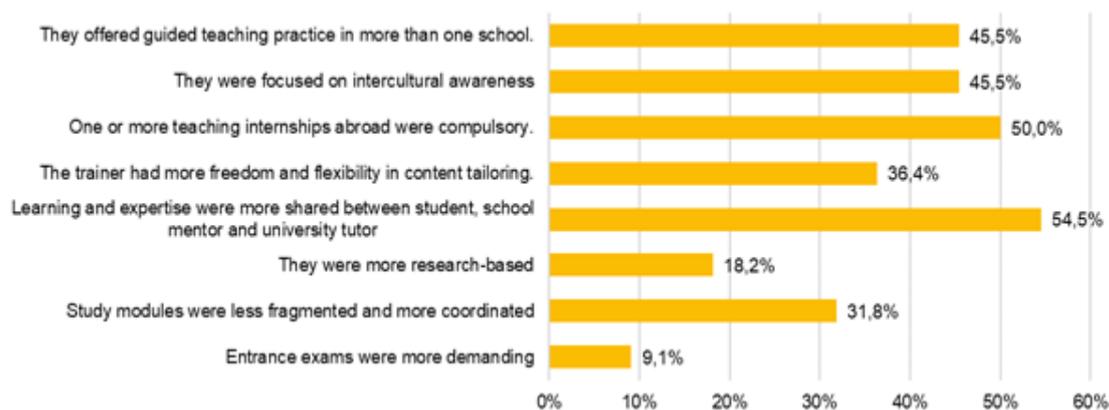


Figure 6. Possible improvements for language teacher training programmes according to policymakers.

Moreover, policy makers and public administrators are positive about the idea of a common and international master, which could bring benefits as the unification of the diverse formats of current language teacher training programmes, a greater degree of integration among Europeans, and a way to facilitate the entrance in the labour market to novice teachers.

3. MAIN CHALLENGES

According to the results gathered from the previously reviewed sources, several conclusions can be drawn and grouped in the following five items:

First, a move towards homogenization of teacher training is necessary. Authors as Karatsiori (2014) or Caena (2014) emphasizes in the need of a convergence between the ITE curriculums in Europe, considering their common goals and the similarities they already present. Moreover, all stakeholders showed a positive attitude towards mobility and interculturality. The implementation of these possibilities beyond national frontiers implies a curricular convergence that favours international dialogue and training experiences.

Second, for internationalisation of foreign language teacher training, digital platforms seem to be particularly useful tools. The use of ICT on teacher training programmes has been proved to have a positive impact (Habibi et. al., 2019), as enhances communication and collaboration between the different members involved in the process. They also facilitate sharing and learning formulas that can be oriented to this specific field of higher education. Furthermore, cultural diversity and geographical distance are obstacles that can be overcome if a multi-national alliance of higher institutions materialises. Added to that, an online tool would facilitate cultural adaptation and favour international communication, two essential elements detected by teacher students, graduated students, senior teachers and policy makers. For a coherent and effective implementation of the ICT during the Practicum stage model must be restructured. The use of these technologies seems to be a trend in the last years, but for effective use, objectives must be clear, as well as the expected results.

Third, the contents of the training programmes need modernisation and upgrading. Societies are living fast changes, from migratory fluxes and changes in family structures to different ways of communication, and education must change with them. 21st century ITE programmes should provide tools, skills and resources to help professionals adapt to the continuous transformations taking place in a changing and dynamic society, with complex, multicultural, and socially diverse learning scenarios.

Fourth, the need to invest economically in ITE, particularly in the financing of student and teacher mobility, as well as in greater diversity and quality of human resources. Life-long learning is a defining element of 21st-century education, as teachers need to be aware of the fast changes in societies. Mobility and virtual mobility are being considered the excellence resource for the sake of intercultural education.

Fifth, feminisation of the teaching practice is related to low status of the profession and unappealing salaries. As Drudy (2008) has suggested, to combat this unfair situation gender needs to be embedded in policy thinking on teaching and teacher education. Governing bodies and universities should invest in attracting high-quality people into the profession, irrespective of their sex/gender. In the medium term, these measures should correct gender balance in teaching and learning.

To sum up, the need for a global and comprehensive language education in Europe depends mainly on ITE, which needs to be updated and improved from several fronts. Although there is still a long way to go before a coherent, balanced, fair and excellent format for foreign language teacher training is built and displayed, through the VIRTEACH project, the first steps are being taken in order to improve this field of education.

4. ADVANCEMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CURRICULUM CONVERGENCE

In what follows, we suggest a battery of resources and measures that may help policy makers and administration officers to focus on specific and particular aspects to be improved in the field of language teacher education.

4.1. AN INTERACTIVE TOOLKIT OF BEST PRACTICES

An Interactive Toolkit of Best Practices gathers common resources and tools for all European teachers. This toolkit, freely available at www.virteachproject.eu, is a compilation of open resources that seeks to facilitate the exchange of best practices and innovative methodologies in the training of language teachers. Its contents offer materials, resources and best practices for an innovative teacher training approach.

The materials included in this toolkit have been selected attending to relevance, adequateness and consistency with the current curricula. In addition, this toolkit includes methodological guidelines, evaluation rubrics, recommended literature and research papers for further reading. Based on existing knowledge and partners' expertise and collaboration, this interactive toolkit comprises a collection of resources, practices and guidelines for foreign language teachers. To this aim, this toolkit includes a systematic literature and research review, with examples of good practices for implementation in foreign language teaching programmes and Master Degrees. The final purpose is to foster a more exigent training and selection of future educators of languages at an international level, to raise the quality of language teaching programs within the European Union, and to strengthen and unify European educational policies.

For the sake of dissemination and transparency, this toolkit has been translated into French, German and Spanish. The VIRTEACH team believes that such wide range of options will facilitate its implementation and use among practitioners.

4.2. VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND ICT IMPLEMENTATION

The VIRTEACH project created an online course embedded in a Virtual Learning Environment (hereinafter VLE). VLEs are particularly useful tools for sharing and learning successful teaching formulas specific to this field of higher education. Also, cultural diversity and geographical distance can be overcome by a multi-national alliance of higher institutions. Added to that, this solution facilitates cultural adaptation and favours international communication, two essential elements for teaching at an international level. Hence, in the pursuit of language teacher training homogenization, the VIRTEACH course was harboured in edX, an open source learning platform with Affero GPLv3 license, to ensure accessibility.

In sum, VLEs offer interactive and dynamic options for foreign language teacher education regardless of their location. Also, our template for an Interactive Digital Notepad is an intuitive and collaborative tool that will help students to fully develop their Practicum stage at any educational institution.

4.2.A. ONLINE COURSE FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

The Online course designed by the VIRTEACH team is built upon essential concepts in the teaching of a foreign language with a special focus on a communicative, digital and intercultural approach. The course is aimed at future teachers of foreign languages who wish to obtain a high-quality training from a critical and international perspective.

Content wise, the VIRTEACH online course aligns with the most recent updates of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (hereinafter CEFR), and deploys a communicative approach based on the use of authentic materials, critical pedagogy and intercultural communication. The course is organised in seven units, each one addressing fundamental issues concerning the teaching of languages, such as Second Language Acquisition, vocabulary, grammar, oral interaction, pragmatics and discourse, English for Specific Purposes and intercultural communication. All units are designed in a progressive and practical way.

The course is available and hosted in the project website under the heading Virtual Learning Environment available at <http://virteachproject.eu/virtual-learning-environment>).

This online course for pre-service teacher educators fosters acquisition of knowledge as stated by the CEFRL, which includes the development of “methods of modern language teaching which will strengthen independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility” (Council of Europe, 2001: 4). This way, the course includes a sequenced set of language training activities for student teachers at a European level and it consists of a friendly and easy-to-use digital tool for monitoring student teachers’ education. At the same time, it tackles essential values and contents for the European foreign language teacher. Hence, language related skills go hand in hand with intercultural communication skills, ICT in the teaching practice, teaching skills for inclusion and gender awareness, and a life-long learning values.

All modules include effective teaching strategies and learning assessment procedures to facilitate an appropriate evaluation of the training process. The essential components of such a comprehensive foreign language teacher education course are oriented towards teaching future professionals how to teach grammar, oral performance, vocabulary and discourse and pragmatics, amongst other relevant fields.

This progressively structured and interactive course embedded in an easy-to-access virtual learning environment supports socialization in the teaching community and stimulates the construction of effective teaching skills. It also provides insights into new teaching perspectives and increases motivation to continue studying.

In terms of implementation, it would be desirable that this online course is validated by the individual member states and the European Council. After that, it could be lodged in a digital platform to which higher institutions would have access for the training of future teachers of languages in the 21st century. It is our belief that having common instruction on how to teach essential components of language using communicative competences is beneficial for convergence and mobility, and naturally includes linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects.

4.2.B. PRACTICUM MANAGEMENT: AN INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NOTEPAD

Societal changes must bring changes in education. Practicum is an essential and meaningful part of teacher education. However, it depends too much on the specific contexts of trainers and trainees. Field training demands intense interaction and support among the participants (Tomaš et al. 2008) so collaboration between school mentor, university instructor and student teacher is key during the Practicum. In this regard, collaborative settings where joint reflection takes place enable mutual learning and bring greater coherence to Practicum (Mauri et al. 2019). Some authors (Celen and Akcan 2017) insist on the need of more observation, seeing different school contexts, improvement in the assessment procedures and technology enhanced learning environments. This way, Practicum mentoring should provide student teachers with feedback and follow-up support, help them become autonomous teachers, and include critical reflection and research orientation (Barros-del Río and Mediavilla-Martínez, 2019). All these issues demand new forms of mentoring in a globalised educational context, which many times implied mobility and internationalization. To overcome these shortcomings, a unified and standardized organisational scheme for Practicum management and implementation in educational training programs is imperative.

The use of ICT on teacher training programmes has proved to have a positive impact (Habibi et. al., 2019). It enhances communication and collaboration between the different members involved in the process. In the case of the Practicum stage, ICT enables an effective supervision, problem solving, introduction of analysis topics, evaluation, etc (Zabalza 2011). Additionally, according to several authors, teachers in High Education contexts are aware about the need of larger formation in the use of ICT, which is not fully integrated in this educational context despite the possibilities they bring (Álvarez-Rojo et al. 2011; Buenestado & Alvarez, 2019).

The VIRTEACH team has implemented improvements in two ways: First, a common structural organisation format for Practicum within educational programmes was suggested. Second, a robust tool for mentoring and communication between student teacher, university instructor and school mentor was designed to set up common patterns

for fieldwork. These two steps ensured that the Practicum is a coherent, reflective, dynamic and enriching learning experience for all parties.

An Interactive Digital Notepad (hereinafter IDN), like the prototype proposed by the VIRTEACH project (allocated and accessible within the online course at <http://virteachproject.eu/virtual-learning-environmen/>), addresses the major challenges detected in recent research regarding Practicum. The template provided by the VIRTEACH team, ensures uniformity in the monitoring of fieldwork at an international level and transparency.

An added value of this template is that it is replicable and easily adaptable to the particularities of each fieldwork. Its interactive nature fosters dialogue, critical feedback, and collaboration among the participants and allows room for innovation in the classroom practice. In our opinion, such collaborative setting is an appropriate innovative deployment of technology in foreign language teacher instruction and an optimal solution for close monitoring and teaching awareness enhancement. The relevance given to collaboration between school mentor, university supervisor and student teacher is easily achieved (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Payant & Murphy, 2012), regardless of the geographical location of the field training.

This tool aims to restructure the Practicum, enhancing collaboration among stakeholders and providing student teachers with critical feedback to improve their work. This IDN meets the principles of the EPOSTL of critical thinking, autonomy and professional advancement. Its reflective nature helps students develop critical thinking and meta-cognitive skills, two key values also fostered in the online course designed by the VIRTEACH team.

4.3. INTERNATIONALISATION

Knowledge of languages is a skill required not only to study abroad but also to join the job market. It determines employment options. In the era of the “knowledge society”, language competence is becoming a fundamental factor in social inclusion and exclusion.

However, there are still relatively large discrepancies in foreign language competence of young people coming from various EU Member States. Hence, taking into account the increasing mobility of

the EU and between its Member States, education and training systems need to adapt to the challenges and opportunities posed by Europe's linguistic diversity. Following the demands that globalisation has imposed on every Member State, higher education institutions were compelled to foster such modifications and adaptations that would allow them to compete on the European arena. The ultimate goal of these steps is to create a European Higher Education Area which would make it possible to contest on the international stage and attract students from various countries even those from outside of Europe (EC, Education, Art.165). Therefore, the EU shall undertake the actions aimed at:

- developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States;
- encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study;
- promoting cooperation between educational establishments;
- developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education of the Member States;
- encouraging the development of distance education;
- supporting Member States in addressing teacher shortages and boosting the diversification and attractiveness of teaching careers;
- assuring that teachers and trainers have opportunities for continuous professional development;
- improving the quality and quantity of teacher mobility periods in initial teacher training and beyond;
- making international mobility an integral part of teacher education.

All these efforts are part of the process of “internationalisation” which is one of the major forces having a profound effect on higher education at the beginning of the 21st century. This phenomenon is viewed as a multifaceted process aimed at integrating an international effort of educators geared towards perfecting the system of higher education all across the European Union.

It is undeniable that teachers are working in an increasingly globalised environment and in multicultural classrooms. International experience and intercultural knowledge are therefore crucial for those studying to become a teacher.

There is an increasing interest in education programs oriented towards “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions (teaching, research, service) and the delivery of higher education” (Knight, 2003). Undoubtedly, internationalisation has become widespread in Higher Education and is also becoming a focus of secondary education. It concentrates mainly on student and staff mobility, on the changes in institutional structures and recently, on calls for internationalised curricula in Higher Education (Leask, 2001). Hence the European Commission is determined to achieve the European Education Area by 2025, where within the effort geared towards improving Higher Education the following steps are undertaken:

- supporting closer and deeper cooperation between higher education institutions, especially international higher education alliances;
- engaging in the full roll-out of the European Universities and European Student Card initiatives;
- co-creating, together with Member States and stakeholders, a transformation agenda for higher education institutions;
- developing a European approach to micro-credentials to help widen learning opportunities and strengthen the role of higher education and vocational education and training institutions in lifelong learning;
- promoting focus on specialised education programmes on advanced digital skills related to cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence and high-performance computing.

Internationalization has become a goal by itself in higher education contexts. Despite the fact that there have always been international teaching strategies, in the sense of developing a universal knowledge on students, in the last years it has become more explicit, as a response to the globalization in societies. Teachers limited to local environments, not exposed to cross-cultural learning experiences, are less able to develop intercultural competences and incorporate a global dimension

in their teaching practice, which can relate into their teaching quality (Quezada, 2012).

Yet, contrary to the above stated opinions, some researchers tend to view internationalization not as an aim in itself but rather as a means to achieve a wider goal, such as quality improvement, restructuring and upgrading of higher education systems and services (Van der Wende, 1997). They view the process of internationalization as “any systematic, sustained efforts aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy and labour markets” (Van der Wende, 1997). Therefore, teacher education must response to society requirements. Nowadays it is yet conceived as a process for reproducing national contexts, resulting in a very national projection of teacher training programmes, that qualify their teachers for their specific context. (Leutwyler et al., 2017).

Seeking to meet these requirements, universities incorporated programmes/curricula that provide their students with the wider international exposure to intercultural knowledge, intercultural mindsets and intercultural communication skills. That means that in the majority of cases English has become the language of instruction. However, as it has been stated at the beginning, there is still a wide discrepancy in the level of the language command between various EU Member States, which has a direct translation into the way the mentioned policy is implemented. What is more, the existence of the “internationally-flavoured” education is being questioned (Trevaske et al., 2013), which also means that the idea of global education is not entirely realized in practice. This results from the fact that various universities and countries have their own concepts, curricula and practices of internationalising their education. In some cases education is profoundly framed within the social and political context, which has direct impact on its content and the way it is realized. Hence, it has been recognized by the European Union that measures have to be implemented to equip students with the knowledge to respond effectively to the challenges that the changing situation presents.

Consequently, there is a need to adapt the teaching programmes to teach international and intercultural communication to students from all backgrounds. Such approach should provide them with the knowledge of English language variation and its implications for communication in English, teaching and learning English and also

researching English in a variety of intra/international contexts. Therefore the main goal of the programmes should include:

- guiding students towards developing knowledge of English language variation,
- promoting the attitudes and skills to communicate effectively with speakers of varieties of English from diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds in a variety of intra/international context and
- (for future English teachers) developing understanding of the complexity of today's English language pedagogy and the skill to teach English as the international language (Marlina 2013).

These items would allow teachers to be trained in a wide range of methods and approaches to follow all the effective practices worked out elsewhere, as well as share experience and ideas with others. Also, teacher trainers, educators and decision makers would identify the wider needs of society and set up institutional and organisational frameworks to help meet the needs of both teachers and students (Kelly et al.2002)

For Knight (2021) and Leutwyler et a. (2017), internationalization can be achieved by different means, such as:

- Individual mobility: whether students or teachers are given the opportunity to travel abroad for educational purposes. This kind of mobility is supported by such programmes as Erasmus.
- Program and provider mobility: in this case, exchanges are offered and organized by the educational institutions, allowing both students and teachers to participate in experiences abroad. This kind of exchange projects usually require international partners.
- Internationalization of the curriculum: the education of the 21st century must represent global and intercultural dimensions on its programmes.
- Internationalization of the campus: continuing the previous way, internationalization of the curriculum must be accompanied by the internationalization of the educational institutions, making them culturally diverse. This also encompasses recruitment of international students.
- International cooperation: international cooperation should be normalized in institutionally teacher education, providing

students with experiences and learning from other educational contexts.

There are challenges, however, that need to be solved to achieve an effective internationalization on foreign language initial teacher education. Leutwyler et al. (2017) pointed out two, after analysing this process in several contexts. First, teacher education is embedded in traditional scholarly institutions. Therefore, this demanded internationalization must go hand in hand with the internationalization of all educational institutions. However, the results of these efforts remain insufficient. Internationalization means different to teacher education than to traditional scholarly institutions, so expectations and objectives pursued are different in this regard. Second, teacher education supplies locally employment market. It is currently aimed to deal with the specific challenges of local contexts, which contradict the global perspective required for internationalization. Teacher education, hence, must answer two issues, on the one hand, adapt students' formation for the global requirements of the 21st century education, on the other hand, the specific needs of the professional communities.

A webinar organised in June 2020 by the DAAD under the title *Internationalising Teacher Education in Europe – Is virtual collaboration the “new way to go”?* recommended some key measures for the sake of internationalization. They especially focused on cross-border mobility of student teachers, as a meaningful learning experience and an opportunity to develop intercultural, interpersonal and multilingual competences. However, there are issues that make students' mobility difficult, such as the lack of language competences and the recognition of the credits studied abroad in their own formative programs, as education programmes lack for the international dimension other degrees show. Hence, the proposals from the European Council for internationalization are:

- Member states shall make further efforts to promote mobility among student teachers and remove persisting obstacles. In this respect, there is a need of investment in exchange programmes and the creation of international networks.
- The EU Commission and the member states shall foster a dialogue and examine obstacles to improve mobility, such as more guidance and the recognition of outcomes of learning periods abroad and academic qualifications.

- The possibility to prepare a proposal for a European competence framework to foster development and assessment of knowledge, skills and attitudes related to sustainable development (to be used on a voluntary basis) shall be explored.
- The Commission shall support closer cooperation between education and training institutions in the EU. This cooperation would join learning opportunities, creating international networks where all students and teachers could share experiences and promoting cross-border mobility.
- The EU Commission shall promote the use of online platforms to facilitate the mobility of students teachers. The use of online platforms with mobility purposes may go in two ways, by using them to find partners abroad or by providing a platform to follow-up mobility.
- The development of education and training opportunities as well as their mobility shall be supported by the Erasmus+ programme and the European Social Fund.
- The Commission shall take full account of these conclusions when developing proposals for the European Education Area and the new strategic framework for cooperation in education and training.
- Kelly et al. (2002) put forward other recommendations:
- A Common European Framework of Reference for Language Teacher Training should be developed to provide a common understanding of the different processes and components involved, guidelines for good practice, a framework for assessing trainees, and a framework of recognised levels of professional expertise.
- An accreditation system should be established to provide a basis for comparability, and to recognise flexible routes to the status of qualified teacher at a European level.
- A voluntary programme of Quality Assurance should be established at a European level with European factors as guiding principles.
- A support network for language teacher training should be established, based on a small EU funded team with the task of building capacity, providing an infrastructure, and offering recognition and long-term continuity for trans-European projects and networks.

- A major European resources service should be established, including a portal-web-site, to provide access to information and online materials for language teachers and teacher trainers.
- The development of arrangements for dual qualification should be further encouraged.
- Closer cooperation should be encouraged between training institutions and partner schools, and between education departments and language departments.
- All in-service training courses should be accredited at local or national level.
- An Advisory Group on European Teacher Training should be established to work with national agencies to co-ordinate key aspects of language teacher training.
- Moreover, the authors propose that the status of The European Language Teacher of Tomorrow should embrace the following categories:
 - European Qualified Teacher Status should be introduced, qualifying its holders to teach in any member state, and to use the title 'European Teacher'.
 - Teacher trainees should be required to achieve agreed levels of linguistic competence corresponding to their specialist, semi-specialist or non-specialist teacher status.
 - European Mentor status should be introduced to recognise key individuals involved in training.
 - Teacher trainees should gain experience of teaching in more than one country.
 - Specialist language teachers should be trained to teach more than one language.
 - Language teachers should be trained in the skills and approaches necessary to make students aware of their role as European citizens, and more training materials should be developed to support this training.
 - All teachers should be trained in using ICT approaches for interactive use with pupils in the classroom.
 - Increased training should be provided in bilingual teaching approaches, and pilot projects should be implemented in each country.

The European Commission regards continuous advancement of education and training as the priority and the issue of profound

importance since widespread access to quality education and training is the driving force of economic growth, research and innovation and therefore it supports Member States through policy cooperation and funding instruments, contributing to better development of education and training of each of the given countries (EC, Education & Training).

4.4. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND ICT

Intercultural communication is a feature closely related with internationalisation. Globalization has changed the way people interact in different social and cultural environments. Technology has led to different codes of behavior for almost all the people in the world. The most important goal of intercultural communication is to make people aware of the cross-cultural boundaries and the similarities or the differences within these spaces. In terms of defining the cultural environments, we should focus on two definitions of culture, one coming from the humanities, the other from the social sciences, as Marilyn Leask (2012) argues, so while teaching in the context of modern foreign languages education at advanced level, a teacher as Kramersch (1996) suggests should notice the way a social group represents itself and others through its material production, be they works of art, literature, social institutions, or artefacts of everyday life, and the mechanism for their reproduction and preservation through history. The other refers to the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of that community. “Whichever definition of culture one might adopt, and the two definitions are not necessarily exclusive, it soon becomes clear, that given their characteristics (...), new technologies have a considerable impact on groups of people, how they present themselves, and communicate, and share ideas, thoughts, memories, attitudes, beliefs etc. with each other” (Leask 2012).

Norbert Pachler has written studies and books concerning teaching foreign languages at beginner and advanced levels and concludes that in “the wake of culture being viewed as a socially diverse phenomenon, observation and data collection, particularly through first hand experiences with target language speakers and the target cultures have come to the fore in modern foreign language teaching and learning. Indeed, the endeavor of imparting a modern foreign language

is increasingly becoming modern foreign language education rather than merely knowledge or skill acquisition (Pachler 2002).

Johan le Roux analyzes the effective formal education that should be about values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions and relationships and “no education can take place without interpersonal communication. Effective teaching can thus be qualified in terms of relating effectively in the classroom. Effective education thus also presupposes effective communication skills. Communication as the means and indeed the medium of education is therefore crucial to school success in culturally diverse education. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class. Communication may be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher (le Roux 2010).

Recently, Michael Byram and Manuela Wagner argue that “language teaching has long been associated with teaching in a country or countries where a target language is spoken, but this approach is inadequate. In the contemporary world, language teaching has a responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people of other cultural backgrounds, teaching them skills and attitudes as well as knowledge” (Byram & Wagner 2018).

While teaching in a multicultural environment, teachers should introduce the major principles of intercultural communication and demonstrate these principles in action by exploring differences in perception, world views, and verbal and nonverbal messages. They also should include current examples and concrete strategies for improving intercultural communication with all the categories of students, the disabled, the different sexually oriented, and the elderly ones because the methodologies differ in their communication patterns.

The students should become familiar with differences and similarities of pluralism and individualism of the people belonging to a wide range of cultural backgrounds, taking into account the values provided by anthropology, high and popular culture, sociology, business, international relations. The courses should be designed in order to try to identify the ways that people behave in terms of individualism and collectivism in multilingual and multicultural societies, the activities of the art, literature, music, theater created by culture versus the contemporary trends of popular culture. One of a main issue for a

teacher is also how to use specific vocabulary (e.g. euphemisms and political correctness) during classes.

Added to that, sexist language is a term that labels the use of male-dominated phrases suggesting that members of one sex are less able, intelligent, and skillful (...); pejorative language is the use of words or phrases disapproving or suggesting that something is no good or of no importance (labeling nationalities, aged people, etc.); taboo language includes words or phrases which are likely to offend somebody—certain words referring to sex or sexual organs, excretion, and people's nationality or race can be particularly offensive, according to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995). Avoiding these words and phrases means using politically correct language and understanding what intercultural communication is.

Intercultural communication can also benefit from the use of ICT, a technical tool that has become the norm in educational contexts in the last decades and a factor even more relevant in pandemic contexts. Geographical and cultural barriers are overcome through the use of ICT, promoting the development of intercultural skills and fluency in communication. As Aparici y García (2016) claim, connectivity enhances collaborative learning where all learners become co-creators.

This gives a new sense to education. We are no longer recipients of knowledge, on the contrary, we need to develop the skills required to reach it. All students have immediate access to an overwhelmed amount of information which, according to Le Cornu (2010) require students to link all knowledge with competences.

Teachers, therefore, must update their teaching-learning methodologies and adapt them to the connected societies. Teachers in higher education are taught how to innovate, designing student-oriented activities and using active learning approaches. To that aim, ICT are positioned as the perfect tool to structure collaborative learning environments where students can discuss and exchange ideas.

Formation in ICT for pedagogical purposes seems vital. If teachers must develop their skills and innovative ideas, they require the support of the institutions, given them the proper formation in how to use and how not to use ICT. Teachers are already aware about the importance of peer-learning and digital environments prompt these kind of interactions. In this contexts, teachers take responsibility of their own learning, developing meta-cognition competences, understanding the

process how students build their new knowledge. Furthermore, collaboration became the key skill for innovation. International networks of student teachers, from very different backgrounds, can be created in this online system that overcome geographical barriers, where foreign language education community can share their resources tools and methods, developing intercultural skills and globalizing foreign language teaching practice across Europe.

Despite its importance teachers in post-compulsory education have no compulsory professional training, as schoolteachers typically do, yet they are expected to embrace significant changes in the way they carry out their professional duties, and build considerable knowledge of how to use TEL, with little time and with minimal training or resources (Laurillard, 2010).

In the case of field training, ICT also facilitate fluent communication among all members involved, enhancing collaboration and critical feedback for student teachers. ICT can be used to build an online community where students can collaborate and develop new pedagogies, learning from their peers' experiences and receiving critical feedback on the part of their supervisors. In this case, the use of ICT is the basis of the tool we propose to improve the Practicum. Its immediacy enhances a fluent communication in which all members can participate.

According to several authors, teachers in High Education contexts are aware about the need of larger formation in the use of ICT, which is not fully integrated in this educational context despite the possibilities they bring (Álvarez-Rojo et al. 2011; Buenestado & Alvarez, 2019). Hence, investment should provide universities with modern digital devices that ensure all members of the learning process' access to the IDN, overcoming the digital gap, and should promote digital literacy. An effective implementation of ICT in foreign language teacher training programmes requires changing the current management models and communication structures. Both trainers and trainees, shall receive a specific training in the use of the new management methods, being aware about the goals established and the steps they must follow on the process.

4.5. MOBILITY AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Mobility is a key issue in the development of intercultural skills on foreign language teacher training. As foreign language students and teachers, intercultural skills are considered vital. Students must acquire these skills during their training, resulting in the promotion of exchange programmes during ITE. Mobility is a key factor that has determined the configuration of the Bologna Process (Zgaga, 2008):

Lifelong learning is rooted in the integration of learning and living, covering lifelong (cradle to grave) and life-wide learning for people of all ages, delivered and undertaken through a variety of modalities and meeting a wide range of learning needs and demands (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning Technical Note, 2017).

The Council of the European Union (2019) proposed the guidelines for a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages. In that document, members propose a number of measures to improve the learning of foreign languages, guiding it towards a communicative approach that allows students to enhance a multilingual competence required for the 21st century global society. Internationalization is a key issue for them, emphasising the importance of student teachers' mobility and the need to implement intercultural approaches in the training of future language teachers. Foreign language teachers shall be supported by investing in their continuous training, promoting cooperation with other professionals, by means of mobility programmes –such as Erasmus or e-Twinning- and encouraging them to implement innovative pedagogies.

In an evaluation of the subject *Mobility and Lifelong Learning* we may take into consideration at the first step two main large groups of addressees: on the one hand, students of foreign languages, and on the other hand, teachers of foreign languages. If in the first case the existing mobility programs are a clear response to the needs of education and training - although it is still necessary to improve the conditions of mobility; in the second case, there is still a long way to go, since Lifelong Learning should take place in *mobility* given the specificity of the professional area and many barriers exist.

Sending and hosting institutions are also vital in this area, particularly with regards to mobility, both students and teachers. Preparation, guidance, internship plans, and preparation of teaching missions are

decisive elements for the success of these activities. Also, the reception, guidance upon arrival, cultural and integration activities, as well as all the academic support during the mobility should be the target of specific strategies for this area of studies and professionalization, insofar as it is not only a matter of integrating, but also of promoting the acquisition of competences that will complement professional daily life.

There is an urgent need for data analysis of the mobility projects results - promoted in the European Union in recent years in the area of language learning and teaching - not only a statistical evaluation, but fundamentally an evaluation of the impact of mobility on Countries and Educational Institutions. Based on this analysis we should evaluate the most successful cases, reproduce the good practices and implement them on a European scale - transforming good practices into policies. A new window of opportunity opens up with the new agenda for European Education Area by 2025 and the benefits for the development of Mobility, and Lifelong Learning for foreign language students and teachers could be very beneficial. Among the announced priorities, we would like to highlight the following:

- Promoting the dual freedom for learners and teachers to be mobile and for institutions to freely associate with one another in Europe and beyond. Learning mobility and cooperation across borders are strong drivers for enhancing the quality of education and training institutions.
- Fostering language learning and multilingualism. Being able to speak different languages is a condition for studying and working abroad, and fully discover Europe's cultural diversity.
- Supporting teachers in managing linguistic and cultural diversity in school is a key element for fostering quality in education, notably by redressing persistent deficiencies in reading literacy.

Also, according to the new Agenda "The Commission plans to launch Erasmus Teacher Academies within the new Erasmus Program in 2021 to create networks of teacher education institutions and teacher associations", it is essential to place the teaching and learning of Foreign Languages as a priority in this new area of the Erasmus Program.

Due to its specificity and also decisive contribution to the success of all the other areas, this area obviously requires the introduction of positive discrimination policies, namely:

- To create a specific incentive program for language teachers - that takes into consideration: the need and relevance of long-term mobility in this field; barriers to Life-Long Learning of these professionals, namely those concerning the family (introducing in Europe the good practices of programs from other continents, example: Fulbright Program); and the costs involved;
- To create prize/certification instruments for Sending and Hosting Institutions, namely for Foreign Language Teacher Mobility: to make the mobility environment friendly for the participants, both in the home institutions and in the host institutions (there are many situations that inhibit mobility at this level: often because in the home institutions the departure of a teacher for training is not seen as an added value for the institution and many institutions do not welcome mobilities because they sense they are just an extra workload).
- To promote the creation of specific Cultural Welcome Programs for mobile language students and teachers.
- To promote the use of the Erasmus+ App, eventually with the creation of a dedicated area for foreign language students and teachers, with specific responses in the area of Countries' Culture and that promote cultural immersion.
- To create a prize for leaders in language teaching/learning - to serve as a motivating example to others - inspired by the ambition, determination, and love of European Language's learning and teaching.
- To develop digital skills for foreign languages students and teachers, specific to products and equipment available for foreign language teaching/learning, both face-to-face and distance learning.
- To create a prize for educators and instructors in language teaching/learning- to serve as a motivating example to others - inspired by the ambition, determination, and love of European Language's learning and Teaching.

4.6. GENDER BALANCE

Teacher practice has traditionally been related to women. This phenomenon is not fortuitous, but related to the position of women in societies, who have traditionally been given the role of childcare. In the case of pre-school and primary teachers, this gap is evident, while in the case of secondary and university teachers, where more specialization is required, the profession shows greater parity.

The “feminized” school is considered, as deficient and defective, according to the studies made by Skelton (2011), an evidence that leads to the increase of male teachers as a solution to improve the social conception of teacher profession. However, this is nothing but a patch that avoids the roots of the problem. This gender biased situation evidences the popular belief about the differences in effort, capacities and teaching styles between genders (Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007), which is supported by media spots, traditional marketing campaigns, the absence of male role models, etc.

According to Drudy (2008), the feminization of the teaching professions is related to the low professional status of the profession and, therefore, with low salaries. In her study, she analyses challenging issues such as: Do boys need male teachers as role models? Are female teachers less competent than male teachers? Does feminisation result in a reduction in the professional status of teaching?. All in all, her study points out at a general lack of respect on teachers’ intellectual abilities, especially for women teachers. In this regard, she suggests that policy efforts must towards attracted high quality people into the profession without concerning on their gender, as there are no robust data on the levels of competence of male and female teachers. The relation between the feminization of the profession and its low status raises fundamental questions about the role of women in society.

It seems undeniable that gender must be embedded in policy thinking about teacher education, and substantial reforms must be undertaken to reshape the intrinsic culture of hegemonic masculinity.

4.7. FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND SHARED POLICIES

Financial support is essential for advancement in education and most particularly for foreign language teacher education. As expected, transversal to all areas there is an evident lack of financial support for mobility programs. Students who receive scholarships to study abroad face the fact that not all costs are compensated for the grants, as the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) pointed out in the 2017 report *Recommendations on Learning Mobility: Insights from the Digital Dashboard*. Depending on the costs of living in their country of residence and in their host country, there is a high probability that students need to “top-up” their grants.

Apart from increasing the grants, which seems to be the easiest option, ignoring factors as the annual budget, *Recommendations on Learning Mobility: Insights from the Digital Dashboard* (ECAS, 2017, pp. 14), proposes other solutions:

- Assign scholarships depending on the destination country, region or city, according to the living standards there.
- Increase the support available, in particular for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Educate students about the cost of their studies across the various choices.
- Look at more enhanced options around means testing.
- Study the effects of low incomes over the students and whether it affects their well-being and results.
- Look at forms of non-financial support.

Financial support is also necessary to develop more and easy-to-use ICT tools, to cultivate skills and to create resources that facilitate adaptation to the continuous transformations of today’s world. Also, life-long learning is another aspect that requires investment. To achieve gender balance, advertising campaigns are needed so that the topic becomes familiar and critical awareness is fostered. Added to this, a more prominent stage should be given to outstanding female practitioners who may contribute by becoming role models. Financial and technical support for hubs, networks and alliances working on gender balance in

the teaching profession should be given a priority. These suggestions may be easily included in policy thinking on teaching and teacher education.

In this regard, we acknowledge that some steps are being taken by the European Commission, particularly regarding the following priorities:

- A Network of European Universities
- The automatic mutual recognition of diplomas
- A European Student Card

Among these, we would like to highlight the importance of networks with curricula convergence goals. For our purpose, the concept of Networks of European Universities may bring a major change to higher education practices, through integrated curricula and mobility, thus fostering quality, excellence and innovation.

Added to these paths, the renewed EU agenda for higher education, adopted by the Commission in May 2017, identifies four key goals for European cooperation in higher education that will strengthen curricula convergence:

- Tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development
- Building inclusive and connected higher education systems
- Ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation
- Supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

As the Interim Evaluation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) suggests:

Measures could include development of networking and opportunities to experiment or pilot new and innovative approaches, country-specific action plans, and capacity-building support. Resources in current funding programmes should be made available for these purposes (2014, 142).

At this point, we would like to emphasise the relevant role of policy makers and education administrators in relation to the implementation and support of the above mentioned measures. Foreign language teacher education deserves a determined action towards updating that ensures convergence and excellence so that our future teachers of languages become active agents of change for a more cohesive and integrated Europe.

5. FURTHER STEPS

In the light of the information gathered in this report, we would like to suggest the following lines of work to strengthen and improve foreign language teacher education at a European level:

1. **Creation of international networks.** Prospective language teachers would benefit from established networks, which could naturally provide them with intercultural, international and inclusive values. These could take the form of networks of European universities (scheme “European Universities Initiative” with the support of the European Commission), or specific field networks, i.e., language education training networks. Also, these could include the whole education cycle (theoretical and practical stages), or be specifically aimed at particular parts of the teacher training stages. For instance, Practicum networks for language teachers could provide enriching and stimulating opportunities that would allow prospective teachers to be acquainted with two or more national countries’ education systems other than their own. In this regard, virtual exchanges may be a suitable tool to complement physical international mobility. For these purposes, the IDN designed by the VIRTEACH team could facilitate management, upgrading and follow-up of transnational Practicum training.
2. **Improvement of ECT credit transfer system.** Skills and professional qualifications beyond country borders is of the outmost importance. Hand in hand with the creation of international networks, teachers’ training and academic qualifications must be recognized at a European level. A strong effort should be made in this respect.
3. **Creation of a European language educator course.** This initiative would provide trainers with shared and updated pedagogical principles, good practices and quality contents and it should be designed within the frame of an essentially communicative approach. A small step has been taken so far by the VIRTEACH team in the creation of an Interactive Toolkit, which provides a comprehensive collection of learning materials, open education resources, methodological guidelines and examples of best practices for the construction of a foreign language teacher training model at European level. Naturally, this Toolkit, available at the project’s website, is subject to enrichment. We suggest that the

European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), whose goal is to encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching and to help Europeans learn languages more efficiently, could be the most suitable international body to design and implement this particular training. This public body, dependent on the Council of Europe, could offer high quality training regularly to the Member States. To enhance professional digital competence, this course should incorporate ICT applications to language teacher education. Content wise, founding values of transnational and quality training such as intercultural awareness, critical thinking and social engagement should be embedded. The Online Course developed by the VIRTEACH team may be a starting point.

4. **Achievement of gender balance** is an urgent goal in 21st century education. Reports confirm that the field of foreign language teaching in Europe is highly feminized. To revert this situation, firm action must be taken simultaneously in different fields. To start with, textbook contents should pass an examination in terms of gender balance. The creation of a body that supervises this aspect would be beneficial in the mid-term. Such body could also design basic criteria to foster an inclusive perspective in contents, both for textbooks and courses, and monitor the use of inclusive language as a norm. Accordingly, specific funding should be allocated to the creation of gender inclusive materials that promote social justice and cohesion in teacher education.
5. **Teacher professional identity enhancement.** Feminisation of the teaching practice is intimately related with the low status of the profession and unappealing salaries. Comprehensive policies that tackle both issues are necessary and urgent. Specific and targeted instructions from governing bodies should encourage universities to invest in attracting high quality people into the profession, irrespective of their sex/gender. In the medium term, these measures would impact on gender balance and fairer working conditions. Financial investment in invest in ITE, particularly in the financing of student and teacher mobility, as well as in a greater diversity and quality of human resources, would have a direct impact on a higher professional status of the teaching profession. Also, economic resources for life-long learning needs to be considered.

It is our hope that we European citizens, education practitioners, policy makers and language learners, make progress in the above selected areas. In pursuing these goals, we will achieve a fairer, stronger and more cohesive European society where interculturality, social justice and mutual understanding become the driving forces of success, peace and progress.

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