INNOVATION AND CHANGE IN THE CHILEAN ITT CURRICULUM FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Mary Jane Abrahams (UAH)
Miguel Farías (USACH)

ABSTRACT: It seems teachers in primary and secondary schools are not doing their job properly. The immediate evidence is that students get very low scores in international exams; all of this amidst a general opinion (shared by parents, teachers, politicians, etc.) that Chile is immersed in an educational crisis without any easy solution. It is in this context where the urgent need arises for an innovative and very creative design to change the curricula at universities so that the country can raise the quality in foreign language education. The aim is for language education to have a real impact in the school communities. Having Critical Pedagogy as one of the main supporting models, this design we will report on is based on the idea that the traditional curriculum is a pedagogy that transmits inflexible social truths and, consequently, this now incorporates participatory and reflective instructional activities, such as situated practice, critical framing, and transformed practice. This innovative curriculum also includes on-going education, inviting classroom teachers to be part of Methodology classes, Reflection Workshops, early Teaching Practice, and Mentoring as a key practice in creating and consolidating communities of interest in language education.

1. Introduction

The title of the call for papers for the II CLAFPL, ‘Language teacher education and social transformation’, fits perfectly well as a guiding principle for our concern with initial teacher training for teachers of English in Chile. There is no doubt that most countries in Latin America are undergoing serious challenges in their educational systems as the forces of globalization and international standards pose high demands on national policies. In this scenario, we contend that language teacher education plays an important role in providing our societies with teachers endowed with a clear role as social actors and intercultural agents of change. The power of language in the construction and struggle against such social evils as discrimination, injustice and domination should be untapped as a means to social transformation.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that foreign language teaching policies are part of educational policies, which in most Latin American countries can be of two major types: those oriented to expand the system and provide access to the population and those geared to improve the quality and efficiency of the system. According to a 2006 Report by the Interamerican Development Bank, “la formulación de la política educativa en la región está desproporcionadamente sesgada hacia la expansión y el acceso, en lugar de la calidad y la eficiencia” (PREAL, 2006, p. 1).

At the local level, we also see that the neoliberal policies Chile has embarked on are leaving quality standards in the hands of the market and so we have seen in the last few years a proliferation of English language teaching training programs set up primarily by some
private universities. Our concern is that such programs seem to understand language education has a technical training component that disregards both the role of language as a social practice that constructs communities of interest and practice and the importance of (action) research in improving the quality of language learning.

In this context, a small group of Chilean academics working in traditional English language education programs has united in a collaborative project to reengineer initial teacher training for English teachers to meet international standards in language proficiency, on one hand, and high quality in teacher professional development, on the other. These two objectives, in our opinion, may pave the way and eventually assure the accountability requirements that have program accreditation as one of its measuring standards. In turn, we are very much aware that, as Bartholomew & Sandholtz (2009, p. 155) have put it, “teachers’ professional learning becomes important not only in preparing candidates for a teaching position but also throughout their careers in the classroom”.

In what follows, we describe the main steps that six Chilean universities have undertaken in coming up with a plan of studies for initial teacher training for English language educators. We start with a diagnostic view of common problems found in the six universities, we continue with a description of the guiding principles or models that inform our proposal, we then describe the organizing principles of the profile, followed by a discussion of the two main curriculum strands that have been designed as integrating components. We finish with a description of what we consider to be the main innovations of this proposal.

2. Diagnosis

The six universities identified the following problems to be common to all of them:

(a) Divorce between training in the disciplines (English linguistics) and in education: Structurally speaking, in most universities the Language Department, or its equivalent, is in charge of providing the courses in English linguistics and the discipline in general, whereas it is the Department of Education, or its equivalent, the one responsible for offering the courses in education. This weakness has been confirmed by the reports from the accreditation process some of these English teaching programs have gone through.

(b) Lack of language achievement standards: It was not until recently, when some sort of measuring standard was needed to justify some major investments in teacher training provided by the Ministry of Education, that the need for an international standard reference was required to assess the language proficiency of teachers and students. Even though there
might be some natural differences across training programs, there is consensus in the professional field as to the concept of proficiency, associated primarily to that of English as an international language of communications (GRADDOL, 1997; PENNYCOOK, 1994; MACKAY, 2003).

(c) Low scores in pilot Cambridge test given by MINEDUC to a sample of teachers and students: ALTE III for teachers and KET/PET to students in 2004. The results for students were so weak a new level, below threshold, had to be created to classify them.

(d) Very inflexible curricula: Chile has traditionally followed what we can call a 'professionalizing curriculum' that introduces the student from the very first year in courses leading to the specialization, as opposed to other curricular systems in which the students are offered options from which they can later choose. Again, the possibilities and affordances of the two systems have to do with economic policies and with the social status of language teaching.

(e) Outdated, uncommitted teacher trainers: Associated to the issue of the social status of language teaching (actually of the teaching profession in general), this is a major issue in most universities. Language teaching dwells in the terra incognita between the social sciences and the humanities and the field of education both of which are treated differentially when it comes to funding for research and other grants. Malderez & Wedell (2007) describe teaching as a complex, open skill. There is no right answer or ‘way’ of doing something….therefore the starting point should not be a checklist of skill based competencies denoting a blue print of professional practice, but a model of growth and personal development towards a shared construction of effective teaching and learning and an identity as an autonomous professional, which is what teacher trainers in Chilean universities lack today.

3. Models or guiding principles

In looking at models that would provide contextualized and updated foundations to build an innovative curriculum, the current literature in the field mentions:

(a) Integrated skills: teaching the language as a whole and providing meaningful connections to other subjects in the curriculum. As access to the foreign language is more and more available through videos, internet, and international travelling, the possibilities of exposure to the English language no longer depend just on the teacher and the classroom.

Meaning provides conceptual or cognitive hangers on which language functions and structures can be hung. In the absence of real meaning, language structures and functions are likely to be learned as abstractions devoid of conceptual or
communicative value. If these motivational and cognitive bases are to be realized, then content must be chosen that is important and interesting to the learner (Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989, p. 202).

Integrating the skills and looking at language learning as a means to fully participate in wider communities of interest and practice requires and effort from the language educator to engage learners into meaningful activities in and out of the classroom. Seeing the contribution that foreign language learning affords for cognitive and social development is essential in this respect.

(b) **Content-based learning**: educating and training critical pedagogues through the use of the English language. Providing learners with more and more opportunities to practice the language and engage in meaningful uses of English.

...as language teachers try to make language meaningful by providing contextual cues and supports, too often their attempts bring the learner into cognitively undemanding situations. Thus, although it is easy for children to learn to label colors and shapes, for example, activities in the language class rarely require students to use this new language knowledge in the application of higher order thinking (Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989, p. 203-204).

(c) **Critical pedagogy**: both because language is a powerful tool in the construction of intersubjectivities and because we assume our profession as situated and committed pedagogues, the principles we have found in the works of Freire (1972, 1998), Giroux (1981), Canagarajah (1999, 2002) and Pennycook (1994, 2001) have proved to be valuable references in our understanding of the role of education and language teaching in the Latin American context. A definition of critical pedagogy by one the leading authors in the field, Shor (1992, p. 129), reads:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse.

Some of the issues inspired by these principles that we attempt to include are: (i) becoming aware of problems in particular school communities and working collaboratively on projects attempting to solve such problems; (ii) critical awareness of the power of language in the construction of knowledge and of the tensions caused by the use of English as an international
language of communications; (iii) working closely with the school communities to provide support in building notions of democratic citizenship (GIMENEZ, 2008).

(d) Mentoring: the newly qualified teacher (NQT) and the teacher trainee both require someone to advise and support them along the different stages of their professional development: someone with whom to engage in the ongoing reflective discussion about the teaching-learning process. Teacher trainees have to be received by a mentor teacher, who knows how to support, guide and supervise them while doing their practicum (the much needed scaffolding in the Vygotskyian model). Similarly, NQTs need a friendly knowing hand that will provide them with awareness, support and company. This accompanying figure is the mentor. There are many ways of deifining this role: “The role of the mentor is to act as ‘wise counsellor’, guide, and adviser to younger or newer colleagues” (SMITH & WEST-BURNHAM, 1993, p. 8). Mentoring, then, with its strong emphasis on the reflective individual and on a committed one-to-one relationship between mentor and mentee, emerges as the natural, valid path to developing aware, reflective and critical in-service teachers as well as trainees in the Chilean educational system, in this way helping to bridge the gap between university education (instead of university ‘training’) and school communities. Thus, universities and schools work together, creating partnerships, in order to significantly improve teaching practices in classrooms, with a view to having a positive impact in the language learning outcomes of learners and to developing critical autonomous citizens who will be aware of their role in society.

(e) Communities of interest and practice: teachers usually work as isolated, separate individuals. They don’t seem to be aware of the power and richness of group work in terms of learning through sharing and reflective discussion for better planning and preparation. Classroom practice can indeed be a very lonely kind of practice. Therefore, future teachers must learn how working with others will provide them with valuable support to turn the theory learnt at university into effective classroom practice. Additionally, they will learn how working with peers on classroom issues can help them find solutions or other better alternatives that, until then, seemed impossible to deal with. Therefore, teachers reflect together, access to an overview of theoretical perspectives on action research, and, especially, come up with practical collaborative ideas from the teachers’, not the researchers’, point of view, “directing their research efforts towards change, not only at the classroom level, but also at the broader institutional level” (BURNS, 1999, p. 2).

(f) Teacher and student mobility: The possibility to share teaching capabilities among participating training programs follows a postmodern tendency to share and distribute
resources. A relatively common curriculum enables student mobility as this experience can be part of SCT (*Sistema de Créditos Transferibles*), a project launched by some Chilean universities.

(g) *Network-based learning*: a virtual platform will be implemented and designed to provide opportunities to (i) practice and share ICT applications for language learning and teaching; (ii) work on projects collaboratively among participating universities; (iii) expand the reach of the project to other programs in Latinamerica and other parts of the world with similar interests; and (iv) serve as a forum for activities exploring the intercultural dimension of language learning.

4. The new profile

The profile underlying this initial teacher training curriculum is articulated around three dimensions and three axes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Axes</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive (knowledge base)</td>
<td>Linguistics, literature and culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural (skills)</td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal (values and attitudes)</td>
<td>Personal and professional identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 1: Dimensions and axes in initial teacher training curriculum](image)

At the intersection between axes and dimensions are the macro competences the NQT should attain, which are more finely tuned in the descriptions, generic activities, learning outcomes and specific competences in each curricular activity (course) the design contains.

The integrated curriculum contains two major encompassing strands:

(a) English language
   (i) Integrated skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening
   (ii) Linguistic components: lexico-grammar, pronunciation
   (iii) Culture and literature
   (iv) Reflective and critical skills

(b) Methodology
   (i) Reflection workshops
   (ii) Field experiences
   (iii) Practicum
   (iv) Action Research
   (v) Methodology. This strand includes:
5. **Innovative components**

As we have mentioned, the innovations include:

(a) Student and teacher mobility
(b) Virtual platform
(c) Networking
(d) Mentor training
(e) Integrated curriculum strands
(f) Communities of practice

6. **Steps to implementation**

As the literature mentions, the actions to be taken in implementing this new curriculum are crucial. They include what we have called ‘academic retreats’ in which teams of teachers from all participating institutions work collaboratively under the guidance of an expert in formulating and creating the activities and resources for each strand. Another action is the implementation of the virtual platform according the specific requirements of the curriculum: the idea is to have technology serve the principles and purposes of the teacher education processes rather than accommodating to already existing technologies.

A very important action is the training required for future staff which has to be in accordance with the main principles underlying the curriculum. We venture that interdisciplinary work is the best option in providing new perspectives for language teaching and learning. Finally, an efficient curriculum needs to have progress indicators set at crucial points in the curriculum as a means to evaluate progress and produce the adjustments required.

7. **Final reflections**

Preparing generations of teachers to face the future can no longer be an isolated endeavour. Even though traditionally teacher educators may have worked ‘from their university desks’, so to say, the fast pace of changes and the need to democratize the education processes require collaboration among educators to contrast, evaluate, implement
and assess the best options for language teacher education. Our experience has been a pioneering effort to bring six universities together with the common objective to improve the quality of English language teaching education in a country that in one more year celebrates its 200 birthday as a nation. By sharing resources and human capabilities these six institutions enforce their missions and visions in the pursuit of quality standards for language teacher education.

8. References


PREAL. La reforma latinoamericana entre dos clases de políticas educativas. *Formas & Reformas de la Educacion: Serie Politicas*, n. 23, p. 1-4, Mar. 2006. Available at:

