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The Perceptions of Future Language Teachers towards the Areas of Change at the Level of Initial Training Programmes

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Abstract

The quality of training teachers is an issue of great interest in many countries throughout the world. In this study there is highlighted the growing importance of initial teacher training for future language teachers, which implies the need for identifying the areas of change. The aim of the research consists in exploring the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the areas of changes at the level of the initial training programmes. A total of ninety-five stratified selected pre-service language teachers participated in this study. We have explored the following research questions: A. What are the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development at the level of initial training programmes in the perception of future language teachers?; B. Are there any significant differences between the perceptions of pre-service language teachers regarding the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development at the level of initial training programmes according to their year of study, specialization, and age? A qualitative methodology employing semi-structured interviews was used to allow flexibility in the exploration of the conceptions of pre-service teachers on the areas of change at the level of initial training programmes. The study is relevant and valuable by offering first-hand signalling of the “areas of changes” proposed as a result of their own representations, with the purpose of developing innovative initial training programmes, with positive long-term effects.

Key words: areas of changes, pre-service teachers, semi-structured interview

Introduction

In recent decades there have been significant changes in the teaching of language learning, which are no longer seen statically as linguistic systems, but as processes in which social and intercultural skills are important (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011, p. 365). Benson (2008) summarizes the myths about language learning,

concluding that it is the false belief that the home language gets in the way of learning a second language. On the contrary, building a strong foundation in the first language results in better learning of additional languages. In this context, we may argue that there are great similarities between learning one's mother tongue and learning foreign languages, as they support each other and contribute to developing cultural competence. Thorough learning of the mother tongue has great benefits in terms of foreign language learning and the curricula objectives of curricula in the teaching of the mother tongue and of foreign languages should be interrelated.

These studies highlight the relevance of the language teachers' psycho-pedagogical competence (Schick & Nelson, 2001, Măță et al., 2013; Măță, 2014). The teachers' initial training can be no longer limited to the content and methodologies of traditional approaches. Since teaching is conducted with students of different ages, there is required a greater preparation in the areas of childhood development, language acquisition, and grade-specific curriculum. Whereas we have a vast literature on the pedagogical underpinning of initial teacher education, and on the respective contributions of schools and higher education to the professional learning of new teachers, we have relatively few accounts of the management of change in initial teacher education. This is a curious lacuna, not least since the last decade has engendered a considerable literature on the management of change and the process of change in the schools to which the 'products' of teacher education proceed.

One of the main objectives of the reform of the Romanian system of teachers' education consists in the restructuring of the paths of education introduced by means of some decisions with a normative character. The basis of the study consists of the problem of professional integration of future teachers and educators in the Romanian education system. The legislation in Romania, in terms of training teachers, did not encourage the adequate pedagogical training of teachers, but academic, specialized preparation. In recent years, there have been some adjustments, but these have not been enough. The initial teacher education should reconsider the status of the pedagogical training as a "hard nucleus" of pre-service teachers. Otherwise, young teachers will have many gaps with important consequences upon their students and the preparation of their career examinations. The consequences generated by the risk of teachers and educators are multiple: instability and professional dissatisfaction; insecurity related to the teaching position; decrease in the number of qualified teachers; decreased motivation and professional efficiency; low quality of education. There is a need for an actual assurance of the growing importance of the initial teacher training for teachers, which implies the need for identifying the areas of change.

They are highlighted the main areas of change in the teacher training programmes for language teachers in Romania: the area of training teachers of Romanian language; the area of training specialists, didacticians; the area of experimental research for innovating educational practices; the area of curricular policies in language didactics.

a) The area of training language teachers

It should be noted, from the start that, for long, the Romanian laws on teacher training has not encouraged the teachers' pedagogical training, but their academic, specialized preparation. In recent years, there have been some, but not enough, corrections. As a result, the status of Didactics as subjects in initial training is marginal. Students pay little attention to pedagogy and didactics/methodologies, by comparison to other disciplines that make up the "hard nucleus" of their specialization. Thus, young teachers come to class with many gaps that are felt in their work with students and their career exam preparation. Until the 90s, there were, in the curricula of Romanian universities designed to prepare future teachers of Romanian language, courses of Language Methodology and not of Language Didactics. Gradually, after the 90s, Methodology began to be replaced with Didactics, which outlines the status of the discipline of the Didactics of Romanian Language and Literature as a border discipline (located at the intersection of the sciences of language and literature, on the one hand, and the sciences education and educational psychology, on the other hand), a discipline oriented both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the Didactics of language and literature studies the outcomes of the learning content and their achievement in the educational process; it identifies the key concepts and approaches of the reference disciplines and considers their introduction into curricula, textbooks and learning activities; it investigates assimilation conditions and processes, identifies problems and proposes solutions. The dissemination of specialty didactics is currently carried out in two ways: the initial and continuous training provided by a university. For the initial training, as of 2005, Romania has aligned with the Bologna Process, so that the concepts of language didactics are taught in the Bologna cycle 1, bachelor's study only for students who opt to attend the psycho-pedagogical module.

b) The area of training specialists, didacticians

Regarding didacticians, these need studies both in the fields of philology and psycho-pedagogy. In Romania, few academics have Didactics as their main specialization, even the young ones. For most universities in Romania, we cannot speak of a clear status of didactician status, this still being integrated in faculties and not in departments of education. Currently, many didacticians come from the

ranks of academics from the faculties of Letters being, first and foremost, linguists, philologists and less of the department people, who know the educational realities from the class. Within the training of didacticians, building the psycho-pedagogical competence is of great importance.

c) The area of experimental research for innovating educational practice

Studies rely on the partnership between the specialist didactician specialist and the classroom teacher in pilot classes. The language teacher education is a field of research and the action-research is the best opportunity for the researcher and teacher, due to the interaction between the two.

d) The area of curricular policies in the domain of Language Didactics

Language didactics from the initial training, school syllabi, syllabi for teacher tenure and teaching degrees examinations should be articulated coherently, as they are closely connected documents. Thus, future teachers would easily integrate into the system without having to start over and over again in learning series of psycho-pedagogical notions.

Aims

The global aim consists in exploring the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the areas of change at the level of the initial training programmes. To better understand how future teachers perceive the areas of change we have explored the following research question:

1. What are the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development at the level of initial training programmes in the perception of future language teachers?
2. Are there any significant differences between the perceptions of pre-service language teachers regarding the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development at the level of initial training programmes according to their year of study, specialization, and age?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology employing semi-structured interviews was used to allow flexibility in the exploration of the conceptions of pre-service teachers on the areas of change at the level of initial training programmes.

Research method

Semi-structured interviews are used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided. The choice of this method was determined by the fact that it allows the flexibility and

the opportunity for unanticipated findings to be discovered, for clarification and for further questions to be asked and explored (O'Toole & Beckett, 2010). The items of the interview guide were analysed by 8 experts from the Romanian education system, specialized in Educational sciences. The open questions from the guide interview were related to the following issues:

- a) What are the areas of changes at the level of initial training programmes for language teachers?, and
- b) What were the areas of change you mentioned related to?

Participants

Ninety-five pre-service language teachers participated in this study. This study used stratified sampling (Thompson, 2012), because it involves dividing a population into two homogeneous strata and constructing a sampling frame for each stratum, based on the comparative analysis of the strata. The participants were from two Romanian universities (53 students from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău and 42 students from "Al. I. Cuza" University of Iași).

Procedure

The interviews were prepared and organized in November 2013. During their deployment, the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participants, and the data was transcribed and processed. The study participants were granted anonymity and data confidentiality.

Results

Taking into account the responses of the pre-service language teachers, there were established the categories and the specific themes with the help of content analysis (Hashemnezhad, 2015) at the level of the areas of change in initial training programmes. There was used the analysis of the main statistical indicators such as the statistical average, the standard deviation, and the frequencies to verify the first hypothesis. Table 1 shows the main statistical indicators for all the categories of areas of change related to the pedagogical competences development according to the perception of future language teachers.

As the results indicate, the most common aspects encountered by pre-service language teachers in terms of areas of change at the level of initial training programmes are those related to the increasing practical activities, based on efficient exercise of pedagogical competences (see Tab 1).

Tab 1: The main statistical indicators for all the categories of areas of change related to the pedagogical competences development

Areas of change	N		Sum
	Valid	Missing	
Using modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences	95	0	2
The application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques	95	0	16
Increasing the number of hours of teacher training	95	0	5
Increasing practical activities, based on efficient exercise of pedagogical competences	95	0	36
Efficient evaluation of pedagogical competences	95	0	7
Achieving extracurricular activities	95	0	1
Assuring the training supports	95	0	3
Facilitating the correlation between content and didactic design	95	0	0
Correlating the development of pedagogical competences with didactics competences (lecture lessons, grammar lessons etc.)	95	0	2
Correlating the development and the evaluation of pedagogical competences with the national exam evaluation criteria for filling a teaching position	95	0	5
Deepening pedagogical key concepts	95	0	5
Improving the teaching style of trainers	95	0	6
Correlating the theory with the application of the pedagogical competencies	95	0	6
Improving the teaching style of trainers of prospective language teachers	95	0	7
Correlating the training activities with the curricular documents	95	0	2
Transforming the pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility	95	0	2
Respecting the principle of quality, rather than the principle of quantity in building pedagogical competences	95	0	1
Forming the adaptability capacity of pedagogical	95	0	5

competences to different contexts (classroom level, accessible language)			
Creating training models with clear work requirements to facilitate the transition from the general to the personalized level	95	0	3
Forming the competences of applying the teaching methods	95	0	10
Forming and developing evaluation competences	95	0	5
Forming and developing the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments	95	0	2
Making changes at the level of the education system to facilitate the building of pedagogical competences	95	0	4
Using varied training instruments	95	0	2
Forming and developing the competences of organizing group didactic activities	95	0	1
Implementing some changes at the level of subjects based on building pedagogical competences	95	0	11
Developing abilities of efficient application of the pedagogical competences	95	0	18
Changing the attitude of trainers towards students	95	0	7
Improving the organization of training activities	95	0	1
Forming and developing the competences of didactic design	95	0	6
Achieving frequent research on the topic of forming and developing pedagogical competences	95	0	1
Increasing awareness of the importance of building pedagogical competences in the training of future language teachers	95	0	1
Forming the competences of using curricular documents	95	0	1
Elaborating training programs to further improve the pedagogical competences at future language teachers	95	0	2

To verify the second hypothesis, there were used the Mann-Whitney U Test to compare two independent samples. Nonparametric tests were applied in order to obtain the abnormal distribution. The results shown in Table 2 show significant

differences between the perceptions of the students from the second year and the students from the third year, only at the level of the areas of change related to the application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques ($z = -2,431$; $p = 0.015$).

Tab 2: The statistic of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development, according to the students' study year

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
The application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques	834,000	2725,000	-2,431	,015

At the level of the perception of the students from the second year, the mean rank is 53.97, while at the level of the perception of the students from the third year it is 44.67 (Table 3). Therefore, these aspects are particularly highlighted by the responses of the second year students.

Tab 3: The analysis of the means for the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development, according to the student's study year

Ranks				
	Study year	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
The application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques	II	34	53,97	1835,00
	III	61	44,67	2725,00
	Total	95		

The results shown in Table 4 show significant differences between the perceptions of the students with the specialization Romanian language and those with the specialization English language, at the level of the following areas of change: using modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences ($z = -1,904$; $p = 0.057$); transforming the pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility ($z = -1,904$; $p = 0.057$); forming and developing the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments ($z = -1,904$; $p = 0.057$); implementing some changes at the level of subjects based on forming

pedagogical competences ($z = -1,954$; $p = 0.051$); changing the attitude of trainers towards students ($z = -2,041$; $p = 0.041$).

Table 4. The statistic of the Mann-Whitney U Test for the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development, according to the students' specialization

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Using modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences	976,000	2867,000	-1,904	,057
Transforming pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility	976,000	2867,000	-1,904	,057
Forming and developing the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments	976,000	2867,000	-1,904	,057
Implementing some changes at the level of subjects based on forming pedagogical competences	897,500	1492,500	-1,954	,051
Changing the attitude of trainers towards students	918,000	1513,000	-2,041	,041

The students from the specialization English language appreciate more the aspects regarding the use of modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences, transforming the pedagogical language with an accent on the accessibility, forming and development of the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments (the mean rank is 49.79), compared with the students from the specialization Romanian language (the mean rank is 47.00). The students with the specialization Romanian language appreciate more the aspects regarding the implementation of some changes at the level of subjects based on forming pedagogical competences (the mean rank is 50.29) and changing the attitude of trainers towards students (the mean rank is 49.95), compared with the students from the specialization English language (the mean rank is 43.90 for the first aspect and 44.50 for the second aspect).

Table 5. The analysis of the means for the areas of change in the field of pedagogical competences development, according to the students'specialization

Ranks				
	Specialization	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Using modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences	Romanian language	61	47,00	2867,00
	English language	34	49,79	1693,00
	Total	95		
Transforming pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility	Romanian language	61	47,00	2867,00
	English language	34	49,79	1693,00
	Total	95		
Forming and developing the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments	Romanian language	61	47,00	2867,00
	English language	34	49,79	1693,00
	Total	95		
Implementing some changes at the level of subjects based on forming pedagogical competences	Romanian language	61	50,29	3067,50
	English language	34	43,90	1492,50
	Total	95		
Changing the attitude of trainers towards students	Romanian language	61	49,95	3047,00
	English language	34	44,50	1513,00
	Total	95		

The research results contribute to understanding the perceptions of future language teachers towards the area of change from the perspective of pedagogical competences development at the level of initial training programmes.

Discussions

The research results indicate three levels of the areas of change in the field of the pedagogical competences at prospective language teachers: a) at the level of future language teachers, b) at the level of trainers and initial training programmes and c) at the level of the educational policies. There can be observed that it results a progressive view upon forming pedagogical competences at pre-service language teachers, from student and trainers to educational system.

a) Changes at the level of future language teachers

In the perception of students, there are necessary changes with respect to the following aspects:

- improving the teaching style of trainers (ability to teach clearly, concisely, systematically; ensuring the continuity of student learning; presenting the content in a form that is easy to remember; turning the authoritarian or laissez faire teaching style in a democratic style; providing concrete examples in specific situations; formulating clear and concise questions; explaining notions clearly to students);
- developing abilities of efficient application of the pedagogical competences (flexibility; the equal treatment of students; impartiality, objectivity; lack of discrimination; cooperation, effective communication with students; building a relationship with students based on mutual respect; appropriate behaviour; empathy; openness to students; increasing the motivation of language teachers; psychological testing of language teachers);
- forming the adaptability capacity of pedagogical competences to different contexts (adaptation to the classroom level; using accessible language; adapting teaching methods to the classroom level);
- forming the competences of applying teaching methods (the application of modern and varied teaching methods);
- forming and developing evaluation competences;
- developing the competences of varied easy use of didactics instruments;
- forming the competences of organizing group didactic activities;
- developing the competences of didactic design;
- forming the competences of using curricular documents.

b) Changes at the level of trainers and initial training programmes

There are mentioned important changes by future language teachers:

- increasing practical activities, based on efficient exercise of pedagogical competences (achieving exercises; conducting simulations; more teaching hours and fewer hours of assistance; more practice; applying pedagogical

- concepts (teaching-learning strategies); achieving the applications during the hours of training and less during homework; achieving sufficient practice before teaching at class);
- efficient evaluation of pedagogical competences (formulating criteria for assessing pedagogical competencies in a practical, accessible, clear, objective way; formulating the requirements in concordance with the requirements of preparation for the teaching career);
 - using modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences (the use of computers; the use of multimedia resources of training);
 - the application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques (interactive methods);
 - using varied training instruments;
 - increasing the number of hours of teacher training;
 - implementing some changes at the level of subjects based on forming pedagogical competences (Language Didactics, Pedagogical practice);
 - assuring the training supports;
 - improving organizing training activities;
 - correlating the development of pedagogical competences with didactics competences (facilitating the correlation between Language Didactics and

Teaching practice; ensuring the correlation between general content and didactic design);

- deepening pedagogical key concepts (highlighting key concepts; reducing the large volume of information);
- improving the teaching style of trainers of prospective language teacher (offering explanations, systematization of information; increasing interest in pedagogical competences formation; the presentation of theoretical contents in an attractive form; the selection of interesting content);
- changing the attitude of trainers towards students (encouraging expression of the students' opinions; providing support to students; creating an appropriate framework for pedagogical competence training; openness);
- correlating the theory with the application of the pedagogical competencies (organizing the theoretical material so that students can practice how to teach);
- creating training models with clear work requirements to facilitate the transition from the general to the personalized level;
- correlating the training activities with the curricular documents (conducting applications on syllabi);
- facilitating the correlation between content and didactic design;

- transforming the pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility (replacing demagogic language with concrete terms; substituting "bushy" information with concrete terms);
- achieving extracurricular activities.

c) Changes at the level of the educational policies

- increasing awareness of the importance of developing pedagogical competences in the training of future language teachers;
- making changes at the level of the educational system to facilitate forming pedagogical competences;
- respecting the principle of quality, rather than the principle of quantity in pedagogical competences forming;
- correlating the development and the evaluation of the pedagogical competences with the national exam evaluation criteria for filling a teaching position;
- elaborating training programs to further improve the pedagogical competences at future language teachers (creation of masters in the field of didactics);
- achieving frequent research on the theme of forming and developing pedagogical competences.

The research results obtained in this study are confirmed by other studies based on investigating the perceptions of pre-service language teachers upon different aspects. Walton and Rusznyak (2013) used focus group interviews, Facebook posts, and journal entries to observe pre-service teachers' pedagogical learning during practicum placements in special schools. Margolis (2014) highlights the need for practical training of graduates of educational programs. In another study, Shchur (2014) highlights the need to increase the number of teacher training hours to help build pedagogical competences. The results of a research conducted by Hardin et al. (2010) indicated that teachers were in need of continued support, especially when working with linguistically and culturally diverse children and their families. The findings of a study achieved by Uzun (2016, p. 12) demonstrate that the content and procedure of the courses need to be revised and restructured in such a way that "they would produce less memorization and more permanent, internalized and digested knowledge and experiences, possibly through extensive practice". Jašková (2016) identified important changes at the level of Pedagogical content knowledge components (the conceptions of purposes for teaching subject matter and the knowledge of instructional strategies) at the level of subjective perceptions of English for Specific Purposes university teachers' professional beginnings. Another studies are based on the investigation the differences between pre-service and in-service

teacher education programs. Genç (2016) observed that "pre-service teachers need more practice opportunities in their way to becoming a language teacher whereas in-service teachers definitely need to improve and update their theoretical knowledge base on current developments in the field". Meschede et al. (2017) analyzed the differences between pre-service and in-service teachers from perspective of relation of teachers' professional vision with pedagogical content knowledge and beliefs. König et al. (2017) found that teacher preparation in higher education institutions is effective for the pre-service teachers' acquisition of general pedagogical knowledge. According to the results of a current study (Depaepe & König, 2018), there is not significant association between general pedagogical knowledge and self-efficacy beliefs. All these results highlight the importance of investigating the pedagogical component of the formation of future language teachers.

Conclusions

The research results reveal the most important areas of change at the level of the perceptions of pre-service teachers regarding the areas of change in initial training programmes. At the general level, the future language teachers appreciate that there are needed changes at the level of initial training programmes in terms of increasing practical activities, based on efficient exercise of pedagogical competences. At the particular level, the areas of change are divided into three main categories, according to the perceptions of future language teachers: at the level of future language teachers, at the level of trainers and initial training programmes and at the level of educational policies. Also, conclusions were formulated based on the study year and the specialization of pre-service language teachers. The students from the second year appreciate more the areas of change related to the application of alternative, modern, interactive and diversified training techniques than the students from the third year. The students from the specialization English language appreciate more the aspects regarding the use of modern information technologies to form pedagogical competences, transforming the pedagogical language with an accent on accessibility, forming and developing the competences of varied and easy use of didactics instruments, compared to the students from the specialization Romanian language. The students from the specialization Romanian language appreciate more the aspects regarding the implementation of some changes at the level of subjects based on forming pedagogical competences and changing the attitude of trainers towards students, compared to the students from the specialization English language.

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