MAJOR TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR STATE EFL TEACHERS: A REFLECTIVE TRAINING MODEL IN THE 'NEW SCHOOL' ERA

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Abstract

This paper outlines the rationale, purpose, context and practices of a reflective training course addressed to in-service state EFL teachers in Greece. The so-called Major Training Programme attempted to inspire new teaching ideas, methods and attitudes towards EFL teachers' autonomy and professional development in the 'New School' era. It followed the reflective model of teacher training which facilitated teachers in making informed decisions that prioritise learning by becoming autonomous and 'open' to experimentation and, thus, enjoying their teaching to the benefit of their learners as well as the Greek state-school foreign language classroom. It was a teacher education course focusing on previous school experience through trainees' critical and autonomous thinking processes. The training programme was structured around the 'New School' purpose and principles relied upon modern pedagogical theories such as the intercultural approach to learning within a cross-thematic framework combining arts with environmental education and educational technology.

Keywords: Training, reflection, interculturalism, development, arts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy and the ability to make informed decisions constantly in such chaotic and ever changing circumstances become even more imperative nowadays especially because traditionally prescribed educational models and methods have been questioned and have been proved ineffective or insufficient the last decades.

According to Cvetek (2008), the traditional teaching methods (e.g. the presentation-practice-production/PPP model) in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching are being replaced by concepts that put more emphasis on the learners and the conditions for achieving learner involvement, on negotiated interaction in the classroom, for instance, on task-based learning (Willis, 1996), and, specifically as regards grammar learning, on learners' language awareness and identification of language forms and meanings (Thornbury, 1994). There seems to be a general agreement in the field of foreign language teaching that a focus on meaning and information processing is needed (Cvetek, 2008), for instance, through guessing, simulation, problem-solving and role-play activities.

In light of the above, it is quite promising that the 'New School' law (3848/19-5-2010) promotes such practices (Pedagogical Institute, 2011b). Within the 'New School' framework, teachers' personal experience and teaching practice are important and valuable and constitute the threshold for any conceptual change or development they might achieve, in that case by attending the Major Training Program (MTP).

Actually, what is important for teacher development to occur is to seek *professionalism*, which can be achieved in collaboration with other colleagues, sincere critical reflection on one's own practices, sharing of problems with colleagues, and efforts for self-improvement for the benefit of both learners and teachers. Professionalism implies that state-school foreign language learning can be transformed into a forum where informed, principled experimentation, is encouraged in cooperation with other stakeholders, bringing a real-life flavour to the whole learning experience (Manolopoulou-Sergi, 2011).

In particular, the MTP prompted teachers to discover their 'personal theory' which constitutes the basis on which new knowledge, skills and attitudes will be accommodated. The training course was structured around both teaching experience and practice focusing on the new unified curriculum for the foreign languages-EPS-XG curriculum (Tzotzou, 2013; 2014a), including concepts such as, *differentiated learning, educational technology, interculturalism and multilingualism, experiential learning, integration of world knowledge, cross-thematic approach to integrating art and environmental issues in the foreign language classroom* (Pedagogical Institute, 2011b). All these issues were processed looking into ways by which they could be implemented in the EFL classroom.

What follows is, first of all, the rationale of the MTP regarding the 'New School' purpose and principles related to EFL learning, a brief review of the pedagogical theories upon which the MTP relied and the cross-thematic framework around which it was structured such as arts, environmental education, technology. Secondly, there is a review of the MTP training background with specific reference to the role of reflection in teacher training and the reflective training model adopted. Last but not least, there is a description of the MTP context specifying its purpose, its main

conceptions of teaching, the basic elements of the training course, the integration of theory and practice as well as its focus on the educational value of arts.

2. THE MTP RATIONALE

2.1. 'New School'

2.1.1. Purpose and principles

The MTP was conceptualized, developed and implemented on the basis of the 'New School' philosophy and purpose. In particular, 'New School' aims to improve the learning outcomes by promoting the digital, innovative, multilingual and multicultural education in order to cover the new educational needs and challenges of the 21st century in our globalized society (Pedagogical Institute, 2011a). In this regard, it exploits modern teaching tools and follows a differentiated approach to learning towards the development of humanistic values and basic skills related to the role of learners as future responsible citizens, their active participation in social and cultural life, their collective social spirit, autonomous action, environmental awareness, aesthetic experience as well as their positive attitude towards lifelong learning.

2.1.2. Foreign Languages

Regarding foreign language learning, as clearly stated in Volume B of the MTP material (2011), the main target is to embed into the school classroom the modern globalized social reality which primary and secondary school learners experience in their everyday routine. In particular, it focuses on the development of learners' *cognitive, social* and *communicative* skills in relation to certain foreign language learning levels as defined in the new *unified curriculum for the foreign languages* (the EPS-XG curriculum - Tzotzou, 2013; 2014a) and as prescribed by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001). To this end, the MTP included learner-centred, communicative, meaningful, experiential and creative activities structured around a *cross-thematic framework* in EFL learning (Chryshohoos et al., 2002).

2.1.3. The EFL teacher's role

The MTP emphasized the fact that the EFL teacher needs to be constantly trained and informed about the new pedagogical approaches which promote differentiated instruction, experiential learning, the cross-thematic approach, intercultural awareness and educational technology. The teacher also needs to be familiar with web resources and applications which can facilitate tremendously teaching, enriching the school textbooks and creating conditions towards learners' motivation. EFL teachers are encouraged to take initiatives and become active course designers, developers and creators by reflecting upon, revising, improving and adjusting the existing curricula to the actual language needs, learning styles and preferences of their learners (Pedagogical Institute, 2011b).

2.2. Pedagogical Theories

2.2.1. Motivation

The MTP placed emphasis on the intrinsic motivation which is manifested when learners are interested in the task at hand. As Manolopoulou-Sergi (2004a,b) states, it is closely related to learners' personal interests (Brewer, Dunn & Olszewski, 1988), perceptions of personal competence and ability (Spaulding, 1992), feelings of mastery (Newby, 1991), control and self-determination (Deci, 1992). To this end, teachers should follow several motivational strategies (Dörnyei, 2001) which make foreign language learning enjoyable, creative, communicative, both personal and collaborative while encouraging critical thinking. Furthermore, learners should realize that they are responsible for their own learning, feel confident and be part of a collaborative and friendly team.

2.2.2. Differentiated learning

The 'New School' aims at differentiated foreign language learning by taking into account different learners' origin, needs, preferences, background and style, linking outside-classroom reality and inside-classroom language pedagogy (Littlewood, 2004).

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options to cover different readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. In a differentiated classroom the teacher uses a. a variety of ways for learners to explore curriculum content, b. a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which learners can come to understand or 'own' information and ideas, and c. a variety of options through which learners can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned (Tomlinson, 1995). By responding to these needs with a sound philosophy of differentiation, teachers have more authentic interactions with their learners, and learners are able to experience opportunities that will help them reach their potential. In other words, differentiation puts learners at the centre of teaching and learning process.

2.2.3. Communicative approach

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that trigger communication. The teacher sets up a situation that learners are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audiolingual method of language teaching which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave learners in suspense as to the outcome of a class task, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day. In this way, learners' motivation comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

Teachers in communicative classrooms will find themselves talking less and listening more, becoming active facilitators of their learners' learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The teacher sets up the task, but because the learners' performance is the goal, the teacher must step back and observe. Because of the increased responsibility to participate, learners may find they gain

confidence in using the target language in general. Learners also become more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Hence, the teacher should provide a context so that class interactions are realistic and meaningful but with the support needed to assist learners to generate the target language.

2.2.4. Intercultural approach

It is essential to provide Greek learners with a thorough and systematic intercultural awareness starting from the culture of the main English-speaking countries first (United Kingdom, United States of America). EFL learners will benefit by gaining solid knowledge of the different world cultures. They will also develop the ability to compare Greek culture to the target culture or other cultures, to evaluate critically, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication, for both transactional and interactional purposes (Citron, 1995; Hadley, 1993). In other words, it is essential to create in the Greek learners' empathy toward the culture of the target language community which will help an appreciation of other cultures as well (Byram, 1989). Robinson (1985) argues that target culture should be viewed as a process, a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling and understanding. Systematic intercultural education is a pre-condition for educating a new generation of young people who will not only tolerate, but also understand, accept, and respect people from different world cultures, will communicate with them efficiently, and will learn from them through that communication (Ho, 2009).

2.3. The cross-thematic framework

2.3.1. Environmental education

The goal is to expose young people, primary and secondary learners, to different environmental issues of concern with the hope that exposure will lead to awareness, interest and result in action. That's why there is a need to develop a more extensive and effective environmental education strategy to better prepare the public to understand and take action regarding current and future environmental issues through the Greek public school system. The best way to raise awareness for environmental issues and promote environmentally responsible behaviours is through increased access to the Environmental Education by engaging EFL learners in collaborative and experiential projects (Pedagogical Institute, 2011d).

2.3.2. ICTs

In the 'New School' era, one of the teachers' responsibilities is to prepare learners for the future. The best way is not only to teach the learners to use technology, but also to teach them by technology (Nordinet al., 2010). In fact, one of the roles of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the EFL context is to provide the tools to facilitate learners' development within the existing English curriculum. In other words, the focus is on the development of knowledge and skills traditionally regarded as important, but this is to be reframed within a digital curriculum.

The use of ICTs in the EFL classroom can enhance language learning in terms of promoting authentic text-based language communication in electronic/digital environments and increasing learners' motivation in producing texts. For example, teachers can use weblogs to create a communicative learning environment in which learners write collaboratively and edit their peers' writing (Tu et al., 2007). Internet websites and weblogs are said to be useful in enhancing learners' language skills. This internet era is fundamentally different from the era in which most teachers went to school and it will define the literacy and communication practices for a generation. Schools, hence, need to embrace ICTs so that learners are prepared to function in a world where new literacies are the expectation and the norm.

The 'New School' as well as the MTP suggest that ICTs have the potential to give great impact on the future of teachers in terms of the role of the teacher, the methods of instruction and the methods of assessment. The role of the teacher changes from the sole knowledge provider to a facilitator or moderator; the methods of instruction change from conventional discussions in the classroom to the use of online forums with the learners (Melor et al., 2014).

2.3.3. Arts

In 'New School', arts form an integral part of the process for the development of learners both as individuals and as social human beings (Pedagogical Institute, 2011a). Those who have studied learning processes throughout the ages, beginning with Plato, have emphasized the importance of the arts in the educational process. Arts education refers to education in the disciplines of music, dance, theatre, and visual arts. Study in the arts is integral to our society. The arts are what make us most human, that is, most complete as human beings. The arts cannot be learned through occasional or random exposure any more than math or science can. Education and engagement in arts are an essential part of the 'New School' and an important component in the EFL learning classroom. The arts can also provide learners with non-academic benefits such as promoting self-esteem, motivation, aesthetic awareness, cultural exposure, creativity, improved emotional expression, as well as social harmony and appreciation of diversity (Pedagogical Institute, 2011a).

3. THE MTP TRAINING BACKGROUND

3.1. The role of reflection in teacher training

Reflection may be defined as an active and deliberate process of thinking which addresses practical problems and takes into account underlying beliefs and knowledge before arriving at possible solutions in a sequence of inter-connected ideas. Reflection results in the careful consideration and implementation of professional action, as contrasted with routine action which may derive from

impulse, tradition or authority (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The notion of reflection was discussed by Dewey (1933), who drew on the ideas of earlier thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and Confucius. Schön (1983; 1987) asserts that professionals should learn to frame and reframe the often complex and ambiguous problems they face. They need to make reasoned judgements about these problems, test out their interpretations of the situation, evaluate the options and then modify their actions while on the job.

In particular, reflection enables teachers to diagnose and understand their classroom contexts, put their learners at the heart of the teaching-learning process, develop a rationale for their teaching on their own and make informed decisions (Al-Issa, 2002). This is believed to lead to new understandings of purposes, learners, learning process, instruction and self and consolidate these new understandings through strategies such as documentation, analysis and discussion (Schulman, 1987). In other words, teachers are encouraged to use their growing 'knowledge base' (Schulman, 1987) to identify problems emerging in their school classrooms through 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1983) and try to solve these problems through continuous reflection, professional and critical inquiry into their own practices (Schön, 1983, 1987).

Zeichner (1994, 1996) also considers that reflection is essential for bringing understanding to the complex nature of classrooms and states that teachers should be trained to reflect on the subject matter and the thoughtful application of particular teaching strategies. He further states that teachers need to reflect on their learners' understandings, interests and developmental thinking. In other words, teachers need to look at teaching from other perspectives beyond their 'egocentric' view, that is, to become more reflective practitioners (Green, 2006).

John Dewey (1933) argued that learning from experience is enriched by reflecting on experience and Schön (1987) adds that reflective practice represents an important factor to improve professional activity. Mezirow (1991; 2000) gives reflection a central role in learning because through it we become aware of the ways in which we interpret reality and give meaning to actions and behaviour. What is more, active reflection on such experiences is also seen as an important means of resolving conflicts between theory and practice.

3.2. Teacher education model

The MTP followed the reflective model of teacher education (Wallace, 1991) as already stated. This model allowed a role for both the trainer and trainees in the process by most importantly emphasizing the development of trainees' own ability to reflect on their teaching through a variety of techniques such as groupwork, plenary discussions, reflection materials, assignments and presentations. The trainer's role was mostly to stimulate, organize, coordinate, monitor, support and encourage both individual reflection and peer observation on EFL teaching practices in a collaborative context (Tzotzou, 2014b). Moreover,

trainees were actively engaged in the exchange of ideas and sharing of concerns by fostering trust, empathy and their emotional involvement (Johari, 2006).

In the course of the MTP, teacher education was not seen as an individual endeavour, but rather, as a process that was anchored in a reflective training model, where knowledge was created through an interactive and consensual interpretation of shared reality. Trainee teachers were given opportunities to reflect on and co-construct professional knowledge with their colleagues. They were provided with appropriate teaching material and reading resources working in supportive and interactive small group tutorial structures facilitated by their tutors. In this context, trainee teachers were triggered to reflect upon professional issues of concern, both individually and in groups. Such issues included the impact and consequences (intended and unintended) of different educational policies as well as practitioner issues such as managing relationships with parents. In this regard, reflective practice was exploited as a professional development process towards achieving behavioural change.

3.3. Towards an enriched reflection model

It could also be said that the MTP followed the enriched reflection model (Ur, 1999) by exploiting both personal input (personal experience) and external input (vicarious experience, theory) through active experimentation, reflective and peer observation (Johari, 2006). Trainees were given the chance to recall and share past experience, reflect alone and in discussion with their co-trainees, both at a descriptive and at an analytical level, in order to work out theories about teaching in practice, thus becoming able to develop their own personal theories of action. External input was encouraged by urging trainees to gain in-depth knowledge and experience from reading materials on the literature, other teachers' experiments (e.g. lesson plans, teaching proposals) and suggested bibliography for further reading. In other words, there was input from both personal and vicarious experiences, critical reflection and the relevant EFL literature (Farrell, 1998; Ur, 1999).

4. THE MTP CONTEXT

4.1. Description

The so-called Major Training Programme (MTP) was organized by the Pedagogical Institute in 2011 (from June to December 2011). The MTP was carried out on the basis of a blended model of training including three cycles of contact sessions and a distance schedule of work (total duration: 200 hours). There were twenty in-service state EFL teachers-trainees in each one of the groups all over Greece who joined both the contact sessions and the distance part of the course. Contact sessions included experiential groupwork and plenary discussions, a written exam as well as the design and presentation of a microteaching while distance work comprised the study of materials, the submission of two

written assignments, regular e-mail correspondence, trainer's support and feedback reports. Last but not least, it was a voluntary/non-compulsory, formal in-service course towards fostering teacher development (Beaumont, 2005).

4.2. Purpose

The main target of the programme, as clearly stated in the printed basic training material was teachers' professional development in a holistic way by building up trainees' internal agenda, awareness and attitudes through peer interaction (Pedagogical Institute, 2011d). In particular, it aimed at facilitating teachers in making informed decisions for their classrooms that prioritise learning by becoming autonomous and 'open' to experimentation and thus enjoying their teaching to the benefit of their learners.

4.3. Conceptions of teaching

In the MTP, art/craft conceptions of teaching predominated over any prescribed sets of teaching skills or general teaching methods. Trainees were stimulated to discover things that work through a process of decision-making, reflection, analysis and assessment (Freeman & Richards, 1993). Teaching was seen as an essentially individual undertaking in which trainees were invited to take initiatives and become active course designers, developers and creators by reflecting upon, revising, improving and adjusting the existing curricula to the actual language needs, learning styles and preferences of their learners. The art/craft approach of conceptualizing teaching was also accompanied by a philosophy conception of teaching based on values as the MTP emphasized the development of human values, growth in self-awareness and in the understanding of others, sensitivity to human feelings and emotions, active learner involvement in learning and in the way human learning takes place (Beaumont, 2005).

4.4. Basic elements of the training course

The MTP followed selection procedures both to accept trainees after applying to the course but especially to assess trainees' teaching proficiency in implementing the so-called 'New School' principles in their classrooms. Initially, it offered general professional training towards understanding the psychological and humanistic aspects of modern education (e.g. team building, empathy) in its new social and multicultural context. Though, the MTP's main aim was to provide trainees with special training by promoting innovative EFL teaching techniques and cross-thematic activities, differentiated learning, course design skills and the integration of new technologies and arts into EFL learning (Strevens, 1974).

4.5. Integration of theory and practice

The MTP was based on the assumption that teachers' knowledge is inherently their own, constructed by teachers themselves, and largely experiential. In this regard, theory informed classroom practice only to the extent to which teachers themselves made sense of that theory. In other words, the MTP situated learning about teaching within an experiential context and developed in teachers ways of knowing and doing that represent the socially constructed, perceptual, and interpretative nature of real teaching. Trainees were constantly engaged in a process of sense-making, enabling them to not simply change what they do, but change their justifications for what they do. In this way, sense-making made theory relevant for practice as teachers' knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, conceptual or perceptual, was understood and acted on within the context of real teaching (Johnson, 1996). Consequently, teachers were not treated as consumers of theories but as 'theorists' (theory-builders) in their own right (Clarke, 1994; Widdowson, 1984) being engaged actively in experiential training through a practice-reflection cycle of activities (Ur, 1999).

5. THE MTP FOCUS ON THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF ARTS

5.1. The role of arts in education

According to Jensen (1999), we are in the twilight of a society based on data but as information and intelligence become the domain of computers, society needs to place a new value on the one human ability that can't be automated and this is emotion. In other words, while today's learners are inundated with data, they are starving for meaningful learning. Moreover, workplace demands are summarized into understanding how to solve problems, how to build teams and coalitions, and how to incorporate the concept of fairness into one's everyday decisions. Learners, therefore, need to be thinkers, possess people skills, be problem-solvers, demonstrate creativity and work as a member of a team. In this vein, the MTP aimed at offering more in-depth learning about the things that matter the most such as order, integrity, thinking skills, truth, flexibility, fairness, dignity, contribution, justice, creativity and cooperation though the arts. According to the MTP and 'New School' philosophy, an effective education through the arts will help learners to see what they look at, hear what they listen to, and feel what they touch. To this end, the MTP encouraged engagement in arts which can help to develop the tolerance for coping with the ambiguities and uncertainties present in the everyday routine of human existence.

5.2. Arts in the MTP material

In all three volumes of the MTP material, there was specific reference to arts and their pedagogical value in school education. In Volume A of the Basic Training Material: General Part (2011), trainee teachers had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the exploitation of arts and aesthetic experience in education. In particular, trainees learned how to integrate effectively the arts into their classroom through the appropriate selection of works of art, the implementation

of techniques for observing or studying arts with their learners as well as through the preparation of didactic scenarios. Trainees also realized the dynamic role of arts and aesthetic experience in the learning process regarding learners' attitudes, behaviours and character formation as well as their skills, abilities and knowledge development. Emphasis was also placed on the criteria, the purpose and the strategies used in order to integrate pedagogically the arts into the classroom as effectively as possible. To this end, a variety of approaches, projects and models were suggested such as the visible and the artful thinking projects, the Perkins model, etc. For instance, in volume B of the Basic Training Material: Specific Part-English (2011), there were sample good practices, that is, model lesson plans, on integrating EFL and fine arts.

Last but not least, volume C of the Basic Training Material entitled 'Use of Arts in Education' (2011) included texts, didactic scenarios and theories regarding the effective pedagogical use of various forms of arts in the school context, such as cinema, visual arts, literature, theatre and music. For each one of the above mentioned forms of arts there was an extensive reference to a. the theoretical background of their pedagogical use and b. good Greek and international practices regarding the connection between cinema, theatre, visual arts, literature and music with school education such as 'Making Movies Matter', 'Ciné Lycée', 'Reggio Emilia Method', 'Artists in Wigan Schools', 'L' Enfant Spectateur', etc. This volume also suggested works of arts for different age groups of learners and provided to trainee teachers with supplementary material such as glossary, websites and bibliography for each one of the above forms of art.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the MTP encouraged reflection and critical thinking through conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action (Richards, 1990). Through critical reflection trainees reached awareness of a need to change (Pennington, 1992) which was the first step towards innovation and improvement by locating teaching in its broader social and cultural context (Bartlett, 1990). Reflection was used as a vehicle for developing the highest professional competence in the complex practice of teaching. Furthermore, following the 'New School' principles the MTP emphasized the universal need for dealing with the arts in schools and developing learners' aesthetic experience in order to give expression to the innate urgings of the human spirit (Eisner, 1987) and achieve a holistic learning combining both knowledge and emotion development as well as environmental and intercultural awareness. All in all, since, as becomes obvious, 'good' teaching is hard to define and describe and even harder to achieve, in the 'New School' era, there will always be room for reflecting, discovering, inventing and refining one's teaching (Schulman, 1987).

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