

Problematic Aspects in Forming Pedagogical Competences for Pre-service Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT The aim of this study is to investigate pre-service language teachers' perceptions about the problematic aspects of developing pedagogical competences at the level of training programmes. The researchers have conducted a qualitative research program, based on a semi-structured interview, to identify the perceptions of 95 pre-service language teachers. The results indicate the existence of significant differences, at the level of the category of problems, only in relation to the year of study. There are significant differences between the perceptions of the students from the second year and the students from the third year only with respect to the problems related to the reduced number of hours for pedagogical training. The identification of the pre-service language teachers' perceptions offers a realistic image for trainers and stakeholders and determines them to find efficient solutions in training programs.

INTRODUCTION

In a variety of ways, the extension of studies in the field of pre-service language teacher education is becoming increasingly obvious. The increased interest in investigating the perceptions of prospective language teachers arises from the need to improve the quality of initial training in accordance with the new requirements for the teaching profession. The different levels of the research may be identified by exploring the pre-service language teacher' perceptions: at the level of the specific components of *teaching* language and literature (Aydin 2012; Debrel 2012; Kaçar and Zengin 2013; Lo 2011; Masuda and Ebersole 2013; Nguyen et al. 2008; O'Neill and Geoghegan 2011; Woodgate-Jones 2006); in terms of *psychological* development (Aslan 2007; Savas 2012; Fatih and Demet 2012); from the perspective of the different *technological* tools used in language teaching (Al-Hebaishi 2005; Ajayi 2009; Chien 2012; Latiff and Daud 2013; Sardegna and Dugartsyrenova 2014); in terms of the different *cultural* factors involved

(Champion 2012; Gelle and Buchanan 2011; Kouritzin et al. 2007); and at the level of *pedagogical* elements (Lo et al. 2010; Yan and He 2010). The pedagogical aspects highlighted by the studies are very few, as shown by the recent studies in this area.

The context of innovations in the field of pre-service language teacher education (Edge and Mann 2013; Samson and Collins 2012; Wichadee 2011) and the frequent changes and restructuring of the educational system in Romania (Stănescu 2011) have generated a unique set of problems in preparing students for a teaching career. Some authors (Ekmekci 1992; Skella 2004) have reported the existence of problems occurring in language teacher education. Some studies have been conducted to identify language teachers' perceptions of various general issues involved in initial training. The main objective of the present research is to investigate the problems highlighted by students in relation to the development of pedagogical competences. This study focuses particularly on the pedagogical problems that students encounter during their initial training programmes.

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Research Context

The reference framework contains an analysis of the current research aimed at highlighting the conceptions of pre-service language teachers regarding various aspects of the training pro-

grammes and a discussion on the relevance of identifying pre-service language teachers' perceptions about the issues involved in building pedagogical competences. Investigating the prospective language teachers' perceptions of different issues represents one of the objectives of the studies achieved in the field of pre-service language teacher education. Understanding the current state of the research in this area is a prerequisite for achieving an innovative study.

Current Research Based on the Investigations of the Problematic Aspects in Pre-service Language Teacher Education

A systematic analysis of this research contributed to establishing the main categories of the issues investigated (Table 1): a) Problems which appear during teaching practice (Çetinkaya Edizer and Çelik 2012; Genc 2013; Gürbüz 2006; Kabilan and Izzaham 2008; Ngwaru 2013; Paker 2000); b) Problems referring to specific competences, such as speaking skills (Gan 2012), translation (Biçer 2003), and language teaching strategies like listening comprehension (Solak and Altay 2014; Tamjid and Babazadeh 2012; Yükselci 2003); c) Social issues related to oppression, in terms of sexism, heterosexism, white privilege, religion (Kubota et al. 2003; McGowan and Kern 2014); d) Intercultural issues caused by culture-based differences (Olaya and Gómez Rodríguez 2013; Xiao 2006); and e) Technical issues identified by using different modern tools in preparing future language teachers (Van Olphen 2007; Zhou et al. 2011). Studies identifying the problems regarding the training of future language teachers focus predominantly on the issues encountered during the teaching practice and at the level of building the specific competences and strategies of language teaching. Investigation on various pedagogical issues is absent from existing research, which determines the need to initiate studies in this area. *The role of the identification of the pre-service language teachers' perceptions of the issues involved in building pedagogical competences*

A variety of reasons highlight the need to study the perception of future language teachers towards the problematic aspects from the perspective of pedagogical competences development. These have been established in connection with the categories of pedagogical competences (Mata 2014):

- ♦ identifying the difficulties related to ensuring *the functionality of the educational process*;
- ♦ determining weaknesses in terms of curriculum design, at the level of using scholar documents, selecting educational contents;
- ♦ underlying the difficulties in processing educational finalities and developing operational objectives;
- ♦ exploring issues related to the use of *specific teaching strategies (didactic methods, instruments, activity organization forms)*;
- ♦ highlighting the problems related to educational design, in terms of elaborating the annual, semester, unit and lesson plans;
- ♦ establishing the main difficulties related to the integration of assessment strategies in educational activities.

The structural model of pedagogical competences will constitute a benchmark for framing the difficulties identified in the pre-service language teachers' perceptions.

The objective of this research is to identify the perceptions of pre-service language teachers of the issues involved in building pedagogical competences at the level of training programmes.

The main hypotheses of research are following:

First Hypothesis: What are the problems related to the pedagogical competences development in the perception of future language teachers?

Second Hypothesis: Are there any significant differences between the views of pre-service language teachers regarding the pedagogical competences development according to their year of study, specialization, and age?

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology consists in establishing the objective and hypothesis; the presentation of the participants involved in the study; the description of the method, variables, and procedure; and the analysis of the research data.

Participants

Ninety-five pre-service language teachers from two universities of Romanian education (53 students from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of

Table 1: Analysis of the studies focused on the investigation of the prospective teachers' perceptions upon the problematic aspects in pre-service language teacher education

<i>Issues</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Results</i>
<i>a. Problems During Teaching Practice</i>	Paker (2000)	- student teachers	- the identification of the difficulties
	Gürbüz (2006)	- 30 pre-service teachers; - questionnaire	- the particular problems involved in teaching a foreign language in a non-native context
	Kabilan and Izzaham (2008)	- pre-service teachers; - interview	- the presentations of the difficulties and the challenges
	Çetinkaya Edizer and Çelik (2012)	- 12 pre-service teachers; - document analysis methodology	- problems regarding classroom management
	Genc (2013)	- 38 pre-service teachers; - observation	- the students' focus on the identification of techniques and strategies
<i>b. Problems Referring to the Specific Competences and Strategies of Language Teaching</i>	Ngwaru (2013)	- pre-service teachers; - document analysis and focus group discussions	- several challenges faced in teaching English during teaching practice
	Biçer (2003)	- 46 students; e	- the need for help in solving problems while translating
	Yükselci (2003)	- 125 students;- questionnaire	- a lack of emphasis on social and cognitive listening strategies
	Gan (2012)	- 20 students; - semi-structured interview	- English speaking problems of ESL students
	Tamjid and Babazadeh (2012)	- 90 female students; - Oxford's Inventory for Language Learning	- no difference between the students' and the teachers' perceptions upon the listening strategy used
<i>c. Social Issues</i>	Solak and Altay (2014)	- 124 prospective English teachers; - The questionnaire on the 'Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems'	- the effective use of top-down processes during the listening process
	Kubota et al. (2003)	- pre-service teachers	- the opportunity to critically examine their own culture and the privileges associated with it
	McGowan and Kern (2014)	- 19 pre-service teachers; - pre- and post-instruction questionnaires	- the effect of an intervention regarding white privilege and oppression on attitudes towards social issues
<i>d. Intercultural Issues</i>	Xiao (2006)	- 35 Chinese students and Irish English teachers; - questionnaires	- the nature of the mismatch caused by culture-based differences in the perceptions and expectations related to L2 teaching and learning style preferences
	Olaya et al. (2013)	- 51 pre-service teachers; - questionnaires, semi-structured interview, documentary analysis	- lack of full understanding of intercultural competence
<i>e. Technical Issues</i>	Van Olphen (2007)	- pre-service teachers;- interviews	- the analysis of the weaknesses related to using courseware tools in the methods class
	Zhou et al. (2011)	- pre-service teachers; - survey and interviews	- low level of ability to use technology

Bacău and 42 students from "Al. I. Cuza" Iasi participated in this study. This study used *stratified sampling* (Daniel 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 strata.

Method

The researchers applied a qualitative methodology based on the semi-structured interview, because it represents a very flexible technique for small-scale research (Drever 1995) and has a fluid structure (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). The *semi-structured interview* consists of a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee, through which researchers attempt to obtain relevant information about a particular topic (De Singley et al. 1998). The semi-structured interview contains open questions that allow the subject a broader discussion and circumstantial interventions of the one performing the interview, and closed questions that allow the collection of quantitative data. According to Harrell and Bradley (2009), semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to thoroughly understand the answers provided. This method was chosen because it allows the subject to build an entire discourse as an answer to a question, which can lead to the identification of the reasons behind the answer. The semi-structured interview is also an appropriate method for exploring the subjects' perception regarding various aspects of the educational field (Pathak and Intrat 2012). The interviews were recorded with a video camera, which involved obtaining the subjects' agreement to be recorded and placing the camera in a position that would capture audio but not disturb the interviewer or interviewee. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment with suitable décor and where the seats were carefully arranged (Whiting 2008). The interviews were then transcribed, coded, and analysed to provide an interpretation of the data. In order to ensure validity of the content and reliability of the questions, the semi-structured interview was analysed by a group of ten teachers with expertise in Education Sciences.

The inclusion of open-ended questions provides an opportunity to identify new ways of seeing and understanding the problems related to the development of pedagogical competences in pre-service language teachers. The open questions from the interview were related to the following issues: a) What are the problems that you have encountered with respect to building pedagogical competences, during the initial training program?, and b) What was the problem you mentioned related to?

The closed questions from the interview focused on the level of the expression of various problems that prospective language teachers have indicated: very often, often, sometimes, rarely, and never.

Variables

The dependent variable consisted of the different categories of problems involved in the building of pedagogical competences in the initial training programmes of language teachers. The independent variables were the following: the year of study (second year or third year) and the specialization (mother-tongue language or foreign language).

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.

Data Analysis

The statistical interpretation of the data was performed using two procedures: a) the analysis of the main statistical indicators such as the statistical average, the standard deviation, and the frequencies for the first hypothesis, and b) the application of nonparametric tests for the second hypothesis, in order to obtain the abnormal distribution.

A *thematic content analysis* was used to analyse the results of semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis allows the transversal analysis of the individual interviews and the observation of the common structures of the discourse or themes (De Singley et al. 1998). The main stages of the content thematic analysis were (Gall et al. 2007): establishing the categories, analysing them, identifying the unit analysis, standardizing the coding procedure, coding the entire material, quantifying the unit analysis, producing the results, then interpreting and explaining the results.

FINDINGS

Table 2 shows the main statistical indicators for all the categories of problems related to the pedagogical competences development accord-

Table 2: The main statistical indicators for the categories of problems related to the pedagogical competences development, according to the perception of future language teachers

Problems	Code	Mean	Std. deviation	Sum	Percent (%)
Reduced number of hours for pedagogical training	11	.13	.334	12	12.63
The predominance of theory and the lack of practical and concrete activities	12	.22	.417	21	22.11
Lack of the abilities for effective implementation of pedagogical competences	13	.07	.263	7	7.37
Lack of adaptability of pedagogical competences to different contexts	14	.03	.176	3	3.16
Lack of efficient organization of training activities	15	.02	.144	2	2.11
Lack of necessary abilities for efficient teaching	16	.05	.224	5	5.26
Lack of the correlation between pedagogical training and specialized training	17	.01	.103	1	1.05
Unfavourable attitude of trainers	18	.02	.144	2	2.11
ineffective teaching style of trainers	19	.05	.224	5	5.26
lack of correlation between theory and practice	110	.18	.393	3	3.16

ing to the perception of future language teachers.

As the results indicate, the most common problems encountered by pre-service language teachers in terms of building pedagogical competences are those related to the predominance of theory and the lack of practical and concrete activities.

To verify the second hypothesis, the researchers used the Mann-Whitney U Test to compare two independent samples.

The results shown in Table 3 reveal 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 problems related to the reduced number of hours for pedagogical training ($z = -3, 117$; $p = 0.002$). At the level of the perception of the students from the second year, the mean rank is 54.95, while at the level of the perception of the students from the third year is 44.30. Therefore, these problems are particularly highlighted by the responses of the second year students.

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that there are no significant differences between the perceptions of pre-service mother-tongue language teachers and pre-service foreign language teachers.

Following the results obtained during the qualitative research based on the interview, we have delineated two categories of problems at the level of the perceptions of future language teachers: a) external issues related to the pedagogical competences development in the initial training programmes and b) internal issues relat-

ed to the individual level of the pedagogical training of students. The percentages indicate that most problems occur at the external level, because 22.11 percent of the students identified problems related to the predominance of theory and the lack of practical and concrete activities.

At the *external* level, the most significant problems related to the development of pedagogical competences in the initial training programmes are, according to the perception of students:

- ♦ the predominance of theory and the lack of practical and concrete activities, including the large amount of information and concepts, the lack of concrete activities and the general uselessness of information for teaching, as well as the complexity of information and the prevalence of scientific jargon;
- ♦ the reduced number of hours for pedagogical training;
- ♦ a lack of efficiently organized training activities, particularly noting the great number of students in a teaching practice group and disorganized pedagogical training activities;
- ♦ the lack of correlation between pedagogical training and specialized training;
- ♦ the unfavourable attitude of trainers, often involving indulgent attitudes and miscommunication;
- ♦ the ineffective teaching style of trainers, including the lack of systematic information, monotonous teaching, presentation of the theory in an unattractive form that does not generate interest and active participation from students, the lack of useful information, a lack

Table 3: The Mann-Whitney U test results regarding the perception of future language teachers upon the issues related to the pedagogical competences development, depending on the year of study Test Statistics^a

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10
Mann-Whitney U	793.500	961.500	1002.500	973.500	990.000	1010.500	1006.500	1008.500	963.000	24.000
Wilcoxon W	2746.500	1522.500	1563.500	1534.500	1551.000	2963.500	1567.500	2961.500	2916.000	45.000
Z	-3.117	-.669	-.354	-1.277	-1.037	-.253	-.730	-.456	-1.213	-1.368
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.504	.723	.201	.300	.801	.466	.649	.225	.171
Exact Sig. [2 (1-tailed Sig.)]										.404 ^b

a. Grouping Variable: Study year
 b. Not corrected for ties.

Table 4: The Mann-Whitney U test results regarding the perception of future language teachers upon the issues related to the pedagogical competences development, depending on the specialization

	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6	I7	I8	I9	I10
Mann-Whitney U	982.500	1037.500	975.000	997.500	1037.500	995.000	1032.500	1037.500	1042.500	24.000
Wilcoxon W	1612.500	2867.500	1605.000	1627.500	2867.500	2825.000	1662.500	2867.500	2872.500	45.000
Z	-.905	-.134	-1.279	-1.337	-.388	-1.097	-.764	-.388	-.150	-1.368
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.365	.893	.201	.181	.698	.273	.445	.698	.881	.171
Exact Sig. [2 (1-tailed Sig.)]										.404 ^b

a. Grouping Variable: Specialization
 b. Not corrected for ties.

of clarification of pedagogical concepts that leads to confusion, and long presentations that generate confusion and lack of interest;

- ♦ a lack of correlation between theory and practice, including the lack of the application of the theoretical knowledge, and the gap between the theoretical and practical pedagogical training.

At the *individual* level, the problems encountered by pre-service language teachers, from the perspective of building pedagogical competences are:

- ♦ the inability to effectively implement pedagogical competences, including high tone, lack of patience, lack of organization, lack of experience, different personal problems, subjectivity, and intimidation in front of mentees;
- ♦ the inability to adapt pedagogical competences to different contexts, including an inability to adjust to the students' knowledge, and an inability to adapt to the didactic design in the classroom;
- ♦ the lack of the necessary abilities for efficient teaching, including the lack of systematic information, the unattractive presentation of information to students, the lack of knowledge of the teaching content, the inability to correlate theory and practice in the classroom, as well as the purely theoretical knowledge and the lack of correlation with the educational reality.

The research results also indicate the existence of significant differences, at the level of the category of problems, only in relation to the year of study. Thus, there are significant differences between the perceptions of the students from the second year and the third year only with respect to the problems related to the reduced number of hours for pedagogical training.

DISCUSSION

The research results indicate that pre-service language teachers appreciate that the most frequent problems are those related to the predominance of theory and the lack of practical and concrete activities. These results highlight the fact that the initial training activities are focused on transmitting information and less on applying pedagogical concepts. This problem highlighted by prospective language teachers is also one of the problems identified in recent studies

(Musset et al. 2014): lack of balance between pedagogical training and professional competence. In the context of Romanian vocational education and training, Musset (2014: 8) highlights the fact that "recent changes in initial teacher education requirements may not ensure a good balance between pedagogical skills and up-to-date industry experience for teachers in vocational subjects". According to the authors, the recommendation consists in designing initial teacher education programmes to ensure a good mix of pedagogical skills, vocational competence, and knowledge. Similar results have been obtained in a comparative research study on identifying the disadvantages of Ukrainian professional education training of pre-service biology teachers (Shchur 2014). The main disadvantage is related to the practical components: the students' inability to turn theoretical knowledge into practice and their unsuitability for teacher performance. Margolis (2014) included the problem related to the lack of practical training of graduates of educational programs in the category of problems of the teacher education itself. According to The Teaching and Learning International Survey results (2014: 16), "the content, pedagogy and practice of the subject being taught are crucial elements in the initial teacher education, but these elements are not always included in the initial teacher education curriculum." All these results point to the low level or the lack of practice in pedagogical skills as the main problem in training pre-service teachers.

Another important result of the research shows that second-year students more frequently face issues related to reducing the number of teacher training hours than third-year students. It is obvious that students need more training hours allocated for teaching competences in the second year of study. This represents a general problem related to the pedagogical training of pre-service teachers. In this context, Shchur (2014) noted the insufficient level of professional educational training of pre-service biology teachers at classical universities. These results show the need to increase the number of teacher training hours to help build pedagogical competences.

Identifying the perception of future language teachers about issues of pedagogical training becomes an important objective in current research because the research results support

knowledge of the students' needs and, consequently, the search for concrete solutions to meet those needs and contribute to increasing the quality of initial training programmes.

CONCLUSION

Two categories of conclusions can be formulated from this research: *theoretical*, following the analysis of current studies in the field of the pedagogical training of pre-service language teachers, and *methodological*, from the perspective of research results obtained.

The main *theoretical* conclusion is that the studies aimed at exploring the problems encountered by prospective language teachers are varied and becoming increasingly numerous. Nevertheless, very few studies are focused on identifying their perceptions of pedagogical training issues. A systematic analysis of various studies in this field helped to identify the main directions of the issues investigated in this study: problems that appear during the teaching practice; problems related to the specific competences regarding the speaking skills, translation, and language teaching strategies; social issues related to oppression; intercultural issues; and technical issues.

The research results highlight two important *methodological* conclusions: the focus of initial training activities on transmitting information and less on the application of pedagogical concepts; and understanding the issues related to reducing the number of teacher training hours by second-year students compared to third-year students. The results supported the categorization of two types of problems: at the external level, the issues encountered by prospective language teachers in terms of pedagogical skills development from the perspective of the educational system and, at the individual level, the difficulties of pre-service teachers related to the abilities necessary for the teaching profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The theoretical considerations and research results suggest two recommendations. First, it is important to develop new studies centred on investigating the perceptions of pre-service language teachers upon pedagogical training issues. Second, the research results highlight the need to increase the share of practical activities

at the level of the initial programmes of language teachers, as well as the number of hours for teacher training.

LIMITATIONS

This study has two important limitations. First, the number of participants is reduced and therefore not representative for the group of pre-service language teachers, so the results cannot be generalised. Second, the research methodology is qualitative and the results may not be objective. Increasing the number of participants in the study and combining the qualitative methodology research with quantitative methods, such as a questionnaire, can eliminate these limitations.

There is a need to initiate new and original approaches and studies to regularly explore the problems of prospective language teachers from the perspective of pedagogical competences development.

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