

## Promoting a Teacher Education Research- -Oriented Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training in English as a Foreign Language

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**Abstract** | Research-oriented programs related to pre-service teacher education are practically non-existent in many countries. Since in Portugal we now have a stable legal system for initial teacher training, how can we help these countries to respond to their teacher training needs and accomplish these same standards? How can we create an international program at MA level that could serve such an objective? What are the research priorities for teachers in primary and secondary education? I will claim for a new general research policy using small-scale research projects in foreign language teaching (FLT), which illustrated a turning point in advanced research in foreign languages teacher training. Presently, researchers no longer narrow their inquiries into linguistic questions or school and student-centered actions. Instead, they focus on a range of issues such as teacher-centered actions, beliefs and policies, and aspects of FLT such as literacy education, special educational needs or methods for teaching gifted students. Despite a lack of funding at all levels, many research projects in teacher education have been undertaken, and new areas have been explored, such as didactic transposition, literary and information literacies, intercultural learning, corpora in FLT, new information and communication technologies in FLT, interlingual inferencing, national standards for foreign language education, FLT for specific purposes, digital narratives in education, CLIL, assessment, and language learning behaviors. This small sample of the many areas covered proves that advanced research in teacher education can also be very useful to promote the growing interest in further internationalization in other sciences (beyond human and social areas) traditionally linked to politics, business and industry (computing, chemistry, biology, medicine, etc.), something that can only be attained by focusing on multilingualism, multi-literacy and lifelong learning.

**Key words** | Initial teacher education, research-oriented curriculum, professional knowledge, small subjects

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Pre-service teacher education is still dominated by pedagogical knowledge-oriented programs around the world. That trend is reasonable up to the point that it tends to disregard the importance of research for someone who will become a trained teacher in a specific subject. In a recent book by OCDE Publishing, *Pedagogical Knowledge and the Changing Nature of the Teaching Profession* (Guerriero, 2017), it is concluded that teachers are trained mostly in *knowing how to teach* and an urgent update of such knowledge is required for almost every country (I argue that we must develop, at least in similar scale, a strong training in *knowing what we teach*, which should include critical research about the taught contents). A combination of both knowledge policies (pedagogical and content-oriented) in teacher education programs is urgent. This derives from the awareness of a decrease in content knowledge acquisition and training for a large part of teachers in pre-university levels, what seems to be a consensus in many countries which do, in fact, highlight the importance of content knowledge training in any teacher education program. But, since the Bologna process implementation in many other European countries and many other western countries, the trend has been a different one. In fact, we should note that a general political agenda has been in operation in Europe since the 2005 report on the implementation of the Lisbon agenda, which underlines the urgent need for quality in initial teacher education combined with in-service training due to the age(ing) profile of the existing workforce (European Commission, 2005).

In Portugal and Spain, introducing a more reflexive and analytical curriculum in such programs can be a great challenge; in these educational contexts, the focus is still a strong training in pedagogical knowledge (training how to teach only), and the word 'knowledge' is many times underrated over the word 'competence' and its pedagogical lexicon. That can be seen even in the general adoption of the phrase "teacher education" over the more consistent "teacher training", as observed by Caena and Margiotta (2010):

'Teacher education' – the term that is increasingly predominant in European discourse, replacing the allegedly narrower idea of 'teacher training' with the holistic concept of a broader preparation of

teachers as learning individuals – actually occupies a rather controversial position within the Bologna European Higher Education Area, for several reasons. . . . The activity of teaching, inasmuch as it is socially and contextually based, naturally reflects ideas and priorities about the aims and desirable outcomes of education and schooling, with underlying values and cultural traits, which are deeply rooted in national histories and traditions. Conceptions and beliefs about the ideal teacher, the ideal citizen and the ideal institutions for student and teacher preparation usually go hand in hand, complementing each other. (320)

If we refer to the different frameworks at stake when we reflect on teacher *education*, we tend to find that most relevant political actions are focused on competence and qualifications frameworks rather than knowledge frameworks, as if the term *education* were to be confined to training in its exclusive pedagogical meaning. In pre-service programs, knowledge training is assumed to be present in any curriculum as something already pre-given by default or it is believed to be the teacher's responsibility during his/her coming-of-age as a professional in the transmission of knowledge. Specific content knowledge is the most learnable and it is assumed that a first degree is the adequate moment for that education; a core curriculum in this moment is always designed as a content knowledge-related curriculum, with little or no attention to pedagogical knowledge. A future teacher will learn pedagogical content and all the secrets of the profession in a separate curriculum, after their first degree. There are integrated courses that change this recipe, but the result is not different due to the supremacy of the pedagogical training factor. If it is assumed that pedagogical knowledge can only be learned in a pre-service environment, curriculum developers and evaluators will go with this presupposition and make it a general rule for all policies.

Research-oriented programs related to pre-service teacher education are practically non-existent in many countries, although there is no lack of policies and theories on research-based teacher education to implement them in every country, from Healey (2005) and Zgaga (2006) to Darling-Hammond & Bransford (2005), who project a different model for North-American teachers urging the creation of an informed teacher education curriculum which should include

more research-based training. But the quest(ion) remains at least in countries such as Portugal, Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, making a personal reference to the Portuguese-speaking world, to explain that we lack both theoretical and the political actions when we talk about research-based teacher education.

Since in Portugal we now have a stable legal blueprint for initial teacher training, how can we help these countries to respond to their teacher training needs and accomplish these same standards? How can we create an international program at MA level that could serve such an objective? What are the research priorities for teachers in primary and secondary education? I make the claim for a new general research policy using small-scale research projects in FLT, which has worked as a turning point in advanced research in foreign languages teacher training for the past decade in my University at least. Presently, researchers no longer narrow their inquiries into linguistic questions or school and student-centered actions. Instead, they focus on a range of issues such as teacher-centered actions, beliefs and policies, and aspects of FLT such as literacy education, special educational needs or methods for teaching gifted students. Despite a lack of funding at all levels, many research projects in teacher education have been undertaken, and new areas have been explored, such as didactic transposition, literacies, intercultural learning, corpora in FLT, new information and communication technologies in FLT, interlingual inferencing, national standards for foreign language education, FLT for specific purposes, digital narratives in education, CLIL, assessment, and language learning behaviors. This small sample of the many areas covered proves that advanced research in teacher education can also be very useful to promote the growing interest in further internationalization in other sciences (beyond human and social areas) traditionally linked to politics, business and industry (computing, chemistry, biology, medicine, etc.), something that can only be attained by focusing on multilingualism, multi-literacy and lifelong learning. A diverse range of technological tools will be used to enhance learning and teaching situations using the Internet, YouTube, Twitter, blogs, podcasts, webinars, Skype classroom, etc. - tools that have changed the way language is taught. These will be combined

with high-quality databases for research. These tools will help redirect initial teacher education towards cooperative and autonomous learning, including reflection on the role of the EFL teacher.

In the three decades leading up until 2014, Portuguese legislation promoted almost exclusively the study of pedagogical issues throughout the period of initial teacher training. Besides, the research-based and related bibliographical references of all curricula produced were almost unchanging and rarely updated and related to international innovations. The practicum focused on classroom teaching methods and the display of classroom management techniques with little or no research included. In May 2014, a new law (Decree 74/2014) was issued which requested the restructuring of all higher education programs in initial teacher education to include a more research-oriented study plan. Because of this, the Bologna process in 2007, and several recommendations made from the beginning of the century by the European Commission claiming, quite rightly, that research and evidence-based practice is relevant to teacher education, all courses at master's level were redesigned. This important shift in the way we train teachers for basic and secondary education resulted in better research-oriented dissertations related to the profession of teaching, instead of the more standardized dossier of practicum activities which had been the general methodological requirement for decades, where critical reflection and scientific inquiry related to educational topics were not required. The need for independent thinking skills and reflection in the work of teachers (Niemi, 2008) should lead to training future teachers to reflect critically on all their actions, the curriculum they are expected to master and their own identity as educators. Consequently, researchers also need to change and do more to reach out to practitioners. This new research paradigm should co-exist with an environment like that found in other countries, in which teachers are regularly confronted with practical core questions such as "What is good for these children?" or "What is in the student's best interest?". As argued by the British Educational Research Association (BERA), "high quality educational research and enquiry has a key role to play. It can enable practitioners to distinguish myth from reality and help identify strategies that have the best chance of success

in the contexts in which they work” (BERA 11). This distinction plays a key role in a move towards quality teaching that is needed in initial teaching education and that is not being fully embraced by national policymakers.

In recent years, Portuguese universities have welcomed many students from Brazil, Angola and Mozambique (many of whom are already qualified teachers in their own countries), onto both PhD and MA courses in education, although not initial teacher education courses. For this reason, we in Portugal are familiar with the needs of these trainees. The status and recognition of the teaching profession in countries such as Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique is at stake today – we have large restructuring procedures going on – and we can find very different needs in Brazil when compared to the other African countries. In Brazil, where a huge system of education for a population of more than 200 million people exists, a different pre-service teacher qualification needs to be introduced to replace the first general degree qualification in pedagogy of most teachers; Fagundes (2016) showed how the appropriation of the concept of reflective teacher seen in several national guidelines is far from a true research-oriented policy in teacher training and in the current system, graduates do not need to take a specialized postgraduate teaching course before becoming a teacher in primary or secondary education. In Angola and Mozambique, the educational systems provide very few opportunities for pre-service teacher training courses at university level and the few which are on offer are of doubtful quality, never having been submitted to external (national or international) evaluation. In these countries, there is a recognized need for an urgent reform of initial teacher education programs, although it seems that there is no political initiative to promote that reform. In these situations, research-oriented programs related to pre-service teacher education are practically non-existent.

In Portugal, we have extended our postgraduate programs to students from the Portuguese-speaking world; we have included Portuguese EFL teachers in special international conferences; we have integrated junior and senior EFL teachers in European research projects such as PETALL (Pan European Task-based Activities for Language Learning), C4C – CLIL for Children, The Language Rich Europe network, Mundus at Crossways – (in)visible paths to

intercultural learning and a Tempus project: LAPIS Language and Pedagogic Innovation in Schools; we have managed to change the general scope of evaluation of initial teacher education programs in order to embrace reflective practice to make sense of pedagogical experiences, thereby moving far beyond the passive description of training activities previously employed, but not forgetting that Dewey's legacy for the globalization of the idea of a reflective teacher needs a cautious approach. That can be done if we accept that "the place to develop the skills of reflective practice is in the practicum classroom as a novice teacher, not in the halls of the university as a student" (Russell 88).

Action research is being argued for as a crucial element in a new approach to in new pre-service teacher education courses, claiming that the curriculum should be redesigned per that methodology (Vieira, 2016). Though action research is important because it leads the teacher to his/ her own teaching actions so that they can be improved in view of what can and should be learned by students, it lacks another important dimension: each action in an individual classroom has only a very specific value and, in education, a single action can never create everlasting value since it cannot be held to be applicable as general practice. We teach because others teach as well and that interconnection has a greater significance than single actions. Action research is very helpful in identifying what a unique group of students do as learners, their results and interests. Adjustability is a key aspect of this methodology, but, in my view, not enough to cover the whole question of inquiring about the nature of teaching. Action research tells us what happens in our classroom and, eventually, we can conclude about what we need to do to provide better-informed training, but we will never go beyond the comfort zone we have worked within. As teachers, we can benefit easily from this perspective because we are closer to our students' interests, problems or goals. And we can share our private experiences with others, nonetheless we are still missing our own reflection about what is our profession, what we need to know prior to the next class and beyond, something that we can only attain with solid scientific research. I am not referring to that dimension of action research for the teacher's professional self-development, but to a rather philosophical solitude that is

implied when we claim for scientific research in teacher education programs. It is that precise moment when we discovered why we are teachers, why we teach in a certain manner, how can we survive any doubt about what we teach, and how can we become better professionals in this business of teaching others what we must know in the first place. The collaborative action research approach, which we can trace back to the pragmatism advocated by Dewey, is already an alternative if the action researcher wants to discuss his/ her findings with a wider community. But he/ she needs to use the methods of scientific (philosophical) research to completely succeed as a teacher.

I believe the right policy should result in the creation of international master's degree courses, or similar postgraduate courses, using the wealth of resources offered by e-Learning platforms. We know how difficult it is for African teachers to travel abroad to improve their educational skills and, in Brazil, it is impossible to provide training abroad for the massive numbers of teachers who require better qualifications in specific subjects. This way, an e-Learning course is a partial solution that can be replicated in other university contexts. Presently, the Open University in Portugal and NOVA University are working together to combine the best practices in distance education of the former with the wealth of resources of the latter to offer postgraduate programs in language teaching, namely an e-Learning MA in English Teaching, without a practicum. Together we have been working with international students from the Portuguese-speaking world and our academic results have been most successful. We hope to strengthen these ties to organize other global courses to train better qualified teachers in different areas, starting with FL teachers.

It should not be forgotten that “[t]he promotion of public understanding and impact of research in the social sciences must continue to pursue the argument for taking account of situational complexity, the fallibility of methods and the possible contestability of interpretations” (Winch 212). This philosophical mode of teaching education awareness is a major challenge in any context, it was somehow what was at stake in the Decree-Law no.79/2014, when pre-service teacher education was revised, and it will be assumed as the paramount goal in any future policy agenda related to initial teacher training.



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