



Language Teachers' Training Courses. The Need for Practical Strategies and Resources in the Light of Today's Evolving Educational Landscape.

Mario Pace

University of Malta, Malta

Abstract

Teachers of languages face several hurdles in today's classrooms. These include, but are not limited to, diverse student needs, limited instructional time, large class sizes, assessment pressures, limited resources, motivating students and sociocultural and linguistic diversity. To overcome these challenges, teachers need to adopt flexible teaching strategies, incorporate student-centered approaches and leverage technology appropriately in order to create effective language learning experiences. In such an evolving educational landscape, language teachers' training courses need not only address the specific requirements of teachers that may vary depending on the context, the language being taught and the proficiency level of their students but also several other key areas, designed to provide teachers with practical strategies and resources they can apply in their classrooms. This is essential, even in the light of the fact that in many countries students are shunning foreign language learning, especially due to a perceived lack of relevance and a limited exposure to authentic language use, making it crucial for teachers to provide authentic language experiences in class, to integrate technology effectively, to foster a positive learning environment and, above all, to connect language learning to the students' personal interests and goals.

Keywords: *Language teaching; teacher training; classroom challenges.*

1. Introduction

Societal changes over the past years have indeed had a significant impact on language classrooms, reshaping teaching methodologies, curricula, and even the role of teachers. The list is endless - from the proliferation of technology, especially the internet and mobile devices which has revolutionized access to language resources and authentic materials enabling learners to engage with language in real-world contexts beyond the classroom, to the emphasis on communicative and task-based approaches which prioritize practical language use over rote memorization, to the growing focus on learner-centered pedagogies that have reshaped teaching methods, to a greater awareness and acknowledgment of cultural diversity and the importance of intercultural competence with a growing need to prepare students for communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts - shaping a contemporary language teaching and learning landscape that is dynamic, inclusive, and attuned to the demands of a rapidly evolving world. It is impossible for me, due to the word limit, to delve into all these societal changes that have influenced language education over the past years and I will therefore only focus on those which I consider are key changes that have the greatest impact on language teaching and learning.

To begin with, it is a known secret that globalization has led to increased interconnectedness and cultural exchange. Language classrooms are today compelled to emphasize cross-cultural communication and real-world language use to prepare students for global interactions. Consequently, teachers need to incorporate authentic materials from various cultures and encourage



language learners to engage in virtual exchanges and collaborative projects with peers from different countries in their bid to help students reach a communicative competence, including sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills, which goes beyond mere linguistic proficiency. The digital revolution has also transformed language teaching and learning. Educational technology, such as online language learning platforms, language apps and communication tools, has not only provided learners with more accessible and flexible opportunities to practice and acquire languages but it has also obliged educators to create interactive and multimedia-rich materials, enhancing engagement and learning outcomes (Levy, 2009) [1].

Multilingualism and Diversity is another societal change that has left its mark on the language classroom. The rapid increase of multiculturalism and multilingualism within societies has led to a greater emphasis on multilingual education with the result that language teachers have to acknowledge and value the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their students whilst promoting plurilingual approaches that leverage learners' existing language repertoires while introducing new languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2015) [2]. Societal changes have also shifted language instruction from grammar-focused methods to task-based and experiential learning. Language classrooms today need to emphasize practical, real-world tasks that require learners to use language for meaningful purposes, in line with the principles of constructivist pedagogy, encouraging learners to actively build their linguistic skills through authentic communication (Ellis, 2003) [3]. Further to this, the demands of the 21st century have led to the incorporation of skills like critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication into language classrooms. Such skills need to be integrated into language lessons in order to prepare students for success in the modern workforce and society (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.) [4].

2. Challenges and Hurdles in Language Teaching and Learning.

It is only natural that due to the above-mentioned changes, language teachers today face a range of challenges and hurdles that can impact their teaching approaches, strategies, and overall effectiveness. To begin with, while technology has brought numerous benefits to language education, the digital divide can hinder some students' access to necessary devices and internet connectivity, leaving teachers no other choice but to find ways to integrate technology effectively while considering students' varying access levels. To make matters worse, in many classrooms teachers encounter students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, making it extremely challenging to meet the needs of all learners and requiring the implementation of strategies that promote inclusion and equity (García & Wei, 2014) [5].

I personally believe that one of the major challenges language teachers face today is balancing the need for standardized assessments with the desire to assess authentic language skills, assessing both linguistic accuracy and real-world communication skills. Whereas standardized assessments often focus on discrete language skills such as grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension and aim to provide a consistent way of measuring language proficiency across different learners and contexts, on the other hand, authentic language skills encompass the ability to engage in meaningful conversations, understand cultural nuances, convey ideas effectively, and adapt language use to different contexts. These skills are crucial for real-world communication but can be harder to assess in a standardized manner. What is certain is that for assessment to be effective, it must recognize the diversity of learners and allow for differences in styles and rates of learning. For language teachers, finding the right balance between standardized assessments and authentic language skills is no easy task and requires collaboration, adaptation, and a commitment to fostering holistic language proficiency in learners.

Today's philosophy of the language classroom is that students are to be exposed to as many different varieties as possible, but this presents a very big challenge with assessments and examinations!!



They are often too conservative because as a rule assessment and examining boards are notoriously conservative. In fact there exists a discrepancy between what needs to be done (and what teachers strive to do) in the language classroom because of assessments, examinations, etc and what the second language acquisition and applied linguistics experts are suggesting: that we need to reflect in our teaching what's really going on in the world in terms of multilingualism, truncated repertoires, multi-translingual practices, etc. This poses a heavy burden on language teachers due to the strong monopolization of the testing organizations to the assessment polices [6].

Another hurdle faced by language teachers is maintaining students' motivation and engagement, especially as students progress through more advanced levels. Such an ongoing process requires flexibility and creativity on the teacher's part, given that as students become more skilled and experienced, their motivations and needs often change. This makes it fundamental for teachers to connect language learning to real-world scenarios that interest and matter to students and to show them how the language skills they're acquiring can be applied in their personal and professional lives. Teachers strive to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-life application given that students are more likely to engage with and retain information when they see its relevance to their lives. And to make matters worse, in contexts where the target language is not widely spoken, creating opportunities for authentic language exposure and communication outside the classroom can be quite difficult. So the challenge and the goal of the language teacher is to create a diverse and engaging language learning experience that prepares students for the real-world applications of the language, even if they can't easily access native speakers in their immediate environment.

3. Language teachers' training courses in the light of today's evolving educational landscape.

To overcome these challenges, teachers need to adopt flexible teaching strategies, incorporate student-centered approaches and leverage technology appropriately in order to create effective language learning experiences. In such an evolving educational landscape, language teachers' training courses need not only address the specific requirements of teachers that may vary depending on the context, the language being taught and the proficiency level of their students but also several other key areas, designed to provide teachers with practical strategies and resources they can apply in their classrooms. This is essential, even in the light of the fact that in many countries students are shunning foreign language learning, especially due to a perceived lack of relevance and a limited exposure to authentic language use, making it crucial for teachers to provide authentic language experiences in class, to integrate technology effectively, to foster a positive learning environment and, above all, to connect language learning to the students' personal interests and goals.

In the light of all this and in very practical terms, language teachers' training courses should be designed to equip educators with the skills, knowledge, and strategies needed to navigate today's evolving educational landscape. I will try to, very briefly, mention those which I consider crucial for language teachers, starting from the ability to implement pedagogical shifts that enable them to create more dynamic, engaging, and effective learning experiences for their students. Teachers should understand the move towards student-centered learning and how to implement it effectively. This involves learning about differentiation, personalized learning plans, and strategies to motivate diverse learners to engage in activities that encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and exploration through hands-on activities, discussions, debates and projects that actively involve them in the learning process. By integrating contemporary theories of language acquisition, cognitive psychology, and educational technology, teacher training can guide aspiring educators in designing lessons that inspire active participation, critical thinking and real-world application of language skills. This involves strategies like project-based learning, flipped classrooms, gamification, and incorporating multimedia resources. Additionally, the training should foster the development of effective classroom



management techniques, communication skills and the ability to create inclusive learning environments that value diversity.

Another mainstay in a language teacher training course is technology integration. Teachers need training on integrating technology into language teaching. This has become increasingly important in today's educational landscape. Technology offers a wide range of tools and resources that can enhance language learning experiences, engage students and improve their language proficiency. I consider proficiency in using language learning apps, online platforms, virtual classrooms and tools for creating interactive content a must for language teachers given that technology can make language learning more interactive and engaging. Interactive multimedia, online quizzes, language learning apps and virtual reality simulations can captivate students' attention and motivate them to actively participate in their learning process. It also provides teachers the opportunity to create a balance between traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning as it involves designing blended learning experiences that leverage the strengths of both approaches. Furthermore, online resources not only provide access to authentic materials such as news articles, videos, podcasts and social media content that expose students to real-world language usage, colloquial expressions and cultural nuances that are essential for developing practical language skills, but they also enable collaborative activities beyond the classroom walls. Students can communicate with native speakers through video conferencing or language exchange platforms, engage in online discussion forums and collaborate on digital projects, fostering language use in authentic contexts and making language learning more relevant to students.

Language teachers should also be trained on how to facilitate collaborative activities that promote communication and language practice among their students. Collaborative learning exposes students to authentic language use in real-world contexts. It encourages students' interaction with peers, providing them with the opportunity to practice communication skills, negotiate meaning and use language naturally, mirroring the interactions they'll encounter outside the classroom. Collaborative learning brings together students from various backgrounds, providing exposure to different accents, cultural perspectives and communication styles. This diversity enriches language learning by reflecting the multifaceted nature of language in its social and cultural contexts. Such a practice gives more importance to the use of languages in different contexts, focusing more on the interconnectedness of language and culture in a fluid and complex system rather than insisting on reaching a level of proficiency as close as possible to that of a native speaker. After all, we need to keep in mind that apart from all the cognitive advantages of speaking different languages, language teaching and learning's ultimate aim is to enable learners to express themselves in diverse situations and circumstances. This also explains the need for teachers to be trained to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity in language teaching by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into lessons and fostering an inclusive classroom environment. Language is influenced by cultural norms, values, and social dynamics. Being aware of such nuances helps teachers guide students to use language in culturally appropriate ways, avoiding unintended offense or misunderstanding, respecting different cultural backgrounds, avoiding stereotypes, biases and misconceptions about different cultures while fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Another fundamental aspect of initial professional development for teachers of languages is engaging in reflective practice. This involves systematically analysing teaching experiences, considering student feedback, and critically evaluating teaching methods to enhance the quality of teaching. Incorporating reflective practice into teaching is a dynamic process which involves regularly setting aside time for self-assessment, journaling, and seeking feedback from peers or mentors. Teachers need more than ever before engage with their students, ask the right questions, motivate students to learn in a way that lasts, and above all they need to be able to look at their own abilities and the way that they connect with their students. Teachers need not only understand well what they do in class but also why they do it. In other words, they have to be reflective practitioners and be able to use



critical reflections to improve instruction by identifying weaknesses and strengths and improving their practice. For this reason, as prospective educators prepare to navigate the complexities of modern classrooms, they must be equipped with adaptable and effective teaching strategies. Reflective practice offers a powerful tool for trainee language teachers to critically assess their instructional techniques, classroom dynamics, and interactions with students. By engaging in this introspective process, trainees can pinpoint their strengths and areas needing refinement, thereby fostering a continuous cycle of growth and development. Such self-awareness empowers future language teachers to tailor their approaches to suit diverse learning styles and changing educational paradigms. Moreover, incorporating reflective practice within teacher training cultivates a mindset of lifelong learning, encouraging educators to stay abreast of emerging pedagogical trends and technological advancements. By nurturing the habit of reflective practice, language teacher training courses contribute not only to the professional maturation of educators but also to the enhancement of language learning experiences in an increasingly diverse and dynamic educational world.

4. Conclusion

Language teacher training courses should be dynamic and responsive to the changing needs of the education landscape, emphasizing practical application and ongoing professional growth. To make language teaching and learning pertinent to the students' needs, language teachers have to keep abreast with all the developments and changes taking place both within and outside the classroom. In such a scenario of an ever-evolving landscape of education, language teacher training courses must embrace dynamism and responsiveness and align with the changing needs of the field. By emphasizing practical application and fostering ongoing professional growth, such courses should strive to equip teachers with the skills and insights necessary to thrive in diverse and dynamic classrooms. As pedagogical trends shift, language teachers must be adept at implementing innovative strategies and technologies, making it imperative for training to incorporate these advancements. Moreover, a student-centered approach, coupled with a commitment to cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, ensures that educators can create engaging and supportive learning environments. Ultimately, a dynamic and responsive approach to language teacher training cultivates adaptable educators who are poised to meet the challenges and opportunities of modern education.

References

- [1] Levy, M. (2009). Technologies in use for second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93(s1), 769-782.
- [2] Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2015). Towards a plurilingual approach in English language teaching: The Basque educational context. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(3), 646-672.
- [3] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Partnership for 21st Century Learning. (n.d.). Framework for 21st Century Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>.
- [5] García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism, and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [6] Pace, M. (2022). Language teaching and intercultural communication. Today's challenges and difficulties in teaching and learning foreign languages. *International Philological Journal*, 13(3), 121-127.