The Future of K–12 Teacher Education: Spanish and Portuguese

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RESPONSE

Envisioning a Future of Re-examination of Foreign Language Teacher Education

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Abstract: US teacher education has been scrutinized for years. In this essay, the author discusses the four major questions that have driven educational reform. Afterward, a historical account of teacher education focusing on teacher certification, teacher testing, and the teaching of modern languages is presented. An international perspective is added by highlighting successful practices in Finland. The voices of several leaders in the field are also presented to offer readers insight into the future of language teacher education. The article concludes with proposals about future directions for language teacher education with particular attention given to the teaching of Spanish and Portuguese.

Keywords: advocacy/apoyo, education reform/reforma educativa Portuguese/portugués, Spanish/español, teacher education/formación docente

Introduction

Teacher education has been under siege for decades, and teachers in the United States are in reformers’ crosshairs more than ever these days (Cochran-Smith 2000). Writing for Forbes, Leef (2013) reported that many students leave high school with dismal abilities in crucial areas (e.g., math, reading) because “many of their teachers are not very good themselves” (1). Seen historically as an easy target for critics who are unconcerned about what those inside the profession think (Labaree 2004), our nation’s leaders promote the notion that “many, if not most of the nation’s 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education, are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the twenty-first-century classroom” (Duncan 2010: 1).

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the future of K–12 teacher education with respect to Spanish and Portuguese. The paper begins by contextualizing the state of affairs in terms of the questions that have driven educational reform over the past 60 years before briefly discussing the history of teacher education in the United States. An international perspective is offered regarding teacher education in Finland, a country whose educational system has drawn great attention since the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The report “PISA 2012 Results” stated that Finnish children ranked first among students in 64 countries and economies in 2009. The essay concludes with insight from experts in the field and the author concerning the future direction of K–12 teacher education in the next 30 years.

Four Questions that Drive Reform

According to Cochran-Smith (2000), the history of teacher education reform in the United States over the past 60 years can be documented in terms of four major driving questions in terms of teacher attributes, effectiveness, knowledge, and outcomes. The political climate shaped the order in which these questions emerged, the degree and kind of public attention to K–12
education, the supply of and demand for teachers, state and federal policies regarding funding, and even perceptions of teacher education as a profession.

Attributes

During the early 1950s through the 1960s, the Attributes question asked about the qualities and characteristics of prospective teachers, good teachers, and teacher education programs at the time when President Eisenhower noted a severe shortage of language teachers (Swanson 2012: 78). Researchers explored the personal characteristics of teachers and those that prepared them, such as a pleasant voice free of a pronounced foreign accent and good diction based on accepted standards of usage (Los Angeles City Schools 1963).

Effectiveness

Beginning in the late 1960s through the mid-1980s, a change of focus emerged. The notion of what it means to be an effective instructor replaced the emphasis on studying teacher and preparation program attributes. Questions revolving around effective teaching processes and strategies and what teacher education processes were most successful in ensuring that pre-service teachers learn these strategies were the focus. At this time, many teacher education programs developed systems for evaluating prospective teachers according to scientific objectives and performance criteria.

Knowledge

Starting in the early 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, public and governmental concern about teacher education and teacher quality became the focus. This period reflected a shift from an emphasis on what effective teachers do to a focus on what they know, and perhaps even more importantly, what they need to know and be able to do. Furthermore, research centered on what the teacher knowledge base should be.

Outcomes

What could be considered the most significant educational topic of the new millennium has been the Outcomes question—the measurement and demonstration of the outcomes of teacher education. The basis of the query suggests that the ultimate goal of teacher education is student learning, and that there are certain measures (e.g., edTPA, Common Core) that can be used to determine the degree of success (or failure) for teacher education candidates, students, teacher education programs, and institutions that prepare teachers. Although these four questions have been in the forefront of teacher education for the past 60 years, several (e.g. Knowledge, Outcomes) continue to be the focus of teacher educators.

A Brief Historical Account of Language Teacher Education

While US teacher education has a rich history of its own (see LaBue 1960), I briefly recount some noteworthy aspects of educational reform worldwide: teacher certification, teacher testing, and the teaching of modern languages, especially Spanish and Portuguese. The genesis of teacher preparation as a profession can be traced to the fifteenth century with a letter to the King of England written by William Byngham, a London parish priest, requesting the creation of a teacher preparation school (Johnson, Collins, Dupuis, and Johansen 1985). The God’s House College was established in 1437 to begin formally preparing teachers, and remains in existence today as Christ’s College Cambridge.
During colonial times, US curricula offered modern languages such as Spanish and Portuguese among others (Gutek 1991). Researchers (e.g., LaBue 1960; Spell 1927) have documented that teachers in New England were selected not on subject matter knowledge or pedagogical skills, but more on whom one knew or to whom one was related. However, the populace expressed dissatisfaction with nepotism and conducted examinations to issue certificates to those who applied. Teacher education focused mainly on the questions of Attributes and Knowledge in the colonies (later, states) and in the western territories until the mid-1800s. On the east coast, state educational agencies controlled certification between 1789 and 1860. Pennsylvania was the first state to require teachers to pass a basic skills test (e.g., arithmetic, reading) in 1834. In the southwest, however, there were not any official examinations to become a teacher. The King of Spain proclaimed the establishment of public schools (e.g., in the territory of New Mexico) and the clergy taught children in Spanish beginning in 1721, and teachers were brought from Spain.

From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, Knowledge and Attributes remained the focus as normal schools became prevalent along with teacher colleges and the beginning of schools of education. By the end of the 19th century, most states required teachers to pass locally administered certification exams (Ravitch 2003) and state authorities began to regulate teacher certification based on Knowledge and Effectiveness.

In the first half of the 20th century, teacher education continued to develop as more and more teacher colleges and normal schools appeared. At the start of World War I, German offerings at the secondary level plummeted and Spanish replaced it “not for any love of Spanish, but rather as a matter of simple expediency. Portuguese, for all practical purposes, did not exist in the American curriculum” (Klein 1992: 1036). At the beginning of World War II, the American Council on Education’s National Teachers’ Examination of the 1930s was abandoned, leading to emergency credentials for teachers. The shortage of language teachers that ensued remains today (Swanson 2012). Unfortunately, in many cases, school districts resort to hiring native speakers to fill vacancies that are not certified to teach.

In the years following World War II, issues surrounding school quality and accountability emerged. The system of US teacher preparation came under attack for its low entry and exit standards, its over-emphasis on pedagogy rather than content area knowledge, a lack of professional knowledge base, and the absence of a relationship between the preparation of teachers and effective classroom instruction (Angus 2001). Five educational groups (e.g., Council of Chief State School Officers) founded the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in 1954 as a mechanism to help establish high quality educator preparation (“About NCATE” 2015). Over the years, landmark court decisions (e.g., Brown vs. the Board of Education), federal legislation (e.g., National Defense Education Act of 1958, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), and world events (e.g., the launch of Sputnik) were influential and they continue to have an impact on language education and language teacher preparation.

**The Case in Finland**

Finnish educational philosophy stands in contrast to the United States. The Finnish National Board of Education’s (“Education System” 2015) main objective is provide citizens equal opportunities to education, and its focus “is on learning rather than testing” (1). Unlike the United States, the Finnish education system relies on the expertise of its teachers instead of focusing on standardized tests to drive school performance.

The Finnish National Board of Education’s “Teacher Education in Finland” (2015) notes that teacher preparation institutions are highly autonomous as they determine teacher education content and curricula. At no cost to students, pre-service teachers are taught the research process so that they become independent problem-solvers who can read and use the most recent research for educational purposes. Unlike the United States, there is an air of trust in teacher and teacher education; national evaluations or registration of teachers is non-existent.
Each pre-service teacher must complete a fifth-year Master’s degree in theory and practice and then “are granted equal status with doctors and lawyers” (Hancock 2011: 4). The result, at least from a testing perspective on the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment, is that Finnish children were ranked fifth in science and sixth in reading among the 64 participating countries and economies (“PISA 2012 Results” 2012). As a result, there is intense competition to become a teacher, which may be explained by the high salaries, autonomy, and respect for teachers. Approximately one in four applicants are selected each year. (Hancock 2011).

The Future of US Language Teacher Education

Reflecting on the history of language teaching in the United States, some of what I recounted earlier (e.g., the over-reliance on testing) will likely continue to persist for the next few decades. For example, it is excessive when teacher candidates in Georgia have to spend $817.50 in teacher quality tests, criminal background checks, liability insurance, etc. in order to enter a profession that offers such a low starting salary (Hildebranpt and Swanson 2014).

Furthermore, I believe that school districts will continue to look at hiring native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese from various countries to combat the teacher shortage as in the past. While native speakers can be an appealing source of teachers, we need begin a concerted effort to recruit, prepare, retain, and value a new generation of home-grown language teachers (see Swanson 2013 for specific strategies). Finally, I believe our profession can be improved by implementing ideas from the Finnish educational model such as focusing on student learning instead of testing (“Education System” 2015), nurturing and respecting teacher autonomy, and offering respectable salaries. Our profession needs to continue to work on the positive characteristics of the Finnish model.

Looking ahead to the future of language teacher preparation, it is helpful to present the opinions of several prominent WL teacher educators on the future of language teacher preparation before I conclude with my own suppositions. First, Dr. Paul A. García, a teacher preparation specialist with more than 45 years of experience, notes that there are three interdependent macro-issues that define the historical and present challenges:

1) We repeat the past. It invades our present and can foretell future.
2) We reduce or lower standards of excellence established by leadership.
3) We acknowledge the debilitating effects of being a disunited profession (García and Davis-Wiley 2016).

From these macro-issues, García derives a series of micro-issues from the literature (e.g., Allen, 2008; Ingold and Wang, 2010). He notes that these issues are of course not so micro in nature. For him, they become a set of seven framing questions essential to language teacher development (LTD):

1) Who should determine pre-service induction?
2) What has changed in LTD?
3) Who are and will be the future language teachers?
4) Who is the teacher educator in terms of attributes and experiences?
5) Who else participates in LTD?
6) What should the period of induction be in terms of time and experiences?
7) Who and where are our future pre-K–12 language students?

García calls for our leading language organizations and professional associations to establish and subsidize a national conversation on future language teachers.
Next, I consulted with Dr. Pamela Wesely, Associate Professor of Foreign Language and ESL Education (University of Iowa). Her thoughts focused on the K–12 context in the United States because of “[her] interests and life experiences”. She mentioned that the profession should focus on a few smaller goals such as “making the pie bigger—teaching more language students at more levels in K–12 schools.” She strongly advocates in favor of increasing the number of elementary and middle school programs, as well as cultivating programs in less commonly taught languages and helping them proliferate. She also states that language teacher preparation must abandon the grammar-based curriculum and embrace the communicative approach (personal communication, June 9, 2016).

Finally, I interviewed Dr. Susan A. Hildebrandt, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics and Spanish at Illinois State University. She postulated that over the next 30 years, we are going to witness a holistic review of the construct of what makes a good teacher. She advocates a de-silification of education, an acknowledgement that the aforementioned four questions driving educational reform are inseparable and interact directly with individual student characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences (personal communication, 8 June 2016). She noted that “we have historically focused on the trees and missed the forest, and teacher effectiveness cannot be boiled down to single or even multiple measures. Rather, it should be seen as a sophisticated interaction among all four of the questions posed above.”

Concluding Thoughts

Along with the four major questions that have driven educational policy since the 1960s, I believe there are two other questions that merit discussion regarding the next 30 years of language teaching—the Relevancy question and the Vision question. With respect to the Relevancy question—is language teacher education relevant for today’s citizen? It is important to examine how the current business model in education directly impacts language teacher education. Unlike Finland, traditional value of respect for teachers in the United States has evaporated into a consumer-oriented demand for an education that promises elusive prosperity.

There has been a shortage of K–12 language teachers, including Spanish, throughout the United States and abroad (Swanson 2012). The pipeline to develop Spanish teachers, for example, students studying Spanish in higher education, has decreased for the first time since 1995 beginning in 2009 (Goldberg, Looney, and Lusin 2015). Given that Spanish enrollments have decreased and that those individuals in Spanish programs constitute part of the language teacher education programs enrollment, there are even fewer potential Spanish teachers, which will only exacerbate the shortage. Furthermore, as language programs in Portuguese, for example, are cut (e.g., Gallagher 2014), any possibility of developing teachers in those languages disappears too.

As do the members of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese and the readers of Hispania, I believe studying languages and preparing language teachers are worthy endeavors. For decades, studies have shown that learning a new language is important for the development of reading abilities (D’Angiulli, Siegel, and Serra 2001), cognitive abilities (Stewart 2005), problem solving (Stephens 1997), and higher academic achievement on a variety of standardized test measures (Turnbull, Hart, and Lapkin 2003), which are aligned well with national twenty-first-century skills initiative.

Teachers are preparing students for their adult lives and the business model needs to be applied to commercial endeavors, not education. The current notion of students as customers significantly changes teaching and learning as teachers. For example, linking teacher merit pay to student outcomes is ridiculous when consequences are limited only to educators. As a former public school Spanish teacher, I cannot remember the number of times I heard from students that “it doesn’t matter how I do on the test because if I ace it or not, I still graduate.” However, if our customers/students perform poorly on some standardized test, it is consequential for
teachers, administrators, and school districts. Until every stakeholder, including students and parents/guardians, has a vested interest in the education of our citizenry, any application of the business model remains rather problematic.

With respect to Vision, I concur with Drs. García, Hildebrandt, and Wesely. I call for a common vision of language teacher education so everyone from the dual language immersion Spanish and Portuguese teacher to language teaching organizations has a common discourse about the value of language study. Given that educational reform is driven currently by Outcomes, we must continue to promote that language learning supports academic achievement in so many ways, such as tremendous gains on the SAT exam (The College Board 2003). In December 2015, Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, and President Obama signed it into law. While language education is part of the Well-Rounded Education Opportunities section, teachers and leaders in the field must continue to inform legislators that studying a second language early in life has a positive impact on the favored content areas of reading and math (D’Angiulli, Siegel, and Serra 2001). Furthermore, publicly advocating for the Seal of Biliteracy should take place.

A common dialogue can help our profession unify and keep professionals abreast of the national trends such as proficiency in language learning and the challenges presented by technology (e.g., Rosetta Stone, downloadable language apps). Cochran-Smith (2000) suggested that the future of teacher education in the United States depends on how we construct the issues within the educational community, how we engage in the public debate, and whether we have a voice in framing the questions that matter, on which we are the experts. Language professionals and others must forge a concerted effort to effect positive change and be part of the much-needed professional dialogue. Undoubtedly, teacher education will continue to be scrutinized for the foreseeable future. Language learning and teaching are worthy endeavors and we must be part of the national education conversation and bring language teaching and learning to the forefront of educational policy at all levels.

NOTES

1 Normal schools were created to train high school graduates to be teachers and to establish teaching standards or “norms.”

WORKS CITED


Response to “The Future of K–12 Teacher Education: Spanish and Portuguese”

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The precarious situation facing the foreign language community in the United States presages a future of re-examination of foreign language teacher education. However pervasive the shortage of foreign language teachers may be as evidenced by Swanson (2012, 2013), of equal concern are the target language proficiency levels and pedagogical skills of the teachers, as well as their knowledge about their students’ motivations for studying the languages (Brooks and Darhower 2014; Pratt, Agnello, and Santos 2009; Rhodes and Pufahl 2008; Richards, Conway, Rosvist, and Harvey 2013), but I will limit my response to language proficiency.

The Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers proposed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (ACTFL/CAEP) require preservice teachers of Portuguese and Spanish to have a minimum proficiency level of Advanced Low (ACTFL/CAEP 2013). This is also the widely accepted minimum requirement for certification. However, the literature indicates that students coming out of US foreign language undergraduate programs hardly ever achieve that level (Darhower 2014; Glisan 2013; Tedick 2013), and only 54% of teacher candidates attain Advanced Low oral proficiency (Glisan, Swender, and Surface 2013). Rhodes and Pufahl (2008) also report that more than one quarter of elementary school foreign language teachers are not certified, and the percentage of elementary schools that had uncertified language teachers increased from 17% in 1997 to 31% in 2008.

VanPatten (2015) cautions about the dearth of experts in language acquisition and notes that the combined expertise (linguistics, language acquisition, language teaching) of tenure-line faculty members at PhD granting institutions in Spanish is about 20% and only 6% of them has expertise in second-language acquisition. That, to him, indicates a major lacuna in “language departments,” and he questions: “Who is driving the bus of language development?” (2). He expresses the concern that since very few language experts are exiting doctoral programs, most of the people who will be at the helm of language departments and programs will not be language experts. He explains that “language acquisition is the place where the rubber meets the road” as language acquisitionists are the ones who have the best chance of informing language teaching (5). He adds that without a strong presence of language experts, there is a predominance of old myths such as the belief that language is a list of rules, which in my view explains the continued pervasive use of grammar-based curricula despite the abundant literature on the indispensability of communicative approaches for communicative competence.

Therefore, school districts will increase the hiring of Spanish and Portuguese native speakers from other countries until there is a consistent flow of homegrown teachers who meet the
required language proficiency standards. The “Visiting Teachers from Spain in the USA and Canada” program of the Ministry of Education of Spain for example continues to gain popularity in school districts.

WORKS CITED


