



**Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers: An Assessment of Language Teacher Education
and its Relevance**

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Abstract

There is certainly a direct link between the labour market and education (QHE, 1994; Fagerlind and Kanaev, 1998). As the labour market changes, so does/should education to respond to the change. This is more so in higher education, which directly provides the work force to run the economy of a country (Dunne, 1999). Therefore, it is imperative for higher education to be mindful of the changes even outside of education, as these impact on the conduct of it (Nair, 2003).

Some of the powerful technological and political forces, which include technology driven growth of information and communication and globalization, are changing the way the world economy operates. By offering new ways of communication, email and internet technology, for example, is rendering distance less of a problem. Undoubtedly, the impact of these forces is being seen in higher education (on line learning, computer aided instruction, global content, etc). If higher education is to be meaningfully relevant, these new developments should inform curriculum. A curriculum reform alone is not enough to deal with the problem, though. Teachers should try to keep abreast of the latest developments and accordingly upgrade their skills.

This paper attempts to examine how these changes influence language learning now and in future and how teacher education programmes in private and government institutions at a degree level are addressing the issues. In particular, the paper tries to assess how relevant the current teacher education curriculum is in preparing the teachers for 'tomorrow'. Besides, whether or not teachers are aware of the issues has been assessed. The curriculum has been thoroughly studied and questionnaires were administered to teacher trainers, graduate and prospective teachers.

Introduction

This is a dynamic world and change is bound to take place in every sphere of life. Higher education is no exception. The 'traditional' belief that higher education is all about 'broadening the mind in a very general sense' and 'intellectual maturity' is no longer comfortably cherished (Dunne, et al: 1999:63). In stead, a more consumerist view is being promoted and a utilitarian role of higher education is being propagated as well. "Higher education has a responsibility for ensuring that students graduate with competences that enable them to work effectively in modern organizations.' (QHE:1994).

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It is imperative for higher education to be mindful about the changes outside education (Nair: 2002) as the shift in the role of higher education is a result of external factors (Dunne:1999).

As well as the shift in the role of higher education, the key role of communication has been emphasized strongly. Communication is at the heart of the work English language teachers do (ECML: 1996). Therefore, an assessment of English language teacher training is interesting in that it gives an understanding of the readiness of the nation to join the global economy. This paper is a modest attempt to assess how reflective English language teacher education programmes are of the current developments and the accompanying new requirements. It tries to examine to what extent teacher trainers are aware of the issues and what they do to address them.

Imperatives for change

The world has experienced major global waves at different times in history. Some of these changes have had far reaching and all encompassing influence. Two such major developments in present day world are globalisation and information communications technology. These two powerful forces are driving world economies towards integration (Dunne:1999). This new economic order heavily relies on knowledge, which, in turn, makes national economies more dependent on higher education's development of people with high-level skills, knowledge and understanding (Dearing Report:1997).

With the advent of a global economy, transnational businesses emerged. People and markets were brought closer (Fischler: 2003). The world became a smaller world and distance is being overcome by the revolution in information communications technology. All these changes and developments force people of different backgrounds to interact and engage with each other more regularly.

A global economy would not have been a reality had it not been for the concurrent revolution in information communications technology. Supported by the advanced features of the internet and other related developments, information could be communicated more efficiently and quickly to destinations in all parts of the world.

Change forces and education

The advent of globalisation and ICT has rendered opportunities in education delivery. Similarly, it has given birth to new content particularly in language courses.

Given the demands of life and the need to learn through out one's lifetime (life long learning), campus-based courses are not ideal to many. That is why distance, on line and e-learning schemes are highly popular among working people. They offer an alternative route to education and training.

Although using technology in language teaching began before the ICT revolution, it is significantly enhanced by IT. Computers have enabled the use of additional multimedia features in language teaching.

These new ways of delivery are strongly tied with technology. As a result, they require both the teacher and the learners to have a certain level of IT skills. This, in fact, could range from basic manipulation skills to advanced skills of programming depending on the need.

The quality of distance and on line education greatly depends on the material and learner support services. Those involved in delivering distance and on line education are expected to have a deeper understanding of the issues in distance and on line learning. Distance and on line learning materials should be designed in such a way that they suit learners with various learning styles.

Communication has never assumed a more central position ever before. Communication with a varied group of people in varied ways. Being an inevitable skill, communication, particularly such new forms as intercultural communication, email writing, writing for the web, etc are being included in language courses.

As the need to interact with people from different backgrounds was vital in a global economy, language courses particularly focused on global content. Activities are set in international contexts.

Ethiopia and the global economy

The global economy which is the result of globalisation and the ICT revolution is 'increasingly more technology and information intensive' (Avgerou 1998). The digital divide between the developed and developing countries is growing rapidly. (Get connected: South Africa). This means, unless governments take action to try to keep up to speed, 'historical patterns of inequality get reinforced' (Heeks 2002; Avgerou 1998).

According to the Guardian Unlimited (August 4, 2005), Ethiopia is currently spending one tenth of its GDP every year on IT. Over the next five years, the government plans to invest more than \$100 million in public center computers. Ethiopia has clearly stated its desire to use IT as a means of improving public service including education and health services.

“ I want to see ICT pervade all our activities as a government, not just in the urban areas. We want to connect all our villages in two to three years. All education services, likewise. We would also like to provide a bit of telemedicine.” Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, The Guardian Unlimited August 4, 2005

Video lessons are broadcast eight hours a day by satellite TV and work is already going on to digitize the lessons for transmission over the internet so that, unlike what is happening now, teachers can have the lesson before hand and adjust the pace according to need.

Unity University College has also recently embarked upon an online learning programme. Although it is difficult to judge the success of these endeavors now, it clearly shows the commitment of the government and the private sector to grab this opportunity and partake of the benefits. According to Ifinedo (2005), 'African countries cannot afford to stand by the sideline and watch as the rest of the world integrates into the network economy.'

Teacher education and change

Teacher education is future oriented (ECML). Teacher education institutions train teachers for the future. Particularly in developing countries, teachers remain on the job for a couple of decades with the pre service training. Therefore, it is imperative that teacher education curricula incorporate both current and future needs of teachers. This requires insight in the side of curriculum developers and

trainers. Besides, the institutions need to have the autonomy to redesign their curriculum when deemed necessary.

Equally important is the development of core and transferable skills which enable life long learning. Although there is ample literature about core and transferable skills, there isn't a universally agreed list of skills. However, learning to learn or improving own learning and performance is considered as one of the undisputed key skills (The Dearing Report; National Council for Vocational Qualification; SCANS).

Modern teacher education envisages equipping teachers with the required skills to improve their teaching. One such approach is reflective teaching.

If teachers are trained how to improve their performance, there are available opportunities for learning. Teachers can learn from their own practice, through interaction with other teachers and teacher educators in their schools (How people learn).

Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1 Trainers' response to internet and email technology use for educational purposes.

| | Within two to three years | Within 5-10 years | After 10 years | Not in the foreseeable future | Total |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| No of respondents | - | 14 | 7 | 4 | 25 |

| | | | | | |
|------------|---|-----|-----|-----|------|
| percentage | - | 56% | 28% | 16% | 100% |
|------------|---|-----|-----|-----|------|

For majority of the trainers (56%) internet and email technology are not to be used before at least 5 years. 28% of the respondents believe that using the technology in schools will be a reality only after 10 years. None of the respondents share the dream of the government to use the technology for educational purposes within two to three years time. When the thing becomes a reality as the government plans (and it is likely it will), many teachers and trainers will be caught by surprise.

Teacher education institutions' lack of information on such fundamental state plans clearly indicates that either there is poor communication between policy makers and other stakeholders or the institutions have detached themselves and are operating in their own island, not caring very much about what happens outside of education. No matter what the reason is such incongruity between higher education institutions' work and government plans certainly diminishes the institutions' contribution to national development.

Table 2 Trainers' IT skill

| | Non existent | Basic | Intermediate | Advanced |
|-------------------|---------------------|--------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| No of respondents | 4 | 21 | - | - |
| Percentage | 16% | 84% | - | - |

As can be seen from the above table, most trainers (84%) have basic IT skills. None claimed to have intermediate or advance levels of computing skills. Although the levels lack clear definition, it is obvious that more than a basic IT skill is required to prepare and deliver lessons, mark results and develop self access materials.

Table 3 Use of computers for teaching related purposes

| | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always | Not at all |
|-------------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------------|
| No of respondents | 5 | 5 | 1 | | 14 |
| Percentage | 20% | 20% | 4% | | 56% |

The majority of the respondents (56%) do not use computers. 20% said they use computers only sometimes. While computers are great aides to teachers even when not connected to the internet, most teachers apparently do not make good use of them. This poor use of computers can be a result of lack of skills or interest. The researcher is aware that both institutions have dozens of computers, which are primarily meant for IT training for trainees. However, he doesn't know how busy the booking is and whether or not teachers have access.

From a management point of view, it is a sure evidence of inefficient use of resources.

Table 4 Trainees exposure to the internet while in training

| | To a very great extent | To a great extent | To some extent | Not at all |
|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| No of respondents | 1 | - | 12 | 12 |
| Percentage | 4% | - | 48% | 48% |

As it can be seen from the table above, the majority of the trainees (96%) confirmed that there aren't many/any opportunities for trainees to access the internet in the training institutions. An informal visit the researcher paid to both institutions revealed even a gloomier fact: virtually no opportunities.

If the government's plan of connecting schools materializes as planned, it is certain that teachers need training. The problem with this kind of training however is that it will be very intensive and expensive.

To begin with, as with other skills, computing skills can not be mastered shortly. Practice is required. Secondly, such 'additional' plans heavily impact on the routine.

Regarding cost, such ventures are very expensive. Simply, such expenses as per diem and transport allowance wouldn't be incurred if it was incorporated in the PRESET programme.

Most of the trainers did not respond to the question, 'How does the ICT revolution affect your work as a teacher trainer?' While a couple of the respondents claimed ICT as having no effect in their work now and in future, only a single teacher trainer said it offers him/her access to latest information. While that in deed is one way it affects the work of a teacher trainer, other more fundamental issues such as change of role and the need for new skills has not been mentioned.

As people with a huge responsibility of training people with high-level skills, knowledge and understanding, trainers should have had better understanding and skills. As a matter of fact, change begins with realizing the need to change.

Twenty language teachers in secondary schools were also approached to get their view on their readiness to use ICT. Nearly all said that they don't want to bother about computers as they won't work in their schools/country. This is exactly what Nolasco and Arthur (1986) identified as a common reason among teachers for not taking the initiative to change. Both the trainers and the institutions are naïve to take the issue seriously and take action.

The government's plan to use ICT as a gate way to development logically fits with a UNDP report that shows strong positive relationship between ICT and national development.

Table 5 Training on distance education for trainers and trainees

| | Yes | | No | |
|----------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| | No of respondents | Percentage | No of respondents | Percentage |
| Trainers | 1 | 4% | 24 | 96% |
| Trainees | 1 | 4% | 24 | 96% |

Although distance and on line education are bound to be dominant features of education delivery in the near future, neither the trainers nor the trainees receive any kind of training. On the contrary, some of the respondents told the researcher that they are involved in distance education as material writers.

Table 6 Internet training for trainee teachers

| | Yes | No |
|-------------------|-----|-----|
| No of respondents | 1 | 24 |
| Percentage | 4% | 96% |

Trainers were asked if prospective language teachers were trained how to use the internet for language teaching purposes. The responses show that this is not included in the training. In fact, when most of the trainers are not capable of using it themselves, how can they teach it?

The revised curricula for both diploma and degree programmes make no mention of distance education. Trainees are given neither the theoretical basis nor the practical skills of teaching at distance. This again is a major strategic loophole.

On the use of computers generally, only 8 % of the trainers are confident in their ability. As was discussed earlier, most of the trainers have basic IT skills.

Table 7 Training opportunities in distance education and IT skills

| | Yes | No |
|-------------------|-----|-----|
| No of respondents | 8 | 17 |
| Percentage | 32% | 68% |

While most trainers lack IT skills and knowledge of the issues in distance education, to everyone's dismay, training opportunities are very limited. Only 32 % said there are opportunities in their institutions. The respondents who confirmed the availability of training opportunities are all from

private higher education institutions. Although the availability of training opportunity, no matter how limited it is, is worth appreciating, a lot more should be done shortly.

Conclusion

Globalisation and Information Communications Technology are pervading every sphere of life. As one affected by globalisation and the ICT revolution, Ethiopia has issued policies to maximize its gains from this global wave of change.

As it has been discussed earlier, the new economic order realized or prompted by globalisation heavily relies on knowledge. This makes the role of education and particularly higher education all the more crucial to national development. For higher education to discharge its responsibilities successfully however, it is mandatory to have a relevant and forward-looking curriculum and skilled and dynamic teachers.

Although the English language teacher education curricula both for diploma and degree levels have been revised recently, apparently, proper account of the changes outside has not been done. That is, new skills, required as a result of change in the operating environment, have not been incorporated. Except a limited discussion of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), which would certainly be a purely theoretical discussion, there is no proper skill training in the use of ICT in language learning. The facilities to practically demonstrate the use aren't available, either. Distance education and other new ways of delivery are not covered in the training programme. Further, there isn't training on learner support both at diploma and degree levels. Generally, the curricula have a strategic shortcoming and do not fully equip tomorrow's teachers with all the required skills.

Language teacher educators are critically short of the skills and experience in using ICT. Worse is that they are not fully aware of the challenges/ opportunities presented by ICT. Like wise, prospective language teachers are not trained on the use of ICT for language teaching purposes. As was discussed earlier, there will be tens of thousands of teachers who would require training by the

time the technology is introduced in schools. Spending huge amounts of money on skill development which should have primarily been an integral part of the initial teacher training programme is unwise and inefficient. Moreover, it makes such useful projects appear more expensive than they actually are hence, impossible to attract funding.

Another area of problem is the mismatch between what the government wants to achieve and what the institutions do. Particularly in ICT and distance education, teacher education programmes do not support the government plan.

Generally, language teacher education programmes do not equip prospective language teachers with the 'new' skills which will be central to their work in a few years time.

Recommendation

Teacher education institutions should tune their curricula to national interest. They should also be forward-looking institutions. What is more, they should do a skill audit of their staff and arrange training opportunities.

Language teacher educators should also take the initiative to develop new skills and make their job more relevant.

Communicating government plans is also very vital. The better informed higher education institutions are, the higher their chances of making meaningful contribution.

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