

Development of Professional Skills and Cluster Approach: Points of Contact in Teaching a Foreign Language*

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ABSTRACT

Number of studies have been conducted about practical approaches to teaching a foreign language and professional development, but their interconnectedness has been considered to a lesser extent. The research presented here examined these patterns comparatively by disciplinary fields that form a kind of academic cluster within the frames of university. The research based on the analysis of various publications on the topic and on the years of personal teaching experience of the author. Three inventories were filled in by participants from one university (Gulistan State University, acting as a source of professionals), one school (School No.2 in Gulistan, acting as a basic employer) and one private school (PS, acting as an another employer). Based on a hierarchical cluster analysis, four patterns emerged: (1) Participants with diverse teaching approaches; (2) Participants perceiving their professional (workplace's) culture as most supportive and collaborative; (3) Individualistic knowledge-focused participants; and (4) Professionally unintegrated participants (students). About 45% of the participants belonged to the first group and their readiness for integration to educational cluster turned out to be on the highest level. Participants in the second and third groups were less open to professional development; this was particularly true for those working in municipal and private schools. Finally, almost all participants in the fourth group had less than one year of teaching experience and results of this group are quite challenging to analyze.

Keywords: teaching, development, professional skills, foreign language, cluster approach, professional culture

Introduction. Higher education systems are globally challenged by the fast-changing society, globalization, and technological development. Pressures on the university staff have increased since high participation rates in tertiary level have resulted in increased class sizes, and students more diverse in age, experience, cultural background and socioeconomic status. In addition, there are other pressures related to tighter budgets, limited resources, accountability, quality assurance, increased research and development that burden the staff. At the same time there is inequality in access, processes of privatization and increasing competition taking place at the high education institutions (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009; Mulryan-Kane 2010).

In the European Union, member states have responded to these challenges with a development scheme called the Bologna Process and by agreeing on common policies and principles that are manifested in the developments of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Since the harmonization of degree structures and qualification frameworks, the Bologna Process has given priority to the social dimension of Higher education, lifelong learning, employability, and educational research and innovation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2015). The European Higher Education Area standards and guidelines for quality assurance emphasize high staff competence, a student-centered approach to teaching, flexible learning paths, individual needs of students, competence-based education and learning outcomes and generic skills (ENQA 2015). All of these trends are accompanied with increasing concern about and attention to the quality of university pedagogy, practices of teaching and learning, and the professional development of both university teachers and students (Hénard and Leprince-Ringuet 2008; OECD IMHE 2010; Saroyan and Frenay 2010; Gunn and Fisk 2013).

Despite the increasing interest in the quality of teaching at universities, in most countries there are no formal qualifications for graduate students, and teaching balance has often been seen as creating tension in university life (Marsh and Hattie 2002; Leisyte, Enders, and de Boer 2009).

Literature Review. Many studies have been conducted about academics' conceptions of learning and cluster approaches to teaching (Kember and Kwan 2000; Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne 2007; Prosser, Martin, and Trigwell 2007; Wegner and Nückles 2015). Also, professional development of university teachers and graduate students (Åkerlind 2003, 2011; Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Postareff et al. 2007; Knight, Tait, and Yorke 2006; Stes et al. 2012; Trautwein 2018) and professional cultures (Knight and Trowler 2000) have received more attention recently. However, the interconnections between these have been considered to a lesser extent.

Cluster approach to education in general cannot be separated from the context of three processes – teaching and learning, professional development, realization of potential. Teachers' and students' perceptions of their professional culture are an essential factor in understanding their practice. This question is seldom studied in the context of university education. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine not only cluster approach to education in general but also to the process of teaching a foreign language, thus exploring more holistic patterns and interconnectedness of “teaching – learning - professional development – realization of potential” chain. As earlier studies have shown differences between teachers representing different disciplines and phases of practical experience (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006; Stes and Van Petegem 2014), our focus is also on comparing these different aspects within the cluster approach.

Method and Participants. This research procedure was conducted at one university (Gulistan State University, acting as a source of professionals), one school (School No.2 in Gulistan, acting as a basic employer) and one private school (PS, acting as an another employer). Initiatives have been launched to support teachers' and students' professional development in all three locations. Participants from the university have an advantage because of the fact that their work profiles usually include both teaching and research, and as a result, their level of readiness to some novelties is higher than that of the participants from municipal and private schools. Moreover, educational policy context, standards and other legislation documents differ in all three locations.

Results. Conceptions of teaching a foreign language and approaches to teaching a foreign language mostly refer to teachers' personal theories about teaching. Conceptions of teaching are rooted in teachers' beliefs about good teaching, the way teachers construct the meaning of what is to be focused on in teaching and how (Trigwell and Prosser 1996). These conceptions are claimed to be rather stable in nature (Kember and Kwan 2000). Approaches to teaching are based on how university teachers experience the act of teaching in a holistic way (Prosser, Martin, and Trigwell 2007), so the intentions of teaching as well as the chosen strategies to carry out these intentions are included (Trigwell, Prosser, and Taylor 1994). These approaches are influenced by the perceived institutional and curriculum design factors and by students' presage factors (Kember and Kwan 2000; Norton et al. 2005; Ramsden et al. 2007). Teachers' conceptions of teaching have a strong impact on approaches and practices, and because of this fact, teachers do not adopt approaches to teaching that reach beyond the sophistication of their conceptions (Trigwell and Prosser 1996).

In fact, in one of the longest established models, Trigwell and Prosser (1996, 2004) identified two main approaches (Trigwell, Prosser, and Ginns 2005). In the Information Transmission/Teacher-Focused (ITTF) approach, the teacher's intention is to transfer information with little or no build-up of interaction with students. The Conceptual Change/Student-Focused (CCSF) approach focuses on students' prior knowledge and aims at developing or changing students' knowledge, which is accomplished by supporting students' active learning and by encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Recently, approaches to teaching a foreign language have also been reinterpreted because of broadening tasks and more complex practices (Tynjälä, Kálmán, and Skaniakos 2019).

Several studies have revealed differences between disciplines in teachers' approaches to teaching. Teachers from professional disciplines scored higher on the CCSF scale than their colleagues from additional disciplines (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006; Stes and Van Petegem 2014). Moreover, first group teachers seemed to explain their teaching approaches on the basis of the culture of their discipline (Stes and Van Petegem 2014). Lindblom-Ylänne and her colleagues (2006) also provided evidence about there being greater differences between professional and additional disciplines than between pure and applied disciplines.

Cluster Approach and Professional Development. Hicks et al. (2010) identified four initial elements to implement cluster approach: (1) embedding a student-centered approach, (2) facilitating the scholarship of teaching, (3) initiating and building up networks and relationships, and (4) introducing staff to institutional policies. Regarding these elements, research studies mainly have focused on how cluster approach can be enhanced by formal pedagogical training. Less emphasis has been given to conceptions of cluster approach than to actual practices. Only an exceptional study by Åkerlind (2003, 2011) analyzed how university staff interpreted their involvement to the cluster system. Three increasingly complex and differentiated conceptions emerged. The teacher comfort focused experience does not include the perspective of change; these teachers become more confident but put less effort into teaching. A more complex experience, teaching practice focused, is seen when an academic develops his or her teaching practice, mainly expanding content knowledge as well as the repertoire of teaching strategies. The last and most complex development view as a teacher, student learning focused, occurs when the development aims at improving students' learning.

Research provides robust evidence that formal pedagogical programs have a positive impact on university teachers' approaches to teaching a foreign language, and to a lesser extent on teachers' behavior as

perceived by students and on students' learning (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Cilliers and Herman 2010; Stes and Van Petegem 2011). The duration of pedagogical programs plays a crucial role in changing teachers' approaches to teaching a foreign language. However, this is not a strictly linear relation, since only practical pedagogical training lasting more than a year seems to have a substantial effect in the form of instilling the student-focused teacher approach (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi 2007). Once effective, the positive impact tends to remain in the long run, as reported by Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi (2008) and affirmed by Stes and Van Petegem (2011). However, some researchers state that the length of academics' teaching experience did not influence the development of teaching approaches as much (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, and Nevgi 2007).

The positive effects of cluster approach can be intertwined with other forms of support provided by institutions that offer pedagogical training (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Remmik et al. 2011). It has been highlighted (e.g. Thomas et al. 2011) that when professional activity is followed by a departmental intervention, the student-focused teaching approach is more likely to be sustained. All in all, it is hard to separate the impact of formal pedagogical approach from informal methods and unconscious learning activities (Williams 2003), but it is also essential to identify the interrelation between formal pedagogical methods and other types of practices. To do so, the framework of professional learning communities is most often applied.

In a review study, Vescio and his colleagues found (2008) sound evidence of the positive impact of professional learning communities motivating teachers to develop their teaching practice in a more student-centered direction. Professional learning communities enhanced the teaching culture, which increased collaboration focused on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment and continuous learning, and also increased student achievement. However, these promising results have not yet been widely affirmed in the university context. Identifying this impact is still a challenge (Arthur 2016), and only some studies have revealed the impact of professional learning communities on academics' development and teaching practices. For example, Warhurst (2006) highlighted the essential influence of a course-based university teaching community of practice, rather than that of departments (which were found to be weak as communities of practice), on newcomers' teaching practices. A study conducted at the Open University (Knight, Tait, and Yorke 2006) showed that there are some signs showing the presence of the elements of cluster approach in education: (1) on-the-job learning, (2) the experience of having been taught in HE, and (3) conversations with colleagues in subject departments as well as attending workshops and

conferences. The third category is the most similar, yet only partly, to how professional learning communities function. At Miami University, Cox (2013) analyzed a more than 30-year-long practice of faculty learning communities; the university provided a structured, multidisciplinary, year-long and voluntary way for developing learning communities. Based on their self-reports, early-career academics who participated in the faculty learning communities felt a positive impact on their interest in teaching and in the scholarship of teaching, and experienced increased comfort as members of the university community.

The impact of the type of disciplinary field on teachers' and students' professional development has been explored less than the interdisciplinary influence on cluster approach to teaching a foreign language. However, in his study, Lueddeke (2003) identified different types of professional development for academics from four disciplinary fields. Academics from the business field were especially interested in strengthening their links to knowledge resources, such as staff knowledgeable in technology-oriented systems for peer review and monitoring of curricular development, while teachers of social sciences focused on student learning as an area of intellectual pursuit, and nursing staff were involved in innovative curricular development and research.

Prosser et al. (2003) found that, among established university teachers, there was a strong link between cluster approach to the teaching process and the perception of the teaching context, whereas this link was not apparent among junior tutors or demonstrators. The results also showed that students engaged in a deep approach to learning in courses of senior teachers, whose approaches to teaching were coherently related to their perception of the teaching context. These findings suggest that the influence of contextual factors on approaches to teaching is more relevant among teachers with more experience (Prosser et al. 2003). In a related study, Ramsden and his colleagues (2007) added further elements of the perception of the university context, such as leadership in teaching, collaborative management of teaching, collegial commitment to student learning, and regarding the context of classroom teaching, such as class size, student characteristics and teacher control. Their structural model confirmed that leadership in teaching and collaborative management have an indirect effect on approaches to teaching via collegial commitment to student learning and the perceived context of classroom teaching.

Discussion. The purpose of the present study was twofold: firstly, to examine the differences between specific subgroups of teachers and students within one educational cluster; and secondly, to identify holistic patterns in teachers' approaches to teaching a foreign language.

Previous studies have thoroughly examined the differences in cluster approaches to teaching between university teachers of professional

subjects and additional subjects (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006), but the differences in professional development and teachers' perceptions of professional culture have been less explored. Our findings affirmed and elaborated the results of the previous studies: teachers from professional (special) studies found cluster approach more important than even just practical approach. It is due to the fact that practice-focused approach, development of thinking skills approach, and learning outcomes and requirements focused approach are kept on the background of the novel educational system's structure. Participants from the university are more involved in research-focused and formal professional development activities and found experimenting in teaching more relevant to their practice.

Our results show that academics' teaching experience can make a difference. The more experience teachers had, the more they found almost all types of teaching approaches relevant. Our results partly affirm the findings of Postareff and her colleagues (2007); in their study, the teachers with the least and most teaching experience scored highest on the Information Transmission/Teacher-Centred Approach scale as well as the Conceptual Change/Student-Focused scale. Similarly, in our study the knowledge-focused approach to teaching was more common among experienced teachers, which supports the idea that the development of teaching approaches can lead to the use of more versatile approaches to teaching. The only exception of the role of experience was the learning outcomes and requirements focused approach, in regard to which no significant differences were found concerning the length of teaching experience.

Conclusion. The findings of our study primarily contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning practices in Higher education through the identification of the key elements promoting professional support. Firstly, the perceived professional culture plays a pivotal role in academics' teaching and professional learning. Particularly for experimenting in teaching and becoming involved in practitioner research and pedagogical training, supportive and collaborative professional cultures are needed. Furthermore, our results show that understanding the professional culture of one's teaching environment is not a quick and automatic process as university teachers with less teaching experience and in fixed-term positions have been found to not really be aware of the professional culture of their institute. Secondly, the developed instruments for diagnosing the patterns of approaches to teaching, professional development and perceived professional culture can help in understanding the need for professional development by certain type of teachers. The experimenters with diverse teaching approaches and those experimenters who perceive their professional culture to be highly

supportive and collaborative can be identified as the key agents for innovating teaching and learning in Higher education institutions. Those academics who were less active in experimenting, research-based teaching and pedagogical training found the professional culture to be more individualistic or they were simply less aware of the professional culture in general. Thirdly, these findings indicate that the support for professional development cannot rely only on isolated support for specific subgroups but requires joint professional development and learning involving all types of academics (see also Thomas et al. 2016). The inclusion of doctoral students, researchers, academics in fixed-term positions and less experienced university teachers in joint professional development opportunities is crucial for improving teaching and learning in Higher education.

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