

Review on Claudia Molnár's PhD thesis

on

How effective are Teacher Education courses in developing confident, communicative language teachers?

by

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How well are English Second Language (ESL) teachers trained in Hungary? Is the low success rate seen in foreign language skill statistics of Hungary affected by outdated practice, rigid curriculum with disproportional course structure of the Initial Teacher Education or noneffective methods used by the In-Service Teacher Training (ISTT)? These are only those main topics that gave rise to discussions embedded in the general educational reform debates often based on opinions instead of data. Evidence based. This is the magic expression of the higher education policy of the recent decade, although decisions relying on multilevel research data do not represent the everyday practice. It is especially true for the complex, multifactorial core problems of foreign language learning and instruction affected by the quality of ESL teacher education. How the ITE curriculum as part of a centralized frame for educational requirements and learning outcomes affect the course structure, school practice? How the National Core Curriculum (NCC) and subject-centered NCC adjusted Framework Curricula may or should influence the ITE curriculum? Do the ITE programs reflect the NCC changes elaborated further in FCs for learning outcome, assessment and teaching method recommendations or it is only a formal, mostly ignored requirement of the program accreditation? There are many questions to answer and many factors to consider. Factors that may have direct and indirect impact on the quality of ITE in general and ESL teacher education and professional development of future and in-service ESL teachers.

All the questions raised above require well designed studies based on solid theoretical background and strong, valid, reliable methods producing replicable results. Therefore, those who use quantitative and qualitative measures of teaching and training need to possess exceptional theoretical and methodological knowledge and a clear view on the whole as well as on the various factors assumed to contribute. Whatever the factors of a study are it is important to bear in mind that suggestions and recommendations shouldn't only be based on the results as several factors assumed to have an impact.

The PhD candidate chose the hardest way to shed light on those factors that contribute to several problems present in the ESL teaching in Hungary and should deserve more attention. In spite of the fact of the general experience of low communication skills of teachers and learners in Hungary, no attention was paid to a salient weakness that is the limited or missing willingness to communicate (WTC). The candidate's aim to have closer view on the contributing factors is timely and less studied as compared to other issue raised in association of ESL teaching. The thesis raises four WTC-focused though not solely WTC-related questions to answer and have a clearer view on those main factors that may contribute to the low success of ESL teaching in Hungary. Four studies exploratory in nature were performed for investigating CLT, learner autonomy, peer feedback and self-reflection.

The main text is 108 pages long and refers to 130 cited papers two third published before 2010. Important and useful information on the studies' design, methods and results are given in the Appendix of 90 pages. The Appendix is worse to read for doctoral students and applied linguistics researchers well before they plan exploratory research with combining qualitative and quantitative measures. Although the Appendix is an interesting reading and helps the reader to have an impression on the richness of data collected, the recent review focuses on the main text.

The general impression of the reviewer after finishing a rather exhausting reading is that the candidate put a lot of time and effort into the study that may pay off on a longer run especially after a solid incubation time. The thesis in general clearly shows the state-of-the art view, attitude and approach of the candidate balancing between the different approaches, theories and dogmas. In spite of this strength the thesis fail to meet several requirements to follow including the clear exposition of the problems, focus and selection of the background literature, clear and well-structured description of the methods and results. For this, exposition of the research aims chosen needs an extreme clarity, strict selection of the main, close and far related topics and a very clear structure. Moreover, several research methods used in applied linguistics are still under development and conclusions drawn from the results valid for a small sample may have a larger impact than justified by the data. Therefore, and especially because of this, a methodological clarity is extremely important, crucially for those methods which have been debated at least for one decade (see Mann, S. (2011). A critical review of qualitative interviews in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(1), 6-24.). In the following, I present my remarks, comments and questions by following the structure of the thesis. It has to be noted that my critical remarks do not call into question the value of the work done and the merits of the PhD candidate. On the contrary, I consider the thesis to be suitable for publication, although only

after a major revision and re-edit. I start with the major and follow with the minor remarks and close with a comprehensive summary.

Chapter 1. Introduction

This part is a sound description of the problems and sets well the assumptions contributing to designing the study. The text is clear, the length is proportional.

Chapter 2. Background literature

Chapter two promises to present the theoretical background supported by the literature selected for underpinning the research performed. It includes a lengthy (nearly 50 pages) description of several issues that can be seen as background literature, though several entries are far related topics that hardly contribute to underpinning the assumptions of the research planned and performed. Here I mainly list the problematic parts and issues without discussing all of them in detail.

- *Length and details* of the main topics do not correspond to their importance and relevance.
- *The focus of Chapter 2* is blurred. It is hard to understand why the PhD candidate pays that much attention to issues that have a very remote relevance to the research questions. This is valid for parts 2.1. and 2.2. where a ‘this and that’ cascade of facts, opinions and publications is presented. A large part (about 25 pages) is used for describing the history of multilingualism and minority languages in Hungary and several related issues with no relevant link to the thesis’ main topic that is ESL teaching and the WTC routed in a part as assumed in the structure and course requirements of ITE and ISTT. A short description with references given would have been enough.
- *The history of teacher education* is irrelevant and to raise related questions would have also been enough if the PhD candidate found enough information on this in the interviews. For that case it could have used as additional finding and exposed in the discussion.
- *The most intriguing part* is the 2.1.4 including several paragraphs on the National Core Curriculum (NCC) of 2012 and the Framework Curricula (FC) from the same year as well on policy issues on the foreign language certificate requirements of higher education entry. With this approach two main problems are more than obvious. First, the policy-related issues and legislative frames of foreign language learning and instruction affecting teachers’ and learners’ performance are far from the prime research topics and studies performed and presented in the thesis. Second, in many countries, the NCC undergoes frequent changes

and the FCs are the most important documents in Hungary as the schools' education program relies only (it should not be the case) on them.

- *An unfortunate consequence of the NCC changes* is that this part of the thesis is outdated as the modified NCC was ratified by the end of January 2020 and the FCs are officially available since March 2020 on the Educational Office's webpage (https://www.oktatas.hu/kozneveles/kerettantervek/2020_nat). It is not too late to reflect to these changes at the public defense. However, the reviewer has to raise the question on the goal and impact of the internal reviewing process. Here, one can only recommend the PhD candidate who underwent the internal review in February 2020 and submitted the thesis in November 2020, to study the ESL FC as this is the prime source of learning and instruction requirements. Reflections on the possible changes and obstacles of implementation would be welcomed on the public defense.
- *The ESL FC in force states*: "Foreign language teaching aims at developing communication competencies that enable learners to express themselves in a foreign language (her English) in a nuanced way, to objectively support, illustrate their thoughts, listen to their peers, make decisions together with their peers, form opinions, information and knowledge. It refers to pictures, figures, audio materials, texts in a foreign language, formulates opinions and takes a position on them, and uses them, in pairs or groups, to solve additional communication tasks. Learners have to develop language skills in personal and online language communication to build relationships." (translated by the reviewer), January 2021) This, however, does not mean that the recent requirements (development goals, competencies, learning outcomes, etc.) could have an impact on ELS teaching by the time of the research performed. However, even the NCC and ESL FC of 2012 gave the highest freedom to teachers in selecting the proper methods and textbooks they thought to serve best the learners' foreign language acquisition.
- *Part 2.2.2. of Chapter 2 promises to give an overview* on the "Teacher Education Today". Instead, some aspects of the past and tradition-stuck practice at several universities (no examples are given are discussed and, in some part, critically analyzed. Figure 4. is outdated, statements of foreign language professors on the scientific classification and recognition published in the first half of the 2010's are not relevant here.
- *Neither data nor relevant publications* support the notion on changing English Teacher Education (TE) stated as "Despite its traditional roots, ELT in Hungary and thus, English Teacher Education (TE) are undergoing significant changes both to curricula and in

practice.” For this a proper and critical analysis of the education requirements and learning outcomes (Képzési és Kimeneti Követelmények /KKK/ in Hungarian) would be needed. Instead, a general description, mainly in form of an inserted table of teaching models from 2006 (Graddol) is provided then the PE course program is given in tables with a very limited analysis provided. This is a rather intriguing part of this chapter as the PE course structure from 2019/2020 dates back to the 20th century and it is not valid for all universities.

- *The presentation of the background literature and data* follows an eclectic fashion in a sense that exposing and discussing the relevant topics and sources are limited, outdated and disproportional. It is very disturbing that the thesis frequently switches between general and local issues. This is valid for the course structure, hopefully not in practice in 2020/2021 at PE, where the given structures mismatches with the ESL KKK having an emphasis on classroom management, communication, subject pedagogy, applied learning sciences, methodology including research methods. It is recommended that the PhD candidate studies the relevant KKK in force and compares it with the PE’s course structure and reports on the result for the public defense.
- *The PhD candidate is right when comments on the NCC as it* “...does not effectively refer to the tertiary sector, we must consider that in the main, teachers teach as they have been taught (this statement provides one of the foundations for the framework of this research) and if we want to encourage more creative, communicative, collaborative, critically thinking classrooms, as proposed by the 21st Century Skills initiative (OECD, 2008), then practices need to be developed whereby opportunities for teachers to ‘learn in a different way than they have often been taught as students themselves’ need to be put into place (Owens, 2013).” However, this is not fully true. The NCC as legislative frame cannot effectively refer to the tertiary sector and does not state that teachers should teach as they have been taught. From a legislative and accreditation point of view the tertiary sector has to consider the NCC’s requirements (knowledge, skill, competencies, assessment, development, learning outcome) and this is forced by the teacher education KKKs and the initial programme accreditation where the NCC-relevance is one of the eligibility criteria. Moreover, there are still ongoing debates on the 21st century skills (meaning, priorities) and the reference given is more than outdated (see the OECD’s publication: [https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20\(05.04.2018\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf))
- *Chapter 2 is finished by this sentence:* “This academic year (2019/20) sees the beginning of a new curriculum” moving ever closer to the university’s desired model, which will

hopefully be producing the confident learners and thus TTs, willing and able to communicate in and through the language/s they are using and teaching.” The PhD candidate is encouraged to give a short summary of the first results of the model change, even if they are preliminary.

- *The thesis’s theoretical background, a general requirement of any publication*, including PhD theses, is presented in the last two fifths (page 28-51) of Chapter 2. It is hard to understand why the literature data and scientific arguments intended to substantiate the hypothesis or assumption the researcher waits for an answer deserves less attention than other topics irrelevant at least in the reviewer’s view.
- *Part 2.3 on WTC is short and not well focused*. It is hard to understand, especially because WTC is a particularly interesting aspect of foreign language acquisition, development and use. Only a limited number of factors (NEST, classroom anxiety) are mentioned here, in spite of the fact that WTC is a big problem everywhere, especially in Hungary. Moreover, it is not clear from the description how the WTC-language anxiety relationship is seen by the PhD candidate, how the different types of anxiety (trait and state) and situations (classroom, everyday life scenes and events, etc.) that elicit contribute to the multifactorial phenomenon called WTC. The PhD candidate is expected to comment on this.
- *Part 2.4 and 2.5 should provide the most important literature review* as the assumptions derived represent the studies’ basis and contribute to the selection and design of the methods used.
- Part 2.4. is the best elaborated part of Chapter 2 as it should be because this one and part 2.5 have to provide a solid background for the assumptions derived. Unfortunately, part 2.4 on learners’ autonomy sets ground on remote fields without reason by mixing history, theories and some research data. The presentation consists some general statements of different research fields including references and cited statements from cognitive and developmental psychology. This includes an irrelevant reference to Vygotsky’s ZPD theory developed for explaining the main constraints of childhood language development. It is false to compare second language acquisition with the natural language acquisition that starts in infancy, for some features and rules even before (suprasegmental in the third trimester of pregnancy). From this view the Sabani et al (2010) notion on Vygotsky lacks the obligatory approach used in developmental psychology that is the clear distinction between the developmental aspects of language acquisition, e.g., ‘the developmental’ during childhood development and the second language acquisition, especially in teenagers

and adults where the role of peers is increased to a great extent and this contributes to several changes including the classroom or communication anxiety (see Mertens et al /2020/ on The Role of Classmates' Modeling and Reinforcement in Adolescents' Perceived Classroom Peer Context, Springer Link Open Access)

- *A popular approach in the TA literature* based on the comprehensive paper of Benson (2011) had a particular impact on this field by providing an often and broadly used theoretical frame for teacher autonomy. However, there are many benchmark studies which may have an even higher relevance on the TA study performed. The Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) study published in the British Council's ELT Research Paper series, shows a proper methodological approach and provides sound conclusions derived from data. The authors studied the beliefs and reported practices regarding learner autonomy of 61 teachers of English at a large university in Oman by using questionnaires and interviews. Their study shed light on both teachers' positive theoretical dispositions to learner autonomy as well as their less optimistic views about the feasibility of promoting it in practice. Teachers' views on the factors that hinder the development of learner autonomy were explored and the most salient factors reported were the adverse learner attributes such as the lack of motivation and limited experience of independent learning.
- *One of the influential studies* (Sinclair, 2000) is often ignored, although the 13 suggested aspects of learner autonomy, by the way similar to those of s Benson, have been recognized and accepted by the language teaching profession years before Benson. They are:

1.	Autonomy is a construct of capacity
2.	Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning
3.	The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate
4.	Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal
5.	There are degrees of autonomy
6.	The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable
7.	Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent
8.	Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e., conscious reflection and decision-making

9.	Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies
10.	Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom
11.	Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension
12.	The promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension
13.	Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures
Defining learning autonomy (Sinclair, 2000)	

An important addition to this is the publication of Palfrey (2003) who drew the attention of foreign language educationalist nearly two decades ago to the gap that might exist between theoretical discussions of learner autonomy and teachers' own understandings of the concept and made the point with specific reference to the manner in which learner autonomy has been conceptualized from technical, psychological, and political perspectives, and, additionally, from a sociocultural perspective (Oxford, 2003). Each of these perspectives is seen to be underpinned by different theoretical assumptions, basically all mentioned by the PhD candidate though without a clear distinctions, critical view and solid conclusions drawn.

It is important to mention that while a technical perspective focuses on the physical settings of learning (often outside formal educational contexts), a psychological orientation is concerned with the mental attributes that permit autonomy. Moreover, while a critical or policy-related perspective focuses on issues of power and control, a sociocultural perspective has a central interest in the roles of interaction and social participation in the development of learner autonomy. It is especially important for the thesis reviewed in a sense, that all key arguments have to have a solid scientific background beyond history of foreign language teaching and NCC changes. Although there have been substantial theoretical discussions on learner autonomy in the field of FL learning, and even though this has generated some broadly accepted understandings of this concept, what learner autonomy means to teachers remains largely unstudied. This, of course, is not to suggest that the review of the selected literature does not contribute to the assumptions derived, it is still not clear from the thesis what are the key issues in the field of learner autonomy.

In spite of the several problems of different nature, the theoretical background of the four studies performed have a satisfactory foundation concerning learner autonomy as well the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Therefore, it is right to assume that the results expected will answer to the questions raised.

Part 2.5 of Chapter 2 presents and discusses the recent view of foreign language education on CLT and its possible use in a better designed initial and in-service teacher education defined as the future of CLT. However, listing the changes required (closing paras of 2.5) is not the right substitution of exposing the candidate's own assumptions to explore (unfortunately they occur only in the Method section). It would have helped the reader to follow and understand the remaining 50 pages of the thesis (methods, result, discussion, conclusions, limitations). Although the eclectic style of presentation is followed in the next chapters, the novelty and originality of the thesis and the weaknesses of the second 50 pages are less marked, though still disturbing because of the lack of a reader-friendly attitude.

Chapter 3. Methods

Here, a list of the main concerns is given. In general, all publications cited should have been presented and discussed in Chapter 2. This is valid for Chapter 4. (Results) as well.

Part 3.2. is on Study 1 (In-service teachers' familiarity with CLT) and part 3.3. is on Study 2. (Autonomy in developing own language skills). The structure is very confusing and important details fail. While some information is given as part of the study described, important data are given together then in tables. What is common that a lot of important data are missing, such as

- age and gender for all samples;
- teaching experience for the in-service teachers (IST) in terms of mean and SD;
- recruitment, reward for participation (for example credit);
- ethical approval (only the informed consent is mentioned).

There is no relevant information on the statistical analysis method used and it is not enough to state that "The data for study 1 was provided in electronic format and was then input by hand to excel in tabular form and then analyzed using SPSS." Variables used? Design chosen?

A summary table would help to have a clear view on the samples. The PhD candidate is expected to present it at the public defense.

The continuous Study 1/Study 2 alternation does not help to follow what was done. Unfortunately, the Study 3 description follows the same editing style. Moreover, a large part of 3.4.1. should be in Chapter 2. and would serve as proper foundation of the assumptions on learner autonomy. Finally, the reader gets easily confused by unorthodox approach that mixes methods, studies, literature, as this definitely does not help to follow and easily understand what was performed on which sample with what method. The study on TTs, again, uses a limited

sample description that follows a lengthy presentation of related literature. A small group (5 males, 3 females) of teachers of various background participated in this study, and a lengthy description of each participant would be more easily followed, and a summary table were included. The same comments could be further repeated as the next part of the Method section followed the same line: a bit of literature, assumptions and some information on the sample.

Chapter 4. Results

The reviewer has to confess that had a hard time cutting herself through the first 67 pages. However, the results acquired in an interesting and pioneering exploratory study, if well presented, would be rewarding. For this good structure, clear description and proper visualization (figures, tables, etc.) is expected.

Part 4.1. does not provide convincing results as just a ranked list of answers given by ten ISTs and two TTs is presented. Figure 4.2 is a graphical presentation of IST exposition to authentic English. It is hard to understand why the SPSS is mentioned as SD is not provided, or group distribution of the exposure frequency is not given. The same is valid for the following part. No details are given for the correlation analysis, only the average time of a two-months exposure that actually varies between 6 and 60 hours (numbers are given in minutes).

Who evaluated the language improvement values? Were their different raters involved? If yes, how high was the rater correlation?

Fortunately, the most interesting results are summarized in a comprehensive table (Table 17). This line should be followed in the future. Moreover, a forced parametrization of the qualitative results is not always the best way to go. There are several methods, used in many disciplines including linguistics, as for example various methods of narrative analysis, computerized text analysis, etc. All in all, the results are very interesting and provide a good data set for using more reliable analysis methods that enable proper statistics as well.

Chapter 5. Discussions

This chapter is the best structured part of the thesis and provides a clear description of the answers to the main assumptions. The explanation of the findings reflects on the scientific literature cited in Chapter 2. A strong part of the discussion is the group-wise presentation of the findings. This very clear structure and focused presentation would have contributed to a better presentation of the previous chapters (2,3,4), tactually the core of a PhD thesis.

Chapter 6. Conclusion, limitation and further research

Here, the PhD candidate refers to confirmed hypotheses (2 of 3), although here assumptions were formulated, otherwise the study would be experimental with hypothesis testing. However, the study relates to investigating a very important 21st century skill that is communication, so that a general reference to all skills lacks confirmation. A repetition of the findings serves here proper recommendations for the ESL teaching, ITE and IST in Hungary. From this chapter, and the same is valid for Chapter 5, seems to be obvious that many topics raised in Chapter 2 are not relevant, at least here.

In general, the thesis is an interesting though raw material for publication. I encourage the PhD candidate to reread the work again and rely on the fresh impressions after an incubation time and use it for a major revision. This should include the correction of typos and unfinished sentences probably due to editing failures and time shortage.

In summary, the novel results of the four studies carried out are as follows:

- Trainee teachers, in the Hungarian context are not autonomous in their own target language skills development. Non- supportive learning environment in which learners are not aware of this necessity is identified as one of the factors of string impact on the lack or loss of autonomy.
- Assumption on the lack of awareness to and readiness for learner autonomy is not confirmed by the study. This is not only a welcome result that further research can be built upon, but it may also help to contribute to reshaping the ESL teacher education.
- Self- reflection practices may contribute to the development of both autonomous learning and teaching confidence. Weather this has a measurable impact on TTs practice in promoting autonomous learning in their classrooms is an important topic for future research.

I accept the thesis and recommend it for public defense.

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