

Reconceptualising PGCE Modern Foreign Languages: the merits of Mlevel accreditation

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Introduction

The past twelve years has been a time of considerable change for initial teacher training (ITT) of secondary school teachers in England. The thrust of educational policy in respect of initial teacher training has been to reduce the role and influence of Higher Education in the education of teachers. Initial teacher training in England today is prescribed by a framework of mandatory competence-based standards, largely of a practical orientation, which places theoretical knowledge on the margins of the beginning teacher's professional knowledge. The PGCE offers an intensive, highly structured and regulated period of initial professional training that appears to limit the development of broader perspectives on education. The current 'model' of initial teacher training in England, in operation since 1994, is one of a contractual partnership between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and selected schools and is prescribed by a national curriculum for teacher training detailed, at present, in the document *Qualifying To Teach* (DfES 2002). The document sets out a list of mandatory competences or 'standards' of which student teachers must provide evidence of achievement in order to be awarded Qualified Teacher Status (QTS))¹. Student teachers spend two-thirds of the training period in school and the quality of a student teacher's school experience has become *the* single most important factor in achieving qualified teacher status. The partnership between HEIs and schools is a key feature of initial teacher training in England. Higher Education Institutions enter into a contractual arrangement with partner schools in which roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. The underlying assumption of a model of initial teacher training that is centrally focussed on school experience is that effective practice is mainly developed *through* practice and that academic considerations are secondary.

The accreditation at Master's level of elements of the PGCE course, currently being introduced in a large number of HEIs around the country, raises a number of interesting questions regarding the nature of the initial training experience. Are we moving 'back' towards an educational rather than training model, and if so, is 'Mlevel' compatible with the existing training model based on the standards prescribed by the Teacher Development Agency (TDA)? Might we assume that future courses will become more theoretically orientated in order to comply with master's level criteria? Does the shift imply a reconceptualisation of what preparing to teach means, or is it just a 'repackaging' exercise? Indeed, at a time when educational policy in a broader sense appears to favour functional and instrumental knowledge and skills over theoretical insights and conceptual understanding, is there likely to be any significant shift in thinking in what is perceived to be of most long-term professional and intellectual benefit to teachers starting out in their careers? There appears to be some scepticism amongst teacher trainers in particular, as to whether it is possible for accreditation at Mlevel to represent a significant departure from the largely skills-based training currently in operation, or indeed whether it is an appropriate development. There is also a concern as to whether it will be possible to attract the calibre of mfl graduates necessary for achieving 'Mlevelness'.

¹ The standards for achieving Qualified Teacher Status are currently being modified and a new set will come into operation in September 2007.

However, research into one 'experiment' in ITT over recent years, the dual certification *PGCE/Maîtrise français langue étrangère (fle)*, provides evidence that we can be cautiously optimistic about the potential of Mlevel accreditation to provide more of a substantial theoretical and professional knowledge base for future development. This article is based on research carried out between 2000-4². It compared the Post Graduate Certificate in Education in modern foreign languages (PGCEmfl) in England with both with both the dual certification course, the *PGCE/Maîtrise (fle)* programme that combines, over an eleven-month period, the PGCE mfl in England and an academic post-graduate course in France, and also the second year of the *Certificat d'aptitudes au professorat de l'enseignement secondaire (CAPES PLC2)* in France. The focus of this article however, is on the comparison between the PGCE mfl and the *PGCE/Maîtrise fle* courses. The research explored the role of theory in the initial training period and attempted to account for its perceived decline over recent years. The interest of the work in relation to Mlevel PGCE is in the study's findings regarding the attitudes, aspirations and knowledge base of dual certification students compared with their PGCE mfl counterparts, and also in the comparative expectations and attitudes of HEI tutors in relation to a more academically-orientated initial teacher education course.

Where we are now in PGCE?

The PGCE student teachers interviewed for this study did not expect their PGCE mfl course to be entirely focused on classroom practice. At the outset some student teachers expected and wanted there to be some 'theory', although their ideas about what theory is, were shaped by their experience of the course: that is, what can be called 'principled guidance on practice - a mediated presentation of aspects of theory, as well as how to do things like plan lessons, assess learning and draw effectively on teaching and learning resources. Their subsequent experience of spending the majority of their time in school led them to be focused on the development of effective classroom management, of their teaching skills and the promotion of effective learning in the classroom, which is mainly achieved through practical experience. Time spent in school was seen by student teachers as the most challenging part of their course. The role of teacher trainers was seen to contribute a broader perspective to the development of classroom expertise, but the essential focus was to support practice. This assessment is supported by student teachers' approach to the academic side of their courses, notably the reading they undertook. This was almost exclusively related to the assignments they had to write and to obtaining ideas or tips for classroom use.

Student teachers on PGCE courses are kept very busy, but intellectually passive in the sense that they are preoccupied with developing the skills required for them to meet the QTS standards, and they have very little time available to read and think. Student teachers interviewed for the study referred to here reported that they had no time to read once they were immersed in school experience. They were more likely to seek practical advice from experienced teachers or tutors than to research issues in books or journals. This experience may limit the intellectual aspirations of student teachers in the future and further reinforce the notion that teaching is a practical occupation.

Nevertheless, the research also confirmed that the current structure of ITT in England, highly prescribed though it is, provides a more coherent and systematic preparation to teach than existed before. The level of control and prescription that prevails in the English system has led to a greater sense of coherence, continuity and progression,

² S. Lawes (2004), *The End of Theory? A comparative study of the decline of educational theory and professional knowledge in modern foreign languages teacher training in England and France*, Institute of Education, University of London (PhD thesis).

albeit in the narrowly defined terms of the national curriculum for ITT and the school-HE partnership framework. The contractual relationship between HEIs and schools to provide ITT, ensures close co-operation to provide, ostensibly, a 'seamless' training experience for student teachers within a prescribed framework that is focussed on supporting and monitoring student teachers in developing their classroom expertise and their knowledge of the principles that guide their practice. HE tutors are involved, sometimes closely, with the training that student teachers receive in school, and as such are able to ensure continuity in student teachers' training experience and monitoring of their development. However, this can lead to a transfer of 'school culture' to the HE setting particularly when tutors are more comfortable with dealing with the practical problems that student teachers encounter rather than presenting broader, more objective perspectives that should distinguish the higher education contribution to the initial training period from school experience.

The marginal importance placed on theory in this context, is emphasised by evidence from the national curriculum for teacher training, PGCE course documentation and student teacher and tutor interviews, that practice is best developed by practice, accompanied by 'principled guidance on practice'. This belief has the effect of eroding the distinctive role of higher education by placing practice at the centre of initial teacher training and making teacher trainers the inspiration for practice rather than the intellect. Nevertheless, tutors asserted that HE does have a distinctive role as offering a broader, more objective overview; of 'filling in the gaps' or offering a more analytical view, and they clearly believed that teacher training is impoverished without an HE influence. Tutors were concerned about their professional role and status in the context of the current partnership model of ITT, which they saw as both limiting and limited. Nevertheless, their attitudes to and understanding of the place of theory in initial training was ambivalent.

It could be therefore, that prevailing views of what should constitute PGCE programmes at the level of policy that and ambivalence within the ITT community, both militate against any real reconceptualisation of PGCE within an Mlevel context, except, perhaps, in a very small minority of institutions. Does this then imply a new hierarchy within the system? Varying levels of Mlevel accreditation that individual HEIs adopt will in itself lead to a differentiated experience for student teachers. There is also a danger of further separating theory and practice unless there is a firm belief and commitment on the part of all those involved in the provision, HEI managers, PGCE tutors and school partners that a refocusing of the PGCE that recognizes the value of theoretical knowledge is beneficial to teachers at the beginning of their careers.

The PGCE/*Maîtrise fle* 'experiment'

The dual certification PGCE/*Maîtrise fle* programme is an example of how the applied theory of modern foreign languages develops student teachers intellectually and both directly and indirectly, supports their professional development as teachers. An examination of some aspects of the programme sheds light some of the challenges as well as the potential of Mlevel accreditation of the PGCE.

The PGCE/*Maîtrise fle* was a very intensive programme, combining two qualifications in one year, but offering a unique initial preparation for teaching, that distinguishes it from any other ITT courses in a number of ways. Firstly, the interview data showed that student teachers read more widely than ordinary PGCE student teachers and that their reading had included theoretical works. This, they drew on to a greater or lesser extent, for PGCE assignments, partly depending on whether or how their PGCE tutors encouraged them to make links and draw on the *Maîtrise fle* knowledge base.

Secondly, although the value of the knowledge gained on the *Maîtrise fle* course in France was not immediately apparent to one or two student teachers, by the mid-point of the programme, the majority confirmed that they had come to see the benefits of the course of academic study. One or two remarked that they thought that the theoretical study had been invaluable and that it was important knowledge for modern foreign languages teachers to have. Most did not expect to be able to make crude links between the two courses, but nevertheless, said that they understood better what they were doing on the PGCE course and in the classroom as a result of the *Maîtrise fle* period of study. One or two rejected the *Maîtrise fle* study because it didn't relate directly to improving their teaching, but this view reflected a misunderstanding of the aims and purpose of the course.

Thirdly, tutors reported that PGCE/ *Maîtrise fle* student teachers acquired a higher academic level in terms of their course work. One tutor spoke of actively encouraging student teachers to draw on knowledge gained on the *Maîtrise fle* course and to cite French texts in PGCE assignments. Others encouraged student teachers to make presentations of the *dossiers* (course assignments) that they had produced in France. Tutors, in particular, also commented on the deeper cultural knowledge in an academic, as well as a social and cultural sense that student teachers gained. This not only provided a rich source of knowledge that could be drawn on directly in the classroom, but also gave student teachers confidence in their subject knowledge and expertise. This was also true for native French speakers who would not have considered their culture from the point of view of a learner from another country.

Fourthly, the dual certification programme showed that student teacher's expectations and aspirations of their training courses are not necessarily purely functional. Although, they may have become preoccupied with the development of practical teaching skills and the requirements of the PGCE course when they returned from France, dual certification student teachers acquired theoretical knowledge that allowed them to adopt a more analytical approach to their teaching, and, as one tutor commented, were capable of higher level abstract thinking than mainstream PGCE student teachers. Equally, having gained a theoretical perspective, it may be that practice was viewed less subjectively.

The data also suggest that when student teachers are required to read substantially works of a theoretical and academic orientation, they achieve an understanding of the value of reading as an integral part of teacher professional development. This would seem to challenge the notion that student teachers' functional expectations and aspirations cannot be challenged and, furthermore, presents a more positive and optimistic view of the potential of Mlevel accreditation.

However, the intensive nature of the programme, left student teachers with very little time to reflect on the knowledge gained in France when, on their return to England, they were launched into the challenges of school life. More time is needed for student teachers to maximise the benefit of combining vocationally-orientated academic study with practical professional training. This is no less true of the increased demands made by Mlevel. As one tutor commented, this would lead to a more relaxed, thoughtful profession. Nevertheless, the best PGCE tutor encouraged links to be made between the theory of the *Maîtrise fle* and school practice through the intermediary of the 'principled guidance on practice' that PGCE subject/curriculum studies offers. At worse, where tutors failed to draw on the *Maîtrise fle* knowledge and experience, many student teachers recognised the complementarity of the two courses and were able to reflect and make links for themselves. The PGCE tutor played a pivotal role in ensuring that student teachers recognised the complementarity of the two programmes and were able to make links between the two. This required a commitment on the part

of the tutor, not just to the demanding nature of the programme, but also to the value of theoretical knowledge in mfl ITT, although this was not universally in evidence.

The theory studied on the PGCE/ *Maîtrise fle* programmes was partial, in that only broadly subject-specific theory was studied, and this group, in common with all PGCE student teachers, did not study general educational theory. However, this dual certification shows that it is possible to challenge both programmatically and individually the anti-theoretical mood that has prevailed in initial teacher training in recent years. The PGCE/ *Maîtrise fle*, by initiating student teachers into theory, elevates their expectations of what it means to be a teacher beyond classroom competence and engenders a set of aspirations and an elevated sense of professional identity that provide a more firm foundation for future development. This is exactly what accreditation at Mlevel could take forward.

Lessons for Mlevel?

The PGCE/ *Maîtrise fle* dual certification course introduced student teachers to aspects of the applied theory of modern foreign languages that is not offered to PGCE mfl student teachers. The extent to which PGCE/ *Maîtrise fle* student teachers drew maximum benefit from the *Maîtrise fle* course was in part dependent on the individual's disposition towards theoretical study and an understanding of its value. But more importantly, the Higher Education Institution where the PGCE course was undertaken was of specific significance. The PGCE course tutor had an essential role in maximising the benefits of the dual certification programme by providing systematic discussion and reflection on their *Maîtrise fle* studies. This is what made explicit the complementarity of the two courses. What the research data also showed was that tutors vary in their understanding of and commitment to achieving complementarity, since, for some, there is a tendency for the requirements of the English national curriculum for teacher training and the development of classroom skills to be the overriding concern. This is a key concern for Mlevel PGCE where there is a danger of a further gulf opening up between HEIs and schools if partnerships do not develop to take account of new requirements, but more importantly to develop a shared vision of a new era in initial teacher education.

Conclusion

For Mlevel PGCE to be more than a repackaging exercise, the issue will have to be settled as to whether practice is developed best through practice or whether, in the light of recent experience in refining the approach to developing practical skills, it is now possible to return to theory and find a way of placing it at the heart of practice. Without a reconsideration of the HEI/school balance, a fundamental re-evaluation of the content of HE courses, and an active commitment to theory at institutional level, but more importantly amongst teacher trainers, it is difficult to see how Mlevel accreditation can have any real substance. The reconceptualisation of PGCE that Mlevel accreditation offers is an intellectual project which those who express a commitment to a more academically orientated PGCE must lead, both in terms of their own engagement with theory and research and the ways in which this might be reflected in their courses. In this way, student teachers' expectations and aspirations of their initial training can be raised and reorientated towards educational thinking and rewarded appropriately through credits at Master's level. Teachers who have studied theory and who have risen to the theoretical challenge throughout their initiation into teaching, will have confidence in knowledge, a vision of education, more commitment to the profession, and certainty about the value of their professional knowledge *as well as* their practical skills. Could this be the vision that drives Mlevel PGCE?