

University-School Partnership Model in Foreign Language Teacher Education

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Abstract

Since 2000 the regulations of the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) in Latvia have stated that 26 credits of the higher education program should be planned for the students' practice at their future working place. The aim of the presentation is to share the experience of introducing the reforms to implement these regulations, thus improving the quality of teaching practice in higher education.

The presentation will deal with the active research carried out for five years at the Teacher Education Department, Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Latvia. The model of university and school partnership in foreign language teacher education will be described and its pitfalls and payoffs will be analysed.

Data collected will be presented through the observation of student-teachers and mentoring process, interviews with school headmasters and professional mentors, self-evaluations of student-teachers after their teaching practice and the questionnaire to the student-teachers about their teaching practice.

Key words: Theory – practice, university – school, partnership, student-teacher, school-based mentor, university-based methodologist – mentor, mentoring.

Introduction

The Foreign Language Teacher Education Department students at the Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Latvia, study for four years in order to become professional English or German teachers. The students are offered the study programme based on the integrated model that gives a possibility to interlink the studies of the language, pedagogy, psychology, modern information technologies and practice. The students simultaneously learn the language and the methods of how to teach it. On graduating from the university, they obtain the qualification of an English or German language teacher, as well as the degree of bachelor in pedagogy.

In 2000 the regulations No.484 were issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. The regulations stated that 26 credits out of 160 should be planned for the students' practice at their future working places. For the Teacher Education Department it demanded closer collaboration with the schools right from the first years of students' studies. On the one hand, it gave more possibilities for students to acquire the language teacher's professional duties, but, on the other hand, it meant a greater responsibility for the students' placement at schools.

The staff of the professional program of English/German Language Teacher Education started to develop the new *University-School Partnership Model* in Foreign Language Teacher Education. The model should meet several requirements. It should integrate theory and practice, and what is more, it should be accepted by and satisfy all three involved parties: the students, the university and the school. Based on the thorough study of theories and present situation in teacher education, since 2001 the partnership model has been designed, piloted and implemented in 14 schools in Latvia. The student-teachers, school and university mentors and school administration have participated in the piloting of the model for 5 years.

Theoretical background

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The Green Paper on Teacher Education highlights two conditions that are important for pre-service teacher education, namely, it should be regarded as one part of life-long professional development that continues after the process of selection, graduation and induction of new teachers into the teaching profession, and the other condition is that faculties of education require partnerships with schools in order to carry out their work. These partnerships should be reciprocal, beneficial for both sides, with clear division of responsibilities and common understanding of teacher education goals. Key players in this partnership are student-teachers, university-based mentors and school-based mentors whose role is not a traditional one of transmitting prescribed teaching methods, but promoting a reflective approach which involves experience, reflection on action and the student-teachers' formulation of personal theories that lead to their informed action in future.

Learning to teach is a complex and sometimes painful task. It involves developing a practical knowledge base about pupils, the situation, subject knowledge presented in understandable way to others and strategies facilitating learning, developing interpersonal skills by incorporating an affective aspect, and it also demands changes in cognition to interpret and control classroom life.

According to Vygotsky (1979), learning happens on two planes (see Figure 1.): the *intermental* plane (when information is heard and perhaps partially understood) and the *intramental* plane (when information is fitted into an individual's current system for categorizing related information). The *intermental* plane operates in the public arena of, for example, lecture where public understandings dominate. The *intramental* plane is where understandings are internalised and new information is accommodated.

We expect that our students progress from the knowledge held by others to constructing their own understandings and then putting those understandings into action.

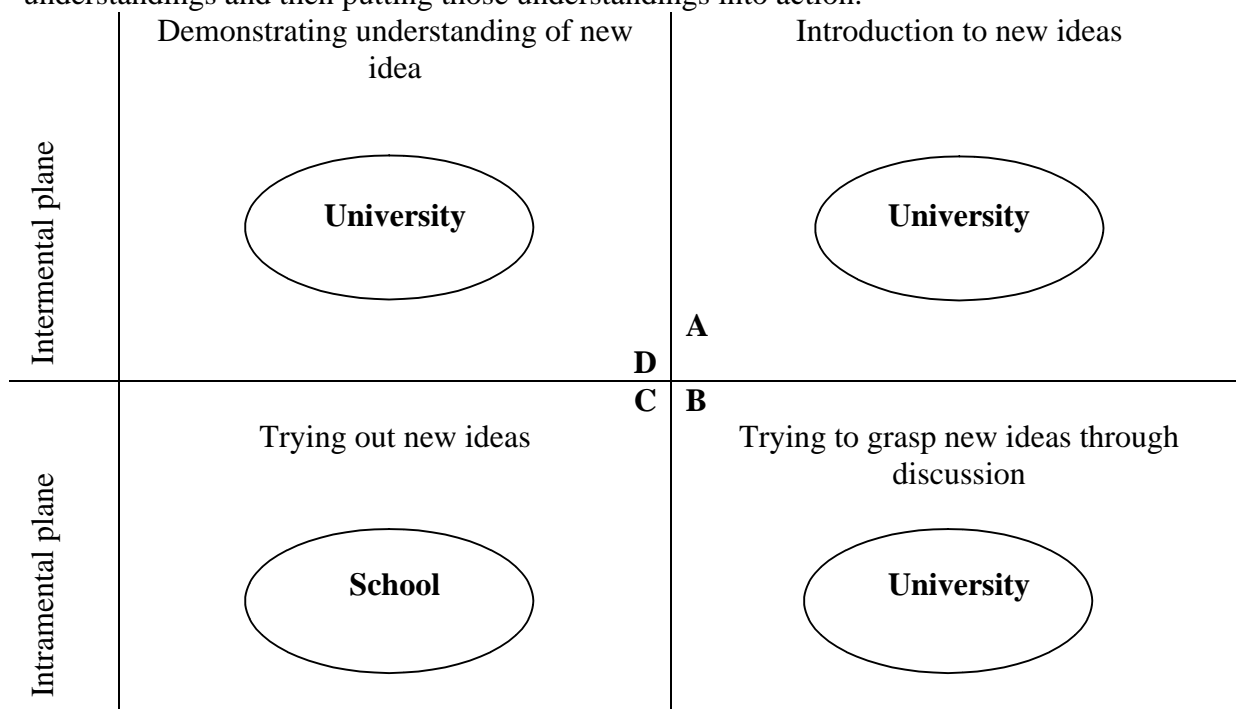


Figure 1. A Vygotskian framework for training without partnership (1979).

University-school partnership or lack of it influences student-teachers' learning. Following a Vygotskian framework (Figure 1.) for training without partnership between the school and university, we come to a model when student-teachers receive the theory of education in the university and work towards an understanding of the educational principles involved in teaching thus developing confidence in their knowledge about teaching. Then they go on teaching practice at

school where they have to apply that knowledge in practice in a classroom and they find it quite difficult. At this moment theory is rejected, they learn from the teachers, imitate them, do as they do and they survive in school. When they return back to the university they are asked to analyse their experience in terms of educational theory, but they cannot do it and feel quite uncomfortable.

If university has strong links with the school (Figure 2.), the student-teachers follow the same route with the difference that after being introduced to educational theories at the university, they immediately see the examples of interesting practice at school. When they come to teaching they meet a professional mentor who helps them make sense of classroom events and guides the student-teachers' learning.

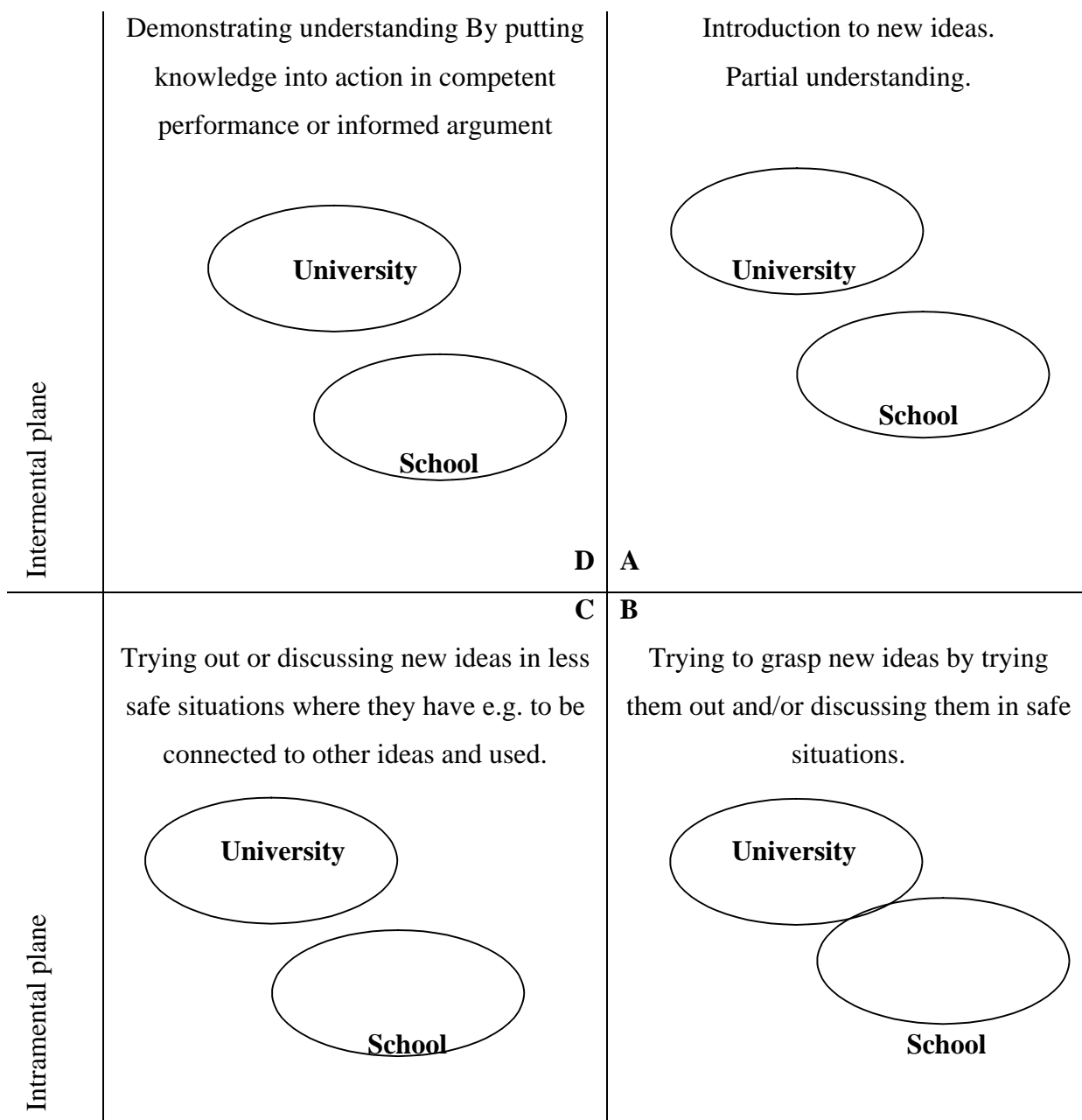


Figure 2. A Vygotskian framework for a training partnership (1979).

In a partnership model learning occurs in both schools and universities, and the support of mentors and university methodologists meets the needs of students as learners.

Freeman (1996) outlines seven distinguishing characteristics of relationship in a partnership that can help or hinder the development of students' independence (see Table 1.).

Table 1. Characteristics of relationship (Freeman 1996).

| | Orientations that help | Orientations that hinder |
|----|--|--|
| 1. | Reciprocal trust (confidence, warmth, acceptance) | Distrust (fear, punitive ness, defensiveness) |
| 2. | Cooperative learning (inquiry, exploration, quest) | Teaching (training, giving advice, indoctrinating) |
| 3. | Mutual growth (becoming, actualizing, fulfilling) | Evaluating (fixing, correcting, providing a remedy) |
| 4. | Reciprocal openness (spontaneity, candour, honesty) | Strategy (planning for, manoeuvring, manipulation) |
| 5. | Shared problem solving (defining problems, producing alternative solutions, testing) | Modelling (demonstrating, giving information, guiding) |
| 6. | Autonomy (freedom, interdependence, equality) | Coaching (moulding, steering, controlling) |
| 7. | Experimentation (play, innovation, provisional try) | Patterning (standard, static, fixed) |

The fact is that the university alone cannot guarantee the development of students' independence.

Partnership model

The project "*Presett Partnership: Towards a Coherent and Effective Partnership Between Universities and Schools in Pre-service Teacher Education*" was launched by the British Council in the summer of 2002 with the aim of improving the quality of pre-service teacher education across Latvia.

The project started with two one-week intensive mentor training course workshops, each lasting 60 hours, in which a selected group of mentors and university methodologists (70 in total) were given the opportunity to explore and develop mentoring skills. The Foreign Language Teacher Education Department of the Faculty of Education and Psychology, University of Latvia, also participated in the project.

The mentoring courses were followed by a year of experiential learning. The results of this practice were presented in the mentors' or methodologists' portfolios and in workshops at a European Conference. During the conference it became clear that the partnership between universities and schools had been strengthened in many respects: the project participants had built mutual confidence and common understandings. It had contributed to the development of university-school partnership model in foreign language teacher education in the University of Latvia (Figure 3.).

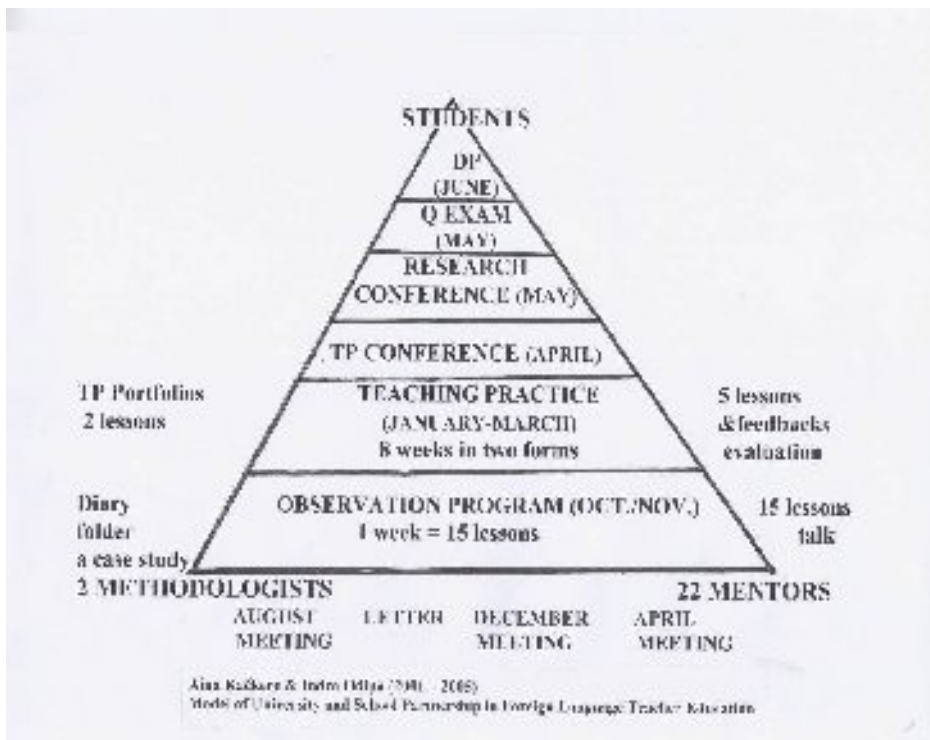


Figure 3. University-school partnership model in foreign language teacher education.

Figure 3. shows the triangle representing the collaboration among the student-teacher, school-based mentor and university-based methodologist – mentor. All three partners share the inside of the triangle. It is common for all three partners; they all can influence it in one way or another. There are two Ministry of Education and Science certified university-based methodologists – mentors in the English Language Teacher Education Section who introduce the students into the teaching practice and 22 certified school-based mentors in 14 schools of Riga. Every year starts with **the meeting in August** – university-based methodologists meet the school mentors to set up the year’s action plan and to finalise:

- ! the best time for the observation program and teaching practice at school;
- ! the number of student-teachers mentors can work with;
- ! the requirements for the student-teachers.

After it has been clarified, the university methodologists can start planning their work with students. The students’ involvement in language teacher’s profession starts in year 2 with the methodology course. In year 3 there is an observation program in the specialty when the students are supposed to get the insight into the language teaching, start building relationships with mentors and looking at the classroom events from the point of view of a teacher not a learner.

Official contracts between the schools and university stating the rights and duties of the both parts serve as pass for the student to enter the school.

Students spend one full week **in November** at schools. During this week they have to observe 15 lessons choosing different observation focus for each lesson and make notes in their diaries, and do a case study.

Mentors should organise the lessons to observe and reserve time for a talk with a student-teacher after the lesson. When the student-teachers return to the university after the observation practice, they discuss their observations in different schools and start developing their own theories of teaching.

In December the university methodologists meet the mentors again – to discuss the observation program, plan the forthcoming teaching practice and work on teaching practice evaluation criteria.

In January students of year 3 and year 4 leave for the schools starting their English teaching practice in two forms for 8 weeks (Year 3 students have teaching practice in primary school and Year 4 – in secondary school). Besides, the student-teachers also have to experience class tutors' duties during the both practices.

Mentors observe student-teachers' lessons and give feedback, scaffold them in their professional development process, evaluate at least five lessons and finally assess their practice.

Methodologists visit student-teachers while they are on practice and observe 2 lessons and talk them through. Methodologists do not assess the student-teachers, they are there to help them improve their teaching performance and meet the mentors. Methodologists evaluate student-teachers' teaching practice portfolios.

In April all the partners meet to discuss the issues of the teaching practice face to face and mentors and methodologists have their own meeting to plan the further work.

During their school practice students do research, small scale case studies that are presented at the student organised annual **International Research Conference in May**. The idea of the conference is to involve the future teachers in self development, encourage their participation in conferences, present not defend research and to improve their presentation skills so necessary for teacher's job. Usually all the university staff attends these conferences and some mentors as well.

There are two more things – the qualification exam and the defence of the Diploma Papers that mentors are involved in. Mentors constitute more than half of the examination board.

Research methodology

The participatory action research has been carried out to implement and verify the effectiveness of the partnership model. It lasted for 5 years.

The data were collected through:

- ! *observation* of students and mentoring process;
- ! *interviews* with 5 school headmasters and 22 mentors;
- ! *self-evaluations* of 3rd and 4th year students after their teaching practice;
- ! *questionnaires* for the students on their teaching practice.

Results and discussion

Summing up and analysing the data, the following most crucial problems were stated:

1. **No partnership in class tutor's practice.**
2. **The old-fashioned requirements of class tutor's practice.**
3. **There are no solid bases for collaboration in class tutor's practice.**

The problems have been mentioned in the order of seriousness and unfortunately they all lead to one and very big weak point. It is the class tutor's practice and it is no wonder because the collaboration between the university and school exists only in the subject teaching and there is almost no collaboration in class tutoring. People don't know each other, they don't come together and don't reach common understanding as it is in the English/German language teaching model.

As Malderez (2002) states, they don't *swing* together (see Figure 4.) and poor student-teacher falls down, but not on the ground as he or she has some previous experience of school life.

The analysis of data resulted in some suggestions for the improvement of this situation. The first one was to combine the class tutor's duties with the subject teaching. After all every English and German lesson have the aims that cater for the personality enrichment, intellectual development and general education. Besides, many of the schools don't practise separate hours for class tutoring and that leads to artificial practice in this field.

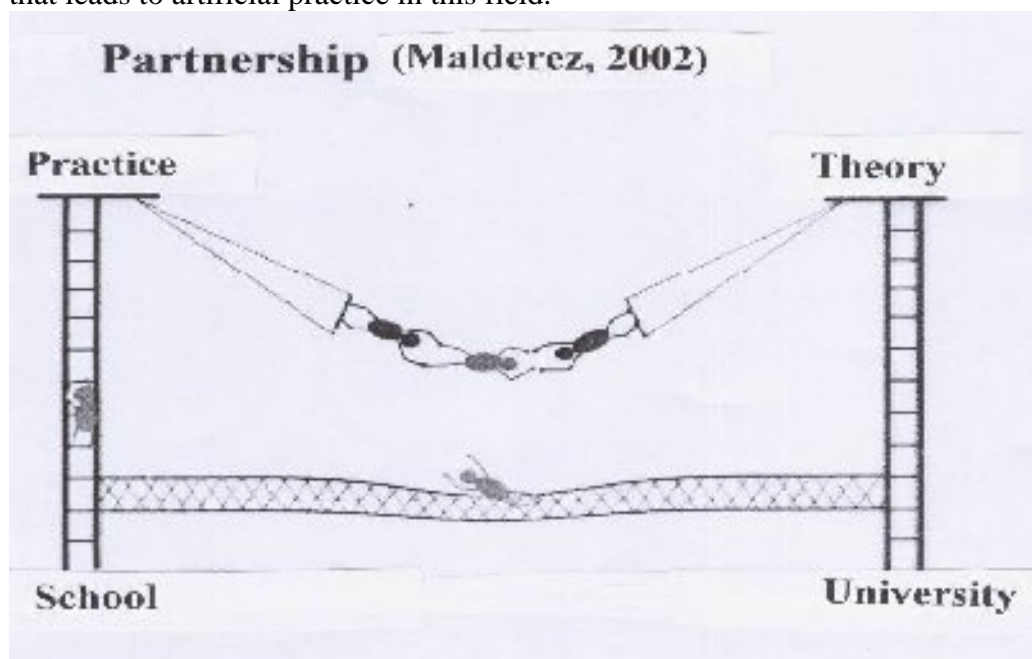


Figure 4. Partnership (Malderez, 2002).

Secondly, if such practice is necessary then there should also be introduced mentoring system. And finally, one university person should be responsible for both practices – the subject and class tutor's.

The next problem area of class tutoring is its documentation. As one headmaster quotes: *"The century has changed, but the requirements are the same as in 80's of the previous century. I graduated from the faculty then and I had the same class tutors requirements"*. Of course, some things can live, but not the ones that were unsuccessful ages ago. As a suggestion for this, can be offered collaboration with school's deputy headmaster, social teacher, or psychologist.

Conclusions

Partnership should be based on philosophy, good will and friendly relationships, but not only. There should also be clarity in documentation, time found for discussions – people of the same level should come together and talk things out, the partnership should be based on the recognition of the ones who do this job in terms of payment, teaching load and status recognition. The people involved in mentoring process should be educated and certified as a school mentors and university mentors. Their education should take place simultaneously in one course, shoulder to shoulder. Their

participation in courses should be of personal importance or necessity, not imposed by the school or university administration. The administration should be informed and involved in the process of students' teaching practices.

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