

Letter from the Issue Editors

In direct recognition of the role of languages in today's world and responding to demands in society, ever-increasing efforts are being made to promote and improve the teaching and learning of languages at all levels. While English may be the leading international language in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, one should accept that the languages that matter most are those which embody our particular cultures and constitute an essential part of our personal identity.

The current issue of the LINGUACULTURE journal brings together a number of 13 papers that reflect the authors' interest in the quality dimension of language education, professional development and academic research. They address some key issues in ELT and also provide a set of case studies which give insights into grounded practitioner experience.

Given the authors' different backgrounds, readers are invited to sample an interesting mix of vantage points and styles of analysis - young researchers and experienced names in the field alike - reflecting current trends and concerns in teaching and research related topics in the general area of education. Despite the contextual differences that have generated these studies, they reflect their authors' shared values and preoccupations for finding solutions to enhance the quality and overall effectiveness of language education.

The volume is organised into three main strands. The first one addresses the overarching theme of Teacher Education & Development and looks at ways in which past and current programmes in the field contribute to school improvement, to what extent they provide teachers with the space to reflect upon their prior experience and any new knowledge and skills introduced, and whether they create a collaborative professional learning environment for teachers. The three papers selected for this purpose come from the UK, Belgium, and Latvia. Based on the author's rich personal experience as a language teacher and educator, Guy Cook's authoritative essay titled "English language teacher education: notes on the past and future" gives a critical round-up of the main approaches to teacher education in the last few decades of the 20th century and tries to ascertain their relevance in our time. To that effect, he identifies some novel aspects of contemporary English language use and learning teachers need to be prepared to engage with in future: new communication technologies, the new global linguistic landscape, the relationship between English and learners' own languages, and the inherent ideological connotations of English language learning. Paul Catteeuw's "The lecturer coach" demonstrates in practical terms what it takes for a traditional lecturer to adapt to an altogether new way of teaching where s/he has to step off the tribune and take a participatory stand at the side in order to be able to coach students in a creative learning environment

that makes regular use of activating learning forms such as zoom sessions and teamwork. The author also develops a comprehensive framework of intercultural competence for business students and introduces different forms of assessment associated with it. Last in this strand is Inta Ratniece and Agnese Ratniece's "Creativity in cooperation - for integrating sustainable development ideas into teacher practice". The paper defines teachers as creative sustainable development promoters who need to cooperate with a view to designing innovative ICT-based content and developing new pedagogies and practice in education and training. The central concept of 'sustainable development' is analysed both from a theoretical standpoint and through the practical results, the gains, and the pitfalls of an Erasmus project bringing together educators from 11 countries.

The second strand - Focus on problems - comprises a select number of ELT issues that are often deemed problematic insofar as they impede achievement in language learning. Whether they discuss the situation of minority languages in Europe or discrete items such as motivation and gender bias in the English classroom, the three papers included here make a strong, convergent case for an equitable education system. Damjana Kern's "The teaching of the Slovene language in minority educational institutions in Carinthia, Austria" explores prevalent approaches and models of bilingual education, with a special focus on the use of Slovene in its twofold condition as a language of instruction and a second language taught in south-east Austria today. Working with the tools of sociolinguistics, the author contends that learners in that particular context mainly choose to learn Slovene for several pragmatic reasons, not least important among them being the economic advantages of bilingualism. In his turn, George Bursuc's "Achieving gender equality in teaching and learning: identifying problems and searching for solutions" channels the discussion along the lines of sensitivity (or lack thereof) to gender equality as reflected in ELT materials available on the Romanian market. Documenting an in-depth review of several coursebooks printed between 1997 and 2004, the study finds that, despite some recent advances, much is still to be done in the way of consistently challenging gender-based stereotypes and attitudes in the ELT materials currently in use. Finally, Ovidiu Aniculăese's paper on "Failure and natural growth. Teaching reading to boys in democratic environments" is predicated on the imperative need for teachers to show openness and flexibility as prerequisites for reducing the considerable gap between girls and boys in reading tests. To that purpose, the author requests that the pleasure principle behind reading be subsumed to the search for value, relevance and truth or, as the case may be, aesthetic quality.

Building on synergies, the loop is closed with the third strand, called Focus on solutions. These last seven papers run the whole gamut from surveying ways of improving learning techniques and solutions for different teaching

situations, which include the use of ICT and blended learning (Rebeca Ungureanu's "The internet and ICT: costs, gains and compromises"), through higher education project-based instruction in English for Science (Chalermchai Chaichompoo's "Implementing project-based instruction for students with low English proficiency: a classroom scenario") and exploring the benefits of action research for increased sensitivity to learning styles and strategies (Oana Balan's "Learning styles in the English classroom" and Mihaela Gotcu's "Is it possible for teachers to teach less and for learners to learn more? Exploring learning styles and strategies in the second language classroom"), to gauging the impact of punctual interventions such as adopting a storytelling approach to the teaching of English to young learners in Narcisa Onu's paper of the same title, implementing language awareness techniques that help develop students' self-knowledge, intuition and creativity (Diana Hiriță-Hodaș: "General language awareness in action"), or the use of metaphor in teaching grammar (Adrian Frențescu's "Using metaphor in teaching the aspects of the past tense to Romanian learners of English"). In all cases, the findings throw light on the learners' perceived difficulties in various skill areas, as well as on their preferences for certain activity types.

Whatever the success of their interventions, these authors' reports provide a substantial body of first-hand experience and knowledge based on which the behaviour of teachers in the classroom and some of the expectations of students, their parents, and wider society will sooner rather than later be challenged and adapted.

We hope this digest charts the territory and helps readers find the papers most relevant to their needs. More important, we hope our readers will be able to draw from the experiences and insights described in this issue of LINGUACULTURE and that this will add real value to their projects by helping them theorise and frame their own interventions in their own educational contexts.