

“DIMITRIE CANTEMIR” CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

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LINGUISTICS, LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY OF TEACHING

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Notes on the Volume from the Editors

As language teaching strategies, programs, and procedures are continually experiencing reassessment, new ideas keep surfacing. This issue of Annals of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. Linguistics, Literature and Methodology of Teaching is meant both to disseminate the Erasmus+ Project VIR_TEACH: A VIRTUAL Solution for a comprehensive and coordinated training for foreign language TEACHERs in Europe (Ref. 2018-1-ES01-KA203-050045) and to carry the modern teaching methods’ review forward to address the contemporary age of digital communication in the twenty-first century. The expanding complexity of the means of communication and the openings created by technology put language skills to new applications. In addition, the challenges of intercultural communication have opened new perspectives on the central role that foreign languages have come to play in the advancement of contemporary societies and thus impact on foreign language learning and teaching. The Erasmus+ Project VIR_TEACH project is devoted to the creation of a digital tool to improve the postgraduate certificates on Masters on Education (Foreign Languages) and provide teachers and researchers with open-source tools and resources. In bringing together contributions on the ESP teaching in various fields and Multicultural Approaches in teaching foreign languages in the current era of globalized creation, we seek to stress the importance of improving and adapting teaching methods to nowadays challenges.

The European Perception of Foreign Language Teacher Training. Findings on a Survey in 13 Countries¹

María Amor BARROS-DEL RÍO² and
Beatriz MEDIAVILLA-MARTÍNEZ³

Abstract. *Rapid changes in society, increase in teacher mobility, and digitalisation of training formats motivate an updated reading of current teacher training in foreign languages in Europe. Under the frame of the Erasmus+ Project VIRTEACH, a survey was tailored and disseminated among the different stakeholders within the field of language teaching in order to collect comparative data. Over 500 responses from 13 European countries define the current state of foreign language teacher training and suggest lines for improvement of methodological approaches, materials and resources. Among others, internationalisation and intercultural communication, digitalisation, and gender balance stand out as sensitive issues that require improvement.*

Keywords: Teacher Training; Foreign Languages; Europe.

¹ The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

² English Department. Universidad de Burgos. abarros@ubu.es

³ English Department. Universidad de Burgos. bmm0045@alu.ubu.es

1. Introduction

Mobility has been a key and central concept for the Bologna Process (Zgaga, 2008). Labour mobility of the teaching and learning community within the European borders is in continuous growth, a fact well documented by Official European reports (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015: 12-13). Several factors contribute to this situation, namely, a constant increase in opportunities for university study abroad, combined with the increasing internationalisation of teacher training (Martínez Rodríguez, 2004: 238-240), and a static labour market resulting from consecutive years of economic crisis (ET2020, 2015: 10-11). Alongside, mobility entails the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) that facilitate communication across linguistic and cultural borders, and dissemination of and access to information (Schratz 2010).

However, so far, despite this dynamic reality, there is no unified format for teacher training at a European level, as national agencies tend to work in each country separately. In general terms, Initial Teacher Education (hereinafter ITE) in Europe, suffers from an excessively local projection that limits the future teaching practice exercise of teacher students beyond their borders. Therefore, when graduated students and senior teachers develop their teaching practice abroad, they suffer the absence of curricula convergence. A more unified and coherent set of principles shared in the teacher training programmes of the different European countries, particularly in terms of curricular content and experiences of internships, becomes urgent.

In the light of these evidences, the Erasmus+ VIRTEACH project, A VIRTual Solution for a comprehensive and coordinated training for foreign language TEACHERs in Europe,¹ seeks to create a digital tool to improve the postgraduate certificates on Masters on Education (Foreign Languages), and to provide teachers, researchers, student teachers and policy-makers with open-source tools and resources.

One of the first steps taken during the project was the design of a survey to detect current weak aspects regarding language teacher training, and to single out positive measures for the advancement of foreign language teacher education in Europe. This device would allow collection of comparative data, detection of critical issues in the training of foreign language teachers, and selection of methodological approaches, materials and resources for further implementation. In this article, we present the

¹ For more information on the VIRTEACH Project, please visit www.virteachproject.eu

nature of the consultation, discuss its results, draw up conclusions on the current situation of foreign language teacher training in Europe and suggest improvements.

2. Demonstration

For data collection within the frame of the VIRTEACH Erasmus+ project prior consultation was conceived as a necessary step to assess the current situation of foreign language teacher training in the European context. For this purpose, an online survey was designed and subsequently distributed among a diverse group of stakeholders. The target group included three distinctive profiles: teacher students and graduated as a teachers of foreign languages, foreign language teachers, researchers at secondary or high schools, language schools and universities, and education policy makers and public administrators. Depending on the chosen status of the survey participants, the consultation addressed appropriate issues.

The survey was launched in November 2019 and was open for 3 weeks. It reached a total of 508 participants from different gender, ages, countries of residence and profiles, which ensured the heterogeneity of the sample.

The proportion of female respondents (84,9%) was significantly higher than that of male participants (14,6%). Significantly, most of the male respondents belonged to the students' group (See Fig. 1). The average age of participants ranged from 39 to 58 years old, followed by the group ranging 29 to 38 years old (See Fig. 2).

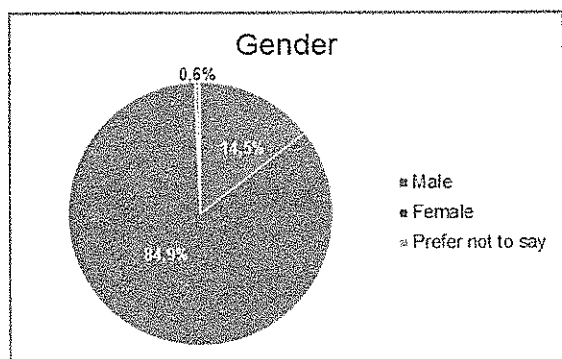


Fig. 1. Gender distribution

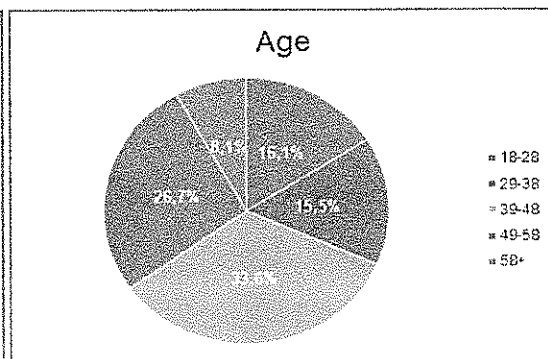


Fig. 2. Age distribution

With respect to the countries of residence of the participants, it is essential to bear in mind that VIRTEACH is an international project that counts with the collaboration of partners from five European countries, namely Portugal, Spain, Romania, Poland and Belgium. Hence, the countries of residence of the participants were closely related to this fact, with 42% of

respondents living in Portugal, 26,5% from Spain, 12,0% from Romania, 10,6% from Poland and 5,7% from Belgium. Other countries of residence such as Finland, Iceland, Germany and Turkey, also participated in the survey but with a much smaller percentage (less than 4% in total) (See Fig. 3).

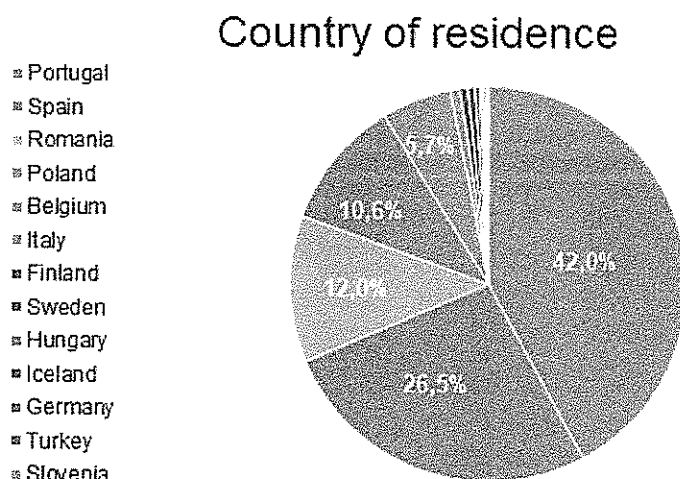


Fig. 3. Country of residence distribution

Finally, the survey sought to reach the diverse population that gathers under the foreign language teaching field umbrella. Hence, the participants were asked to identify their current status. The sample was formed by a majority of teachers of foreign languages (67%). Only one fourth of the respondents were teacher students (29%). Among them, almost three thirds (68,2%) held a Bachelor's degree as foreign language teaching and over one third (31,8%) held a Master's degree in foreign language teaching. Finally, only 4,3% of respondents identified themselves as policy makers (See Fig. 4).

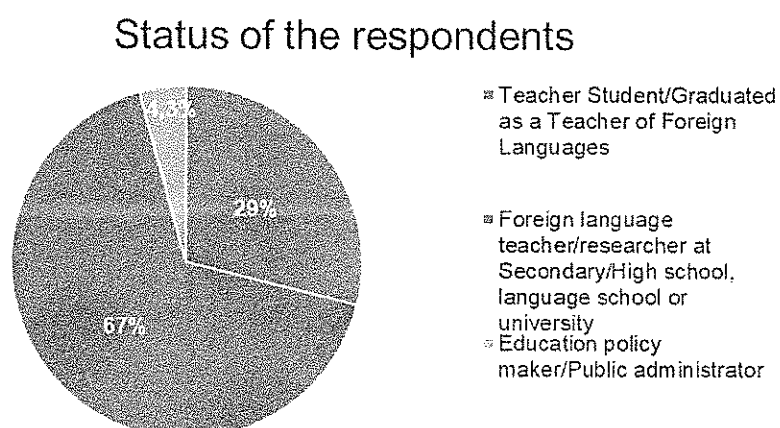


Fig. 4. Status of the respondents

Once these general data were collected, the survey split according to the different status previously selected. Detailed responses given by the different stakeholders can be found in the following sections.

2.1. Perception of foreign language teacher training among teacher students and graduates.

To start with, participants were asked about their motivations to become teachers of foreign languages. Loving languages (72,3%) and teaching vocation (59,5%) were the most selected options. At the other end of the scale were salary and the status of the profession with 11,5% and 5,4% of votes respectively.

Then, they were asked about the social perception of the teaching profession in their countries of residence. Respondents chose the following options: a specialised job (27%), an attractive career (24,3%), and a prestigious occupation (12,8%). Alongside, 25% indicated that teaching is perceived as an easy job, which matches with 24,3% of the respondents who selected the option “a job anybody can do”. Added to this, 23% selected the option “a woman’s job” and only 0,7% chose the option “a man’s job”.

The survey also sought to analyse the contents of the training received. When asked about the degree of satisfaction with the training they have received to become teachers of a foreign languages, the vast majority of the participants affirmed to be satisfied (40,8%) or very satisfied (32%) (See Fig. 5).

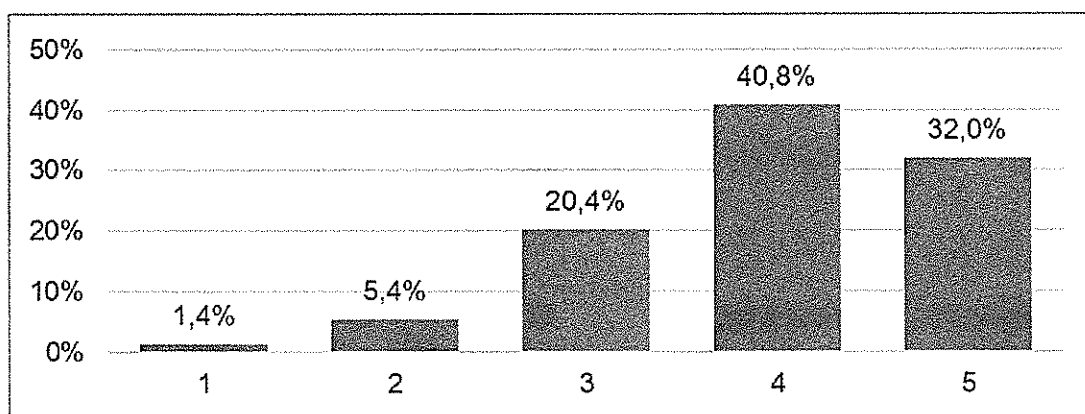


Fig. 5. Degree of satisfaction with the training you have received

Despite these positive results, the participants also provided qualitative rating for improvement in the training received. A more communicative approach, basic contents on pedagogy and language skills, and practical workshops on innovative methods were the prioritized items. On the contrary, issues such as information about the labour market and competitions to join the public sector, and knowledge about other European education systems were not seen as important.

Equally, participants were asked to rate a range of options to improve their guided teaching practice as novice teachers. “Freedom to implement activities and methodologies” and “An online system to connect student, school mentor and university tutor”, as well as “Time/space to exchange in-service experiences among teacher students”, were the most commonly selected options.

In this line of thought, according to students’ opinions, training programmes for foreign language teachers would improve with international exchange programs and financial support to visit schools abroad, a stronger support on the part of schools, and more visits of scholars and experts in the classroom, as well as more training on intercultural skills and digital tools.

When participants were asked about the idea of a European Master’s degree for teachers of foreign languages, responses showed a good reception.

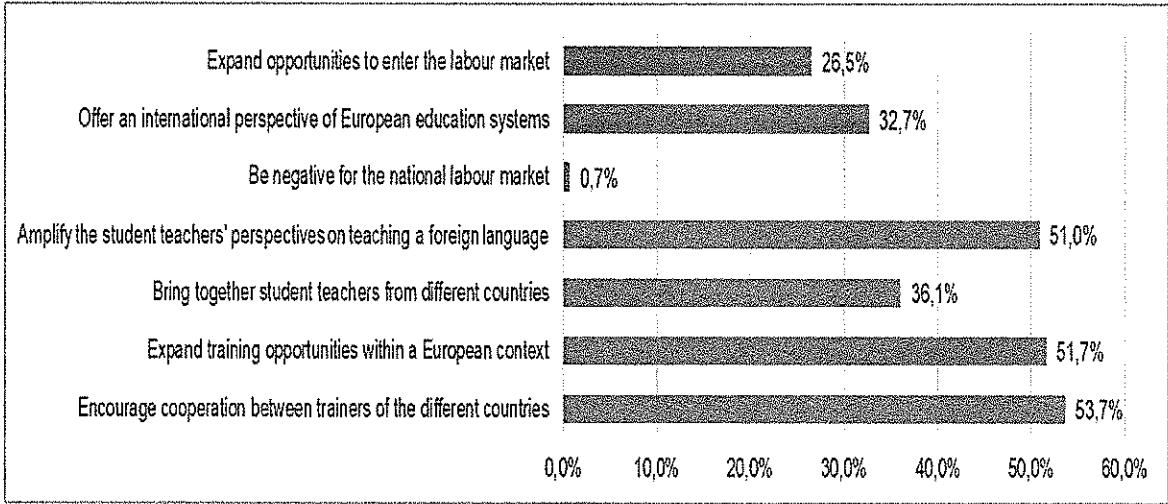


Fig. 6. Positive effects of a European Master’s Degree for Teachers of Foreign Languages

As figure 6 illustrates, a European Master’s degree would encourage cooperation between trainers from different cultures (53,7%), expand training opportunities (51,7%), and amplify students’ perspectives on

teaching a foreign language. Only 0,7% of the participants considered it negative for the labour market.

2.2. Perception of the Foreign Language Teacher Training on Foreign Language Teacher/Researcher at Secondary/High School, Language School or Universities.

Due to the varied forms of the foreign language teaching profession, participants were asked to select their working environment. As a result, the sample showed a majority of secondary or high school foreign language teachers, (51,5%), followed by those working at a university (35,9%) and in a language school (12,6%) (See Fig. 7).

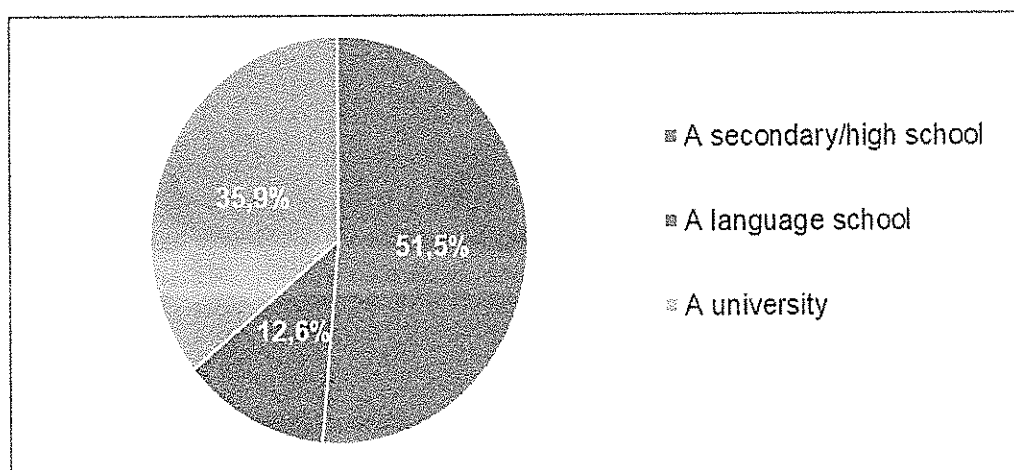


Fig. 7. Foreign language teacher distribution

In terms of professional experience, the vast majority selected a teaching experience of more than 11 years (79,1%), leaving only 11,6% with less than 5 years of working experience.

As in the case of teacher students and graduate students, their main motivations to become teachers or foreign languages were a teaching vocation (68,3%) and love for languages (73,0%), with economic reasons being relegated to the least important aspects on the list (0,9%).

Equally, when expressing the social perception of their profession in their countries of residence, the respondents selected the following options in order of preference: “It is a job that anybody can do” (33,1%), and “It is an easy job” (28,2%), but at the same time, they also affirmed that teaching is considered an essential profession for society (21,2%). Following previous trends, the choice “It is a women’s job” received a

significant amount of votes (21,8%), while no respondent voted for teaching as “a men’s job”.

When asked to select three measures to improve the social perception of the teaching profession, two options stood out above the rest, namely investment in teachers’ training (82,9%), and increase of teachers’ salary (68,8%). Other well received options were to implement a more rigorous procedure of teacher selection (43,2%), to extend initial teacher training (34,1%), and to reduce teachers’ working hours in the classroom (32,4%) (See Fig. 8).

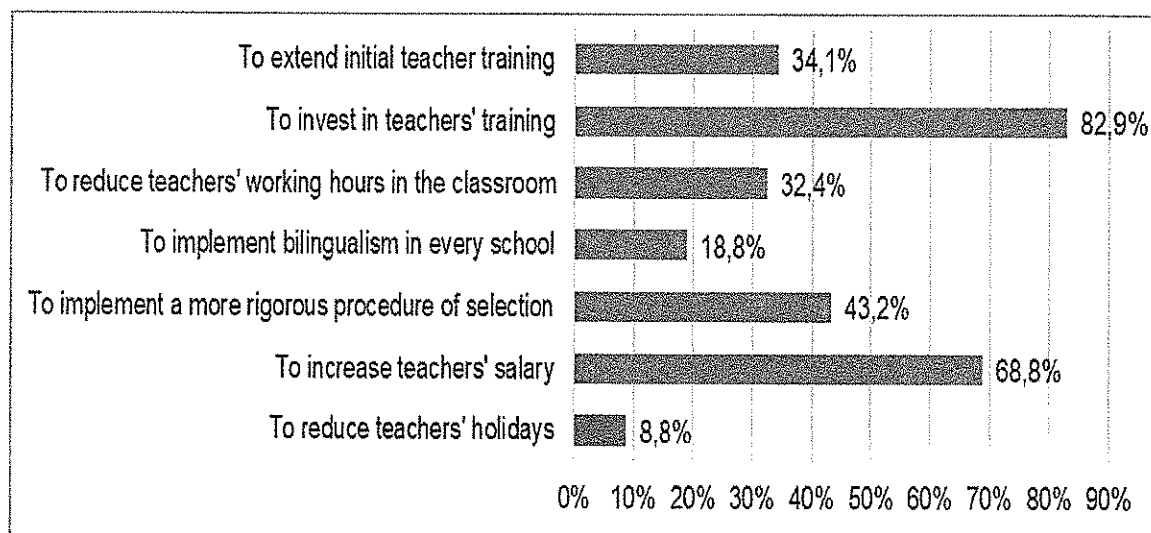


Fig. 8. Selected measures to improve social perception of the teaching profession

Most of the respondents in this group had experience in mentoring teacher students. In this respect, a significant amount of participants (58,7%) considered mentorship an important phase for teacher training, with 31,1% of respondents claiming its positive effect on all parties. Accordingly, none of the stakeholders argued that mentoring should disappear, and very few voted for shortening its duration (0,9%). Furthermore, opinions stated that mentoring should provide students with feedback and follow-up support (49,4%), help them to become autonomous teachers (45,1%), and include critical reflection and research orientation (40,1%).

According to the surveyed teachers’ experience, the selection of foreign language teachers should be based on their ability to teach and educate (83,4%), a proficiency level of the language they teach (76,2%), and vocation for teaching (48,0%), rather than on their previous

experience (11,3%), their university certificates (11,3%) or their having passed a public competition (8,4%).

Regarding contents, these participants voted for career-long training in communicative teaching strategies (58,4%). Intercultural awareness (38,4%), ICT for pedagogical use (38,2%), reflective and critical teaching strategies (36,0%), foreign language skills (29,7%) and classroom management (25,3%) were also considered essential elements in teachers' training.

Finally, experienced teachers deemed very positive the idea of a European Master's degree for foreign language teachers: 39,7% considered it very relevant and 35,% thought it was relevant.

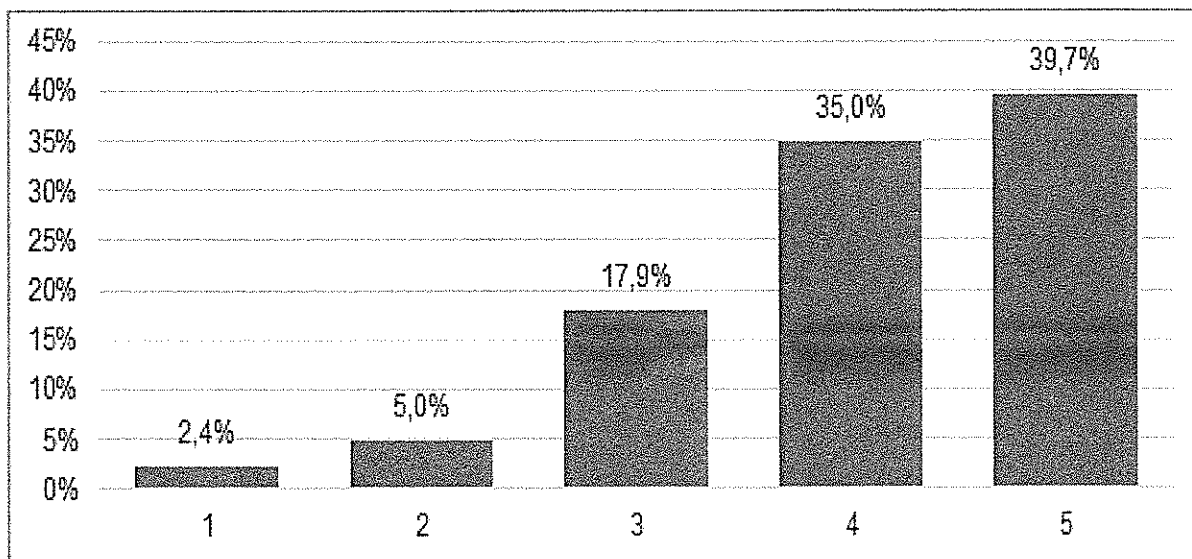


Fig. 9. Relevance of a European Master's Degree for teachers of foreign languages

Among the advantages this training could offer, teachers highlighted the upgrade of the social perception of the teaching profession (52,9%) and its benefits for the sake of European integration (36,3%), as well as an easier entrance in the labour market (32,8%). Together with these ideas, a high percentage of participants (39,2%) selected the need of appropriate funding and support from the EU, national and local bodies for high quality training.

2.3. Perception of the Foreign Language Teacher Training on Education Policy Makers/Public Administrators

Policy makers and public administrators also shared their point of view about foreign language teacher training in Europe. They made it clear that

training programmes can be improved if students, school mentors, and university tutors shared their learning and expertise (52,2%). Also if internships abroad were promoted (47,8%), especially in more than one school (43,5%), and if such training was focused on intercultural awareness (43,5%). In particular, exchange programmes (73,9%) and the exchange of expertise between school mentors and university tutors (52,2%) were considered paramount during pre-service teacher training.

Almost all participants voted for the creation of a European Master's degree, considering it very relevant (52,2%) or relevant (34,8%). They deemed this initiative a positive measure to upgrade the social perception of the profession (59,1%), to open novice teacher's minds (45,5%) and to facilitate European integration (40,9%). (See Fig.10).

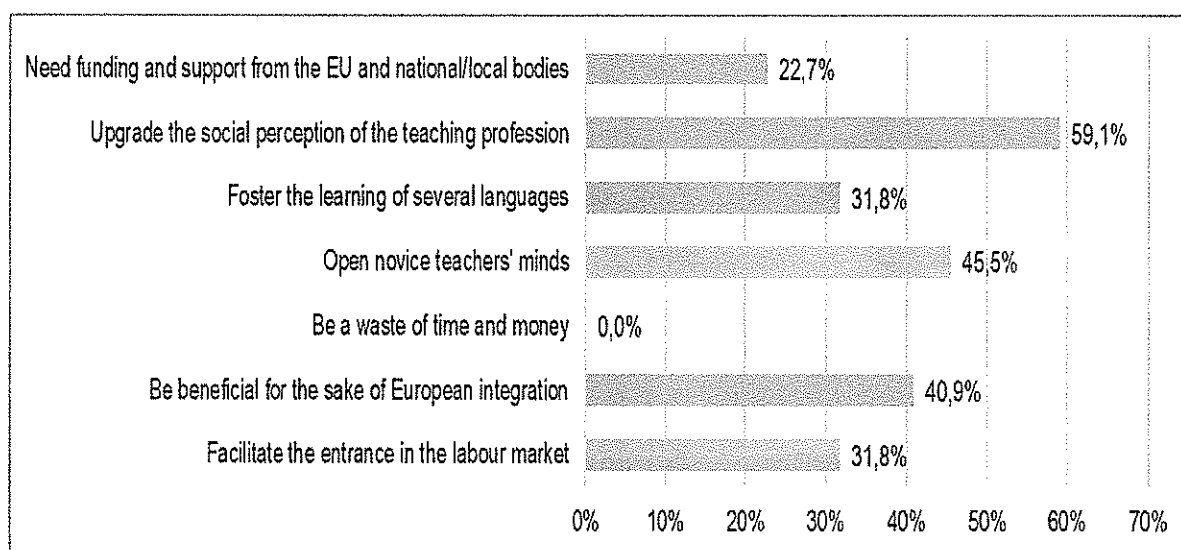


Fig. 10. Benefits of a European Master's Degree for teachers of foreign languages

Added to it all, they also thought that such kind of degree would facilitate the entrance in the labour market of teacher students and would foster the learning of other languages in the European area (31,8%).

3. Discussion

The sample, which included teacher students and graduated students, teachers and policy makers, offers an updated picture of the social perception of foreign language teacher training, its voids and the

improvements it must undertake to meet the needs of the profession in the 21st century.

A significant feature of the sample is its bias in terms of gender. With a remarkable majority of female respondents, the survey indicates that the field of foreign language teaching in Europe is highly feminized.

With regards to motivation, teacher students and graduated students underlined their genuine love for languages and their teaching vocation. Consistently, their views on the social perception of their profession initially matched these ideals, as some of them referred to specialisation and prestige as two defining elements. Contrary to these ideas, they also acknowledged a general understanding of teaching as an easy task, and quite a feminine one. This mismatch may have responded to their mixed feelings towards their vocation. In other words, their personal inclination for a task they regard as inspiring, exciting and rewarding, seems to be colliding with a socially belittled profession they have not entered yet.

On their side, experienced teachers form a more complex set of participants. To start with, it is important to underline that foreign language teaching can take place in many different environments which range from primary secondary and high schools to language schools and universities. While this fact offers many possibilities for pedagogic exploration in the classrooms, the training that teachers receive is not always specific in terms of language level, purpose and educational stage. Furthermore, each country offers its own kind of training, both in form and content, regardless the increasing internationalisation of the profession.

We agree with several studies (Morgan and Clarke 2011; Gu and Benson 2014) that pre-service teacher training is a crucial stage in the construction of teacher identity. Hence, social perception of the teaching profession acquires a relevant role in the construction of that collective identity and improvement in pre-service training must take that issue into account. When asked about their motivations, most teacher participants indicated their natural love for languages and their vocation for the teaching practice. Economic reward was not a key factor for their choice. However, in the eyes of experienced teachers, the social perception of their profession was not too positive. Even though education is generally considered an important task that society must provide, in their opinion it was seen as a job with a low level of specialisation, an idea intimately biased in terms of gender. According to the data gathered in this survey, feminisation of the teaching profession was not only a fact, but also a conceptualisation that affected the status of teaching. As Sheelagh Drudy

has clearly stated: “This global phenomenon is firmly rooted in issues relating to economic development, urbanisation, the position of women in society, cultural definitions of masculinity and the value of children and childcare”(2008:309). The participants of this survey confirmed these ideas and suggested that the teaching practice and its social perception is gender biased. It is no wonder that the measures for improvement selected by the participants referred to greater investment in teacher training and salary increase. All in all, upgrading in the social perception of the teaching profession is needed, and both high quality training and funding are core aspects to tackle.

Regarding teacher training content, teacher students and graduated students showed a high degree of satisfaction, although they sensed that more communicative and innovative approaches could be beneficial for language teacher training. In particular, they suggested online systems for monitoring purposes. Added to that, they detected a need for peer exchange and freedom for innovation. Finally, a more international format of language teacher training was demanded, in tune with the need to acquire intercultural skills. These issues could be addressed in a European Master’s degree for teachers of foreign languages, a means that they thought could favour intercultural cooperation and expand their opportunities in the European area.

For experienced teachers, mentorship was rendered important during teacher training and they indicated that more effort should be invested in follow-up support and building up autonomy, critical reflection and research orientation. These choices project an ideal model for future teachers of languages who should be independent, autonomous and innovative. In order to pursue these goals, training programmes should orientate their contents towards communicative and reflective teaching strategies so that trainees are able to manage classrooms smoothly. In a changing, challenging and complex world, special attention to ICT for pedagogical use must be paid, and intercultural awareness has become a must for the future teachers of languages.

Finally, policy makers and public administrators were very much in favour of internationalisation in language teacher training programmes. They were aware of the importance of mobility and the need to implement intercultural approaches in the training of future language teachers. Added to that, policy makers acknowledged the benefits a common and international degree could provide: unification of the diverse formats of current language teacher training programmes, a greater degree of integration among Europeans, and a way to facilitate the entrance in the labour market to novice teachers.

4. Conclusions

According to the results gathered from this survey, several conclusions can be drawn and grouped in the following five items:

First, a move towards homogenization of teacher training is necessary. All stakeholders showed a positive attitude towards mobility and interculturality. But implementation of these possibilities beyond national frontiers implies a curricular convergence that favours international dialogue and training experiences.

Second, for internationalisation of foreign language teacher training, digital platforms seem to be particularly useful tools. They facilitate sharing and learning formulas that can be oriented to this specific field of higher education. Furthermore, cultural diversity and geographical distance are obstacles that can be overcome if a multi-national alliance of higher institutions materialises. Added to that, an online tool would facilitate cultural adaptation and favour international communication, two essential elements detected by teacher students, graduated students, senior teachers and policy makers.

Third, the contents of the training programmes need modernisation and upgrading. 21st century ITE programmes should provide tools, skills and resources to help professionals adapt to the continuous transformations taking place in a changing and dynamic society, with complex, multicultural, and socially diverse learning scenarios.

Fourth, it is necessary to invest economically in ITE, particularly in the financing of student and teacher mobility, as well as in a greater diversity and quality of human resources. Life-long learning is a defining element of 21st century education.

Fifth, feminisation of the teaching practice is related with a low status of the profession and unappealing salaries. As Drudy (“Gender” and “Professionalism”) has suggested, to combat this unfair situation gender needs to be embedded in policy thinking on teaching and teacher education. Governing bodies and universities should invest in attracting high quality people into the profession, irrespective of their sex/gender. In the medium term, these measures should impact on gender balance in teaching and learning.

In sum, ITE is an essential step for language education in Europe and it needs urgent improvement from several fronts. There is still a long way to go before a coherent, balanced, fair and excellent format for foreign language teacher training is built and displayed. Through the VIRTEACH project, some steps are being taken so that this relevant field of education

improves and outstands as a useful and necessary tool for the benefit of all Europeans.

5. Acknowledgements.

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