

## **UNIVERSITY-DEGREE PROGRAMS FOR TEACHERS AND THEIR ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION: PROS AND CONS AT A GLANCE**

**Anastasia Atabekova**

Full Prof., Dr. Sc.in Comparative Linguistics, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia,  
RUSSIAN FEDERATION,  
aaatabekova@gmail.com, atabekova\_aa@pfur.ru

### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the alternative certification status in the current education system. The research goal is two- fold and aims to explore the situation in the national administrative frameworks regarding the teachers' certification with further focus on teachers' opinion on their alternative certification.

The research methodology combined desk and field studies.

The relevant literature review aims to explore the topic within international framework. The international and national policies, academic research findings are subject to comparative study.

Further the opinions of Russian teachers who are foreign language trainers at Russian institutions and business entities were subject to sample analysis. Totally over 130 respondents took part in the survey regarding their experience in preparing for certification exams and further sitting at such exams. The survey used an open-ended questionnaire.

Cluster and discriminant types analysis were applied. The SPSS was used for data processing.

The findings confirmed the research preliminary hypothesis that argued for solid professional background for language teachers: they are supposed to hold a relevant university degree that in turn should be supported by alternative qualification in Foreign Language Didactics. Moreover, some critical comments were voiced regarding the content of the exam materials and assignments regarding their generalized nature and consequent lack of targeted approach to teaching foreign language for particular audiences, in particular contexts, for particular purposes, etc. The survey confirmed the importance of alternative certification for teachers' continuing professional development, external evaluation of professional competence, and stronger competitiveness on educational market.

**Keywords:** foreign languages, alternative certification, teachers' competence

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

To introduce the topic, it seems worth mentioning that higher education globalization requires international standards of professors and researchers' qualifications recognition.

Regarding the concept of standard we should mention that there is an internationally accepted understanding of the above phenomenon that is viewed as "Document established by consensus and approved by a recognized body that provides for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for activities or their results aimed at achieving the optimum degree of order in a given context." (ISO/IEC Guide 2:2004). However, we have to acknowledge that "In spite of the broad scope and the vast impact of standards in today's society, standardization is still not yet a well-defined, established discipline from a theoretical or academic perspective" (ISO 2014:21).

On the other hand, due to the Bologna process there is a strong practice of mutual recognition of university

degree titles and diplomas (Bologna 1999). On the other hand, the EU practice confirms there is no automatic recognition (No automatic recognition... 2017).

Furthermore international educational environment draws attention of the world community to alternative certification issues. Scholars warn that alternative certification is not a panacea for classroom efficiency and academic progress (Darling-Hammond 2010).

Taking into account the above contradictory situation the present research considers it important to shape a preliminary understanding of the situation through exploring Russian teachers of Foreign Language's attitudes to the alternative certification they became subject to.

The research goal is two- fold and strives, first to outline the situation in the national administrative frameworks regarding the teachers' certification, and, second, to get teachers' opinion on their alternative certification.

The research preliminary hypothesis states that currently the higher education requires solid professional background for language teachers, they are supposed to hold a relevant university degree, that in turn should be supported by alternative qualification in Foreign Language Didactics

## **2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology combined desk and field research.

Theoretical studies focused on documents and papers that focus on national experiences with respect to teachers' alternative certification in general.

Empirical studies covered the analysis of teachers' opinions regarding materials offered for preparation of teachers for international certification in internationally accredited agencies in foreign language teachers' certification and survey of Russian teachers of foreign languages who agreed (though were not forced to) to sit at exams leading to their internationally recognized certification of their teaching capacity.

The present paper abstains from disclosure of respondents' personal data or their reference to a particular accreditation agency or exam (as respondents' opinions might bear subjective views due to a number of reasons, including the exam results).

The respective questionnaire included two open-ended questions:

- Why did you decide to sit the exam?
- Did you find the preparation materials useful?(yes/no/why?)
- Did you find the exam useful? (yes/no/why?)

Totally 134 Russian teachers of foreign languages provided their opinions through direct on-line invitations from the author. The following parameters were taken as variables: age, gender, qualification (HE degree in Languages/ lack of university degree in Language and Language teaching) work experience as a teacher of Foreign language, job place (Russian university member of nation-wide project of academic excellence/ other metropolitan university/regional university/ language trainer at a business entity).

Cluster and discriminant types analysis were applied. The SPSS was used for data processing.

## **3. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Literature Review**

The research started with investigating administrative and academic vision of teachers' certification

The higher education involves a varied range of stakeholders, including students and their parents, teachers and their institution administration, state supervision bodies, and international agencies that assess and evaluate national universities from personal, local, regional, national, and international standards perspectives. These diverse audiences are really interested in types of qualifications the academic institutions can provide to confirm their being in line with both national and international requirements

Regarding teachers of foreign languages, there are internationally recognized standards for teacher's certification in teaching a particular language as a foreign one (see for instance, the following links: Teaching qualifications and courses...2017, Become a teacher of French as a Foreign Language 2017, Japanese Language Teacher Certification (2017).

It should be mentioned that international education community (OECD 2012, European Commission 2013), national agencies for teachers' certification (Guide to the Certification...in Australia 2017, Renewal Guide to National Board Certification, USA, 2017), higher education institutions (Enhancing Quality...2013)

themselves strive to shape highly qualified academic community that meet international teaching standards.

The present research takes into account that there are national policies regarding the issues of preferences and real outcomes regarding institutional experience of dealing with teachers who are holders of university degree titles.

Meanwhile we consider it is timely to focus on alternative certification in the field of foreign language teaching as we agree with those administrators and scholars who argue that that this kind of activity become extremely important within the context of global training of professional for specific domains across the world (Alternative Teaching Certification 2017).

As for the advanced Russian universities (members of the nation-wide academic excellence project 5-100) there is a strong trend to enhance the academic community whose members combine national degree titles with internationally recognized certificates/diplomas. The above approach is supposed to balance national needs and international standards of teaching (5-100 Russia-wide Project Seminar in RUDN 2017).

Moreover, the sources review makes it possible to list some positive aspects of alternative certification. Thus, Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor (2008) specify that some alternatively certified teachers were more efficient in the classroom. Nonetheless, opposite data and opinions can be found through research papers, see, for instance, M. Lynch reference to longitudinal study in Houston, Texas (Lynch 2016). M.Lynch reports that out of 8,000 alternate-route teachers found in TFA, only 2,000 remained in the program, indicating a very poor retention rate (Lynch 2016).

Moreover, educators prevent from positive chorus in favour of alternative certification (see, for instance, Darling-Hammond, Berry, Thoreson 2010, Kane, Rockoff, Staiger, 2008).

Taking into account the above literature observations we consider it necessary to shape the preliminary statement over the alternative teachers' certification in the following way:

The alternative certification might be a good motivation for teachers, it can bring fresh impetus to the teachers' community. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that the profession of a teacher requires systemic knowledge and skills regarding the curriculum planning, resources selection, timetable fit observation, rapport building, resources selection and planning, etc.

### **3.2 Foreign Language Teachers' Survey on their Alternative Certification**

The empirical studies helped to identify teachers' opinions related to the exam preparation materials and alternative certification exams procedure. The results of the teachers' survey mad it possible to specify a number of clusters that characterize the respondents' views regarding the alternative certification materials and procedure.

Table 1 shows those reasons that soured teachers of foreign languages apply for external certification procedure.

**Table 1. Teachers' reasons to sit the exam**

Clusters	% of the respondents who mentioned the item
The language teaching market and industry requirements	84%
Personal development requirements	66%
The employer's recommendations	44%

The discriminant analysis identified as statistically significant teachers' job placement at a university that is member of s' Russian university member of nation-wide project of academic excellence or the respondents' employment in a large corporate business entity ( $\lambda = 0,223$ ,  $\chi^2 = 2,211$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ).

It should be noted that there are no strong requirements from the Russian institutions or agencies that engage in language training service provisions.

Table 2 portraits teachers' opinions regarding the exam preparation materials.

**Table 2. Teachers' opinions on the exam preparation materials**

Clusters	% of the respondents who mentioned the item
Useful in terms of understanding the exam structure	88%
Useful in terms of the exam assignments types	67%
Useful in terms of training time management for the exam	58%

The discriminant analysis identified as statistically significant teachers qualification ( $\lambda = 0,241$ ,  $\chi^2 = 3,011$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ) and their work experience as a teacher of Foreign language ( $\lambda = 0,323$ ,  $\chi^2 = 3,01$ ,  $p < 0,011$ ).

Those respondents who lacked HE degree in Languages and had less than 5 year- long experience in teaching foreign languages were among those who specified all three items.

Moreover, in their open-ended replies respondents expressed doubts on the right variants of the answers to assignments concerning the choice for teacher's best strategies in the classroom, the selection and combination of teaching resources, the lesson plans best options etc.

The respondents justified their comments by the statements that language teaching profession much depends on the concrete classroom profile, on the concrete materials under study, on particular skills being trained in a particular context, and on the teacher's personality, as well.

**Table 3. Teachers' opinions on their participation in the exam**

Clusters	% of the respondents who mentioned the item
The exam is useful to enhance Foreign Language Didactics knowledge	71%
The exam is useful in terms of refreshing/structuring/enhancing professional concepts and terminology	67%
The exam assignments produced limited reference to the real diversity of the classroom environment	64%
The exam materials should be carefully planned in terms of teachers' work in multicultural classroom	36%

The discriminant analysis identified as statistically significant teachers' qualification ( $\lambda = 0,223$ ,  $\chi^2 = 2,211$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ) and work experience ( $\lambda = 0,441$ ,  $\chi^2 = 3,874$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ).

Those respondents who lacked HE degree in Languages and had less than 5-year-long experience in teaching foreign languages were among those who specified the first two items. And teachers who were holders of HE degree in Languages and had over 10 year- long experience in teaching foreign languages mostly formed the pool of the respondents who specified the third and the fourth clusters.

The findings of the present study confirm the previous research findings regarding the language teachers' specific characteristics, including "the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher-learner relationships, and contrasts between native and non-native speakers (Borg 2006).

Moreover, teachers' comments regarding the exam materials failure to meet the General Foreign Language Didactics provisions and applications might lay grounds for questioning the exam materials conformity with the relevant discipline scope and contents. The materials sometimes seem to be subjective. In this regard we would like to refer to the data, provided by M. Lynch who says that teachers who entered into the classroom through the alternate certification route revealed limited or poor knowledge of the curriculum, poor

understanding of student motivation, difficulty in conveying content knowledge to students, less effective instruction planning (Lynch 2016).

Furthermore, the research results go in line with those educators and policy makers who underline the necessity of “high quality pre-service training, targeted professional development, mentoring and the support of parents and community partners” (Education Reforms...2012).

In general, the respondents evaluated the alternative certification in a positive way. Although, the replies reveal that exam materials might provide rather generalized approach to foreign language teaching with no reference to socio-cultural/ psychological profile of the learners in the classroom.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research results shed new light on the situation in the national administrative frameworks regarding the teachers' certification. The analysis confirmed that there should not be one-way solution to enhance language teachers' professional competence.

The empirical data goes in line with preliminary hypothesis that argued for solid university-degree based professional background for language teachers, who are at the same time recommended to engage in alternative qualification in Foreign Language Didactics; the above approach contributes to balancing national and international standards of foreign language teaching.

The research findings are expected to help education policy makers, university administration and individual teachers of foreign languages balance their international and national/regional/local requirements and standards.

The empirical survey reveals that the alternative certification does not provide a full and comprehensive picture regarding teaching contests and challenges.

Nonetheless, current examination materials for teachers' certification require a specific attention in terms of cultural adjustment depending on applicants' experience of working with a particular target audience regarding world regions, respect towards national cultures and traditions, etc.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The publication was prepared with the support of the RUDN University program 5-100.

#### REFERENCE LIST

- 5-100 Russia-wide Project Seminar in RUDN. (2017). Available on-line: <http://www.rudn.ru/?pagec=6385> (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Alternative Teaching Certification (2017). Available on-line: <http://www.teaching-certification.com/alternative-teaching-certification.html> (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Become a teacher of French as a Foreign Language (2017). Available on-line: <https://www.alliancefr.org/en/courses-and-training/teach-french/become-teacher-french-foreign-language> (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Bologna\_1999.Bologna-Declaration (1990). Available on-line. [https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna\\_1999\\_bologna-declaration-pdf/](https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna_1999_bologna-declaration-pdf/) (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Borg, S. (2006). The distinctive characteristics of foreign language teachers. *Language Teaching Research*, Volume: 10 issue: 1, page(s): 3-31 (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). Recruiting and Retaining Teachers: Turning Around the Race to the Bottom in High-Need Schools. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, Vol. 4, No.1, pp.16-32.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Berry,B., Thoreson, A. ( 2010). Research and rhetoric on teacher certification. Available on-line: [https://www.teachingquality.org/sites/default/files/11\\_doescertificationmatter.pdf](https://www.teachingquality.org/sites/default/files/11_doescertificationmatter.pdf) (accessed 20 November 2017).
- Education Reforms: Discussing the Value of Alternative Teacher Certification Programs. Hearing before

the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education. Committee on Education and the Workforce. U.S. House of Representatives (2012). Available on-line: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg75109/pdf/CHRG-112hhrg75109.pdf> accessed 20 November 2017).

Enhancing Quality of Teaching English (2013). The site of the Ural federal State University (Russia). Available on-line: <https://jtr.urfu.ru/ru/novosti/3548/> (Accessed 20 November 2017).

European Commission. Supporting teacher competence development for better learning outcomes, Education and Training (2013). Available on-line: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/teachercomp\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/teachercomp_en.pdf) (Accessed 20 November 2017).

Guide to the Certification of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers in Australia (2017). Available on-line: [https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/certification-resources/guide-to-cert\\_online.pdf](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/certification-resources/guide-to-cert_online.pdf) (Accessed 20 November 2017)

ISO 2014 – Teaching Standards. Good practices for collaboration between National Standards Bodies and universities (2014). Available on-line: [https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/archive/pdf/en/teaching\\_standards\\_en\\_-\\_lr.pdf](https://www.iso.org/files/live/sites/isoorg/files/archive/pdf/en/teaching_standards_en_-_lr.pdf) (accessed 20 November 2017.)

ISO/IEC Guide 2:2004, 60 p. Available on-line: <https://www.iso.org/standard/39976.html> (accessed 20 November 2017).

Japanese Language Teacher Certification (2017). Available on-line. <http://www.teaching-certification.com/japanese-language-teacher-certification.html> (accessed 20 November 2017).

Kane, T. E., Rockoff, J. E., & Staiger, D. O. (2008). What does certification tell us about teacher effectiveness? Evidence from New York City. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(6), 615-631.

Lynch, M. (2016). The PRO'S and CON'S of Alternate-Route Teacher Preparation Programs . The Edvocate. Available on-line: <http://www.theedadvocate.org/pros-cons-alternate-route-teacher-preparation-programs/> (accessed 20 November 2017).

No automatic recognition. Recognition of academic diplomas. Your Europe (2017). Available on-line: [https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/education/university/recognition/index\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/education/university/recognition/index_en.htm) (accessed 20 November 2017).

OECD (2012) Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for 21st Century – Lessons from around the world (Background Report for the International Summit on the Teaching Profession), <https://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp2012/49850576.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2017).

Renewal Guide to National Board Certification (2017-18). Available on-line: <http://www.nbpts.org/wp-content/uploads/Renewal-Guide-to-Board-Certification.pdf> (Accessed 20 November 2017)

Teaching qualifications and courses. Cambridge Assessment English. (2017). Available on-line: <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/teaching-english/teaching-qualifications/> (accessed 20 November 2017).

Xu, Z., Hannaway, J., Taylor, C. (2008). Making a Difference? The Effects of Teach For America in High School? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 30. Pp. 447-469.