

Towards the Development of Standards in Foreign Language Teacher Preparation

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Introduction

Foreign language teacher preparation programmes typically include a theoretical basis and a practical component. The knowledge base drawn from linguistics, theory of second language acquisition, discourse analysis and classroom-based research enables student teachers to better understand the nature of language and language learning and to gain an insight into the theoretical background of the current practices. This knowledge and information provide the basis for the practical components of teacher education programmes. The practical component is based on language teaching methodology and the opportunity to practice teaching. In methodology courses students are expected to acquire knowledge about teaching strategies and to be able to choose the appropriate teaching strategies. Teaching practice provides students with the opportunity to apply the obtained theoretical and procedural knowledge when teaching their lessons. Teaching practice is no longer understood as merely putting theory into practice but as a learning opportunity in which students raise awareness about their own and other teachers' teaching and create their own teaching theories. Current practices tend to enable students to develop their observation skills, self-reflection and decision making.

This paper supports the belief that teaching practice is to be understood as a process during which a student teacher develops the core competences of a language teacher. In this context the development of standards for pre-service foreign language teachers seems appropriate. In the author's opinion, these standards are not to be used only as a method of assessment but they should promote self-reflection, critical thinking and decision making which are of major importance for the students' further development in in-service teaching. So, the major purpose of these standards is not evaluation but reflection, not assessment but development. The use of standards is to be seen as a tool of self-evaluation and self-improvement.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to provide contribution towards the development of standards in foreign language teacher preparation. An attempt is made to find out the competences of a language teacher as seen by the students of English language and literature, future teachers of English as a foreign language. The paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the competences that a future language teacher should develop in the undergraduate degree programme?
2. How do student teachers rank the stated competences in terms of their importance?
3. To what extent do student teachers think that they have developed the stated competences?
4. What are the implications of the obtained results for teacher preparation?

Sample

The subjects in this research are 57 students of English language and literature at the University of Zadar in Croatia. The research was carried out in May 2005 when students were just about to finish the course in English language teaching (ELT) methodology. They had already taken courses in didactics, pedagogy and psychology of education. ELT methodology course consisted of lectures (50 %), seminars (30%) and teaching practice (20%).

Methodology

The students were asked to write a brief essay in which they described the competences of a graduate student of English at the beginning of his/her teaching career. They were expected

to describe the knowledge, abilities and skills that, in their opinion they should have developed in their undergraduate degree programme and that should enable them to teach effectively in the future.

On the basis of these written assignments the competences of a graduate language student were defined and listed. Each competence that was mentioned in the students' essays more than 5 times was taken into consideration. A list of fourteen competences was made.

The same students were then asked to rank these competencies in terms of the importance they would give to each of them (1 = the most important, 14 = the least important). They were also given a separate list containing the same competences and were asked to state, by circling from 1 to 5 (1 = not developed at all, 2 = poorly developed, 3 = quite developed, 4 = well developed, 5 = very well developed), to what extent they thought they had developed each competence.

Results and discussion

The results obtained by research are presented in tables and discussed.

Rank	Competence	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	Linguistic and communicative competence	3.73	4.43
2.	Communication and presentation skills	3.75	2.42
3.	Ability to motivate learners for learning	5.94	2.51
4.	Ability to choose appropriate teaching strategies	6.61	4.52
5.	Ability to deal with unpredictable situations and to maintain discipline	6.67	2.34
6.	Ability to plan the lesson	6.81	3.95
7.	Ability to organize learning activities	7.16	3.31
8.	Ability of pedagogical action	7.25	3.85
9.	Ability to create friendly atmosphere in the classroom	7.25	4.21
10.	Ability to respond to learner abilities and needs (flexibility)	7.88	3.60
11.	Knowledge about teaching strategies	8.38	3.41
12.	Knowledge about the culture and literature in the target language	9.20	4.49
13.	Ability to assess learner language knowledge/ competence	9.90	3.10
14.	Knowledge of methods and theoretical concepts in FLT	9.94	3.92

Table 1. Competences of a pre-service language teacher- results of a questionnaire

On the basis of the students' essays, following previously mentioned criteria, fourteen competences were distinguished. Three of them refer to the so-called theoretical knowledge while the other eleven refer to abilities and skills of a foreign language teacher. The students think that these fourteen competences should be possessed by a pre-service language teacher i.e. the one who has finished a teacher preparation course as a constituent part of his/her undergraduate degree programme and is ready to start his/her teaching career.

It is important to point out that students think that a pre-service teacher should have knowledge about foreign language teaching i.e. s/he should have factual and procedural knowledge about approaches and methods in foreign language teaching as well as an insight into theoretical concepts and a variety of teaching strategies. They also think that a pre-service teacher should be familiar with the culture of the target language communities as well as with the literature written in the target language. In the author's opinion, it is encouraging that student teachers think that theoretical knowledge should be a constituent part of teacher competence.

Still, students give priority to practical competences. Namely,

theoretical competences (*Knowledge about teaching strategies, Knowledge about the culture and literature in the target language and Knowledge of methods and theoretical concepts in FLT*) have a very low ranking (10, 11 and 13 respectively). A similar students' attitude with regard to the relationship between theory and practice in foreign language teacher education has already been discovered in previous research (Curkovic-Kalebic 2004).

Out of eleven practical competences students think that the most important is communicative competence i.e. the ability to use the target language accurately, appropriately and fluently in different speech situations. A foreign language is the aim, the object and a means of teaching in a foreign language classroom. So, high proficiency in the target language should be a *conditio sine qua non* of a good language teacher. Therefore, it is not surprising that students think that communicative competence in the target language is the most important competence of a foreign language teacher.

The second important competence, in the students' opinion, is communication and presentation skills. It is not surprising that students, after their first teaching experience, gave a very high ranking to this competence. The teacher's ability to speak clearly, to be interesting and understood by learners is one of the most important preconditions for language learning to take place. With regard to the importance they gave to communicative competence and communication and presentation skills it may be concluded that students think that the ability to "transfer" knowledge successfully to learners is of equal importance as the knowledge of the subject.

The means obtained for other competences show that, in students' opinion, other practical competences are less and unequally important.

The third important competence is the ability to motivate learners for learning. Students are aware of the importance of motivation in the process of foreign language learning. Learner success in foreign language learning highly depends on his/her motivation for learning. Therefore, "...teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness." (Dorney 1998, 130). This means that a language teacher has to develop techniques to increase learners' motivation.

The means obtained for the next three competences are almost the same (from 6.67–6.81). Students give great importance to the ability to choose appropriate teaching strategies. This ability deals with decision making. It is closely connected with the knowledge about teaching strategies. In their essays students make a clear distinction between knowing about strategies and being able to choose appropriate teaching strategies. When deciding about the importance of these competences they gave priority to the latter. On the basis of the students' answers it may be concluded that knowing about teaching strategies is a necessary competence of a FL teacher but that type of knowledge is useless if the teacher is not able to choose good (effective) teaching strategies.

Students also think that they should develop the ability to deal with unpredictable situations and to maintain discipline. This ability is of crucial importance for the teacher's effective teaching. So, it is not surprising that students consider it to be one of the competences of a language teacher.

Lesson planning is one of the skills students develop in the course of their teacher preparation programme. They become aware of the importance of defining the goals of the lesson, the objectives of the lesson stages and the procedures and techniques by which these objectives are achieved. They often report about usefulness of lesson planning in their first teaching experience. Therefore, it is understandable that they consider lesson planning to be one of the competences of a language teacher.

Ability to organize learning activities, ability of pedagogical action, ability to create friendly atmosphere in the classroom and ability to respond to learner abilities and needs i.e. *flexibility* are also the competences that, in students' opinion, a pre-service teacher should develop. These competences are highly oriented towards the learner, his/her success in the learning environment and his/her education in general. Students gave these competences lower ranking than to the competences that refer to professional abilities i.e. the skills that are closely connected to the subject of teaching and teaching itself. However, it has to be pointed out that students think that a good language teacher should have other qualities that contribute to effective teaching i.e. successful learning.

Students think that the ability to assess learner language knowledge is one of the teacher competences but they consider it as the least important practical competence. Assessment of learner knowledge is an important part of the teacher's job. In the author's opinion it is to be treated as a separate skill of a language teacher. The reason why students gave it the lowest rank might be due the fact that, during their teaching practice, they had not done any assessment i.e. they had not given any grades to learners.

In the conclusive part of the discussion about the results presented in Table 1 it has to be pointed out that standard deviations for most of the means are very high. This fact indicates that there are significant differences in students' opinions about the importance of the listed competences. This diversity can be contributed to different beliefs, attitudes and experiences that student teachers have with regard to effective teaching and qualities of a good language teacher.

The table below shows the results of the second questionnaire that was submitted to student teachers.

Rank	Competence	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	Ability to create friendly atmosphere in the classroom	4.00	0.75
2.	Ability to motivate learners for learning	3.87	0.83
2.	Ability to plan the lesson	3.87	0.86
3.	Communication and presentation skills	3.87	0.83
4.	Linguistic and communicative competence	3.71	0.89
5.	Ability to organize learning activities	3.69	0.69
6.	Knowledge about teaching strategies	3.58	0.90
7.	Knowledge of methods and theoretical concepts in FLT	3.52	0.84
8.	Ability of pedagogical action	3.50	0.93
9.	Ability to respond to learner abilities and needs (flexibility)	3.47	0.77
10.	Ability to choose appropriate teaching strategies	3.45	0.81
11.	Knowledge about target language culture and literature	3.43	0.79
12.	Ability to assess learner language knowledge/ competence	3.41	0.69
12.	Ability to deal with unpredictable situations and to maintain discipline	4.41	0.99

Table 2 Students' development of language teacher competences – self-evaluation

The results presented in Table 2 are interesting from several points of view.

First, the results show that students think they have quite developed all the mentioned competences of a language teacher. There are 9 competences the mean of which is above 3.50. The lowest mean is 3.41. The standard deviation for all the means is lower than one.

Second, the results show that students consider some of these competences to be better developed than others. It might be interesting to compare the results presented in Table 2 with the results presented in Table 1. Several competences that students find very important are, in their opinion, less developed than the ones they find less important. Thus,

Ability to choose appropriate teaching strategies, which is the fourth strategy in the order of importance is among the least developed competences. Or, *Ability to deal with unpredictable situations and to maintain discipline*, which is the sixth in importance is the least developed competence according to students' evaluation. On the other hand, some of the competences that are among the least important are much better developed than other competences. For example, *Knowledge about methods and approaches and theoretical concepts in FL teaching*, that is the least important competence in students' opinion, is better developed than some practical competences that students find very important.

The students' evaluation of the development of competences can also be explained with regard to the characteristics of their teacher preparation programme. Namely, students had more opportunities to develop some practical competences while the opportunities for the development of other practical competences were rather few. Thus, students evaluate their ability to plan the lesson as almost very well developed since they had enough opportunities to practice lesson planning while, for example, they had no opportunities to assess learner knowledge. On the other hand their theoretical competences are considered to be better developed than some practical competences since a lot of time was dedicated to informing learners about theoretical concepts in foreign language teaching. The results presented in Table 2 should be taken into consideration in the future organization of foreign language teacher preparation.

Implications for further research

The competences of a language teacher as defined by student teachers of English can be used as a starting point in the development of foreign language teacher standards. Namely, the author advocates a bottom-up approach in standards development. The next step, that should probably have been the first step, is to ask learners about the qualities of a good language teacher. The author believes that learners' answers will give other qualities and values that a good language teacher should possess. The reason for such a belief can be found, among other things, in the answers that students of English give when asked, at the beginning of their methodology course, about characteristics of a good language teacher. Their answers, provided in the form of a poster which contains five characteristics of a good language teacher, show a number of characteristics that refer to teacher values and attitudes. Students often report that a good language teacher, besides being professional and motivating, should be creative, patient, conscientious, approachable, fair, authoritative, humorous, understanding, should have enthusiasm for work etc. In attempts to find out what we all think about teachers and teaching similar responses are obtained. For example, Harmer (1998) states, on the basis of interviews he made with teachers, teacher trainers, methodologists and students in three countries, that "Although, ..., the character and personality of the teacher is a crucial issue in the classroom, by far the greatest number of responses to the question "What makes a good teacher?" were not so much about teachers themselves, but rather about the relationship between the teacher and the students" (ibid. 2). These characteristics, in the author's opinion, should also be incorporated in the description of teacher competences.

So, this research can be extended in such a way that learners' and in-service teachers' opinion about the qualities and competences of a good language teacher are obtained. The results obtained by such research could be used as a basis for the development of foreign language teacher standards.

Implications for teacher preparation

The results obtained by this research could be used as a contribution to the development of standards in foreign language teacher preparation. Namely, a set of core competences can be designed and described. The competences can be described by a set of indicators for each competence. The role of these indicators is seen as multifunctional. First, they can serve as a learning tool. Awareness about the competences of a language teacher and knowledge about the nature of these competences can help student teachers to reflect on their teaching and to promote self-evaluation. Thus, a student teacher could take an active role in his/her education. A teacher educator/mentor can use a set of competences as an observation instrument. Indicators of a particular competence enable a mentor/teacher educator to observe the degree to which a particular competence is developed. Data obtained by such an observation can be used as a basis for discussion in post-observation sessions. Finally, a set of core competences could be used as a tool for assessment.

The results obtained by this research should be taken into consideration in the further organization of foreign language teacher preparation. The most important conclusion drawn from this research is that student teachers should be given more opportunities to develop practical competences. These competences can be best developed in school-based teaching practice. This means that student teachers should have more opportunities to teach than they have now. Also, school-based teaching practice should not be a one-off but a process in which a student teacher raises awareness about the teaching process, develops the ability to reflect upon and observe their own teaching.

Instead of a conclusion

The development of standards for language teachers is a complex and a long process. Any attempt at defining the competences of a foreign language teacher, such as the one that was made in this paper, presents a contribution to the development of standards in general and standards in teacher education in particular.

Summary

Based on the analysis of student teachers' essays, the competences of a pre-service foreign language teacher were stated. Students were asked to rank the stated competences in terms of their importance and to evaluate their own development of each competence. The results obtained by the analyses of questionnaires were discussed and implications for further research and teacher preparation were pointed out.

References

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