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## FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER COMPETENCES AS PERCEIVED BY ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE STUDENTS

### ABSTRACT

This paper considers competences of the foreign language teacher in the Republic of Croatia. Despite the clear classification of foreign language teacher competences on a primary level, which was developed within the TEMPUS project, no reliable instrument has yet been constructed to account for those competences. The purpose of my research was to investigate the metric characteristics of an instrument which could be useful for determining foreign language teacher competences in the Republic of Croatia. A questionnaire was applied to 126 study participants (bachelor and master English language and literature students). The final version of the questionnaire consisted of eighteen items and four factors, which were extracted using exploratory factor analysis. The results have shown that the developed instrument is not fully applicable to the Croatian foreign language learning context. Still, some of its aspects may be used in future instrument construction.

**Key words:** competences, foreign language teacher, students' perspective

### INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the subject that is taught, the process of teaching and learning is influenced by many interrelated contextual factors in which learning takes place. When it comes to foreign language teaching and learning, the role of context plays a very important, if not the most important role. Consequently, it influences learning results. Foreign language teaching and learning most often take place in a formal context within the educational system. Thus, the learner's contact with the target language and culture is not direct. In such a context, a teacher (most often) represents the only source of a foreign language and culture and so his/her role is of paramount importance.

The contemporary understanding of the educational process redefines the traditional role of the teacher: s/he no longer plays the role of a person who not only possesses and transmits knowledge, but also needs to possess and establish positive interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships in the classroom. The quality of the teaching process therefore depends entirely on the teacher's professional competences as well as on his/her personal characteristics.

Dunkin and Biddle's model of teaching (1973) presents some essential relationships operating in teaching. According to the authors, teachers' competences

(both subject-specific and educational), as well as their formative experience and properties, act on the process variables, which, in turn, results in immediate and long term variables. Other factors having a bearing on the quality of output are context variables. These include student characteristics as well as community and classroom contexts which 'surround' the formal language learning classroom. Dunkin and Biddle point out the importance of both characteristics of teachers and learners, and their influence on the classroom climate which, consequently, determines the quality of interaction and output. Although we stress the importance of the holistic point of view, our interest in this article is directed towards the teacher's competences.

Since foreign language learning takes place in afore-mentioned formal classroom settings, it is assumed that all learners are exposed to the same amount and quality of input. However, we have witnessed that not all students acquire language at the same speed, which results in their different levels of achievement. The former, of course, partially depends on a learner's characteristics (motivation, knowledge, attitudes, etc.), but learning is not a one-way process, therefore the differences referred to cannot be only ascribed solely to the learner's differences. American psychologist William Huitt (2003) made an attempt to explain differences in achievement by his transactional model of the teaching-learning process. He developed a four-category classification: context, input, classroom processes and output, all of which have distinct variables within themselves. Since Huitt's primary interest was differences in academic achievement, it seems logical that he put emphasis on the output category because the variables within the rest of the categories are used to predict or relate to the variables measured in this one. Nevertheless, Huitt's transactional model once again points out the importance of the teacher's characteristics in learning and teaching.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER COMPETENCES

In a review of literature (devoted to teacher characteristics), we have come across a certain amount of terminological inconsistency which we feel necessary to clarify. Namely, there are several terms which address the (more or less) same issue: *teacher characteristics*, *teacher qualities* and *teacher competences*. Our contention is that both characteristics and /or qualities belong to a wider set of teacher competences, since they describe knowledge, characteristics, skills and abilities that the competent teacher should have. However, it has to be noted that the term *teacher characteristics* also refers to personal/individual characteristics of a teacher. In this sense, they can be viewed both as competences (which can be learned and improved) and as personality traits (characterized by a certain amount of stability).

The necessity for differentiating between 'universal' or general teachers characteristics or competences and those associated with specific subjects has been emphasized by many researchers (Hammadou, & Bernhardt, 1987; Borg, 2006; Lee, 2010). In his 2006 study Borg examined more than 200 practising and prospective English language teachers, as well as teachers of other subjects, and identified a total of eleven key distinctive characteristics in which language teachers were different from teachers of other subjects.

When it comes to defining 'good' or 'effective' language teachers, the literature on the topic, apart from legitimate, academic exploration-based competences, ad-

ditionally reports on good language teachers as seen by learners. It is interesting to note that the aspect of learners' subjective perception of a teacher's qualities was not recognized until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many contemporary studies have shown that learners' subjective perceptions of teacher characteristics has an influence on the quality of teacher-learner interaction and, consequently, affects both cognitive and affective aspects of foreign language acquisition. Young (1991) emphasizes that a teacher may influence the classroom atmosphere in both a positive and negative way, and underscores the importance of defining the activities and interactions that may lead to negative experiences in foreign language learning and teaching.

Effective foreign language teachers have been described in the literature by means of a wide range of characteristics that refer to both their professional competences and their 'desirable' personal characteristics. A good foreign language teacher is expected to possess knowledge in the target language and culture as well as knowledge in educational science (pedagogy, psychology), which enables him/her to organize the class well, to motivate, present, explain and clarify the material in a comprehensible way. Apart from subject-specific competences, the discussed literature also distinguishes a set of desirable personal characteristics which most often include warmth, tolerance, fairness and a good sense of humour (Brosh, 1996; Vadillo, 1999, Sakurai, 2012).

#### **Foreign language teacher competences in the Republic of Croatia**

In an attempt to define the most relevant set of foreign language teacher competences, the document *Competences of Primary School Foreign languages Teachers in the Re-*

**Table 1.** Competences of Primary School Foreign language Teacher in the Republic of Croatia

SUBJECT-SPECIFIC COMPETENCES
COMPETENCES RELATED TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher's communicative language competences</li> <li>• Teacher's intercultural competence</li> </ul>
SUBJECT-SPECIFIC TEACHER COMPETENCES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competences related to general theories of language acquisition</li> <li>• Competences related to the application of the knowledge of MFL teaching theories</li> <li>• Competences related to the evaluation and assessment of the students' communicative language competence</li> </ul>
EDUCATIONAL COMPETENCES
PEDAGOGICAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPETENCES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General pedagogical-psychological competences</li> <li>• Competences related to classroom instruction</li> <li>• Competences related to out-of-class activities</li> <li>• Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills</li> </ul>
COMPETENCES RELATED TO LIFELONG LEARNING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competences related to knowledge of educational systems</li> <li>• Competences related to the development and improvement of language teaching skills</li> <li>• Competences related to the improvement of language skills</li> </ul>

*public of Croatia* was drawn up.<sup>8</sup> This project focused on the initial and continuing professional development of foreign language teachers working at primary level. One of its main outcomes was a draft of Primary Language Teachers' training competences.

According to the document, there are two basic areas of competences: subject-specific and educational competences. Subject-specific competences include competences related to language and culture, whereas educational competences relate to foreign language teaching. The first subgroup refers to the linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic level of the required knowledge, as well as to knowledge and skills necessary for teaching the cultural elements of a foreign language. The latter refers to glottodidactical and methodical knowledge and skills necessary for qualitative foreign language teaching.

The second area of educational competences is comprised of competences related to educational science and those related to lifelong learning. The first one refers to the possession of general pedagogy and psychology knowledge as well as to intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. This subgroup also includes personal (cognitive and emotional) characteristics and skills of a foreign language teacher. Finally, lifelong education competences relate to the knowledge of educational system(s) as well as to competences related to the improvement of both teaching and language skills.

The document has an enormous value in the field of foreign language learning in Croatia, since it is the first document which systematically defines the areas of competences within which foreign language teachers should professionally evolve. It serves as a guideline to foreign language teachers, university professors and other experts who educate and prepare prospective teachers for their demanding profession.

However, there is yet no instrument to evaluate those competences.

## METHODOLOGY

### 1. Aim

This study sought to find answers to several questions. First, we wanted to investigate whether Sakurai's (2012) questionnaire on students' images of 'good' English language teachers would be relevant in the Croatian context.

Second, we intended to find out which of those competences are considered relevant by prospective English language teachers.

### 2. Participants

In total, the study included 126 English language and literature students (M=21%, F=79%). All students were double majors from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, academic year 2012/2013. Both bachelor and master students were included.

### 3. Questionnaire

The study made use of a questionnaire which was originally developed by Nuibe et al. (2006) in Japanese and which only later was translated into English by Sakurai (2012). In our study we used the English version of the questionnaire, but we also had

<sup>8</sup> The document was developed within the TEMPUS Project: Foreign Languages at Primary Level: Training of Teachers

to introduce one minor change, since the English version had been prepared for a study of 'good' Japanese language teachers. Thus, the term *Japanese* was replaced by the term *English*. The questionnaire contained 41 items. These items included questions about the students' images of a 'good' English language teachers. The study participants rated each item on a four point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree).

## RESULTS

In order to replicate Sakurai's (2012) statistical analysis, we employed exploratory factor analysis, including the Kaiser Criterion, the Scree test, the Goodness-of-Fit test and an oblique rotation method to determine the number of relevant factors. We also employed a maximum likelihood extraction method because it provides the best population estimates when samples are small (Hoyle & Duvall, 2004, in Sakurai, 2012, p. 49). On the other hand, we did not employ Stepwise variable Selection in Exploratory factor Analysis (SEFA) on the grounds that we wished to have a greater control over omitted items.

The criteria for items' omission were communalities and saturation values. Questionnaire items with saturations and communalities higher than .30 were retained in factor analysis.

The first factor analysis, conducted on all items, distinguished thirteen factors according to the Kaiser Criterion and six factors according to the Scree test. This factor solution indicated many problems connected with the fact that many items had low communalities and saturation values (<.30), whereas some items had high saturation with regard to only one factor.

Our next step was an attempt to replicate Sakurai's factor analysis by incorporating three factors and eighteen selected items into analysis. Again, the results were not satisfactory and displayed some of the problems mentioned above. For these reasons, the exploratory procedure was conducted on a six-factor structure with the omission of items that had a) low saturations b) high saturations with regard to more than one factor and c) low communalities. After the extraction, the final factor analysis was conducted on eighteen items. The results were the following:  $\chi^2$ [87 df] = 123.64,  $p$  = .006, variance = 40%. The factor structure (following the Scree test criterion) resulted in a four-factor solution presented in the table below.

**Table 2. Factor model of a good English language teacher for English language and literature students**

Items	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Factor 1: Competences related to classroom instruction				
28. Have a good patience	.771	.029	-.024	-.031
41. Make students maintain discipline in class	.567	-.081	-.130	.048
37. Make class friendly and comfortable	.504	-.064	.073	.163
31. Make class interesting and fun	.416	.105	.158	.125
25. Be able to explain in student's mother tongue	.403	-.018	.098	-.155
1. Be optimistic about self, others and life	.366	-.080	-.004	.293

Items	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Factor 2: Intercultural competences				
35. Have ample knowledge about classical English literature	.143	-.877	-.280	.045
27. Have a broad knowledge about English culture	.116	-.621	.200	-.023
8. Have a broad knowledge of international economy and concerns	-.129	-.551	.100	-.026
Factor 3: Communicative language competences				
4. Be able to speak in standard English	-.006	.015	.706	-.039
33. Use English accurately and fluently	.091	-.035	.641	-.061
13. Able to give straightforward explanation when students have difficulty	-.012	-.138	.478	.241
Factor 4: Intrapersonal and interpersonal competences				
3. Be enthusiastic about teaching.	-.136	.000	-.037	.587
9. Enjoy teaching	.043	.105	-.062	.584
15. Be hard working teacher	.074	-.130	-.002	.568
21. Be warm, kind, understanding	.200	-.141	.094	.507
16. Be happy and able to answer students' questions	.005	.051	.271	.482
40. Accept students' emotions	.275	.021	.030	.360

Eigenvalue for retained factors as well as for two additional factors are: 3.02, 1.91, 1.18, .982.

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between scales constructed with regard to the results of factor analysis, together with scale reliability coefficients are presented in the table below.

**Table 3. Intercorrelations between scales and scale reliability coefficients**

	N	M	sd	$\alpha$	1.	2.	3.
1. F1 Competences related to classroom instruction	6	3.52	.373	.692	1		
2. F2 Intercultural competences	3	2.89	.532	.707	.263**	1	
3. F3 Communicative language competences	3	3.75	.350	.640	.252**	.211*	1
4. F4 Intrapersonal and interpersonal competences	6	3.44	.374	.720	.466**	.182*	.348*

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

## DISCUSSION

The factor analysis yielded four factors that can be attributed to a good English language teacher as seen from the students' perspective. Competences related to classroom instruction (Factor 1) are described through qualities such as optimism and patience. They also point to the teacher's ability to create a friendly and comfortable learning environment as well as an interesting and fun teaching environment but with a certain amount of discipline as well. It is interesting to note that the items *Praise and encourage*

students (18), *Be able to correct students' mistakes properly* (29) and *Not embarrass or make fun of students' errors* (34) were not retained, albeit their content referred to pedagogical-psychological competences in Factor 1. The most plausible explanation for this could be found in items' frequency and mean values (Item 18 [M=3.60], Item 29[M=3.84], Item 34 [M=3.89]). Items' frequency values show that students recognized the pedagogical importance of proper error correction and feedback. Although items 29 and 34 had one of the highest mean values, low distribution of these items impaired their variability.

Foreign language teacher intercultural competence (Factor 2) or knowledge about social, cultural and political particularities of the target community was also recognized as important. It has to be registered that, when compared to other items, items comprised in this factor had significantly lower mean values as well as the factor itself. In other words, intercultural competences seem to be the least important when compared to other three competences included in this factor model.

In order to be a good foreign language teacher, one should also, according to the study participants, possess and develop communication language competences (Factor 3). Competences related to this factor in the first place concerned the ability to speak accurately and fluently in Standard English. Item 17 (*Possess a basic knowledge of linguistics*) was rated as rather important (M=3.57), but for same reasons mentioned above, it was not retained in the factor analysis. This factor was rated as the most important of all four factors (M=3.75), which is not surprising because a communicative curriculum of the twenty-first century proclaims a goal of communicative competence.

Items with the highest saturations formed the last, fourth factor. This factor described intra and interpersonal foreign language competences. These competences mostly referred to those personal qualities of the teacher, like warmth, kindness, an enthusiastic approach, empathy, that are considered to be a prerequisite for creating a healthy and positive classroom interaction.

If we compare the results of the present study with those presented in Sakurai's paper, we can point out some similarities and differences. Sakurai's factor analysis yielded three factors: *Interaction with learners*, *Knowledge about Japan and Japanese language* and *Experience and qualification*. Although the names of the factors are somewhat different (we followed the TEMPUS competence classification), it may be observed that they both, to a great extent, refer to the same competences. One exception is Sakurai's third factor (*Experience and education*), which was not extracted in our factor analysis. Items representing each factor, however, differ in these two studies. This can be explained by the aforementioned discrimination indices that were (for many items) very low. Another possible explanation is that there is a cultural discrepancy between Japan and Croatia. Borg (2006), as well as many other authors, states that foreign language teacher characteristics do not represent a universal phenomena. Rather, they must be viewed in the context of a cultural background in which learning takes place.

## CONCLUSION

When designing a twenty-first century curriculum in foreign language teaching, it is necessary to take into consideration the opinion of both teachers and students. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to investigate what competences are considered



by present and prospective foreign language teachers as being of particular relevance in their work with children.

This study aimed at creating an instrument for measuring foreign language teacher competences in the Republic of Croatia. The results of the study have shown that Sakurai's questionnaire is not completely applicable in the Croatian foreign language learning context, but it nonetheless may be partly used in creating future instrument. The study also provided a valuable data on the importance of foreign language teacher competences as seen from students' perspective. Communicative language competence was seen as the most important, followed by competences related to classroom instruction, intrapersonal and interpersonal competences and, in the end, intercultural competences. It is our opinion that the conclusions arrived at are important for any future discussion of the foreign language teacher competences and it is our hope that students' perspectives will be considered in any future creation of contemporary curricula.

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