Gaining Specific Competences from the Perspective of Future Teachers of English

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the specific competences future teachers of English need to acquire and on their ability to use them in class. Within the survey we observed three competences: communicative, linguistic and linguodidactic competence. The aim of the research was to find out how students of English at the Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc assess their competences after completing their first and second compulsory teaching practices. Furthermore, we wanted to compare the students' assessment of the selected competences. For the survey we chose a non-standardized questionnaire which was distributed to the students of the follow-up Master's degree study programme of English.

Key words: specific competence, pedagogical reality, future teachers of English, communicative competence, linguistic competence, linguodidactic competence.

Introduction

During preparation for the teaching profession there are skills and knowledge future teachers need to gain and master before they step into the pedagogical reality. These skills and knowledge can be called by an umbrella term – competences. The aim of

faculties of education is to educate their students in three different areas: pedagogy, psychology and the student's own field of specialization. Through studying subjects and undergoing obligatory teaching practice the students are literally being made competent to follow the teaching profession. Still, this does not mean that all the graduates of faculties of education automatically become good teachers: there will always be a certain aspect of students' character that plays a significant role in this matter and that needs to be taken into consideration.

Theoretical background

Competences in general

Although this article mainly pays attention to the specific competences of future teachers of English, it would be advisable first to look at this term in general. According to D. H. Hymes (1972), a competence is a sum of the abilities emerging from the actual knowledge which is brought to practice by an individual. Similarly, Spilková (1996) states that competences in connection to the teaching profession should cover not only knowledge, skills and abilities but also values and personal characteristics. Průcha, Walterová and Mareš (1998) claim that a teacher's work would not be effective without professional competences. As it follows from Choděra's assertion (1999, p. 102) that a 'teacher's competences should be derived from future knowledge and qualities of pupils', the main impact occurring through the gaining of competences is the fact that it is the pupils who are affected by this process. All these statements might have serious implications for pedagogical preparation at the faculties of education that should build and support the acquisition of these competences during the university studies of future teachers.

Beside professional competences, there are also specific competences following from the study of the subjects students specialize in: both should constitute the educational programme at the faculties of education equally. Professional subject competence is one of the key competences of future teachers, according to Vašutová (2001). In this article we focus on specific competences connected to the studying and teaching of the English language, and therefore we proceed from the division of professional subject competence presented by Hanušová (2005),who segments this competence in terms of foreign language teaching into five categories: communicative, linguistic, socio-cultural and intercultural, literary and linguodidactic competence, of which we investigate three: communicative, linguistic and linguodidactic competence.

Communicative competence

Communicative competence can actually be considered as a superordinate term for linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. This way of dividing up communicative competence is also accepted by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which further states that 'the communicative language competences are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means' (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9). Communicative competence can basically be summarized as the ability to communicate on a certain level in a particular language. The act of communication includes both receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing) skills, these can also be called 'communicative activities' (CEFR, 2001, p. 57). Chocholatá (2011) mentions two areas in which communicative competence is put into practice as far as the teaching profession is concerned. The first one is the area of presenting information and the second one deals with the structure of the subject. This means that teachers need to be prepared to pass their knowledge on to their pupils in an understandable way with respect to the syllabus of the subject they specialize in.

Linguistic competence

Linguistic competence, in other words the knowledge of the theory of language, covers the areas of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc., which are fundamentally acquired within subjects such as phonetics and phonology, linguistics (morphology, syntax), lexicology or language practice. According to Stern (1991), knowledge of language theory helps a methodology expert to think about the language in a critical and constructive manner. But, as the CEFR (2001) points out, the language system is so complex that it will never be possible for its user to master the language faultlessly. Another reason for this is the fact that language is constantly going through changes and evolution. In addition to that, there are new linguistic areas such as textual linguistics, pragma-linguistics, sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, which have a significant influence on linguistics in the field of pedagogy (Hanušová, 2005).

Linguodidactic competence

In each case, it would be useless for students who are expected to become teachers one day to focus only on the theoretical side of the language without being able to pass their knowledge on to pupils. For this reason the students are led to master teaching methods and techniques which are needed for the teaching process. The concept of so called 'pedagogical grammar' by Stern (1991, p. 175) should combine both pedagogical and linguistic knowledge by explaining linguistic terms in a way that is understandable for language learners.

This is the subject matter of linguodidactic competence. The acquisition of linguodidactic competence is the main aim of foreign language teaching methodology courses. Although Choděra (1991) places linguodidactics among the pedagogical disciplines, it includes not only pedagogical and psychological but also linguistic attributes. Linguodidactics is, in a way, a link between the theory and practice of foreign language education. According to research carried out by Babická and Nevařil (2003) among students of English of the Faculty of Education, Olomouc, most of the students mentioned that 'the courses at the faculty are too theoretical and lack an interconnection with practice'. The possible ways to change this belong among the most discussed topics in methodology. An unsuitable balance between theory and practice is also shown by the results of a research study performed by Binarová (2003), who understands the needs of the students but on the other hand claims that the ability to teach can be practised only partially during their studies. In her opinion, it is the aim of faculties of education to prepare students for this life-long expertise in their profession.

Research

As already mentioned, the area of the research is built on three specific competences: communicative, linguistic and linguodidactic competence, all three of which are actually subordinate to one key professional subject competence. The field of study of the research is the English language. The three competences are here investigated from the point of view of students in their follow-up Master's degree study programme. It is actually a self-assessment of students' specific competences, so we need to make allowances for the personal attitude of the students towards themselves as current students of English and future teachers of this language. Therefore the aim of the research is not to measure the quality of the specific competences of the students of English. The emphasis was rather placed on students' opinions in which they express how they feel about being teachers of English in the near future. The substance of the research lies in the students' self-evaluation of the knowledge and skills represented by the three competences and their achievement in using these specific competences in the pedagogical reality.

Aims

– To find out how students assess their specific competences after both the first and the second compulsory teaching practices soon before the completion of their studies at the Faculty of Education.
– To find out whether there are any significant differences in the three competences the students evaluated.

The respondents and the Institute of Foreign Languages

The respondents were second-year master's students of English at the Faculty of Education in Olomouc. These students had completed both their first and second compulsory teaching practices and they served as pilot stage survey respondents for the IGA grant project research. A questionnaire was distributed to them in a printed version in their lessons of methodology. The questionnaire was filled in by 24 respondents.

The aim of the Institute of Foreign Languages is to prepare its students for the teaching profession in two areas. The first one, on which the focus is mainly placed in the Bachelor's degree study programme, is the theory of language presented by the study of linguistics, British and American literature and facts about English-speaking countries. In the follow-up Master's degree study programme the main attention is paid to English language methodology and practical use of the knowledge gained about the English language in the teaching process.

The Method

For the students' self-assessment of specific competences we chose a non-standardized questionnaire with a numeral scale consisting of five points (1 to 5), where 1 meant the lowest level of confidence in a statement and 5 the highest. The questionnaire had three parts, which explored communicative, linguistic and linguodidactic competence. The communicative and linguodidactic competence section was further divided according to productive and receptive skills into speaking, writing, listening and reading, and communicative and linguodidactic competence were also enriched by sociolinguistic and socio-cultural aspects. The descriptors were selected from two sources and all of them were structured as 'Can Do' statements. The communicative and linguistic competence part is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or more precisely, the C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) level of proficiency which should be achieved by students at the Institute during and after the completion of their studies. The second source was the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), from which we selected the descriptors connected to linguodidactic competence in the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and reading).

Table 1

Specific competences questionnaire descriptors

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
Speaking
I can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
I can keep up with a conversation with native speakers.
I can formulate ideas and opinions with precision.
Writing
When writing I can spell accurately, apart from occasional slips of the pen.
I can express myself in writing on a wide range of general or professional topics.
I can vary my vocabulary and style according to the addressee, the kind of text and the topic.
Listening
I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured.
Without much effort I can understand films which contain a considerable degree of slang and idiomatic usage.
I can understand lectures, talks and reports in my field of professional or academic interest.
Reading
When reading I can qualify opinions and statements precisely in relation to degrees of, for example, certainty/uncertainty, belief/doubt, likelihood, etc.
I can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.
I can extract information, ideas and opinions from highly specialized texts in my own field, for example research reports.
Sociolinguistic appropriateness
I can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.
I can express myself confidently, clearly and politely in a formal or informal register, appropriate to the situation and person(s) concerned.
LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE
I can define basic English linguistic terminology.
I can describe the sound system of English.
I can classify word classes and their grammatical categories.
I can analyze sentences and relations between sentence elements and clauses in sentences.
I can characterize English vocabulary and explain the relations between lexical units.
I can consistently maintain a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.
I can characterize different national varieties of English.
I can vary intonation and place sentence stress correctly in order to express finer shades of meaning.
I can recognize a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts.
I can apply the theoretical linguistic knowledge in my own language production.

LINGUODIDACTIC COMPETENCE
Speaking
I can select a range of meaningful speaking activities to develop fluency (discussion, role play, problem solving, etc.)
I can select a variety of oral activities to develop accuracy (grammar, word choice, etc.)
I can plan activities which link grammar and vocabulary with communication.
I can select a variety of techniques to make learners aware and help them to use stress, rhythm and intonation.
Writing
I can select a range of meaningful writing activities to help learners become aware of and use appropriate language for different text types (letters, stories, reports etc.).
I can use a variety of techniques to help learners to develop awareness of the structure, coherence and cohesion of a text and produce texts accordingly.
I can select writing activities to consolidate learning (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.)
Listening
I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when listening.
I can design and select different activities which help learners to recognize and interpret typical features of spoken language (tone of voice, intonation, style of speaking, etc.)
I can help learners to apply strategies to cope with difficult or unknown vocabulary when listening.
Reading
I can use literary texts as sources of cultural, social and historical information and views.
I can help learners to develop critical reading skills (reflection, interpretation, analysis, etc.)
I can encourage learners to use their knowledge of a topic and their expectations about a text when reading.
Socio-cultural competence
I can select activities (role plays, simulated situations, etc.) which help learners to develop their socio-cultural competence.
I can select a variety of texts and activities to make learners aware of the interrelationship between culture and language.

The results

For each part of the questionnaire (communicative competence, linguistic competence and linguodidactic competence) we counted the number of students who selected one of the points on the scale from 1 to 5. Then we calculated the average percentage of students for each particular point in all the parts of the questionnaire, also counting separately the skills in the communicative and linguodidactic competence section.

Communicative competence

The results showed that the majority of the students are quite confident about their specific competences. On average 45% of the students chose a rating of 4 (very confident) when evaluating their communicative competence, while listening and reading

were evaluated equally by 50.6% of the students as the skills in which they feel very confident. In the second place, characterized as quite confident (rating of 3), were 24.1% of the students, of whom 31% mostly evaluated themselves as being quite confident in socio-linguistic appropriateness. Very close to this degree was a rating of 5, meaning highly confident, which was selected by 23.9% of the students. Only one person felt that they lacked confidence (rating of 1) in one of the descriptors in the reading section. This means that the respondents generally feel either quite confident or very confident in their communicative competence.

Linguistic competence

Linguistic competence was most often given ratings of 3 (quite confident) or 4 (very confident): to be exact, 41% of the students chose rating of 3 (quite confident) and 39.8% of them selected a rating of 4 (very confident). In this competence there were already more cases of the lowest degree (rating of 1): to be exact, in seven descriptors out of 12 there was always one person who felt a lack of confidence. This can mean that the students have problems in the area of linguistics and they do not feel certain enough about this competence.

Linguodidactic competence

Similarly, linguodidactic competence was given an average rating of 4 (very confident) by 48.7% of the respondents, mostly in speaking, reading and socio-cultural competence. 35% of the students felt quite confident in their linguodidactic competence, mainly evaluating writing and listening as the skills where they are quite confident. In this section there were students who were not confident in seven out of 15 'Can Do' statements, particularly in listening, where they chose the first option (rating of 1) four times. It shows that the students are confident about their own listening skill but they are uncertain about how to pass this skill on their pupils.

Overall analysis

When the competences are compared, on average, 23.9% of the respondents evaluated themselves as being highly confident (a rating of 5) in communicative competence with linguodidactic competence in second place in the same rating was 17.33% of the students and linguistic competence last, with 11.3% of the respondents. In comparison to that, there was only one case in which the student felt a lack of confidence, but on the other hand there were more descriptors in the linguistic and linguodidactic section (seven) where the respondents had low confidence (rating of 1) in the descriptors. In the

introduction to the research we mentioned the fact that there is also a personal aspect of either over- or under-estimation. If this is taken into consideration, the research tells us that the students tend to feel rather positively than negatively about themselves. However, this does not have to influence their teaching profession in a bad way. Usually, high confidence serves as a good tool for pedagogical reality, because within a class of pupils it can awaken respect for their teacher's work.

Conclusion

According to the results, it can be claimed that the students of the Faculty of Education studying English at the Institute of Foreign Languages feel quite or very confident in the knowledge and skills they have gained during their studies at the faculty. This is not as positive as we had hoped, but what can bring encouragement is the fact that there was a much lower number of 'Can Do' statements in all the parts of the questionnaire which the respondents did not feel confident about. We found out that the students' assessment of their specific competences is rather somewhere in the middle between the ratings of 3 and 4 on the scale, and this applies to all the competences. Still, communicative competence can be evaluated as the most successful, because of the fact that there was almost no one who did not feel confident in this competence. This survey served as an initial stage of a larger survey that will investigate how future teachers of English assess their competences after their first and second compulsory teaching practices.

Acknowledgement

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