



## Ready to Teach: The Development of Teacher Trainees' Perceived Competence

**Joanna Pfingsthorn, Wolfgang Gehring**

Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (Germany)

### Abstract

*In Germany, standards for teacher education programs are outlined by the assembly of ministers of education of all German states (Kultusministerkonferenz). These standards presuppose that prospective EFL teachers develop a number of competences during the course of their training, such as the ability to plan their lessons in a methodologically sound manner, to create learning environments that foster deep-learning and motivate pupils, to equip pupils with means to promote their learning autonomy as well as to assess learning outcomes, conditions and processes in a valid and objective way [1]. The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages provides a similar guideline and allows prospective teachers to reflect on and assess their competences in the area of curriculum-based lesson planning, teaching methodology, fostering learner autonomy and the assessment of learning [2]. Although the Kultusministerkonferenz standards are federally accepted in Germany and define the core knowledge that teachers should possess, they do not delineate the curriculum of teacher education programs, i.e. they do not specify what essential information has to be taught to what extent, in what order and using what methods. In fact, there is a lack of scrutinized empirical evidence of what approach to teacher training works best and realizes such learning standards in the most effective way. This leads to various institutions relying on various methods and emphasizing various topics and content [cf. 3; 4; 16] – a tendency also observed on the international arena [cf. 5; 6; 7]. Despite common learning goals, such conditions leave ample room for divergent, not necessarily desired, and often vague learning outcomes, processes and experiences within teacher education programs. As a result, the development of perceived teaching competence among prospective teachers cannot be assumed to follow a predictable pattern, which can be problematic since varying degrees of perceived competence can be indicative of fluctuations in intrinsic motivation of prospective teachers to engage in their profession [8; 9].*

*The goal of the project is to investigate the subjective experience of prospective EFL teachers undergoing their training and, by extension, the degree to which perceived teaching competence is affected by the outlined training conditions. The study takes a cross-sectional look into the changes in perceived teaching competence among EFL teachers currently undergoing their training at different stages of their training. The results of the study carry implications both for teacher training and classroom practice.*

### 1. Standards and variation in teacher training programs

All foreign language teacher-training programs at German universities, the completion of which is a prerequisite for becoming a state certified teacher working at primary or secondary schools, are based on learning standards issued by the assembly of ministers of education of all German states (Kultusministerkonferenz). These standards presuppose that prospective foreign language teachers develop a number of competences during the course of their training, such as the ability to reflect on relevant research and theories in the process of planning and conducting lessons, to create media rich and methodologically varied learning environments that foster deep-learning and motivate pupils, to equip pupils with means to promote their learning autonomy, to deal with learners' individual differences as well as to assess learning outcomes, conditions and processes in a valid and objective way [1]. While these learning goals are set and binding, the specific structures of educational policies each state implements in their teacher training programs vary ever so slightly in terms of e.g. the weight of various content areas that are covered during the course of the studies, the length of teaching internships, the methodological and organizational characteristics of university classes [16]. This leads to various institutions relying on various methods and emphasizing various topics and content [cf. 3; 4; 16] – a tendency also observed on the international arena [cf. 5; 6; 7]. This way, a significant degree of individual differences in learning processes and subjective experiences of teacher trainees is to be expected. Since factors that increase perceived competence generally tend to exert a positive impact on intrinsic motivation, as long as they contribute to an increase in the perception of self-determination [15], the desired outcome of teacher training programs should be to



train students to feel (and ideally be) competent teachers, who can choose from various methods and approaches to teaching languages. It is the goal of this study to examine subjective experiences of teacher trainees currently pursuing university teaching degrees, and more specifically the development of their perceived competences as delineated by the ministers of education for German states. By extension, the study investigates the degree to which perceived teaching competence is affected by the outlined training conditions.

## 2. Methodology

The study included 40 individuals currently pursuing a B.A. (20 students) and a M.Ed. (20 students) program in English/American studies at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, Germany. The average age of the participants was 23 years old. 60% of the participants, prevailing in the M.Ed. stage of studies, report having worked as an intern at a school, on average over the course of 5 weeks and during the course of their studies. 45% of the participants spent at least 6 months in an English-speaking country, while for 75% of the sample the stay lasted at least a month.

The participants were presented with a list of more than 200 can-do descriptors (Figure 1) referring to various teaching competences: reflecting on relevant theories, learning processes, educational structures as well as research; planning and conducting lessons; media use; learning and teaching evaluation and diagnostics; dealing with language errors; and dealing with mixed-ability learners. Each can-do descriptor was based on the standards laid out by the conference of state ministers of education (KMK) [1] and/or based on the EPOSTL documentation [2]. The participants were asked to indicate for each item/can-do descriptor their perceived stage of development for that particular competence. They marked their answers on a 0%-100% scale (Figure 1), where 0% stands for “*This competence has not yet been developed.*” and 100% means “*This competence has been developed very far.*”

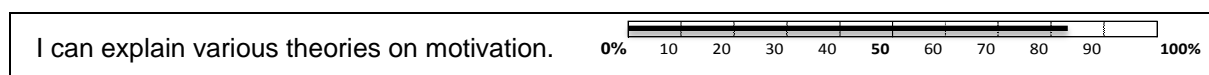


Fig. 1. Example of a questionnaire item, the scale and a marked answer.

## 3. Results

The results reported in this study present a fraction of the originally obtained data and concentrate on the participants' perceived competence to plan and conduct lessons, with a focus on mixed-ability learners. The abbreviation MED stands for Median.

Figure 2 displays perceived competence ratings in the area of lesson planning differentiated for the B.A. and M.Ed. participants. The boxplots depict the scores observed for the ability to:

- Structure a coherent lesson plan (B.A. MED=70.5, M.Ed. MED=78.8);
- Combine scientific and didactic arguments in lesson plans (B.A. MED=59.8, M.Ed. MED=72.9);
- Define concrete learning goals (B.A. MED=61.4, M.Ed. MED=81.1);
- Differentiate learning goals for mixed ability learners (B.A. MED=61.4, M.Ed. MED=81.1);
- Design activities that meet the needs of learners (B.A. MED=68.8, M.Ed. MED=83.6);
- Design activities that train linguistic/systematic skills (B.A. MED=62.3, M.Ed. MED=81.9);
- Design activities where language and culture interact (B.A. MED=56.5, M.Ed. MED=79.5);
- Design activities where productive skills interact (B.A. MED=73.7, M.Ed. MED=83.6);
- Design criteria-based activities (B.A. MED=60.6, M.Ed. MED=75.4).

The differences observed between the B.A. and M.Ed. groups are statistically significant for items a-i (independent sample t-test, a:  $t(38)=1.96$ ,  $p=0.05$ ; b:  $t(38)=2.37$ ,  $p=0.02$ ; c:  $t(38)=2.28$ ,  $p=0.028$ ; d:  $t(38)=2.28$ ,  $p=0.028$ ; e:  $t(38)=2.95$ ,  $p=0.006$ ; f:  $t(38)=2.27$ ,  $p=0.01$ ; g:  $t(38)=2.26$ ,  $p=0.03$ ; h:  $t(38)=2.8$ ,  $p=0.009$ ; i:  $t(38)=2.67$ ,  $p=0.011$ ).

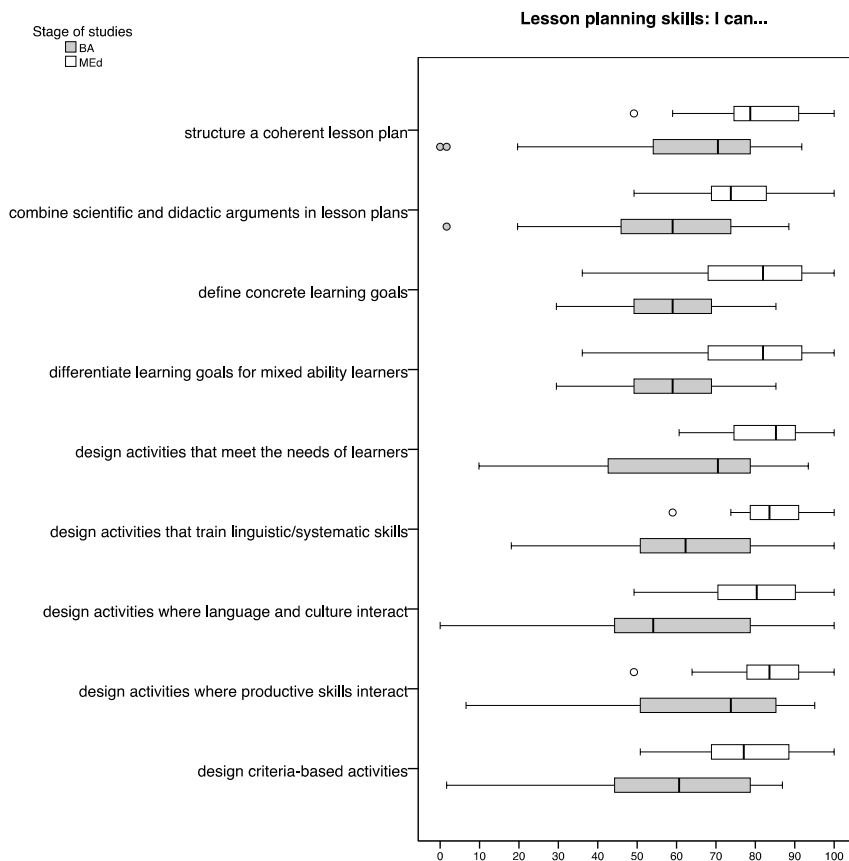


Fig. 2. Perceived competence in the area of lesson planning skills.

Although the results reveal an unsurprisingly high variance within the self-assessment ratings, they also point to a rather positive perception of own competences, both among B.A. and M.Ed. students. In fact, 75% of all the ratings done by M.Ed. students in the area of lesson planning exceed the value of at least 61%, whereas for B.A. students that number is located in the interval between 41-49%. The data also indicates a strong positive shift in perceived competence as students' transition to the M.Ed. program. M.Ed. students tend to feel more competent compared to B.A. students with respect to planning lessons that are sound both from the didactic and scientific point of view. The data also point to a stronger sense of competence among M.Ed. students to define clear learning goals, to differentiate these goals for mixed-ability classrooms as well as to develop activities that touch upon various relevant aspects of language teaching such as e.g. culture, productive skills, or criteria.

Figure 3 presents perceived competence ratings in the area of conducting lessons observed among B.A. and M.Ed. participants. The boxplots depict ratings of the perceived ability to:

- Begin lessons in a motivating way (B.A. MED=77.8, M.Ed. MED=88.5);
- Use and lead various forms of social interaction (B.A. MED=68.8, M.Ed. MED=81.2);
- Adapt the lesson to the cognitive needs of learners (B.A. MED=67.2, M.Ed. MED=71.3);
- Adapt the lesson to the affective needs of learners (B.A. MED=61.5, M.Ed. MED=74.6);
- Support learners with different learning styles (B.A. MED=68.8, M.Ed. MED=69.7);
- Offer special support to students that need it (B.A. MED=55.7, M.Ed. MED=56.5);
- Recognize ways to support gifted students (B.A. MED=49.1, M.Ed. MED=59);
- Continuously keep up the attention of the learners (B.A. MED=60.6, M.Ed. MED=68.8);
- React spontaneously to what is happening in class (B.A. MED=60.6, M.Ed. MED=79.5);
- Change the role of the teacher depending on the context (B.A. MED=72.1, M.Ed. MED=78,7);
- Create smooth transitions between activities (B.A. MED=66.4, M.Ed. MED=78.7).

The differences observed between the B.A. and M.Ed. groups are statistically significant for items b, i and k (independent sample t-test, b:  $t(33)=2.02$ ,  $p=0.026$ ; i:  $t(36)=2.52$ ,  $p=0.0016$ ; k:  $t(36)=2.87$ ,  $p=0.007$ ). The obtained results reveal further areas in which the shift from the B.A. to the M.Ed. stage of studies exerts a strong influence on participants' perceived competence levels. M.Ed. students report higher levels of competence to choose from and participate in various social forms of learning in

class, to react spontaneously to events in the classroom and to create smooth transitions between activities than B.A. students do.

However, for some items/competences, the ratings manifest a high variance and remain comparable irrespective of the stage of studies. This trend is especially visible for a group of items dealing with mixed-ability learners (items c-g). Here, the middle 50% of both B.A. and M.Ed. participants rate their competence anywhere between 20%-30% at its lowest and 70%-80% at its highest point. Little to no change can be observed in the scores or their variance as the students shift from the B.A. to the M.Ed. stage of studies. Although the latter score range suggests a strong degree of confidence in the ability to deal with mixed-ability learners, that confidence cannot be attributed to the university experience, certainly not on a group level. This is also true for the seeming lack of confidence expressed by low ratings that remain at 20%-30%. These results imply that while it is possible for some students to experience positive shifts in the perception of competences during the course of their study, there is also a strong likelihood that such developments do not take place.

A similar lack of a meaningful effect of the study programs can be observed in the relatively high levels of competence reported both at the B.A. and the M.Ed. stages with respect to opening lessons in a motivating way, changing the role of the teacher depending on the context. However, these persistent high ratings are less alarming as they point to an area that, at least from the standpoint of students, does not require excessive training.

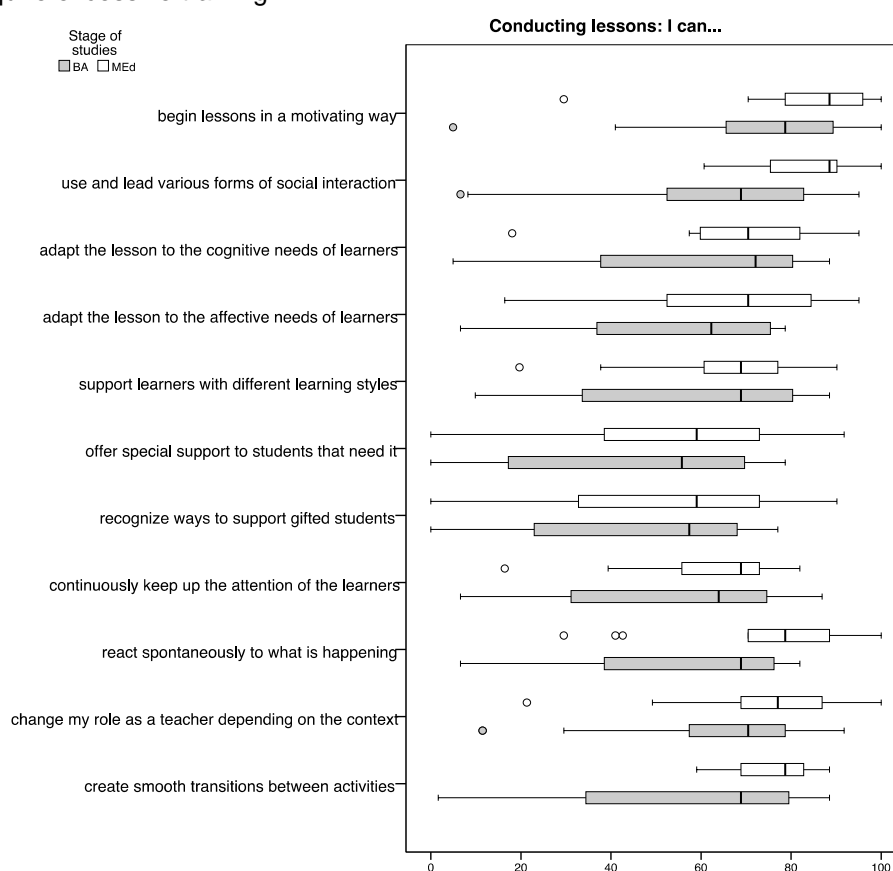


Fig. 2. Perceived competence in the area of conducting lessons.

#### 4. Conclusion, discussion and implications

The study revealed two trends in the subjective experience of prospective EFL teachers undergoing their university training. On the one hand, it is clear that that training alone has the potential to exert a positive impact on teacher trainees' perceived competence. Such an effect was visible in the area of lesson planning, where more experienced students and future teachers feel more confident about structuring lessons in a didactically and methodologically sound manner, define learning goals and design various forms of activities. Similar effects could be found within the field of conducting lessons. On the other hand, this positive shift in perceived competence in the course of studies cannot be taken for granted for all competence areas. In its non-alarming version, the lack of a positive shift implies high perceived competence ratings to begin with that are consistent throughout the course of studies. The more problematic situation can be illustrated by the competence to deal with mixed ability



classrooms, which revealed a high and similar variance in ratings for both B.A. and M.Ed. students, suggesting that while some individuals may seem competent to deal with mixed ability learners, many teacher trainees lack the confidence and university teacher training cannot be attributed the power to influence the situation.

To conclude, the development of perceived teaching competence among prospective teachers can and does follow a predictable pattern, yet for chosen competence areas only. In that sense, the conditions of teacher training at universities, with common general learning goals yet individualized combinations of topics and content, create a situation in which the processes of learning and teaching are somewhat uncontrolled. While it may never be fully possible and desirable to control every individual's learning processes, especially their perceived competences, educational institutions should strive for more structure and transparency in the ways they train the prescribed competences and not shy away from focusing on the subjective experiences of the trainees. Although the results of the study point to many promising and positive developments in perceived competence, they also emphasize relatively limited and unstructured growth in teacher trainees' perceived competence to deal with mixed ability learners. Since dealing with individual differences, varying learning styles, preferences, interests and levels of performance have become a reality and possibly one of the most important and frequently discussed aspects of English classes in German schools in the last 10 years [10, 11, 12, 13, 14], it becomes quite clear that boosting teachers' feeling of competence and potentially their intrinsic motivation to deal with mixed ability classrooms is a necessary part of the equation.

## References

- [1] Standards für die Lehrerbildung: Bildungswissenschaften (2004). Retrieved 28 May 2015 from [http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen\\_beschluesse/2004/2004\\_12\\_16-Standards-Lehrerbildung.pdf](http://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/veroeffentlichungen_beschluesse/2004/2004_12_16-Standards-Lehrerbildung.pdf)
- [2] Newby, D., Allan, R., Fenner, A., Jones, B., Komorowska, H. & Soghikyan, K. (2007) European Portfolio for Students Teachers of Languages. A reflection tool for language teacher education. Retrieved 17 June 2015 from <http://epostl2.ecml.at/Resources/tabid/505/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>. Council of Europe.
- [3] Schiefner-Rohs, M. (2012). "Kritische Informations- und Medienkompetenz im Spannungsfeld zwischen Hochschul- und Disziplinkultur". *Zeitschrift für Hochschulentwicklung* 7 (3), 16-27.
- [4] Bremer, C. (2011) "Medienkompetenz in der hessischen Lehrerbildung." in: Knaus, Thomas & Olga Engel (Eds.), *framediale – Digitale Medien in Bildungseinrichtungen*. München: kopaed, 57-73.
- [5] Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Visible Learning. A Synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses relating to Achievement*. London and new York:Routledge.
- [6] Levine, A. (2006). Educating school teachers. Retrieved 28 May 2015 from [http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Educating\\_Teachers\\_Report.pdf](http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Educating_Teachers_Report.pdf).
- [7] Walsh, K. (2006). Teacher education: Coming up empty. *Fwd*, 3 (1), 1-6.
- [8] Dörnyei, Z. (1994). Understanding L2 motivation in the foreign language classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 78: 273-84.
- [9] Williams, M. & Burden, R.L. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Gehring, W. (2014), „Lernzieldifferenter Englischunterricht“, in: Gehring, W./Merkl, M (eds) *Englisch lehren, lernen erforschen*, Oldenburg, 33-60
- [11] Lohmann, C. (2011), *Differenzierung: Lehrkräfte zwischen Herausforderung und Verunsicherung*. Praxis Englisch 2, 43-45.
- [12] Böttger, H. (2010), *Englisch lernen in der Grundschule*. Bad Heilbrunn: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- [13] Trautmann, M. & Wischer, B. (2011), *Der Vielfalt mit Vielfalt begegnen*. Praxis Schule 1, 4-7.
- [14] Bräu, K. & Schwedt, U. (Eds.) (2005). *Heterogenität als Chance: Vom produktiven Umgang mit Gleichheit und Differenz in der Schule*. Paderborner Beiträge zur Unterrichtsforschung und Lehrerbildung. LIT Verlag.
- [15] Ryan, R. M. (1982). Control and information in the intrapersonal sphere: An extension of cognitive evaluation theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 450-461.
- [16] Das Sekretariat der Kultusministerkonferenz (2014). Sachstand in der Lehrerbildung. Retrieved 27 August 2015 from <http://www.kmk.org/bildung-schule/allgemeine-bildung/lehrer/lehrerbildung.html>