

IMPACT OF ENGLISH TEACHERS' COMPETENCIES ON STUDENTS' LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT: TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES IN PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOL (OBERSTUFE) EDUCATION IN THE FEDERAL STATE OF SCHLESWIG HOLSTEIN, GERMANY¹

Ivana R. Ćirković-Miladinović*

University of Kragujevac, Faculty of Education in Jagodina, Serbia

Abstract: The paper aims to research how secondary school (German: Oberstufe) students perceive the quality of English teachers' competencies in terms of their effect on students' learning. Four major categories of teacher competencies (prescribed by the Ministry of Schleswig Holstein) were examined to discover the quality of teachers' competencies as perceived by teachers on the one hand, and the effect of these competencies on students' overall English language knowledge on the other. The ratings of teacher and student perceptions were quantitatively gathered in a survey using a five point Likert scale. Students' responses were qualitatively collated and analysed as well. The findings show that more than half of the participating English teachers have negative opinion about the contribution of the related competencies to their professional identity and overall students' knowledge, which was confirmed by the group of examined students. However, teacher training programs could benefit from the practical experiences of teachers and their suggestions while making adaptations in teacher training both at pre-service and in-service level.

Keywords: *teacher competencies, students' knowledge, English as a foreign language, upper grades of secondary school (German: Oberstufe).*

Introduction

Efficient teaching and learning has become a significant field of research in various countries and domains over the last decade. The teacher has a very

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important position in any school system, therefore, teacher quality is an important educational issue, and teacher qualifications have become an important component of teacher quality (Okpala & Ellis, 2005).

According to Whitty (1996: 89–90) there are two sets of qualities that characterize a successful professional teacher: professional characteristics and professional competencies. Professional characteristics comprise professional values, personal and professional development, communication and relationships as well as synthesis and application (Ibid.). Professional competencies include knowledge and understanding of students and their learning, subject knowledge, curriculum, the education system, and the teacher's role (Ibid.).

Medley & Shannon (1994: 213) have a different attitude so they state that there are three dimensions of teacher quality instead of two: teacher effectiveness, teacher performance, and teacher competency. **Teacher effectiveness** as a teacher competence includes three main components: interpersonal skills, classroom procedures, and subject knowledge. This component can be related to social competence because it is about a teacher's ability to communicate with the student, understand his/her learning difficulties and create a positive atmosphere. **Teacher performance**, as a second component, explains teachers' subject knowledge and their ability to plan and structure the content. The third component, **teacher competence**, is related to teachers' teaching skills and teaching methods. Well-developed teaching skills and effective teaching methods can lead to positive individual student development. In contrast, incompetent teacher can affect students' motivation for language learning and lower their self-esteem (Ćirković-Miladinović, 2017).

All three components are equally important, but this paper will be focused on teacher competencies which, in more general terms, are called teaching skills, i.e. the ability to organize and teach in interesting and flexible ways, using good teaching methods. In order to explain this concept, Sultan and Shafi (2014: 10) point out that competencies are specific and self-evident qualities or properties a teacher should possess in order to make a persuasive and student-favourable climate. Further, competencies are concerned with three areas of learner's behaviour in which the teacher helps students to create a basis and investigative disposition, to predict progression in all areas of life and its effect on the social order, and to help learners with moderating and transmitting qualities supported by the social order (Ibid.).

Being a competent teacher means showing a high degree of professionalism inside and outside the classroom. Certainly, it is difficult for a teacher to have all competencies and capabilities in perfect amalgam. However, developing skills and taking into account the acquired experience may lead a teacher towards gaining competency (Dorman, 2001). Teacher competence needs to be very high in order for meaningful teaching and learning processes to take place (Segun, 1986). In Germany, at the secondary school level, where a

distinction is made between **Junior Secondary School** (from 5th to 9th grade) and **Senior Secondary School** (from 10th to 12th grade – Oberstufe) curricula, teacher competencies for each level, and appropriate subjects would vary as well. These competencies must therefore be adequate and appropriate in terms of the school level and relate to academic and professional preparation, professional growth, classroom interaction and evaluation (Macaulay, 1986).

Unlike Medley and Shannon (1994: 213) who relate teacher competence to teachers' teaching skills and teaching methods, Akpan (2002) believes that teachers' professional competencies are both academic and pedagogical. Academic competency includes the teachers' knowledge of his subject while pedagogical competency is the art of teaching the subject, observing such principles as teaching from known to unknown, concrete to abstract, and from simple to complex (Akpan 2002). The English language teacher's success in the classroom depends very much on his preparation for the instruction process. Other competencies required of teachers include knowledge of subject matter, pedagogy, skill processes, resourcefulness, behaviour, motivation and evaluation (Ivowi, 1986). A competent foreign language teacher attends conferences, workshops and seminars, has good classroom control, effective communicative skills, adequate knowledge of the subject, utilizes a variety of teaching methods or strategies, and shows enthusiasm for teaching (Akinbobola, 2004).

It is well known that teaching and learning have a causal relationship. Former research discoveries linked with teacher competencies have identified that there is a solid relationship between teacher's ability and feasible learning outcomes (Allen, Fraser 2007). Wade and Moor (1992) indicate that teachers need to learn teaching methods and to be prepared to shape themselves into proficient teachers, certain of their own capabilities and confident of the students' potential. One of the essential concerns of educational research is to see how classroom settings impact students' education and achievements (Bouffard, Roy, Vezeau, 2005).

A few studies have demonstrated that teaching in the classroom may have either positive or negative impact on students' performance and accomplishments (Pianta et al. 2008; Aikens, Barbarin, 2008). Student performance is impacted by many school variables, for example, school poverty (Aikens, Barbarin 2008) or the school environment (Pianta et al. 2008), competent teachers, students' and teachers' motivation and ambition, school management, learning resources, parents' involvement in school life and many other elements. According to the previously mentioned studies, teacher's competence and warmth were the two most significant elements connected with successful scholarly performance in elementary school (Birch, Ladd, 1997). Pianta's study represented longitudinal research on classroom atmosphere as a correspondence of accomplishment of development (Pianta et al. 2008). Perception of the classroom environment reported by students has additionally been analysed

in connection with academic accomplishment (Bennacer 2000; Crosnoe, Johnson, Edler 2004). All these studies have shown that students' perception of the teacher is a fundamental element of teacher's performance in the classroom, so it may be said that teaching and learning processes cannot be separated. Teachers and students are associates and it is very important how they perceive each other.

Even though most students in school have a clear notion of their teachers' different capacities, we still lack information regarding the importance of teacher competence for student development. This has been difficult to find out owing to the many different factors of influence concerned and due to a lack of necessary methods of analysis to distinguish between different sources of variation among teachers (Malm, Lofgren 2006: 62). This paper will, therefore, try to establish whether there is a dependence between teacher competencies and students' knowledge of the English language from the example of a German private school.

Chancellor Gerhard Schröder voiced a widely shared view in education policy when he asked for English to become a compulsory foreign language from the first years of primary school (see "Stellungnahmen: Englisch ab der 1. Klasse", Die Woche 17, April 21, 2000). Subsequently, the use of the target language English became one of the top tasks of teachers in Germany (Weskamp 2011). Thus, the shift towards English as *lingua franca* (ELF) has affected the spread of English in education. But has it also affected the substance and the objectives of English language teaching?

Research problem

According to the Joint Declaration of the Conference of Ministers of Education and the Chair of the Teacher' Associations (October 2000), standards for teacher education and competencies were grouped into four categories: A) **Teaching** – competence 1: teachers plan and evaluate lessons in a professional and appropriate manner and carry them out objectively and professionally; competence 2: teachers support the learning of students through the design of learning situations, they motivate students and enable them to establish connections and to use what they have learned; competence 3: teachers promote students' ability to learn and work independently. B) **Education** – competence 1: teachers carry out their educational task; competence 2: teachers have a role model, they know the social and cultural living conditions of pupils and influence their individual development within the school; competence 3: teachers communicate values and norms and support self-determined judgments and actions of pupils. C) **Judging** – competence 1: teachers exercise their assessment task fairly and responsibly; competency 2: teachers diagnose learning

prerequisites and learning processes of pupils; they promote pupils in a targeted and differentiated way and advise learners and their parents; competence 3: teachers record students' achievement on the basis of transparent assessment criteria. D) **Innovation** – competence 1: teachers are constantly developing their skills; competence 2: teachers are aware of the special requirements of the teaching profession, they understand their profession as a public office with special responsibility and obligation; competency 3: teachers see their profession as a continuous learning task; competence 4: teachers participate in the planning and implementation of school projects.

Method

Purpose of the study

The study aims at achieving the following objectives: 1) to investigate English teachers' opinion about the contribution of the related competencies (prescribed by the Ministry of Schleswig Holstein) to their professional identity and overall students' English language knowledge. 2) to determine students' attitude towards the influence of teachers' qualification and competencies on the school performance of students in English.

Participants

The research was conducted in one private secondary school in the federal state of Schleswig- Holstein, Germany. All the participants, students N = 130, were at the Gymnasium upper level (Oberstufe) which is three-year education comprising class levels 10 to 12. In this institution students prepare for the German Abitur (after class 12) as the final examination for university access. The school offers the following secondary level profiles: 1) Mathematics and natural science profile with possible profile subjects: biology or physics. Profile enhancement subjects are biology, physics and chemistry; 2) Linguistic profile with the profile subject: Spanish. Profile enhancement subjects are French, Russian and History; 3) Socio-economic profile with the possible profile subjects: Economy and Politics, History or Geography. The two non-selected social sciences are then also profiled as enhanced subjects; 4) Sports profile contains Sports and Health science. Profile enhancement subjects are Biology and History. Examined students aged between 16 and 17. These pupils were mainly German (67%), Turkish (13%), Dutch (7%), Polish (5%), Russian (4%) and other (4%). They studied English as a foreign language in school. To those students who were not German, the German language was their first foreign language and English the second one.

Total number of teachers who participated in this survey was 21. Examined teachers, N = 21, were teaching in the same private international school and they were teaching English as a foreign language. The school is situated in two nearby cities in Germany and has 1460 students overall.

Results and discussion

Teachers were asked to rate four categories of competencies according to Schleswig- Holstein standards for teacher education in terms of how much each of the competencies contributed to their own preparedness to teach, assess, and innovate as well as in terms of their professional development and identity. This means that teachers were surveyed to rate each item according to their personal feeling on whether they possessed certain competency or not. The results are presented in Table 1. below where the numbers represent an average values of 5-point Likert scale (1 – Not at all satisfied, 2 – Slightly satisfied, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Very satisfied, 5 – Extremely satisfied) for each category A, B, C or D and each item 1, 2, 3 or 4 as explained previously.

Table 1: Four categories of teacher competencies

Average values for each item												
A) Teaching			B) Education			C) Judging			D) Innovation			
1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	4
4.14	3.23	3.57	4.55	3.07	2.96	3.44	3.13	4.34	2.98	3.00	2.89	2.83

The highest level of competency for teachers (4.55) was given to category B – *Education* and item number 1: *Teachers carry out their educational task*. The second most important item was number 3 from category C – *Judging* (4.34): *Teachers record students' achievement on the basis of transparent assessment criteria*, followed by item number 1 from category A – *Teaching* (4.14): *Teachers plan and evaluate lessons in a professional and appropriate manner and carry them out objectively and professionally*. These results could be explained on the basis of the concrete situation in the surveyed school and the demands that the school owner poses to teachers. Namely, the most important activity for teachers in this school is to carry out the educational task and to prepare the materials for individual students' work. Teachers spend most of their time preparing the materials and making copies because students are not allowed to use workbooks in English classes. Furthermore, teachers believe that their core task is targeted planning and organization of lessons while they lack time for the reflection on teaching and learning processes. Teachers were

also not satisfied with having no time for individual and systemic evaluation. In addition, teachers are expected to cooperate very closely with parents because parents pay the school fees for their children and in return they demand the best education for that money. Both sides, parents and teachers, need to communicate and agree in order to find constructive solutions when it comes to educational problems or when learning process fails.

If we take into consideration that the professional quality of teachers depends on the quality of their teaching and their own satisfaction with their teaching skills, it is not surprising that teachers rated all four items from the category D as the least important items (explanation is given in the section Research problem); The reason for this could be very high demands in the field of teaching and education (category A and B) so teachers after 5 to 8 lessons a day and 9 working hours overall do not have additional motivation to develop their competencies or to take account of the new developments and scientific findings in their professional activities. Continuing education and training is usually done after long working hours of a school day and it is focused only on lesson management without leaving space for innovation and teachers' creativity.

Also, each category was analysed according to teachers' view on how much their competencies contribute to a better quality of students' English language knowledge. The statements were rated in series from 1 to 5 where 1 was considered very poor, 2 – poor, 3 – acceptable, 4 – good, 5 – very good. The results are given in Table 2. below.

Table 2: Average values of competencies' contribution to overall student's English knowledge rated by teachers and students' ratings of their own skills

Language skills		Average values given by teachers	Average values given by students	Matching and non-matching values
READING	Skimming and scanning	4.01	4.09	+
	Reading to learn from texts	3.79	3.71	+
	Reading to write	3.82	3.80	+
	Reading to critique texts	4.57	3.67	-
WRITING	Creative writing	4.44	3.24	-
	Summary writing	4.38	4.30	-
	Essay	4.12	4.08	+
	Formal/informal letter	3.99	3.90	+
LISTENING	Talk, lecture, speech	3.74	3.72	+
	Telephone conversation	3.75	3.71	+
	Discussion, debate	3.66	4.42	-
	Conversation	3.76	3.74	+
SPEAKING	Giving a presentation	3.77	3.73	+
	Project work in group	3.69	4.32	-
	Taking part in a conversation	3.70	4.00	-
	Discussion, debate	3.66	4.11	-

Note: The activities analysed for the purpose of this research were taken from the Schleswig Holstein curricula prescribed for this level of the English language knowledge.

According to the results in Table 2, teachers believe that the most practiced skills are reading and writing because these are believed to be the most important skills for the university studying and academic research. Since the focus of the research was on senior secondary school students (from 10th to 12th grade) and their teachers, results like these were expected. Teachers think that their competencies mostly contribute to students' reading and writing skills – *reading to critique texts* (4.57), followed by *creative writing* (4.44) *summary writing* (4.38) and *essay* (4.12). This might be due to the fact that students are mainly left to work individually because the intellectual competence of a student is considered to be the primary asset in the quality of learning the students acquire in German schools. On the other hand, teachers believe that

their competencies least contribute to listening and speaking skills, specifically, *discussion and debate* (3.66), *project work in group* (3.69) and *taking part in a conversation* (3.70). This might be due to the fact that the focus on specific skills and the quality of instruction depends on the curricula arrangement of the resources at the disposal of a teacher, not necessarily on their competencies. Also, if we take into consideration test results of these students, we may notice that spelling and grammar are the most difficult areas of English for German students (the overall grade for the questioned students in the mentioned tests was 3.15 where 1 is the best grade and 5 is the lowest passing grade). Thus, we may also point out that students in this school struggle a lot with spelling even in their mother tongue, so, for this reason, the focus is on writing skills both in German as L1 and in English too.

One of the aims of this paper was to research how Secondary school (upper level) students perceive the teaching quality of English teachers in terms of the effect these qualities (competencies) have on students' L2 learning. The average values in Table 2. represent teachers' satisfaction with their own competencies in terms of contribution to overall student's English knowledge and students' responses on how they themselves perceive and rate their own English language skills. Correspondingly, the last column represents comparison of (non)matching values of teachers' and students' responses.

The majority of students rate *summary writing* (4.30), *discussion and debate* (4.32), and *project work in group* (4.32) as the language skills they possess at the highest level. The only match between teachers' and students' responses we may notice is regarding *summary writing*. The least practiced skills according to students were *reading to critique texts* (3.67) and *creative writing* (3.24) although the teachers thought that these were the ones at the very high level, thanks to the teaching skills and lesson activities teachers provide in English lessons. Non-matching values were found in terms of *taking part in a conversation* (4.00 according to students and only 3.70 according to teachers). Discrepancy was also found concerning *discussion and debate* where students think that their skill is at (4.32) level while teachers think that students are very poor in these skills (3.66). In rating these skills, 1 was considered very poor and 5 – very good.

In comparing teachers' and students' ratings of the same language skills, it can be seen that the surveyed students feel that they do not have the level of skill their teachers expect them to have on one hand, and on the other hand, students feel that they have certain skills at higher level while their teachers think that these skills are fairly poor.

In order to explain these results, students were asked to give answers to questions in the survey and to rate teacher competencies in terms of the quality of the English language lessons.

Namely, all students' ratings on how they perceive the quality of English teachers' competencies in terms of the effect these have on students' learning outcomes, were collated and analysed. The data is of the collective experience and is equally valid whether stated by one person or more (Akerlind, 2005: 323 in Penn-Edwards, 2010). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Four categories of teacher competencies rated by students

Average values for each item												
A) Teaching			B) Education			C) Judging			D) Innovation			
1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	4
4.55	3.07	4.47	4.23	2.89	2.84	3.00	3.11	2.87	NA	NA	NA	2.76

The highest level of competency for teachers (4.55) was given to the category of teaching (*teachers plan and evaluate lessons in a professional and appropriate manner and carry them out objectively and professionally*). This item was rated higher by more students (86.33%) than any of the other competencies. Students then rated the following items *teachers promote students' ability to learn and work independently* (4.47) and *teachers carry out their educational task* (4.23), as the next highest expected teacher skills. These are evidently seen as important teaching skills for students in this school which students explained in comments given in the survey: *Teachers of English in my school teach in a professional way, they are always prepared for the lesson* (86.33% of students gave such a comment); *Our English teachers insist on writing tasks and individual work* (81.23%) and *they follow the curriculum no matter what* (80.57%). Students were least satisfied with items number 2 (*Teachers know the social and cultural living conditions of pupils and influence their individual development within the school*) and 3 (*Teachers communicate values and norms and support self-determined judgments and actions of pupils*) in Education category. In order to explain their perceptions, students gave the following comments: *It is not usual to talk to teachers about our everyday life and living conditions, only the class teacher is allowed to know this* (75.15%); *Teachers pay attention only to those who are very good students and support them, the rest of us are left behind* (71.37%). Given answers were followed by the items from the category *Judging* (3.00, 3.11, and 2.87). These low scores were explained by the following students' comments: *Teachers are only concerned to record test grades* (68.88%); *In judging our knowledge, teachers rely only on written assignments and do not practice oral evaluation* (64%); *We work really hard during the whole year to master summary writing and to analyse texts but in the end it turns out that we are not well prepared* (62.21%); *Teachers do not pay attention to our feelings* (62.07%). For the category *Innovation*, students could only

give answers for the item number 4 (*Teachers participate in the planning and implementation of school projects*) explaining that students are also included in these projects, especially in Erasmus mobility programme where English is in demand. Many students (59.43%) said that they would like to have the chance to go abroad and to practice English outside the school.

The findings in research task one showed that teachers are not satisfied with the contribution of the prescribed competencies to their professional identity and overall students' English language knowledge. Teachers believe that they need more time to practice speaking with students, especially discussion and debate while writing skills are thought to be practiced the most. Also, teachers were not pleased with the allocated time for their professional development and according to their comments, these sessions were not useful for the improvement of their teaching skills. This is in line with the finding of Ivowi (1986) that there is significant relationship between teachers' competence and students' performance.

The results of research task two showed that students are mainly not satisfied with teachers' judging competencies and they pointed out that speaking skills and creative writing tasks are the ones least practiced in the classroom. This might be due to the fact that in this examined school the quality of English lessons depends on both teacher's motivation and the flexibility in teaching given by the school owner. This is in agreement with the results of Inyang (1997), that teaching is effective when the teacher makes use of instructional materials. In addition, Pianta et al. (2008) found that all teachers need depth in subjects they teach, including the understanding of the new knowledge and this calls for high professional development.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

Although students' self-confidence and self-conceptions are dependent on many background conditions as well as on earlier school experiences, our understanding is that high teacher competence can lead to positive individual student development.

However, the affective side is thought to be the most important quality teachers should have. Students accept that they are responsible when they fail but believe that if teachers give them enough encouragement and positive feedback, this would increase their motivation to study harder (Ćirković-Miladinović 2017).

Based on the results of the study the following recommendations could be made: private schools should give more freedom to teachers in order to get more benefits from their teaching; educational process would work better if there was enough time given to teachers in order to develop professionally

during working hours, not after long working hours; teachers' satisfaction with their own competencies is closely connected to students' satisfaction with their own English knowledge and overall language performance; adequate attention should be paid to teaching qualification as a pre-condition for entry into the teaching profession.

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