

WISHES AND REALITIES: THE COMPARISON OF STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON GOOD AND ACTUAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER COMPETENCES AND CHARACTERISTICS

Morana Drakulić, PhD.

Faculty of Teacher Education
University of Rijeka, Croatia

ABSTRACT: *This study investigates elementary school students' perception on Good and Actual English language teacher competences and characteristics in a group of 592 elementary school students in Croatia. Using a quantitative research design, participants were asked to describe the qualities of a Good language teacher as well as to assess whether and to what extent these qualities are present in their Actual English language teacher. Descriptive and inferential research results indicate that there exists a discrepancy between the two types of perceptions, whereas more favorable perceptions were ascribed to Good foreign language teacher. Bearing in mind that the effective language teacher represents the source of positive attitudes and high motivation, results point to the importance of comparison between these two viewpoints. The identification of disparity between students' expectations and language classroom reality present a valuable source of information regarding the areas of FL teacher competence which need to be improved during both pre-service and in-service training.*

KEYWORDS: foreign language teacher competences and characteristics; students' perceptions; good language teacher; actual language teacher

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge of foreign languages in the 21st century contemporary society represents a necessity and an imperative for each individual in a knowledge-based society. In this context, English as a foreign language has often been in the center of researchers' attention due to his rising position of *lingua franca*. The rise of English as a common global language has, consequently, indicated the need for high quality of foreign language education as a necessary prerequisite for the effective foreign language learning and students' attainment of communicative competence. In this regards, both training policy-makers and educators were prompted to reexamine the existing curriculums and redefine and readapt them to the demands of the continuous global changes. This complex process involved a careful and thorough investigation of the current state, needs and 'preferences' in the educational practice. The extensive research in the field of applied linguistics has been, therefore, tackling a variety of issues ranging from the investigation of methods, teacher competences and learner characteristics to a wide variety of contextual factors which affect the quality of the learning process as a whole. In this connection, foreign language teaching and learning has been recognized as a social activity whose effectiveness is heavily dependant on the quality and the type of interaction between its participants. Foreign language teacher, as the competent professional and the creator of this process, has the crucial role in establishing, developing and maintaining the supportive environment in which the learning takes place.

The importance of foreign language teacher competences has been recognized in both theoretical and empirical research (Borg, 2006; Carvalho, 1999; Chen & Lin, 2009; Enever,

2011; European Commission, 2013; Kelly & Grenfell, 2004; Sakurai, 2012) conducted so far. The common agreement in the literature is that teacher effectiveness is dependant on the quality of acquired professional competences which, as a consequence, has a positive impact on the quality of his instruction. The notion of the good or effective language teacher has been present in the literature for more than ten years (Harris & Duibhir, 2011). The existing literature on language teacher effectiveness seems to suggest that a diversity of teacher's attributes can be categorized into two broad categories; the one that refers to languages teachers' instructional competence and the other that reflects his/her personal and interpersonal characteristics and skills. The empirical data also suggest that students' perceptions on the importance of the abovementioned categories vary from one learning context to another and in relation students' age. This implies that students' perceptions are highly dependent on both instructional level as well as on the socio-educational context in which learning takes place. However, the empirical research conducted so far seems to be suffering from several shortcomings: they are fragmented and not age-related; they are primarily concerned with adult (adolescent) learners; they are too theoretical in nature and lack reference to specific socio-educational contexts (Harris & Duibhir, 2011, p. 24).

The scarcity of empirical research conducted among elementary school sample has also been pointed out by Drakulić (2017). The author states that (young) learners' views must be taken into consideration in any attempt to define what constitutes an effective or good language teacher. Moreover, it has frequently been reported that students' and teachers' perspectives on language teacher effectiveness differ which consequently may lead to unfavorable attitudes, motivation and lower sources of achievement in language learning. For all these reasons, the identification of the discrepancies between these two viewpoints represent a valuable source of information regarding the competence areas which need to be improved.

Foreign language teacher competences

A competence, regardless the field or the discipline it is referring to, is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes knowledge, skills and abilities of an individual to perform a specific role in an efficient or successful manner. In an educational context, the notion of competence implies a possession of knowledge, skills and abilities which are, at one hand, common to the profession and, on the other, specific to the subject of teaching. Within the European context, three large professional institutions (the Council of Europe, the European Commission and European Language Council) have investigated a lot of effort in the investigation, definition and development of important documents that deal with the current issues in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. The central position is held by two documents: *Supporting Teacher Competence Development for Better Learning Outcomes* (2013) and *European Profile for Language Teacher Education* (2004).

The Document *Supporting Teacher Competence Development for Better Learning Outcomes* proposes three broad areas of teacher competences: Knowledge and Understanding, Skills and Dispositions. The first area includes theoretical knowledge about the subject taught, pedagogical/psychological knowledge related to organizational aspects of education and assessment. The second area refers to reflective, metacognitive and interpersonal skills which may be used in various interactions (with students, colleagues and parents) and in teaching. Finally, the area of dispositions proposes desirable inter and intrapersonal characteristics needed for effective teaching and practice. While this document gives general outlines for teacher education regardless the subject, the document *European Profile for Language Teacher*

Education (2004) presents a comprehensive outline of foreign language teacher education and is a source of expert advice and good examples in the field of foreign language teacher education in Europe. Taking into account the wide diversity of language teacher education programs in Europe, the Profile has been designed as a frame of reference which could be adopted to the existing needs as well as the guidance for the improvement of language teacher education programs. It offers an overview of knowledge and skills, i.e. professional competences needed for an effective foreign language teaching. The Profile contains a description of forty items important in foreign language teacher education in Europe divided into four sections: 1 Structure (advocates the holistic interplay between academic knowledge in general and the practical experience); 2 Knowledge and Understanding (highlights the importance of the academic knowledge about language discipline and pedagogical knowledge); 3 Strategies and skills (the ability adapting teaching approaches to the educational context and individual needs of learners) and 4 Values (advocates the importance of promoting positive social and cultural values).

According to the documents, the definition of essential competences is the absolute imperative in today's world of rapid social and economic changes. Thus, ensuring the common ground provides the quality of teacher education and the high levels of pupil attainment. However, teacher competences, should also be defined on the basis of existing tradition and culture where teaching and learning take place. The documents, therefore, successfully 'reconcile' the two opposite postulates and advocate the cultural diversity of teacher profession as well as highlight that the aim is not the unification of competences but provision of conceptual frames which can be adapted to each national level.

Competences of primary school foreign language teachers in Croatia

Guided by the fundamental principles and proposals by the European Union, the Republic of Croatia has also recognized the importance of initial and continual professional development of foreign language teachers. In 2000, under the auspices of CARDS programme and under the umbrella of the EU programme TEMPUS the Project *Foreign Languages at Primary Level: Training of Teachers* was designed. On the basis of international observation and comparison of the pre-service and in-service teacher training the document *Competences of Primary School Foreign Language Teachers in the Republic of Croatia* (2007) was drawn up.

The aim of the Document was 'to systematically define the areas of competence within which foreign language teachers should professionally evolve' (Radišić, et al., 2007, p. xi). It reflects the fundamental efforts and policies of the European Union which advocate the importance of foreign language learning and provision/development of quality teachers as prerequisites for better learning outcomes.

The Document proposes two basic competence areas of foreign languages: subject-specific and educational competences. According to the Document, subject-specific competences describe the knowledge, skills and abilities distinctive for foreign language teaching and include two subgroups of competences. The first subgroup, competences related to language and culture, presupposes that a foreign language teacher should have sufficient knowledge of linguistics, sociolinguistics as well as pragmatics of the language. This subgroup also includes teacher's intercultural competence, i.e. the knowledge of social and cultural similarities and differences which will enable him/her to develop students' intercultural competence and the understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The second subgroup, subject-specific teacher competences, presupposes that a foreign language teacher should have the knowledge of

general theories of language acquisition and their application in practice, as well as the knowledge related to the assessment of students' communicative competence. These, in particular, include the knowledge of traditional, alternative and modern theories of foreign language teaching, and the knowledge about contemporary principles of the organization of the process of foreign language teaching and learning. The possession of these competences enable the teacher to encourage the development of students' receptive and productive skills by using a variety of techniques, materials and forms of teaching, selected and adapted to individual students' differences. Finally, these competences enable the teacher 'to create a positive class atmosphere for foreign language teaching, to motivate students and to recognize the debilitating effect of foreign language anxiety' (Radišić et al., 2007, p. 12).

The second basic competence area proposed by the Document is educational competences which include the skills and abilities that are common to the entire teaching profession, regardless of the subject taught. This area also includes two subgroups of competences: pedagogical-psychological competences and competences related to lifelong learning. The first subgroup, pedagogical-psychological competences, covers a wide range of knowledge, skills and abilities that refer to pedagogical-psychological competences, competences related to classroom instruction and out-of-class activities and, finally, to teacher's intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills. According to this competence area, a foreign language teacher should, first of all, possess the knowledge of general pedagogy and general and developmental psychology, which enables him/her to critically evaluate and choose the most appropriate procedures in teaching, with special attention dedicated to children with special needs.

Competences related to classroom instruction to a great extent reflect all other competence areas described in this Document, since they represent the application of acquired knowledge, abilities and skills in practice. Being able to choose the most appropriate methods, procedures, and materials to teach, a foreign language teacher should strive to organize a purposeful and motivating teaching and learning environment. Finally, special emphasis is put on the awareness of the students' individual difference variables and socio-cultural background as one of the most influential factors which may affect learning outcomes.

Apart from the competences related to classroom instruction, a foreign language teacher should also possess the knowledge and abilities related to out-of-class activities. This primarily refers to his/her familiarity with the purpose and structure of the school, namely the knowledge of administration and pedagogical and legal documents. Furthermore, as an individual, a foreign language teacher should be able to assess his/her position in relation to other participants in the teaching process. Lastly, a foreign language teacher should take into account the roles, rights and obligations of both teachers and parents in the overall teaching process.

The last subgroup of the pedagogical-psychological competences are the intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills, which differ from the previously mentioned ones since they do not describe theoretical knowledge and the ability of its application in practice, but rather refer to the attributes of the teacher's personality as well as skills that contribute to the creation of a positive, motivating and facilitating classroom environment. A foreign language teacher should, therefore, be tolerant and patient in working with students and always have understanding for their differences in abilities, skills, intelligence and motivation. Furthermore, a competent teacher should be able to display creativity and innovation through which (s)he

will develop motivation, positive attitudes and interest in foreign language learning. Moreover, a foreign language teacher should be able to reach decisions independently, be ready to accept responsibility for the teaching process and its results, as well as strive for constant analysis and critical assessment of his/her work. Finally, a competent teacher should be able to show empathy but at the same time be able to control his/her impulsive reactions with the aim of creating a healthy and harmonious relationship with all the participants of the teaching process. The subgroup 'Competences related to lifelong learning' refers to, as the name suggests, the need for continuous improvement of the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired at pre-service training. These include competences related to the knowledge of educational systems in terms of familiarity with relevant legal documentation, and competences related to the development and improvement of language skills and language teaching skills. The Document suggests that a teacher should be aware of his/her personal responsibility to further improve the knowledge of methodology through participation in various seminars and workshops, as well as his/her communicative competence.

The Document 'Competences of Primary School Foreign Language Teachers in the Republic of Croatia' represents the first attempt of a systematic definition of foreign language teacher competences in the Croatian primary school context and as such has enormous value (Drakulić, 2013). Although it is only a draft which, according to the authors, can serve as a base for Croatian and European primary language teachers' competences and standards (Verin & Radišić, 2003, p. 8), this document contains all the relevant areas of foreign teacher pre-service and in-service professional development.

Research on foreign language teacher competences

While the abovementioned documents provide a valuable theoretical and conceptual frameworks within which language teacher competences may be investigated, the empirical research on the topic offers a valuable insight on teacher competences within a classroom context. In that sense, the attention has been primarily directed towards the definition of teacher effectiveness, i.e. the exploration of 'desirable' or efficacious competences and characteristics. The question of what constitutes an effective foreign language teacher has been the subject of debate since foreign languages became a compulsory subject in schools' curriculum. There is a common agreement in literature that effectiveness in foreign language classroom is a rather unique phenomenon because of the nature of the subject itself and thus cannot always be compared to effectiveness in other disciplines (Bell, 2005; Borg, 2006; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Park & Lee, 2006).

One of the first attempts to define distinctive factors unique to the foreign language teaching profession was one of Hammadou and Bernhardt's (1987). In their paper they proposed five factors by which FL teacher and FL teaching are different from any other subject. These are: 1) The nature of the subject matter itself, 2) The interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction in the subject matter, 3) Difficulties in gaining increased subject matter knowledge, 4) A dearth of colleagues in the same subject matter, and 5) The problematic nature of outside support for learning the subject matter.

While Hammadou and Bernhardt (1987) offered a strictly theoretical view, Borg (2006) and Bell (2005) based their description of distinctive FL teacher characteristics on empirical research. Borg (2006) collected and examined the data from five different groups of participants which included pre- and in-service language teachers as well as teacher specialists from other

subjects. The study identified eleven key distinctive characteristics of language teachers: 1) the nature of the subject, 2) the content of teaching, 3) methodology, 4) teacher-learner relationships, 5) non-native issues, 6) teachers' characteristics, 7) training, 8) status, 9) errors, 10) student body, and 11) commercialization (Borg, 2006, p. 24).

Bell's (2005) dissertation study investigated postsecondary teachers' views on behaviors and attitudes that are believed to contribute to effective FL teaching and learning. The research was conducted within the framework of Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999) and it also included other variables relevant to foreign language teaching. The results indicated a strong agreement on all five of the 'Standards for Foreign Language Learning' as well as on theories related to communicative approaches to FL teaching and learning, small group work, negotiation of meaning, strategies for FL learning and teacher qualification. For the remaining three categories – error correction, focus on grammatical form and individual FL learner differences - the results were inconsistent, which implies that the respondents were uncertain whether any of these categories contributed to effective FL teaching.

In discussing relevant literature on foreign language teacher effectiveness another important issue is the one of perception. The review of the contemporary literature not only suggests the importance of both teachers' and students' evaluation of teacher effectiveness but also reports discrepancies between these perceptions. In this connection, Beaudrie, Brown, and Thompson (2004) approached the issue of teacher effectiveness from three different perspectives: that of university students', teacher's and observers'. The authors used two instruments: the Teacher Course Evaluation (TCE) Questionnaire, which was administered to students, and the Teacher Effectiveness Questionnaire, which was administered to students, teachers and peer observers. After comparing the data obtained from the second questionnaire, a significant difference was found between the teacher's view of her teaching effectiveness (the teacher gave the lowest evaluation), the peer observers', and the students' evaluation of their teacher, who gave the highest overall score. The analysis of qualitative data gave some interesting insights into various factors that students considered in their evaluation of the teacher and the course. The high rating of teacher effectiveness was most frequently based on the teacher's ability to present the material in a clear and comprehensive way and on the teacher's personality traits. Another study, conducted by Shishavan and Sadeghi (2009), explored the characteristics of an effective language teacher as perceived by teachers and students in high school and university setting in Iran. Teachers' and students' perceptions differed to a large extent on approximately 20% of questionnaire items. The teachers generally gave priority to the knowledge of language, pedagogy and foreign language teaching methodology, as crucial factors that constitute effective teachers, while the students ascribed importance to teachers' personal characteristics. Both groups agreed that desirable characteristics were creativity, patience, flexibility and positive attitudes towards learners and their needs.

Finally, several authors aimed to explore students' expectations from foreign language teachers in terms of their knowledge and skills. Vrhovac (1993) found that students preferences vary in relation to their age, i.e. that the youngest participants (aged 8) valued play-like activities and personal characteristics such as kindness. On the other hand, both higher grade elementary and secondary school students placed the highest importance on the knowledge of language and culture, to teacher's ability to create a dynamic and interesting lesson, as well as to the ability to create a good relationship with students. Disparity was also found in Carvalho's (1999) research in which he investigated potential differences between students' perceptions of 'ideal'

and 'real' foreign language teacher competences and characteristics. The comparison of the results revealed significant differences for the four items that referred to the encouragement of weaker students, checking understanding of the subject matter, creativity and patience. The results, furthermore, confirmed the author's initial assumption that students would give more importance to the teacher's personal qualities than to those related to methodology.

Even though the abovementioned comparative findings have often been reported in the literature worldwide, the research on the identification of language teacher's qualities from the perspective of foreign language students has, to the knowledge of the author, not yet been conducted in Croatia. Studies that have been conducted so far concentrated only on students' perception of their actual language teacher, and, as such, neglected the issue of students' beliefs on what constitutes a good or effective language teacher in the first place. The present study, therefore, represents an attempt to fill the existing gap by defining and describing the good and the actual foreign language teacher competences as perceived by elementary school students in Croatia.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and method

The sample consisted of 592 participants out of which 302 (51%) were male and 290 (49%) were female. All participants attended higher grades of elementary school, i.e. 12.6% attended fifth grade (age 10-11), 13.8% attended sixth grade (age 11-12), 14.7% attended seventh grade (age 12-13) and, finally, 12.6% attended eighth grade (age 13-14) of elementary school. The quantitative data was collected during February and March 2016 in three different elementary school in Croatia, all situated in urban areas. Prior to the questioning, the participants were introduced to the aim of the study and were guaranteed anonymity. Approximately 30 minutes were needed to fill out the questionnaires, but the time varied in relation to participants' age.

Instruments

Since comparative study of this kind has not yet been conducted in Croatia, for the purpose of this research two questionnaires were constructed: 1) Good English language teacher questionnaire, and 2) Actual language teacher questionnaire. Both instruments were comprised of the same items but were, as their names indicate, assessed from a different perspective.

The statements were designed on the basis of examination of the existing questionnaires (Barnes and Lock, 2010; Beaudrie et al., 2004; Bell, 2005; Carvalho, 1999; Sakurai, 2012) as well as on the areas of competences defined by the *Competences of Primary School Foreign Language Teachers in the Republic of Croatia* document. The questionnaires are comprised of 27 positively worded items assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1=not important at all, 5=very important). The questionnaires contain three subscales which assess three different areas of teacher's competence. The first subscale, *Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills*, is comprised of 12 items and it assesses language teacher personal characteristics and skills. The second subscale, *Intercultural competence*, (6 items) assesses teachers' knowledge and skills related to foreign language culture, i.e. the knowledge of social and cultural similarities and differences. The final subscale, *Competences related to foreign language classroom instruction*, is comprised of 12 items and it investigates students' perceptions on the preferred methods and procedures in the foreign language classroom.

RESULTS

In order to investigate the distribution of the statistical data for each questionnaire, the mean and the standard deviation for all items were computed. The items (variables) were then grouped into three composites and composite scores were computed as well.

Component		Mean	St. deviation
Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills	Scale sum	52.40	5.09
	Scale average	4.36	0.42
Intercultural competence	Scale sum	23.6	4.50
	Scale average	3.93	0.76
Competences related to foreign language classroom instruction	Scale sum	39.07	5.26
	Scale average	4.34	0.58

Table 1 Composite scores for components assessing Good English language teacher competences and characteristics

As can be seen from Table 1, the highest mean values were computed for the variables assessing competences related to classroom instruction ($\bar{x}=52.40$, $SD=5.09$), followed by variables assessing the teacher's Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills ($\bar{x}=39.06$, $SD=5.20$) and finally, with those assessing the foreign language teacher's intercultural competence ($\bar{x}=23.60$, $SD=4.50$). However, since scale sum values reveal important information on how data is distributed only on a scale level, but do not provide information on the distribution within the sample, the sample mean for each component separately was computed as well. The obtained scores confirmed that the component *Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills* has the highest mean value ($\bar{x}=4.36$, $SD=0.42$). It is followed by the slightly lower mean value for the component *Competences related to foreign language classroom instruction* ($\bar{x}=4.34$, $SD=0.58$), and, finally, with the component assessing *Intercultural competence* ($\bar{x}=3.93$, $SD=0.76$).

The results obtained for the second questionnaire, the one which assessed Actual language teacher competences, reveal somewhat different distribution of the statistical data.

Component		Mean	St. deviation
Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills	Scale sum	44.10	9.58
	Scale average	3.67	0.79
Intercultural competence	Scale sum	20.10	6.12
	Scale average	3.35	1.02
Competences related to foreign language classroom instruction	Scale sum	33.80	8.45
	Scale average	3.75	0.93

Table 2 Composite scores for components assessing Actual English language teacher competences and characteristics

As shown in Table 2, the highest mean values are obtained for the first component, related to the teacher's intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills ($\bar{x}=44.10$, $SD=9.58$), and for the third component whose items assessed competences related to classroom instruction ($\bar{x}=33.80$, $SD=8.45$). However, sample mean scores show that the component assessing competences related to foreign language classroom instruction has the highest sample mean

score ($\bar{x}=3.75$, $SD=0.93$), followed by a slightly lower score obtained for the Intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills ($\bar{x}=3.67$, $SD=0.79$), and for the component assessing the teacher's Intercultural competence ($\bar{x}=3.35$, $SD=1.02$).

From the above presented data it may be concluded that there exists a discrepancy between good and actual foreign language teacher perceptions. In order to examine whether the differences are statistically significant a paired-samples t-test was performed on three pairs:

1. Good ELT intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills (GPER) - Actual ELT intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills (APER)
2. Good ELT intercultural competence (GCUL) – Actual ELT intercultural competence (ACUL)
3. Good ELT competences related to foreign language classroom instruction (GINSTR) – Actual ELT competences related to foreign language classroom instruction (AINSTR)

Pair	Component	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Paired-samples t-test		
				t	df.	p
1	GPER	52.49	5.09	19.83	591	0.00
	APER	44.10	9.58			
2	GCUL	23.67	4.59	13.45	591	0.00
	ACUL	20.11	6.12			
3	GINSTR	39.06	5.26	14.52	591	0.00
	AINSTR	33.81	8.45			

Table 3 Paired-samples t-test results for the Good and Actual ELT perceptions

The component assessing GPER has the highest sample mean score ($\bar{x}=52.49$, $SD=5.09$), followed by the APER mean values ($\bar{x}=44.10$, $SD=9.58$). The paired-samples t-test showed there is a statistically significant difference between the computed mean values ($t=19.83$, $df=591$, $p<0.01$). Much of the same results were obtained for the other 2 pairs as well. The t-test indicated that there is a statistical difference between a good English language teacher and the actual English language teacher intercultural competence perceptions ($t=13.45$, $df=591$, $p<0.01$), as well as between the perceptions of a good and the actual English language teacher classroom instruction competence ($t=14.52$, $df=591$, $p<0.01$).

On the basis of the presented data, we may conclude that students' perceptions of the competences of a good and the actual English language teacher differ significantly. Elementary school students' assessment of an English language teacher competences go in favor of a good English language teacher, since the assessment of their actual English language teacher competences is significantly lower.

DISCUSSION

The current study found that the most important quality of a good English language teacher is the possession of certain intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills. Students, in other words, are of the opinion that a good language teacher should be, first of all, righteous

and should explain the teaching content in a comprehensible manner, both in terms of appropriate methods and language use. Furthermore, a good language teacher should respect his students, be patient but not too lenient and should enjoy teaching and transferring knowledge to his students.

The second most important competence area is that of foreign language classroom instruction. Good language teacher should, in this connection, be able to create a relaxing and pleasurable classroom atmosphere in which students can work in peace, should be organized and be able to give a quality feedback on students' work and progress. The least important competence area as perceived by students is the one related to teacher's intercultural competence. Here, it has to be emphasized that students do recognize the relevance of teacher's familiarity with the culture of English speaking countries but, compared with the other two competence areas, they consider it to be the least relevant quality of a good English language teacher.

In accordance with the present results, previous studies (Beaudrie et al., 2004; Chen & Lin, 2009; Vrhovac, 1993) have also revealed instructional competence and teacher's personality as the most important characteristics of an effective (good) foreign language teacher. Therefore, it is not surprising that teacher's intercultural competence was perceived as the least important among these three competence categories. Some authors (Lange, 2011) have speculated that students' perceptions of desirable teacher's traits are affected by their perception of the most important classroom situations, i.e. elements that they are being assessed. Another possible explanation is that of prevalence of instruction of vocabulary, grammar and communicative skills over teaching about culture and customs of English language speaking countries.

The findings of the current study reveal that the actual language teacher possesses many of the desired competences and characteristics. The highest scores were obtained for competences related to foreign language classroom instruction, followed by teacher's intra and interpersonal characteristics and skills and, lastly, teacher's intercultural competence. The inspection of mean values within the component regarding teacher's instructional competences shows that elementary school students perceive their teachers to be the most competent in areas related to organization of the content that has to be covered and examined during the lessons. Regarding personal characteristics, actual language teacher is perceived as righteous person who respects his students, tries his best to transfer the content and displays enjoyment while teaching English language. Finally, students also perceive their teacher to be knowledgeable in the culture of English speaking countries but are of the opinion that the topics related to culture are not frequently taught in English language classes.

The comparison of the results obtained by both descriptive and inferential statistics indicates that more positive perceptions are ascribed to a good language teacher than to the actual language teacher in all three components assessing his/her competence. The greatest discrepancy was found for the component assessing teacher's intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills, followed by competences related to foreign language classroom instruction and intercultural competence. These results are not surprising, since teacher's personal characteristics were perceived to be the most important feature of a good language teacher. Teacher's personality has proven to be very, if not the most, important factor in foreign language learning among younger students (Enever, 2011; Nikolov, 2002). This is due to the fact that younger students perceive an emotional link to the teacher as a relevant factor within the learning context and, thus, attach more importance to the teacher's personality than to some

other areas of teaching profession. For this reason there is a possibility that elementary school students may have been overly critical when assessing their actual language teacher intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics and skills.

Comparison of the results of the perceptions of a good and the actual teacher instructional competence revealed that the greatest discrepancy in opinions was related to the teacher's competence in terms of creating a positive and a relaxing classroom atmosphere in which students can work in piece. This finding is very indicative and implies that students are rather dissatisfied with how the teacher sets the tone of the class environment and how the teacher is dealing with the classroom discipline. This, in turn, may have a negative effect on students' perception of teacher's personal characteristics discussed above. This was also confirmed by Mihaljević Djigunović (1998) who reports on strong positive relationship between all scales assessing foreign language teacher. The perception of a teacher as incompetent in foreign language classroom instruction may act as a demotivator in the sense that students may not want to invest an effort in learning which consequently may lead to low levels of achievement.

Lastly, the examination of the perceptions related to the evaluation of the teacher's intercultural competence revealed several interesting findings. Generally speaking, students are of the opinion that their language teacher does not display a desired amount of knowledge about the culture and customs of English speaking countries. On the other hand, students' think that teaching about the culture, as well as about the differences and similarities between the social customs is neither an important nor frequently observed competence of a foreign language teacher. These contradictory results may stem from the fact that the students are not aware of the cultural content being taught since the same is often implemented in larger thematic units and is not explained explicitly, like, for example, grammatical content. This inconsistency may be also due to common students' belief that a good (language) teacher should know everything about the subject (s)he teaches. In this context, the knowledge of culture is perceived to be an important aspect of a teacher as a professional but, on the other hand, a not very important part of a foreign language curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The present study arose from the need to better understand the role of students' subjective perceptions of teacher competences in Croatian elementary school context. We were motivated by a relatively small number of domestic research on this topic as well as by the non-existence of research which compared students' perceptions of good and actual English language teacher competences and characteristics.

After reviewing our basic assumptions on the potential reasons for differences in perceptions between good and actual language teacher, one last notion has to be pointed out. Namely, any discussion about the discrepancies in perceptions, including this one, must consider the possibility that the teachers who have been assessed in this research, are, indeed, not good language teachers. Although this explanation is as plausible as any, we believe that the higher grade elementary school students are, to a great extent, satisfied their English language teacher, despite the significant differences that were observed.

Finally, we believe that these results should be interpreted in the light of educational reality where the learning takes place. In this connection, Vrhovac (1993) offered a very realistic

overview of the problematic areas of contemporary foreign language teaching methodology in the context of Croatian educational system which is, we believe, applicable to other learning contexts as well. She draws attention not only to the enormous complexity of the profession itself but also to intolerably heavy pedagogical and material working conditions. The author concludes, and we agree with this observation point, that the improvement of teachers' expertise, status within a society and working conditions is an imperative which will inevitably lead to the better quality of the teaching profession.

References

- Barnes, B.D. & Lock, G. (2010). *The Attributes of Effective Lecturers of English as a Foreign Language as Perceived by Students in a Korean University*. Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 35 (1), 139-152. Retrieved from ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1325&context=ajte
- Beaudrie, S., Brown, A. & Thompson, G. (2004). *Multiple Perspectives on Teacher Evaluation in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Arizona Working Papers in SLAT, 11, 57-80. Retrieved from <https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/AZSLAT/article/view/21297/20875>
- Bell, T.R. (2005). *Behaviours and Attitudes of Effective Foreign Language Teachers: Results of a Questionnaire Study*. Foreign Language Annals, 38(2), 259-270. doi: 10.1111/j.1944-9720.2005.tb02490.x
- Borg, S. (2006). *The Distinctive Characteristics of Foreign Language Teachers*. Language Teaching Research 10 (1), 3-31. doi: 10.1191/1362168806lr182oa
- Carvalho, I. (1999). *The Effective Language Teacher*. New Routes, 8, 12-18. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/estesinversos/Home/curriculo-lattes/publicacoes-academicas/the-effective-language-teacher>
- Chen, Y. & Lin, S. (2009). *Exploring Characteristics of Effective EFL Teachers from the Perceptions of Junior High School Students in Tainan*. STUT Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2, 219-249. Retrieved from society.stust.edu.tw/tc/s/dmbu051
- Drakulić, M. (2013). *Foreign Language Teacher Competences as Perceived by English Language and Literature Students*. Journal of Education, Culture and Society, 1, 158-165. doi: 10.15503/jecs20131-158-165
- Drakulić, M. (2017). *The Effect of the Teacher on the Affective Component of the Process of Foreign Language Learning* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.
- Enever, J. (Ed.) (2011). *ELLiE. Early Language Learning in Europe*. London: The British Council.
- European Commission (2013). *Supporting Teacher Competence Development for Better Learning Outcomes*. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/school/doc/teachercomp_en.pdf
- Hammadou, J. & Bernhardt, E. (1987). *On Being and Becoming a Foreign Language Teacher. Theory Into Practice*, 26 (4), 301-306. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1476843.pdf>
- Harris, J. & Duibhir, P. Ó. (2011). *Effective Language Teaching. A Synthesis of Research*. Dublin: Trinity College Dublin.
- Kelly, M., & Grenfell, M. (2004). *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference*. University of Southampton. Retrieved from <http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/report/MainReport.pdf>
- Lange, K. (2011). *Perspectives on Intercultural Competence. A Textbook Analysis and Empirical Study of Teachers' and Students' Attitudes* (Master's thesis), Freie Universität Berlin. Retrieved from www.diss.fu-berlin.de/docs/.../Perspectives_on_Intercultural_Competence.pdf

- Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (1998). Uloga afektivnih faktora u učenju stranoga jezika. Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu.
- National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999). Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. Yonkers, NY: Author.
- Nikolov, M. (2002). Issues in English Language Education. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Park, G. & Lee, H. (2006). *The Characteristics of Effective English Teachers as Perceived by High School Teachers and Students in Korea*. Asia Pacific Education Review, 7 (2), 236-248. Retrieved from files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ752344.pdf
- Radišić, M, Pavičić Takač, V. & Bagarić, V. (Eds.) (2007). Competences of Primary School Foreign Language Teachers in the Republic of Croatia. Osijek: Učiteljski fakultet u Osijeku.
- Sakurai, Y. (2012). *Learners' Perceptions of 'Good' Foreign Language Teachers: A Quantitative Analysis between Native and Non-Native Teachers*. Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 9 (1), 46-60. Retrieved February 5, 2015, from e-flt.nus.edu.sg/v9n12012/sakurai.pdf
- Shishavan, H.B. & Sadeghi, K. (2009). *Characteristics of an Effective English Language Teacher as Perceived by Iranian Teachers and Learners of English*. English Language Teaching, 2(4), 130-143. Retrieved from www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/viewFile/4462/3803
- Verin, E., & Radišić, M. (eds.) (2003). Foreign Languages at Primary Level: Training of Teachers, Reports and Conclusions. Osijek: University of Josip Juraj Strossmayer.
- Vrhovac, Y. (1993). *U potrazi za zadovoljnim učiteljem stranoga jezika*. In Trenutak sadašnjosti u učenju jezika (Eds. Andrijašević, M. & Vrhovac, Y.). Zagreb: Hrvatsko društvo za primjenjenu lingvistiku, (pp. 29-36).