Academic Teachers' Self-Evaluation of English Language Competences and Teaching Methodology

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Abstract

The article presents research on the linguistic and didactic competences of academic teachers in a technical university as part of an EU project to improve the effectiveness of education of academic teachers. It indicates the relation between language and methodological competences in teaching content classes in English. Participants who rated their teaching competences more highly also rated their language competences more highly. Based on these findings, the authors make suggestions concerning the preparation of staff for the university.

Key words: *academic teachers, self-assessment, teaching competence, language competence*

Introduction – Research Background

The growing migration processes of individuals nowadays have impact on the place in which they intend to pursue their educational aspirations. Educational systems also teachers prepare to meet this task, including university staff teachers who work with students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Recognizing the needs, an EU funded project has been undertaken to diagnose the language and teaching competences of university staff in a group of academic lecturers. This study has been partly inspired by related research on the competences of future teachers in the Slovak Republic by Lipnická, Babianková and Cabanková (2019).

Academic staff in Poland should include diagnostics and self-evaluation of competences in their annual responsibilities, as there is no formal teaching qualification required for an academic to teach at a university in Poland. Staff are required to have a relevant degree and fulfil the requirements assigned at the recruitment process. However, the in-service preparation of university teachers in Poland includes self-assessment processes. Teaching competences of the faculty consist of among others, academic teachers' cognitive, affective and motivational capacities in the process of academic instruction. Equipped with these competences teachers may carry out complex teaching activities to fulfil the objectives of their instruction, implement generally recognized and innovative strategies and methods (Gębał, 2019). Additionally, Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013) found that the study of theoretical disciplines connected with attendance at practical lectures and seminars has an improving influence on self-evaluation by the academic teachers.

The EU document on Education and Training (2013) defines teachers' didactic knowledge as "knowledge of the discipline". This includes components such as content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curricular knowledge, contextual knowledge and process knowledge (cf. Roberts, 1998). Cognitive processing of manifold knowledge and its evaluation allow academic teachers to reflect on ways of instruction, their own competences and relationships. University authorities ought to support the teachers' didactic reflection on education, as a source of teacher self-development in the teaching profession. It is by self-evaluation that an individual begins to lay down realistically achievable goals for themselves, makes an effort to achieve them, and is able to assess the achievement and set new goals (Zembylas, 2003; Day, 2004;). The educational benefit of self-evaluation is in the authenticity of teachers' assessment of their judgements. Teachers' self-evaluation may be evoked by an external assessment, a situation which takes place, as well as by using an intentionally administered self-evaluation tool. Teachers acquire experience through events in their teaching (episodic knowledge), and through a number of various situations in the educational process, which they generalize into experiential knowledge.

This study is to highlight another type of knowledge that is indispensable in teaching the content subject through the medium of English, i.e. language proficiency and linguistic skills in general. In the European Profile for Language Teacher Education, Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, and McEvoy, (2004) state that it is the teachers' responsibility to ensure adequate language competence to teach effectively. Furthermore, the authors claim that the greater the teacher's language proficiency, the more creative and confident their teaching is. Lafayette (1993:135),

Medgyes (2001: 440) and Farrell (2007: 55) argue in a similar vein that nothing is more important in teaching, apart from content knowledge, than to have sufficient command of the language to present the subject contents. This is important for practising teachers who no longer attend regular language courses, as their linguistic competences and skills are bound to gradually suffer attrition, because of lack of exposure, limited opportunities for advanced language use inside and outside the classroom and, often, overreliance on the same materials for lengthy periods (cf. Berry 1990).

Facts about the Research University

The university under study represents a technology institution that educates engineers and specialists. According to its mission statement, that technical university conducts innovative scientific research, educates highly qualified staff, and influences the development of the region. The university aims to improve the quality and attractiveness of education, to internationalize the university by increasing the international exchange of research and teaching staff, and the number of students in international exchange, developing cooperation with foreign research centres and international companies. In order to accomplish these aims, the university needs to improve the number of courses offered and quality of education in English, and adapt the educational environment to foreign students. In consequence, measures taken include continuous training of staff to upgrade their teaching competences and foreign language skills, with English as the leading medium of communication for visitors.

Recently, the number of students in the university approximates 20 000, in 15 departments and 5 educational research centres (see table below).

Table 1. Data on faculty and students

Students	From abroad	From the university abroad
2017/18	172	195
2018/19	225	199
Lecturers	107	220
Courses in English		
	Foreign	University
for Students	223	3527
by Academic teachers	101	124

The POWER Project

The project consists of 12 modules run by staff of two faculties, and is intended for 120 academic teachers from all faculties with doctorates and also includes doctoral students. Each module ranges from 60 to 120 teaching hours, comprising face-to-face classes and on-line courses. As part of the project, the organizers tried to equip the participants with materials and competences that allow them to create their own didactic activities to implement in classes conducted both with the Polish and foreign students. The major topics cover, among others, psychosocial skills, the academic lecturer as a coach, workshops on formative evaluation, and on reflective practice, and positive education in academic practice. They are more focused on conducting classes with innovative teaching methods (for example, modular classes, e-learning, etc.), using the constructions and expressions typical of academic English (lesson plans, laboratory instructions, etc.), shaping skills of information management skills, and in presenting educational content.

In connection with the objectives of the POWER project, as specified above, we posed research questions concerning differences in academic teachers' self-evaluation, depending on their degree, type of study, teaching practice in years and language proficiency.

Research Method

The research instrument was a questionnaire and an interview with the participants on their teaching practice. About 120 academic teachers were selected (on a voluntary basis) from all faculties, lecturers with PhD and doctoral students (mostly MSc engineers), currently employed by the university. In self-evaluation, teachers assessed both their language knowledge and teaching experience, since both appear correlated. The research goal was to analyse self-evaluation of academic teachers who participated in the project, concerning their command of English and academic teaching experience, as well as the development of their English skills and didactic competences. The second objective was to find out how the teachers' self-evaluation opinions vary in relation to the command of language and teaching competence. The research problem was defined by means of the following questions:

Q 1: How do the academic teachers evaluate their English language knowledge?

Q 2: How often do they teach their subject in English?

Q 3: How do they evaluate managing classes with foreign students?

Q 4: How do they, as academic teachers, evaluate the overall didactic experience in teaching?

Q 5: How do they estimate their actual performance during the classes conducted in English?

Items S5 to S10 focused on academic teachers' self-evaluation of their own knowledge and experience in the development of language and didactic competences. The items used Likert scales, and the teachers evaluated their knowledge and experience as follows: 1 – insufficient, 2 – sufficient, 3 – good, 4 – very good, 5 – excellent:

S5 – I evaluate my knowledge of English as (1–2 – 3 – 4 – 5);

S6 – I evaluate my knowledge of didactic competences as (1–2 – 3 – 4 – 5);

S7 – I evaluate my knowledge of methods for the subject I teach in practice as (1–2 – 3 – 4 – 5)

S8 – I evaluate my knowledge of methods on the language and didactic competence as (1–2 – 3 – 4 – 5);

S9 – I evaluate my experience in educational activities and in language and communication skills as (1–2 – 3 – 4 – 5).

S10 – I evaluate my experience of cultural education and awareness as (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5).

The questionnaire was administered during the POWER project instruction at the beginning of each course in each group, then participant opinions were processed and evaluated statistically.

Research Results

Research data acquired by the questionnaire method were evaluated using descriptive methods. We were interested how the academic teachers evaluated their knowledge of language and didactic skills. Statistical evaluation of results, as displayed in Table 3, showed that academic teachers evaluated their didactic knowledge significantly better (significance at the level of $p \leq 0.01$) than language knowledge. Better evaluation of didactic skills by the academic teachers was not confirmed statistically in item S7 that regards the knowledge of methods for the subject they teach, presumably due to the frequent changing of the courses the academic teachers are obliged to run each year. Another reason might be the on-going reform of the higher education system and the alterations in the study programmes.

Next, we investigated whether the academic teachers evaluated better their experience in educational practice. Statistical evaluation of results showed that academic teachers evaluated their experience significantly better (significance at the level of $p \leq 0.01$) in both items S09 and S10. The comparison of knowledge and experience in self-evaluation by academic teachers is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Statistical data on knowledge and experience self-evaluation of academic teachers

Questionnaire items	Number of respondents		Mean		Standard deviation		Teachers' t-test	
	MA	PhD	MA	PhD	MA	PhD	t	P
S 5 I evaluate my knowledge of English as	45	67	2.7	3.4	0.73	0.93	-3.46	0.0007
S 6 I evaluate my knowledge of didactic competences as	45	67	2.7	3.4	0.75	0.88	-3.44	0.0008
S 7 I evaluate my knowledge of methods for the subject I teach as	45	67	3.0	3.4	0.79	1.10	-1.70	0.0898
S 8 I evaluate my knowledge of methods of language and didactic competence development as	45	67	2.3	3.0	0.79	0.96	-3.59	0.0005
S 9 I evaluate my experience in educational activities and in language and communication as	45	67	2.3	3.2	0.85	1.16	-3.19	0.0018
S10 I evaluate my experience in cultural education and awareness as	45	67	2.3	3.0	0.79	0.96	-3.59	0.0005

Discussion

The respondents evaluated their own teaching competences better than their knowledge of the English language in which they conducted classes. They gave high marks to their subject knowledge and experience, while giving up valuing their own methodological skills. The academic teachers with doctoral degrees assessed the level of teaching and language competences much better than teachers with MSc degree. We can agree with the common thesis in pedeutology (Gołębniak & Zamorska, 2014) that greater professional experience determines higher self-esteem in terms of their professional role, to a degree, if measured in terms of work experience, and frequency of educational practice, i.e. activities strictly related to teaching. Thus, increase of didactic skills occurs along with the progressing process of professionalization, which cannot be stated about the English language skills.

Better self-evaluation of knowledge and experience, and didactic competencies, rather than English language skills by this group of teachers could be caused by insufficient feedback, and lower amount of language contact in instruction. The teaching staff do not have many opportunities for discussion, or critical feedback on the preparation and performance of their educational activities, particularly on the development of their language and didactic competences. This could also be the reason why some academic teachers were less critical of their own didactic competences and evaluated their knowledge and experience better. University teachers equipped with suitable didactic tools, strategies and teaching techniques can have a tremendous bearing on their professional development (Berry, 1990).

Interviews with Academic Teachers

Besides the above quantitative research by means of a questionnaire, interviews with the teachers were conducted in form of a presentation round at the beginning of classes in each group. This enabled a better understanding of the problems associated with their language and didactic competences; sometimes their opinions were voiced in written form in the questionnaires they returned. This time, during interview the questions from Q1 to Q5 were used by the researchers to verify the data obtained from the questionnaire. We present the following key findings from the interviews:

QUESTION 1: How do you as academic teachers evaluate your English language knowledge?

	No	%
no knowledge	0	0.0
little knowledge	26	25.5
quite highly	51	50.1
excellent	35	34.3
Total	102	100.0

QUESTION 2: How often do you teach a subject in English language?

	No	%
sometimes	65	63.0
often	34	33.3
never	2	1.9
cannot say	1	1.2
Total	102	100.0

The results are consistent with previous findings, thus, out of the total number of respondents 102 participants, approximately 63.0%, use the English language in the teaching process. However, the number of the teachers who do not use the English language as compared to the declared language proficiency is quite evident. These findings are a challenge for the teachers themselves, the university management, but also for further education plans and projects.

In their interviews, only a few respondents did not experience any inconveniences of teaching in the English language. The most common opinions voiced by the respondents on the issue of using English in classes emphasized *“reduced self-esteem and hopelessness”, “there are students in the group who are more fluent in English than me and they show off before the group”, “complete reluctance to go to lectures and teach in English language”*. There were several respondents who provided different answers: *“I never liked it, I teach a lot and have no problems in my classes”, “No, I never felt any threat”, “No, not in me, but I see it in my classmates – they struggle with the study in English language and have problems of this nature”*. Thus, they declared that teaching their subject in English is not only an issue for the instructors, but also a considerable number of students find the situation demanding, or even artificial.

QUESTION 3: How do you evaluate managing classes with foreign students?

Reasons	No	%
lack of experience	12	11.7
I prefer traditional teaching	38	37.2
demanding lesson preparation	27	26.4
little experience with foreigners	14	13.7
cannot say	11	10.7
Total	102	100.0

In the respondents' opinions, they lack sufficient professional knowledge in certain areas, which means they do not trust themselves, and prefer classical teaching that is less demanding in terms of class preparation. This is a widespread opinion in academic circles that instruction through the medium of English is more demanding, as it requires a good command of the language skills appropriate for the subject contents, and then, the choice of the teaching methods, etc. These findings show that it is necessary to make the teachers aware of this significant change in their approach to education, with a particular emphasis on the use of innovative methods to face these challenges.

The most commonly reported reasons of the problems with foreign students by the respondents were external: *"Student are overloaded with many courses and dwindling expectations once at the university"*, *"Low motivation to study in English on the part of students"*, *"Poor cooperation with other academic teachers and lacking feedback"*. The respondents also highlighted the university education system: *"Malfunctioning education system"*, but also *"low status of the study program"*, *"high pressure on the students to study particular issues that they themselves consider to be futile and useless"*, *"a lot of study assignments and duties, a lot of responsibilities at school and at work"*.

QUESTION 4: How do you evaluate the overall didactic experience in teaching, and in teaching in English language?

	N	%
no experience	0	0.0
average	9	9.4
quite highly	61	60.1
excellent	32	33.3
Total	102	100.0

As might be noticed, the same scale of self-evaluation was applied in Questions 4 and 1 to compare the attitudes of university teachers to their language and didactic knowledge. The data show significant discrepancy between the two spheres of educational expertise.

QUESTION 5: How do you estimate your performance during the classes in English language?

According to the respondents, some described the positive impact of teaching their subjects in English: *"One has a very different approach to those subjects where the teachers use English, and yet manage to build respect through their expertise".* *"A very important course – if the teacher is empathetic, attentive and fair, it reduces the likelihood of failure"*. On the contrary, some respondents voiced the possible negative influence of teaching in English: *"If the teacher demands much from the students, it may happen that the students simply give up"*. *"An important role – the more demotivating the teachers are, the more it affects the students"*.

The interviews with the academic teachers showed that the area is relatively unrecognized in our country with regard to university courses in English, and it is important for it to be researched in a relevant way. The most interesting is the remark on a continuous reduction of demands for candidates during the admission process, and the related lack of desirable intellectual and cognitive requirements of future students, another point that should also be verified with further empirical research.

This research, in sum, found that lack of didactic knowledge, due to high specialization in the subject area, created considerable inconveniences in further stages of the education career. The university staff were more concerned with the subject content and methodologies, than with theoretical aspects of education. Furthermore, the acquisition of knowledge in teaching methodology is not systematic, thus more attention must be paid to the in-service training of academic teachers in particular. This investigation has shown that foreign language didactics does not receive systematic attention in the direct preparation of the university staff, and that teachers act randomly. Another issue is that the most experienced teachers are aware of such challenges and can anticipate certain fundamental problems.

Conclusions

The present research has both benefits and limitations; the major limitation of the research was the method used, as the academic teachers could not evaluate all their knowledge and experience. Interviews with academic teachers provided more precise information, even though taken from a smaller number of academic teachers. There were several items in the questionnaire which reduced its reliability. The research was limited also by its size, sample availability and local character. In line with the findings of Leader-Janssen and Rankin-Erickson (2013), our research results demonstrate that the development of future teachers and educational staff is a long-lasting process. The length of study, and the subjects taught improve the self-evaluation of didactic competences of academic teachers in their profession, however, a separate important issue is the theoretical, didactic and methodological preparation of the faculty aimed at the harmonious development of academic teachers' theoretical knowledge and practical experience spread in full-time study. The findings discussed in the research revealed possible shortcomings in the university teachers' attitudes to the development of their knowledge and experience. This should be improved by an extension of the study programme and more contact periods, consultations, and reflections with other teachers of the subjects. However, the research results may be of benefit for the development of the curriculum related to language and didactic competence. The investigation is meaningful also for follow-up research projects and for the improvement of the diagnostic process of academic teachers' competences in their own educational practice.

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