Anna Szuchalska

University of Bialystok, Poland

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2358-0696

a.szuchalska@uwb.edu.pl

Exploring teacher competencies in early language education: Perspective of MA pedagogy students

The article aims at exploring students' perceptions of the significance of particular teachers' competencies in early language education. In the first part, a literature review synthesizing diverse definitions of teacher competencies based on varied criteria is presented. The second part depicts the results of a quantitative study involving a survey undertaken at the University of Bialystok, with 54 fourth-year pedagogy students majoring in early education participating. The survey instrument comprised closed-ended questions categorized into six competencies. The findings revealed that, among psychological and pedagogical competencies, skills and knowledge in fostering student motivation were deemed vital (59.3%). Educational competencies highlighted the significance of teacher's empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism (68.5%), while substantive competencies emphasized the importance of using the foreign language during lessons (63%). Intercultural competencies highlighted the importance of teacher's tolerance and openness (65%), and methodological and didactic competencies identified knowledge and skills in the concept of early school foreign language teaching as critical (53.7%). Among diagnostic competencies, the ability to interpret and evaluate lessons, observe and assess student involvement in linguistic activities, and recognize and understand errors were equally important (51.9%). The research

outcomes offer valuable insights into the perspectives of MA pedagogy students, shedding light on the competencies they deem essential for effective early language education.

Keywords: teacher competencies, early language education, quantitative study, survey, MA pedagogy students

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje nauczyciela, wczesne nauczanie języków obcych, badanie ilościowe, badanie sondażowe, studenci pedagogiki

1. Introduction

In the era of globalisation, the role of language teachers, particularly in early education, has become increasingly significant. In Poland, like in many other countries, the demand for proficient language instruction at the primary level has surged, driven by the growing recognition of early language acquisition as a basis of lifelong linguistic and cognitive development. With English being the prominent foreign language in Polish schools, the competencies required of language teachers in early education have received increased attention.

The importance of well-qualified language teachers in the early years cannot be overstated. Early education serves as the foundation for children's future academic success, and language skills are a critical component of this foundation. In Poland, educational reforms and the introduction of new curricula have emphasized the need to educate teachers who are not only proficient in the language they teach, but also equipped with the pedagogical skills necessary to engage young learners effectively. However, the concept of teacher competencies is multifaceted, encompassing not only linguistic proficiency, but also a deep understanding of pedagogical methodologies, cultural awareness, and the ability to foster a positive and inclusive learning environment.

This article seeks to explore students' perceptions of the significance of particular teachers' competencies in early language education within the Polish educational framework. The initial section of this paper provides a review of the literature, beginning with a description of professional requirements to be met in order to become a foreign language teacher in early education. Following this, the concept of 'competence' is defined and an extensive list of foreign language teacher competencies in early education is provided. The subsequent sections detail the study's methodology and present the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion, which includes final observations on the topic.

2. Teaching a foreign language in early education in Poland – Literature review

2.1. Professional requirements

Having analysed various European education policy documents, Komorowska and Krajka (2024) observed that all of them emphasize the importance of introducing foreign language instruction in early education, even as early as in pre-school. Recommendations contained in these documents resulted in several countries implementing foreign language education in early kindergarten, e.g. Poland, Luxembourg and Belgium at the age of 3, Greece at the age of 4, Cyprus and Malta at the age of 5 (Komorowska, Krajka, 2024: 28).

Professional requirements to be met in order to become a foreign language teacher in early education in Poland were defined in § 7 of the *Regulation of the Ministry of National Education* of October 10, 1991 and in the *Journal of Laws* No. 98, item 433 (with amendments). Teachers in early education who teach foreign languages are obliged to hold a diploma from a master's or professional degree programme in philology or applied linguistics, with accompanying pedagogical training, or a diploma from a teacher training college with pedagogical preparation, or a diploma from a dual-specialization master's programme in early childhood pedagogy and foreign language instruction. To teach a foreign language in a kindergarten, one is required to hold a language proficiency certificate at least at an upper-intermediate level (B2) and have completed postgraduate studies or a qualifying course in the field of early teaching of a given foreign language. The Annex to the *Regulation of the Ministry of National Education* of 12 March 2009 provides a list of certificates confirming knowledge of foreign languages with required grades. These are: a) First Certificate in English (FCE), b) International English Language Testing System (IELTS), c) Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – Educational Testing Service (ETS), d) City & Guilds Level 1 Certificate in ESOL International (reading, writing and listening) Communicator (B2), e) Pearson Test of English General, f) Pearson Test of English Academic, g) Education Development International (EDI).

The need to develop a structured and consistent approach to teaching a foreign language in early education is essential as "YL [young learners] teachers are responsible not only for developing skills and building appropriate pronunciation and grammar, but also for fostering learners' motivation, [and] triggering their interest in the new language and appreciation for foreign cultures" (Komorowska, Krajka, 2024: 27-28). Thus, Stec (2009: 54) suggests that educating language teachers-to-be should be broadened to encompass early education, as students in their academic training

need to engage with both theoretical and practical aspects of both special-izations. These include areas such as general, developmental, and education-al psychology of children; general pedagogy; didactics; as well as theories and methodologies related to early education. Furthermore, students should be introduced to aspects of music, art, and speech therapy, and they should have the opportunity to participate in voice production classes, literary and drama courses, aesthetic education for children and youth, as well as reme-dial and compensatory education.

2.2. Teacher competencies in early language education

When asked what it means to be 'a good language teacher', respondents most often list diverse personality traits. They claim that an effective lan-guage instructor should be, *inter alia*, sincere, open to acknowledge stu-dents' mistakes, committed, tolerant, self-confident, creative, passionate, firm, fair, patient, respectful and authentic (Werbińska, 2004, 2011; Nosid-lak, 2021, 2024). Being a proficient language teacher also means possessing certain competencies which might be defined as "a set of professional skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that every teacher must have in order to perform their job effectively" (Průcha, 2006: 306). The *Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport* of September 7, 2004 on teach-er education standards provides a catalogue of competencies that should be acquired within preparation for the teaching profession. These are teaching, educational and social competences.

While teacher competencies are undoubtedly a crucial aspect of teacher education, there is no overall agreement on what these competen-cies entail. Werbińska (2011) identifies two reasons for this state of affairs:

> firstly, the conceptual foundation of teacher knowledge is very complex be-cause it intermingles so much with the individual teacher's identity; secondly, it is so complex because it draws heavily on a number of related disciplines, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology and peda-gogy, to name but a few (p. 39).

Indisputably, teacher competencies are dynamic, continually needing to be re-evaluated and developed, as they are "by their nature always un-finished, still insufficient and constantly in flux" (Kwaśnica, 2004: 294). This stems from the unique nature of the teaching profession, where each teach-ing scenario is distinct. Enhancing competencies is an integral part of a teach-er's professional growth, which continues throughout their entire career.

Drawing from the analysis of both theoretical and empirical studies (Andrzejewska, 2008, Werbińska, 2011, Erenc-Grygoruk, 2013), several competencies can be identified as essential for fostering effective language acquisition and developing a positive learning environment. The different competencies of a teacher should be viewed as interconnected, not treated in isolation.

To facilitate the clarity of description and analysis in this article, the teacher competencies in early language education have been divided into six categories.

2.2.1. Psychological and pedagogical competence

Psychological competence may be defined as "the teacher's ability to communicate effectively with students" (Werbińska, 2011: 49) and is considered to be the core of being a good teacher, as it influences the teaching-learning atmosphere and student-teacher rapport. This competence also involves considering the characteristics of children's learning and behaviour that stem from their stage of psychomotor development. It is crucial, particularly in early education, as the teacher assumes a significant role in students' lives during this phase of development, acting more as a caregiver than a traditional educator.

Pedagogical competence refers to "those dimensions of teaching regarded as essential in the repertoire of any teacher, regardless of the subject matter" (Werbińska, 2011: 51). It is acquired in teacher education studies and various professional courses.

Broadly speaking, psychological and pedagogical competencies encompass the knowledge and skills in the fields of: holistic, multisensory teaching, applying the principle of visualization, task diversity, appropriate work pace during the lesson, developing motivation, using didactic games, developing autonomy, using various social forms of work during lessons, giving feedback for students and parents, selecting and structuring educational content, developing learning skills, individualizing the didactic process, using open forms of work, and implementing artistic activities (Andrzejewska, 2008: 44).

2.2.2. Educational competence

Educational competencies are described as the comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that teachers need to effectively plan, deliver, and

assess educational experiences, while also addressing the developmental, psychological, and social needs of their students. According to Shulman (1987), these competencies involve not only content knowledge but also pedagogical content knowledge, which is crucial for delivering subject matter in ways that are understandable to students. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) emphasize that effective teachers must also possess the ability to manage classroom dynamics and use a variety of instructional strategies to meet diverse learners' needs. Furthermore, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight that ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to refine these competencies and adapt to the changing educational landscape.

2.2.3. Substantive competence

Substantive competence may be defined as "the teaching skills specific to a particular subject matter" (Werbińska, 2011: 47). In the area of teaching English as a foreign language to young learners substantive competence refers to the teacher's deep understanding of the subject matter, including knowledge of English language structures, vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar, as well as the pedagogical skills required to effectively teach these elements to children. This competence involves the ability to select and apply appropriate teaching methods and theories that align with the developmental stages and learning styles of young learners.

According to Richards (2010), substantive competence is critical as it allows teachers to adapt their instructional strategies to suit the linguistic and cognitive abilities of their students. Cameron (2001) emphasizes the importance of understanding how young learners acquire a second language, noting that teachers must be skilled in creating engaging, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning experiences that promote language acquisition. Brewster and colleagues (2004) also stress the necessity of integrating language teaching with content that is relevant to the children's world, thus ensuring that language learning is both effective and enjoyable.

2.2.4. Multicultural competence

Multicultural competence refers to the capacity to communicate and collaborate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds who speak other languages. In order to do so, the teacher must be open and tolerant, able to shift perspectives, and possess the knowledge of both their own culture and that of the foreign language community. Multicultural competence is

essential for teachers to facilitate students' understanding, not only of foreign culture, but also their own, and to prepare them for effective intercultural communication. The competence is particularly important in the case of teaching a foreign language in early education, as one of the teachers' roles is to raise students' awareness of linguistic diversity in order to arouse their interest in learning other languages, which is stated in *the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 14 February 2017 on the core curriculum for preschool education and the core curriculum for general education for primary school, including for students with moderate or significant intellectual disabilities, general education for vocational schools of the first degree, general education for special schools preparing for work and general education for post-secondary schools.* The regulation establishes that one of the tasks of preschool is to "create educational situations that are conducive to building a child's interest in a modern foreign language and the desire to learn about other cultures."

2.2.5. Methodological and didactic competence

As Pfeiffer (2001: 195) describes it, methodological-didactic competence is "the ability to create and conduct effective glottodidactic processes". This means that it involves a teacher's proficiency in choosing, organizing, and implementing suitable teaching methods and strategies that correspond to children's developmental needs and learning styles. This competence includes the ability to design and structure lessons that capture the interest of young learners, encourage their active participation, and facilitate language acquisition through relevant and meaningful activities.

Educators with strong methodological and didactic skills are proficient in creating a learning environment that encourages interaction, curiosity, and motivation. They are capable of employing a range of instructional techniques, such as storytelling, games, songs, and visual aids, to make language learning both enjoyable and effective for young learners. Furthermore, they are able to assess students' progress and modify their teaching approaches to address the varied needs of their students, ensuring each child reaches their full potential in learning English.

2.2.6. Diagnostic competence

Diagnostic competence may be defined as "knowledge and skills necessary for effective implementation of tasks related to recognizing individual de-

velopmental and educational needs and psychophysical abilities of students (Klimek, 2016: 168). According to Andrzejewska (2008: 46), the ability to effectively assess and support a student's language development is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of skills. Teachers must possess knowledge of the methods available for obtaining information about a student's language progress. This includes the ability to create and utilize control tasks that are appropriate for a specific group of students, as well as to independently develop these tasks in ways that are engaging and attractive to children.

Monitoring students' language development progress is also crucial, as is recognizing and understanding the potential causes of errors. Teachers must be adept at observing and evaluating students' engagement during language activities and identifying their individual learning styles. Based on these observations, educators can make informed decisions regarding the most suitable didactic activities for each student.

In addition to these skills, teachers should be able to communicate effectively, with both students and parents, by preparing descriptive assessments that clearly articulate a student's knowledge and skills, particularly when they are beginning to learn a foreign language. Furthermore, the ability to interpret and evaluate lessons plays a significant role in the learning process, as does the capacity to use diagnostic results to enhance and support ongoing learning.

3. Method

3.1. Research aims and questions

The primary objective of this research project was to explore how pedagogy students majoring in early education perceive language teacher competencies. To align with the research objectives, the following questions were formulated:
1. What are the prevailing beliefs among MA pedagogy students majoring in early education about the essential competencies needed for effective language instruction in the fields of:
    a) psychological and pedagogical competencies
    b) educational competencies
    c) substantive competencies
    d) multicultural competencies
    e) methodological and didactic competencies
    f) diagnostic competencies?

3.2. Participants

Fifty-four MA pedagogy students majoring in early education from the University of Bialystok participated in the study. All of the respondents were fourth-year students. The reason for the selection of this particular group of participants was that they possessed characteristics and experiences directly related to the research questions, as earlier in the current academic year they had had a lecture on the methodology of early English language teaching, during which they discussed various topics related to the learning and teaching of English to young children. One of those topics was the competences of an English language teacher in early school education. All participants in the study were women, which is due to the specific nature of this particular university programme. It is unsurprising, given the historical perception of teaching as a profession predominantly associated with women. According to a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service, data from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries indicate that, on average, women comprise over two-thirds of teachers across all educational levels, from pre-primary to tertiary education (EPRS_ATA(2020)646191_EN). A similar trend is observed in the European Union, where in 2017, women accounted for 72% of the nearly 6 million school teachers in the EU (EPRS_ATA(2020)646191_EN). The majority were full-time students, while about one-fourth were part-time students.

3.3. Procedure

The study was conducted in November – December 2023. The participants were asked to complete an anonymous self-administered questionnaire. In order to limit ambiguity and ensure students' understanding of the survey, the questions were asked in Polish, as the participants' native language. The questionnaire was made available online (via Google Forms) for access at any time and from any location. The questionnaire was divided into six parts, corresponding to various competences under study. Each part consisted of several statements in Likert scale where 1 meant 'not significant' at all and 5 – 'highly significant'. A survey was selected as a research instrument because it is "a system for collecting information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour" (Fink, 2003: 1), which means that it is the most convenient tool for gathering data from a large group of respondents.

The data was statistically analysed and the results were then interpreted.

3.4. Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted with R software (version R-4.1.2). Distribution of outcomes was presented using proportions.

4. Research findings

The next section outlines the main research findings, structured around the topics addressed in the questionnaire and corresponding to the research questions mentioned earlier.

The initial portion of the questionnaire facilitated the gathering of quantitative data, providing an understanding of participants' beliefs concerning psychological and pedagogical competences. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of outcomes in the field of psychological and pedagogical competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the field of holistic, multisensory teaching	0.0	0.0	7.4	35.2	57.4
Knowledge and skills in the field of applying the principle of visualization	0.0	0.0	9.3	59.3	31.5
Knowledge and skills in the field of task diversity	0.0	5.6	11.1	31.5	51.9
Knowledge and skills in the field of appropriate work pace during the lesson	0.0	0.0	13.0	35.2	51.9
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing motivation	0.0	3.7	3.7	33.3	59.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of using didactic games	0.0	0.0	13.0	31.5	55.6
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing autonomy	0.0	3.7	27.8	27.8	40.7
Knowledge and skills in the field of using various social forms of work during the lessons	1.9	3.7	14.8	33.3	46.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of feedback for students and parents	1.9	0.0	13.0	48.1	37.0
Knowledge and skills in the field of selecting and structuring educational content	0.0	3.7	5.6	33.3	57.4
Knowledge and skills in the field of developing learning skills	0.0	1.9	1.9	38.9	57.4

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the field of individualizing the didactic process	0.0	0.0	11.1	40.7	48.1
Knowledge and skills in the field of using open forms of work	0.0	3.7	25.9	37.0	33.3
Knowledge and skills in the field of ability and readiness to implement artistic activities (plastic, musical, theatrical, dance)	1.9	5.6	18.5	38.9	35.2

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

The analysis of the data in Table 1 shows that the competence students considered most vital was the teachers' knowledge and skills in fostering students' motivation (59.3%). This suggests that motivation is seen as a key factor in the learning process, and students place a high value on teachers who can inspire and engage them effectively. Respondents also felt that teachers should exhibit a similar level of proficiency in holistic, multisensory teaching, organizing and selecting educational content, and enhancing students' learning skills (57.4%). This indicates that students appreciate a comprehensive and well-structured approach to learning. They recognize the value of varied teaching methods that cater to different learning styles and the importance of a clear and coherent curriculum. Conversely, the expertise that received the least emphasis from participants was in the areas of applying the principle of visualization (31.5%) and using open forms of work (33.3%). This may suggest that students may either feel less impact from these methods or believe that other competencies are more crucial for their learning success.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on educational competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of outcomes in the field of educational competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of educational psychology	0.0	1.9	18.5	29.6	50.0
Ability to diagnose behaviours characteristic of a given age group	0.0	3.7	5.6	42.6	48.1

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to shape norms and principles of conduct and attitudes	0.0	1.9	9.3	38.9	50.0
Sensitivity and caring of the teacher	0.0	1.9	9.3	29.6	59.3
Empathy, enthusiasm, optimism of the teacher	1.9	1.9	3.7	24.1	68.5

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

As indicated by the data analysis in Table 2, empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism are highly valued, with 92.6% of respondents rating these qualities as „significant" or „very significant". This suggests that personal qualities and a positive attitude are seen as crucial for effective teaching. The sensitive and caring nature of the teacher are also rated highly, with 88.9% considering it „important" or „very important." This underscores the importance of a nurturing and supportive approach in education. The ability to shape norms, principles of conduct, and attitudes is considered significant, with 88.9% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." This highlights the role of teachers in guiding students' behaviour and moral development. Knowledge of educational psychology is also regarded as essential, with 79.6% of respondents considering it „important" or „very important." This reflects the value placed on understanding psychological principles in teaching. The ability to diagnose behaviours characteristic of a given age group is highly valued, with 90.7% rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates the importance of teachers being able to recognize and respond to developmental stages.

The third part of the questionnaire concentrated on substantive competencies. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of outcomes in the field of substantive competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Teacher's oral language skills	1.9	5.6	14.8	46.3	31.5
Ability to respond spontaneously and correctly to situations occurring in the classroom	0.0	3.7	9.3	38.9	48.1
Ability to explain the rules of language games	0.0	1.9	11.1	37.0	50.0

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to tell fairy tales	0.0	11.1	27.8	33.3	27.8
Ability to use a foreign language during lessons	0.0	3.7	3.7	29.6	63.0
Excellent pronunciation	0.0	1.9	7.4	33.3	57.4
Knowledge of the characteristic register of the language, including rhymes, poems, songs, children's games	1.9	3.7	16.7	48.1	29.6
Ability to adjust the level of difficulty of the utterance to the recipient - a child starting to learn a foreign language	0.0	0.0	7.4	37.0	55.6
Ability to manage one's own professional development	0.0	3.7	22.2	38.9	35.2

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

Based on the data provided in Table 3, several conclusions can be drawn about the participants' perceptions of various substantive competencies. The ability to use a foreign language during lessons is considered highly important, with 92.6% of respondents rating it as either „significant" or „very significant." This suggests that practical language usage is a top priority for effective teaching. Excellent pronunciation and the ability to explain the rules of language games are also seen as crucial, with 90.7% and 87% of respondents, respectively, rating these skills as „important" or „very important." This highlights the value placed on clear communication and the ability to clarify concepts in teaching. The ability to respond spontaneously and correctly to situations in the classroom is rated as important or very important by 87% of respondents, emphasizing the need for teachers to be adaptable and responsive to dynamic classroom environments. The ability to tell fairy tales is considered moderately important, with 61.1% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." While valued, it is not as highly prioritized as other competencies. The ability to adjust the level of difficulty of language to suit a child's learning stage is highly regarded, with 92.6% rating it as „important" or „very important." This reflects the importance of tailoring instruction to the learner's level. The ability to manage one's own professional development is also seen as significant, with 74.1% rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates a recognition of the need for continuous learning and self-improvement among teachers. Knowledge of the characteristic register of the language, including rhymes, poems, songs, and children's games, received a lower importance

rating, with 77.7% of respondents finding it „important" or „very important." While still valued, it appears to be less critical compared to other competencies.

The following section of the questionnaire focused on multicultural competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of outcomes in the field of multicultural competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
The ability to communicate and cooperate with people from other cultural backgrounds and speaking other languages	0.0	3.7	24.1	40.7	31.5
An attitude of openness and tolerance	1.9	0.0	9.3	25.9	63.0
Knowledge of the culture of one's own country and the country and community speaking the foreign language	0.0	0.0	20.4	50.0	29.6
Making students sensitive to linguistic diversity in order to develop their linguistic awareness and interest in other languages	0.0	3.7	9.3	42.6	44.4

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

As indicated in Table 4, an attitude of openness and tolerance is rated as highly significant, with 88.9% of respondents considering it „important" or „very important." This suggests that students view these qualities as crucial for effective communication and cooperation in multicultural environments. Making students sensitive to linguistic diversity is also regarded as significant, with 87% of respondents rating it as „important" or „very important." This indicates a strong recognition of the importance of developing students' interest in and awareness of different languages. The ability to communicate and cooperate with people from other cultural backgrounds is seen as important by 72.2% of respondents. While still valued, it ranks slightly lower than openness and linguistic awareness, suggesting that students prioritize attitudes over specific skills. Knowledge of one's own culture and that of others is moderately emphasized, with 79.6% of respondents viewing it as „important" or „very important." This suggests that while cultural knowledge is important, it is considered slightly less critical than openness and tolerance.

The last but one section of the survey centred on methodological and didactic competencies. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of outcomes in the field of methodological and didactic competences

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge and skills in the area of the processes of acquiring the first language and foreign languages,	0.0	1.9	16.7	38.9	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of the concept of early school foreign language teaching,	0.0	1.9	13.0	31.5	53.7
Knowledge and skills in the area of the ability to plan the process of teaching a foreign language	0.0	0.0	11.1	38.9	50.0
Knowledge and skills in the area of supporting the development of foreign language learning strategies by children	0.0	0.0	16.7	40.7	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of using information technology during lessons (selection of materials and their appropriate, goal-oriented use)	1.9	0.0	20.4	37.0	40.7
Knowledge and skills in the area of supporting the development of students' skills in using media to learn a foreign language	0.0	5.6	18.5	44.4	31.5
Knowledge and skills in the area of acquiring and using additional (authentic) teaching materials in lessons	1.9	0.0	24.1	38.9	35.2
Knowledge and skills in the area of preparing their own teaching materials	1.9	1.9	18.5	35.2	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of knowledge of methods of early school foreign language teaching in the area of individual skills	0.0	3.7	13.0	40.7	42.6
Knowledge and skills in the area of using narrative texts	0.0	3.7	40.7	35.2	20.4
Knowledge and skills in the area of teaching a foreign language through meaningful action in an authentic situational context	0.0	5.6	20.4	46.3	27.8
Knowledge and skills in the area of developing self-assessment skills, working with a portfolio	1.9	7.4	33.3	37.0	20.4
Knowledge and skills in the area of evaluation and selection of textbooks	0.0	7.4	13.0	51.9	27.8
Knowledge and skills in the area of integration of teaching content with language teaching	0.0	1.9	16.7	37.0	44.4
Knowledge and skills in creating your own methodological background	0.0	0.0	20.4	37.0	42.6
Knowledge and skills in understanding the place of teaching children a foreign language in the context of further learning of this language	0.0	1.9	16.7	44.4	37.0
Knowledge and skills in explaining the goals and methods of teaching to children, parents and other teachers	0.0	7.4	18.5	37.0	37.0

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

Based on the data from Table 5 regarding methodological and didactic competencies, the following conclusions can be drawn from the highest and lowest scoring statements. The statement concerning knowledge and skills in the area of the concept of early school foreign language teaching received the highest score, with 53.7% of respondents rating it as „very important." This indicates a strong emphasis on understanding foundational concepts in early foreign language education, suggesting that participants believe this knowledge is crucial for effective teaching practices. Another high-scoring statement was knowledge and skills in the area of the processes of acquiring a first language and foreign languages, with 42.6% rating it as „very important." This highlights the importance of understanding language acquisition processes, which is essential for developing effective teaching strategies. The statement about knowledge and skills in the area of using narrative texts received the lowest rating, with only 20.4% of respondents marking it as „very important." This suggests that participants may view the use of narrative texts as less critical in their methodological approach to language teaching, potentially indicating a preference for other teaching strategies. Similarly, the knowledge and skills in the area of developing self-assessment skills and working with a portfolio also scored low, with only 20.4% rating it as „very important." This could reflect a lower priority placed on self-assessment techniques in the overall teaching methodology.

The final section of the survey focused on diagnostic competencies. The findings are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Distribution of outcomes in the field of diagnostic competencies

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Knowledge of possible methods of obtaining information about the student's language development	0.0	1.9	24.1	33.3	40.7
Ability to use control tasks appropriately for a given group of students	0.0	1.9	11.1	57.4	29.6
Ability to independently create control tasks	0.0	3.7	16.7	48.1	31.5
Ability to prepare control tasks in a form that is attractive to children	0.0	1.9	13.0	40.7	44.4
Ability to monitor progress in students' language development	0.0	0.0	9.3	50.0	40.7
Ability to recognize errors and search for and understand their possible causes	0.0	1.9	14.8	31.5	51.9
Ability to observe and assess the student's engagement in language activities during the lesson	0.0	3.7	7.4	37.0	51.9

Statement	1 – lowest significance, 5 – highest significance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to recognize the learning styles of individual students	0.0	5.6	13.0	42.6	38.9
Ability to make decisions about appropriate didactic activities concerning individual students	0.0	1.9	7.4	50.0	40.7
Ability to formulate information addressed to the student and parents and to prepare a descriptive assessment	0.0	7.4	9.3	35.2	48.1
Ability to assess the knowledge and skills of a student starting to learn a foreign language	0.0	3.7	5.6	48.1	42.6
Ability to interpret and evaluate the lesson	0.0	5.6	9.3	33.3	51.9
Ability to use the results of the diagnosis to support learning processes	0.0	1.9	7.4	42.6	48.1

*Data presented as proportion of all outcomes for given statement.

Source: own study.

The analysis of the data in Table 6 shows that the ability to recognize errors and search for and understand their possible causes also scored highly, with 51.9% rating it as „very important." This suggests that the ability to diagnose and analyse errors is viewed as a key competency in fostering students' language learning. Additionally, the statement concerning knowledge of possible methods of obtaining information about the student's language development received the highest rating, with 40.7% of respondents marking it as „very important." This indicates that participants see this knowledge as crucial for effectively understanding and supporting students' language development. On the lower end, the ability to recognize the learning styles of individual students received a modest rating, with only 38.9% indicating it as „very important." This may suggest that while recognizing learning styles is acknowledged, it is not considered as critical as other diagnostic competencies, indicating a potential area for development in teacher training. Another statement that scored relatively low was the ability to independently create control tasks, with 31.5% rating it as „very important." This suggests that participants may feel less confident in, or place less priority on, this specific skill, compared to other diagnostic abilities.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of MA pedagogy students regarding the essential competencies of language

teachers in early education. Students placed significant emphasis on the teacher's ability to foster motivation, highlighting its role in engaging young learners. This is consistent with Werbińska's (2011) view that creating a motivating learning environment is central to effective teaching. Empathy, enthusiasm, and optimism emerged as the most valued traits, highlighting the importance of personal qualities in shaping the educational experience. These findings resonate with Darling-Hammond and Bransford's (2005) assertion that effective teaching relies not only on content knowledge but also on emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. The emphasis on using a foreign language during lessons aligns with Richards' (2010) focus on practical language application in teaching. Foundational knowledge of early language acquisition and teaching methods was prioritized, reflecting the need for a solid theoretical basis in practice. The high importance placed on openness and tolerance aligns with the growing emphasis on intercultural awareness in education (Komorowska & Krajka, 2024).

These findings suggest a need for balanced teacher training programs that emphasize both theoretical and practical aspects of language education. While the competencies highlighted by the participants reflect a strong foundation for effective teaching, areas such as intercultural communication and innovative methodologies could be further reinforced. Additionally, the relatively lower emphasis on diagnostic competencies points to the importance of integrating these skills more prominently in teacher preparation curricula.

6. Final remarks

The conclusions drawn from the literature review and the quantitative analysis of the collected data have been organized according to the research questions.

As for psychological and pedagogical competence, the conclusions suggest that, for the respondents, the most effective teachers are those who can motivate, engage, and provide structured, multisensory learning experiences, while less emphasis is placed on more experimental or visual teaching methods.

The data concerning educational competence implies that participants place significant importance on both the personal qualities of the teacher, such as empathy and enthusiasm, and their professional skills, such as understanding educational psychology and managing student behaviour. The combination of these competencies is seen as essential for effective teaching and student development.

In the field of substantive competence the information gathered in the study indicates that teachers prioritize practical language use, clear communication, adaptability, and professional development as key competencies in their roles. Skills such as storytelling and specific language knowledge, while important, are viewed as somewhat less critical.

In the area of multicultural competence, the data collected in the study reveals that participants place the highest importance on fostering openness, tolerance, and linguistic awareness in a multicultural setting. Communication skills and cultural knowledge are also valued but are seen as somewhat less critical than these overarching attitudes.

Regarding methodological and didactic competence, the findings indicate that respondents highly value competencies related to foundational concepts in foreign language teaching and language acquisition processes. In contrast, there is less emphasis on the use of narrative texts and self-assessment skills, suggesting areas where teachers may feel less confident or may prioritize other teaching methods over these approaches.

Overall, the data concerning diagnostic competence reveals that participants prioritize competencies related to understanding students' language development and diagnosing errors, highlighting the significance of these skills in effective teaching practices. In contrast, competencies such as recognizing learning styles and independently creating control tasks are viewed as less critical, which may reflect areas where teachers feel less equipped or prioritize other aspects of their diagnostic expertise.

As Werbińska (2011: 64) concludes, the competencies of language teachers in early education are multifaceted as "the composite elements are interrelated with one another and, as one framework, correlate positively with a construct of human wisdom as an educational value", and essential for facilitating effective language learning. Pedagogical knowledge, linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, interpersonal skills, and the ability to assess and reflect on practice are all critical components of a successful language educator's skill set. As the literature suggests, developing these competencies is vital for teachers to create engaging, supportive, and effective language learning environments for young learners. Continuous professional development and training are essential to ensure that teachers can adapt to the evolving needs of their students and the educational landscape.

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