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Insights into TEFL Student Teachers' and Novice Teachers' Perceptions on English Language
Competencies for Effective Teaching

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Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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Abstract

The competencies that an effective teacher should have for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), has been the focus of many studies. Although the concept of effective teaching differs from culture to culture, and there are different views on which skills and competencies an effective teacher should have, the skills and competencies of competent teachers are generally divided in three categories: practical classroom skills, improvisational performance and English language proficiency. Given the fact that one of the essential prerequisites for teaching EFL is English language proficiency, the present study seeks to examine student teachers' self-perceived linguistic competencies for teaching EFL and the factors that have contributed to the development of their linguistic proficiency. Furthermore, the current state of the English language improvement courses, both on the BA and the MA level, is presented and analyzed. The study also provides an insight into the difficulties and the language-specific challenges student teachers encountered while teaching in the pre-service training. The data were collected by means of an anonymous online questionnaire. The results of the study indicate that students of the MA TEFL program at the University of Rijeka feel competent to teach EFL, although there is still need for more language-improvement courses and practice at the MA TEFL program.

Keywords: *Teaching English as a Foreign Language; EFL; English language competencies for teaching; linguistic proficiency; TEFL programs; pre-service training*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, globalization and the importance of the English language on a global scale have led to the creation of a larger population of English speakers, and an increased need for teachers of the English language. The majority of English teachers in the world are non-native teachers (NNESTs) (Canagarajah, 1999 as cited in Moussu, 2008), who are often underestimated and compared to their native colleagues. If we look at the concept English as a foreign language (EFL) or English as a second language (ESL) teacher it clear that, in order to teach effectively, both native (NESTs) and non-native (NNESTs) teachers of the English language need to develop, among others, a certain set of language-specific competencies (Richards, 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that there are a lot of models that comprise of different skills and competencies that an effective language teacher needs to possess, for the purpose of the present study the focus is primarily put on one aspect of the EFL teachers' knowledge base - the knowledge of English for language teaching.

In order to successfully deliver lessons in English, a teacher has to be linguistically competent in the English language (Lange, 1990, Richards 2010). Apart from general language proficiency, teachers' linguistic competence also has to include the skills that enable them to prepare and teach lessons (Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns, 2015). When carrying out a lesson, language teachers use their language skills for managing the classroom, communicating lesson content and providing feedback (Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns, 2015). In order to prepare novice teachers for their teaching careers, numerous TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) programs have been established since English has become the go-to medium for communication on a global scale. Such programs have a direct impact on the quality of

education and, therefore, need to be designed to provide the future teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and competences in order for them to learn how to teach effectively.

In line with this, the present study aims to examine MA in TEFL program graduates' view of their linguistic proficiency and their self-perceived ability to teach English through English. The study also seeks to investigate the language-specific challenges that the participants have encountered while teaching and the factors that have contributed to the development of their linguistic proficiency.

This thesis is divided into the following sections. Section 2 gives an overview of the present status of ELT. In section 3, the skills and competences that EFL teachers should have for effective teaching are examined. Moreover, English language proficiency for teaching is analyzed, and EFL teacher education programs and the previous research on the competencies of pre-service English language teachers are discussed. Section 4 focuses on the present study and the results and section 5 comprises the discussion. The concluding remarks are presented in the final section.

2. English teachers today

The most important change that has taken place in the domain of English language teaching in the last 50 years is the fact that English has moved from being the native language of the English-speaking nation to becoming the global language used for international communication (Ur, 2012, McKay, Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). Native English speakers have been increasingly outnumbered by speakers whose native language is not English, which has resulted in English no longer being a foreign language, owned by a particular English-speaking nation, but rather an international language used worldwide (Ur, 2012). Apart from

being the language used for international communication, it has become the language of business, mass media and culture, which resulted in an increased number of its speakers (Crystal, 2003). Given the fact that it has become a global language, English is increasingly taught and learned all around the world (Crystal, 2003). Although there are examples of learners who have acquired the basic level of English (A2 level of CEFR) incidentally through exposure to popular media (television, music, videogames, movies, social media), in order to gain fluency in the language, formal instruction is needed (Van Canh, Renandya, 2017). The English teacher plays a central part in this process.

According to Canagarajah (1999 as cited in Moussu, 2008), 80% of English teachers in the world are NNESTs. NNESTs are defined as teachers for whom English is a second or a foreign language, who work in an EFL teaching context, whose students are monolingual speakers, whose native language is the same as their students (Medgyes, 2001). However, the problem with the NNEST category is that these teachers are oftentimes compared to native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and considered second best (Maum, 2002).

In fact, there is a common assumption that goes so far to say that NESTs and NNESTs are two different species (Medgyes, 1994). They are classified into the NNEST category primarily in terms of their native language, nationality, and linguistic proficiency, and, by implication, their teaching behaviors. Although there can be a discrepancy in NNESTs linguistic proficiency, which affects their teaching behaviors, they can be equally as good teachers of English (Medgyes, 2001).

Comparing the competencies of NESTs and NNESTs and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses has been the focus of research, with researchers often making claims about their linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. The strengths that are often associated with NNESTs are knowledge about language, good learner models and guides, and the ability to

understand students' needs and difficulties in language learning (Arva and Medgyes, 2000; Medgyes, 1994). NESTs, on the other hand, are oftentimes attributed with strengths such as language proficiency, fluency and cultural knowledge (Cheung & Braine, 2007; Mahboob, 2004). If these statements were true "it would follow that NESTs know the language, while NNESTs know about the language, however, the situation is much more complex" (Vodopija-Krstanović 2011: 221).

Given the fact that "language proficiency does affect how well a teacher can teach a second language" (Richards, 2015: 113), teachers who have a high level of proficiency in the English language, are considered to be more competent in providing the best input for the learners, which is a key principle in successful instructed language learning (Ellis, 2005).

In view of the fact that language proficiency of NNESTs has been an issue for many years, it has also served as the basis for discriminating against teachers who are not native speakers of English. In fact, NNESTs' teaching competences were frequently undermined and judged through their language skills. Young et al. (2014) describe the language ability of many NNEST teachers as having only a basic command of English and using their first language in class either because of their limitations in English language proficiency or the feeling that the students might not understand them if they spoke in English.

This view, that a teacher is not a competent teacher unless he/she is a native speaker or has a native-like proficiency, is called *native-speakerism* (Holliday, 2006). Holliday (2006, 385), defines it as "a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology." The fact that being a native speaker is not sufficient when it comes to language teaching is illustrated in an example

by Hobbs (2013) who reports a native speaker's perspective on the attempt of teaching after having completed a language teaching course:

“Simply being a native speaker of English ... seemed barely adequate preparation for the new way of framing and packaging the English language I was being asked both to understand and to ‘perform’ as a teacher ... I had little understanding of what I was doing and did not receive a particularly high final grade at the end of my four weeks. Yet again, though I knew I had not done that well, I could not have objectively stated why.” (Hobbs, 2013: 171)

Despite the common belief that NESTs are more competent teachers, both NESTs and NNESTs need to develop a certain number of competencies in order for their teaching to be effective.

The language-specific competencies that a NNEST needs to possess are the abilities to do the following:

- to comprehend texts accurately
- to provide good language models
- to maintain use of the target language in the classroom
- to maintain fluent use of the target language
- to give explanations and instructions in the target language
- to provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g., of vocabulary and language points)
- to use appropriate classroom language
- to select target-language resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, the Internet)
- to monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy
- to give correct feedback on learner language
- to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty

- to provide language-enrichment experiences for learners (Richards, 2010: 103)

On the other hand, NESTs would additionally need to pay attention to their language and be able to:

- monitor one's language use in order to provide suitable learning input
- avoid unnecessary colloquialisms and idiomatic usage
- provide a model of spoken English appropriate for students learning English as an international language
- provide language input at an appropriate level for learners (Richards, 2010: 103-104)

Having just argued, teachers of English to speakers of other languages, be they NESTs or NNESTs, need to have the (language and teaching) skills and competences to effectively teach EFL, and to transfer their knowledge to the learners. Let us now turn our attention to what specifically EFL teachers need to know and be able to do in the classroom.

3. What EFL teachers need to know

Conceptualizations and understandings of effective teaching differ from culture to culture (Richards, 2012). In some cultures, a good teacher is the one who maintains a distance between oneself and the students, uses teacher-focused methods and controls and directs the classroom. In other cultures, however, the ideal teacher facilitates learning and encourages learner creativity, independent learning and critical thinking. Such a teacher will use learner-centered activities and promote collaborative learning.

With the emphasis on learner-centered teaching, which has gained significance in recent years, Harmer proposes a model, where teachers are no longer only the “givers of

knowledge” or “controllers” but rather facilitators and resources for the students to draw on (Harmer, 2001: 57). Except for being the facilitators of learning, language teachers take a set of different roles which include the following: a) controller, b) organizer, c) assessor, d) prompter, e) participant, f) resource, g) tutor, h) observer and i) performer (Harmer, 2001).

It might be useful to briefly take a look at the various teacher roles in the EFL classroom. The teacher as the controller, tells the students to do certain things, organizes exercises and makes announcements. When organizing different activities, the teacher also has to take the role of an organizer. The assessor role takes place when a teacher has to assess students’ knowledge and provide feedback. When the students need encouragement or do not know how to proceed with an exercise, the teacher takes the role of a prompter and helps the students by directing them the right way. An effective teacher should not only look at the students performing, but also has to be an active participant in the activities. Sometimes, the teacher has to be a resource and answer students’ questions, and a tutor, who combines the abilities of a prompter and a resource. Most of the time, the teacher is the observer, who keeps track of learners’ language performance and gives them constructive feedback. Frequently, teachers can also be described as “actors” (Harmer, 1995). What is meant by this is that a good teacher is also a good performer, who acts energetically, encouragingly, clearly and fairly when the students are involved in a team game (Harmer, 2001).

As for the knowledge, skills and competences an EFL teacher should have for effective teaching there are different classifications and perspectives on what makes a good EFL teacher. One of the oldest and most quoted classifications was developed by Shulman (1986), who divided teacher knowledge into subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curricular knowledge.

Similarly, according to Tsui (2003), the knowledge base of an EFL teacher comprises the following categories: knowledge of English Language, pedagogical knowledge, language learning knowledge, knowledge of managing learning, other curriculum knowledge, and knowledge about the learner. All the aforementioned categories are interrelated and should be present to assure effective teaching.

The skills and competencies of a language teacher, according to Richards (2015) fall into three categories: practical classroom skills, improvisational performance and English language proficiency. However, it should be noted that in the teaching context, language proficiency does not consist only of knowing of a language and being able to communicate in it, but also, of the ability to transfer this knowledge to the students. The three components of teacher expertise of a language teacher are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and discourse skills (Richards, 2017).

Firstly, content knowledge or language-related knowledge or language awareness, includes a variety of sources of language knowledge such as linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis (Richards, 2017). Although content knowledge is one of the prerequisites for teaching, having only content knowledge does not make a teacher an effective one. This can be illustrated on the an example of a student majoring in linguistics and possessing the knowledge of functional grammar or the knowledge of phonology, but being unable to recognize which levels of grammar or phonology should be taught at different levels of the acquisition of the English language, and thus organize a syllabus or use different strategies for conveying such knowledge.

However, not having the necessary content knowledge does indeed pose a serious problem in teaching EFL. For example, a Hong Kong secondary school English teacher, who lacked knowledge of English grammar was not able to provide metalinguistic explanations,

which made it difficult, even impossible, for the students to understand a certain grammatical concept, in this particular case, the passive voice (Andrews, as cited in Richards, 2017). The reason for this was that the teacher did not have the necessary content knowledge to answer the students' questions on the use of the passive voice.

Secondly, pedagogical knowledge and ability, as simply defined by Richards (2017) is the teacher's knowledge of teaching. Besides content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge includes activities, techniques, theories, beliefs, principles, values and ideas that a teacher possesses. "Pedagogical knowledge and ability draws on content knowledge as well as other sources of knowledge but in the process transforms it, since it is understood in relation to knowledge of the learners, the curriculum, the teaching context and to teaching methods" (Richards, 2017: 12). For example, a teacher who has pedagogical knowledge and ability knows how to present and explain the difference between tense and aspect or stative and non-stative verbs to the students, while a teacher who has only content knowledge might not know how to do this (Richards, 2017).

Finally, discourse skills in English, according to Richards (2017: 14) are the third essential component of a teacher's knowledge and ability, which enables one to "teach English through English". More specifically, discourse skills enable a teacher to maintain communication in accurate, comprehensible and fluent English language.

All the aforementioned categories share key common features of ELT professionals: language proficiency, pedagogical skills and pedagogical content knowledge. It is evident that the knowledge of English does not necessarily subsume the knowledge of pedagogical content or the curriculum; however, studies have shown that English language competence is an essential prerequisite for effective teaching (Vodopija-Krstanović, 2011).

The general perception of the students in the study conducted by A. Taqi, A. Al-Nouh and S. Akbar (2014) demonstrates that teachers' advanced proficiency in English is crucial for being an effective teacher of EFL. In fact, the results of the study have shown that high achieving students thought of proficiency as the most important component, while low achieving students considered socio-affective skills as the most important (Taqi, Al-Nouh and Akbar, 2014).

Another study that was conducted on Vietnam-based teachers has shown that while native-like proficiency is not necessary for teachers to teach effectively, they have to have an adequate level of proficiency to deliver lessons (Canh, Renandya, 2017). Having an advanced level of proficiency enables teachers to use the target language fluently and confidently, to provide good language models, to select and adapt teaching materials for an effective use, and to give suitable feedback on students' work (Richards, 2017). The study has shown that language proficiency can contribute to teachers' teaching skills and that students have more positive attitudes towards teachers with higher proficiency, believing that they are more capable of helping them improve their language skills.

Given the fact that there is no clearly defined level of proficiency that an English language teacher needs in order to teach effectively, not all teachers are required to have the same level of proficiency because of different contexts, different needs, and the move towards teaching English as an international language (Vodopija-Krstanović, Marinac, 2019). Tsang (2017) believes that being highly proficient is not always appropriate. In his study, the teacher with the highest level of proficiency, a native speaker, could not be understood by weaker students because of colloquial, fast and native-like speech, and lacked teacher language awareness to produce a more comprehensible input. The study also found that factors other than proficiency can play a more important part in the teaching effectiveness in a foreign

language classroom. These include: “pleasant personality including kindness, humor and developing a close rapport with students, effective pedagogy and good pronunciation and accent” (Tsang, 2017: 111).

Taking into account the fact that the majority of EFL teachers are NNESTS and that English is an international language taught in multilingual and multicultural settings, teacher knowledge base can no longer include only the linguistic features of English and how it is taught and learned (Richards, 2008), but should also comprise teacher identity, diversity, the native/non-native divide (Miller, 2009), the social, cultural and international position of English and the way it influences learners, teachers and ELT (Franson and Holliday, 2009).

However, for the purpose of this study, we will focus mainly on one aspect of EFL teachers’ knowledge base, which is the knowledge of English for language teaching. Although language proficiency is indeed an important aspect of teaching, the proficiency that is needed to teach a foreign language through the medium of the language, is not easily described (Richards, 2017).

3.1 English language proficiency for teaching

Mention has been made that linguistic competence is a crucial characteristic of competent language teachers (Lange, 1990, Richards 2010), who should have an extensive knowledge of the target language, in order to successfully deliver lessons. Richards, Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a set of six interrelated areas that define teachers’ language proficiency: organizational knowledge, grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, functional knowledge, and socio-linguistic knowledge. The problem with this view is that language proficiency is often difficult to measure. Whether one is

deemed to be a competent teacher or not, depends on our definition of the term proficiency (Pasternak and Bailey, 2004). For this reason, some believe that the concept of teacher language proficiency should be redefined to include not only general language proficiency, but also skills that a language teacher needs to possess in order to prepare and teach lessons (Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns, 2015).

According to Young (2014: 5) a teacher who is expected to teach English through English should be able to do the following things:

- use or not use English partially or completely while teaching, but being familiar with the curricular content
- be familiar with classroom routines, including basic classroom management and teaching strategies, and can carry out predictable classroom tasks and routines
- use the curriculum
- draw language support from instructional materials
- teach students who are at the beginner or intermediate level of proficiency
- interact with students in English in simple and predictable ways.

According to Harmer (2001), language teachers take many roles in the classroom. The roles change from one activity to another and proficiency has a direct impact on how effectively a teacher can carry out these roles. One of the crucial teacher roles in a language classroom, is to be a good language model to the students. (Harmer, 2001: 65) Students receive language models from textbooks, reading materials, audio and video materials, but in formal contexts, mainly from their teachers. Therefore, a teacher has to be proficient to ensure that the students understand what is being said and provide a good language model to them. In order to provide good language models to their students, teachers can, for example, model dialogues or read aloud (Harmer, 2001: 65).

The *English-for-Teaching* construct proposed by Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns identifies the language skills that teachers can draw on when carrying such instructional routines. When conducting these routines, teachers have to use their English language knowledge to manage the classroom, to understand and communicate lesson content and to provide feedback to the students (Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns, 2015).

For example, when a teacher says, “work with a partner” or “turn to the person next to you”, he/she accomplishes both the task and the language criterion (organizing the work and being understandable and recognizable to the speakers of English) (Freeman, 2017). These phrases have a purpose and they demonstrate what a teacher wants the students to do at a certain point in a lesson. In that case, English is used to support the teachers’ pedagogical competence.

If we look at teachers’ competence in terms of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), it can be concluded that the ELT profession is a highly complex one. The EPOSTL contains 193 descriptors that identify aspects of teaching and help teachers reflect upon their knowledge, skills and competencies. The descriptors, divided into seven categories – methodology, resources, lesson planning, conducting a lesson, independent learning and assessment of learning – comprise can do statements, which describe what EFL teachers should be able to do after they have graduated from a TEFL program.

The EPOSTL section on conducting a lesson includes a group of descriptors that specifically focus on the teachers’ use of the target language in class. According to these descriptors, a competent language teacher should be able to do the following:

1. conduct a lesson in the target language.
2. decide when it is appropriate to use the target language and when not to.

3. use the target language as metalanguage.
4. use various strategies when learners do not understand the target language.
5. encourage learners to use the target language in their activities (Newby et al, 2007: 43).

From these descriptors, it is evident that, if the teacher is not fluent or proficient in a language, they will not be able to carry out the abovementioned activities and teach effectively. Furthermore, if a teacher does not have the necessary metalinguistic knowledge of grammar, they will not be competent to teach grammar or deal with learners' questions about grammar. Similarly, if a teacher lacks speaking skills, they will not design activities that will engage students in spontaneous interaction or encourage students to participate in speaking activities. It can then be concluded that English language proficiency is indeed an essential prerequisite for language teaching.

What seems to be a weakness of less proficient teachers is that they are more likely to use the student's native language and by doing this, give unsuitable input to their students (Young et al, 2014, Souriyavongsa et al, 2013). In addition, less proficient teachers could face difficulties in detecting and correcting learner errors (Canh, Renandya, 2017). Other shortcomings of less proficient teachers include being dependent on teaching resources and less likely being able to engage in improvisational teaching or error correction (Medgyes, 2001). Weak teachers lack confidence and will thus not use appropriate activities causing disinterest in learners who will underachieve or even reject the foreign language. A possible solution for the lack of proficiency is incorporating more language development courses in EFL teacher education programs. These courses should be tailored to support EFL teachers.

3.2 EFL teacher education programs and competencies of pre-service English language teachers

EFL teacher education programs have great significance because they directly impact the quality of teaching. Such programs have developed significantly over the last 30 years but need to constantly develop in line with research and modern trends (Richards, 2008). Many TESOL and TEFL in-classroom and online programs have emerged since English has gained importance in international communication. TEFL stands for teaching English in a country, where it is not a primary language, whereas TESOL includes both teaching EFL and teaching ESL, usually in a context where English is the primary language. Both programs usually consist of a theoretical part and a practical part. Except for the theoretical part, modern teacher educational programs provide future teachers of English with practical training, often through pre-service training. According to Ur (1992), both the theoretical and the practical component should be incorporated in teacher education. Studies have shown that pre-service teachers believe that both the theoretical knowledge and the teaching practicum had a great impact on their formation as teachers (Gülru Yüksel, 2014). However, teacher education programs are oftentimes criticized for being either mainly theoretical or distant from classroom reality. Since teaching is challenging, language teachers need to be able to adapt to the multiple roles that they have to take on in order to be effective (Martinez Agudo, 2017) and teacher education programs have a crucial role in the formation of teacher professionalism and their preparation for classroom reality.

To date there is general agreement that an EFL teacher education program has to include the following components: content knowledge (knowledge of the target language, literature and culture), pedagogic knowledge (teaching strategies), pedagogic content knowledge (teaching strategies in relation to language teaching) and support knowledge

(knowledge of linguistics and other language-related disciplines) (Day, 1991, Freeman, Johnson, 1998, Richards, 1998).

Similarly, Barry (1990) states that despite the potential differences among them, EFL teacher education programs generally consist of the following five components: skills component (teaching skills), methodology component (the theoretical knowledge of teaching methods and materials), theory component (knowledge of language, teaching and learning), subject matter component (linguistics, literature and culture) and language improvement component (proficiency in the target language). Research shows that all of the components are crucial in an EFL teacher education programs.

It is important to note that although one of the essential components of these programs is the language improvement component, students of EFL teacher education programs continue to have problems related to their language proficiency (Brinton, 2004). The following example perfectly illustrates the language proficiency issue:

“After six-week field practicum, I find my biggest obstacle as a good teacher comes from my language ability. Since my own English ability is lousy, thus, when I explain something to students, I think I unconsciously make lots of errors or express ineptly. As tonight, I said “in this moment” instead of “at this moment,” “after their marry” instead of “after their marriage.” A language teacher, should set good example for students to model rather than confuse them as I did.... I can sense that a qualified language teacher should at least possess enough knowledge of the targeted language.... I really wonder about my teaching quality? Sometimes, I can’t help to think maybe I am “brain-retarded” in learning language. (I don’t improve much ever I have almost stayed here for one year. It’s really frustrated!).” (Brinton, 2004: 197)

From the example it is evident that the student teacher faces numerous language-related problems. The student teacher thinks that being a good teacher means having good language skills but feels that the level of his/her language proficiency is low. This makes him/her more self-conscious of the mistakes that he makes and lowers his/her self-esteem as he/she believes that the teacher should be a good language model to the students. There also seems to be a threshold of language proficiency that the student teacher defines as *enough* to teach the target language, which he/she evidently lacks. Finally, what is problematic is the rather negative attitude towards personal language development as the student teacher did not notice an improvement in language proficiency, despite the fact that he/she had spent time in an English-speaking country (Eslami et al, 2010: 223).

Richards (2017) mentions three studies that report how language proficiency was seen as an obstacle for the teachers. The first study of foreign language teachers in Australia, conducted by Elder (1994, as cited in Richards, 2017), found that 40% of teacher trainees thought that their tertiary language learning experience was not sufficient and adequate for them to be prepared for their language teaching career. The second study by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999, as cited in Richards 2017) demonstrated that 72% of non-native graduates saw their limited language proficiency as a major limitation that impeded their teaching. The third and the more recent study by Butler (2004 as cited in Richards, 2017) found that teachers in elementary schools in Korea, Taiwan and Japan felt a substantial gap between the proficiency level that is needed to teach English effectively at the elementary level and their self-assessed language proficiency (Şallı-Çopur, 2008). Overall, EFL graduates felt that they needed to improve their competencies related to language knowledge, spoken English, classroom management, assessment and instruction.

A possible solution for the abovementioned issues is to assess EFL student teachers' needs and reconceptualize EFL teacher education programs to meet those specific needs (Zhu 2013). What needs to be taken into consideration are the need for professional development, the need for bridging the gap between theory and practice and the need of educating teachers for globalization (Zhu 2013). However, Parra (2013) emphasizes that the potential of reflective teaching should not be neglected as student teachers also need to observe, question, describe, take notes, interpret, reflect, plan, act, and write.

The need for implementing change in TEFL programs was corroborated by study on Spanish TEFL students regarding the quality of the TEFL program and their teacher development. The results showed that both linguistic competence and managerial competence were well developed in the EFL teacher education program (Martinez Agudo, 2017). The students considered the lack of language awareness, as a result of lack of communicative practice in classes and late specialization in TEFL, to be the main weakness of the program. They reported that the specialization should start earlier in the program and that there should be more English language development courses (Martinez Agudo, 2017).

Finally, it can be concluded that teacher education programs have an essential role in the process of formation of EFL teachers because they equip future teachers with the skills and competencies that would enable them to teach effectively. In other words, to assure effective classroom practices, there have to be quality teacher education programs. However, these programs should also develop prospective teachers' EFL skills and competences as inadequate proficiency has been identified as a drawback to effective EFL teaching and learning.

4. The present study

In line with the aforementioned, this study examines TEFL student teachers' and novice teachers' perceptions on their language skills and competences for teaching EFL.

4.1 Aims

The aim of this study was to examine student teachers' and novice teachers' perceptions of:

- a) their level of linguistic competence for teaching
- b) the difficulties they faced when teaching EFL during the pre-service training
- c) the extent to which the TEFL program developed their English for teaching purposes and prepared them to teach English effectively.

4.2 Research questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the perceived level of linguistic proficiency of student teachers?

RQ2: To what extent do student teachers perceive their level of proficiency to be adequate for effective teaching of EFL?

RQ3: What language-specific challenges did the student teachers encounter while teaching during the pre-service training?

RQ4: Are a sufficient number of English language improvement courses offered in the MA TEFL program to prepare student teachers for the EFL classroom?

RQ5: Which factors have contributed the most to the development of student teachers' English language proficiency?

4.3 Context

The study was conducted the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at of the University of Rijeka. Specifically, the study focused on the students of English department MA in TEFL program.

The MA in TEFL, organized as a double major program lasts four semesters and consists of various courses in English related to EFL teaching, linguistics, literature and cultural studies. In addition, general education courses in pedagogy, psychology and didactics amounting to 60 ECTS points, which are delivered in Croatian, are obligatory for all students in the teaching track. The aim of the program is to develop students' theoretical and practical knowledge for successful teaching. Accordingly, the TEFL program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences includes both theoretical and practical courses. These include courses that enable the students to grasp the general principles of teaching English by providing them with theoretical knowledge on ELT, as well as practical skills or the ability to put theory to practice in Practicum in EFL Teaching, conducted at the Department, and the EFL pre-service training in public elementary and secondary schools. The latter is highly important because it offers the students an opportunity to teach in authentic classroom situations and practice their teaching skills.

The core TEFL courses are Introduction to English Language Teaching, English Language Teaching Methodology and Practicum, Pre-service training and Foreign Language Assessment. As for linguistics course these include Second Language Acquisition, Introduction to Psycholinguistics, English Language Acquisition and an elective course First Language Acquisition. In addition, 2 language development courses (Academic writing 1 and Academic writing 2) are also offered. However, all of these courses are elective courses as it seems that it is either assumed that the students can decide whether they need to further develop their language skills and competences in the Master's program or that they have attained the required language proficiency at the BA level. All the core language development courses are offered in the BA in English language and literature program.

As for TEFL courses, the methodology course is an obligatory course in the third semester of the master's program in TEFL. The course consists of two parts: the lectures and the practicum. The lectures cover the following areas of ELT: Development of communicative competence, teaching reading, teaching writing, teaching listening, teaching speaking, teaching culture and developing intercultural communication, teaching vocabulary, teaching grammar, task-based language teaching (TBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), teaching of different age groups, classroom management, teaching heterogeneous groups, correction of errors, interaction in the English language classroom, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), EPOSTL, preparing a lesson plan. The practicum enables students to independently plan and conduct English language lessons. Students are also taught how to observe the teaching of four skills, grammar, vocabulary and culture by watching the lesson delivered by their colleagues and providing anonymous peer feedback. After having completed these courses, students undergo a pre-service training in elementary schools and high schools. During the pre-service training, students are given the opportunity to practice teaching in real classroom setting, thus giving them an authentic

teaching experience. The pre-service training course consists of the teaching practice in elementary and secondary schools and includes 12 hours of in-classroom observation, 6 hours of teaching, 10 hours of microteaching activities, 4 hours of peer observation and 20 hours of teaching assistant activities. Student teachers are also expected to compile a portfolio of teaching materials and lesson plans and complete the EPOSTL.

Although it is considered a prerequisite for language teaching, the development of English language proficiency is often neglected in English language teaching programs around the world (Erozan, 2005). Cullen (1994) states that low proficiency levels of English should not only be a concern for the future teachers but also of those planning teacher training programs.

With the aim of developing the student's linguistic competence, four language improvement courses are offered at the undergraduate level and one at the graduate level. Undergraduate courses that are aimed at the development of linguistic competencies are English language 1 to 4. Each of these courses usually consists of two parts: one dealing with grammar and vocabulary and another one that has to do with the development of writing skills or translation. Academic writing 1 is currently the only course at the graduate level that includes the development of English language competencies.

4.4. Participants

The research was conducted among students of the TEFL program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, all of whom have completed the courses of the MA in TEFL program and the pre-service training in Croatian elementary and high schools.

The sample comprised of 31 students of the TEFL program at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka who enrolled in the master's TEFL program between the academic years 2012/2013 and 2016/2017. When this study was conducted, 45.2% of the participants had graduated, while 54.8% were still students at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The participants were between 4 and 10 years old when they first started learning English. The majority of participants, 25.8%, started learning English when they were 10 years old, followed by 22.6%, who started learning English when they were 6. While some participants reported that they also learnt English at a language school (32.3%), the majority (67.7%) stated that they never learnt English outside elementary school or high school.

4.5 Research method

The data were collected by means of an anonymous online questionnaire, written in English. The questionnaire was first piloted among a smaller sample of TEFL students, who provided constructive feedback. Their suggestions were used to create the questionnaire used in this study. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and made accessible on the internet from February 8, 2019 to May 5, 2019. The participants were invited via email and were asked to respond to the questions in English. The estimated time for completion was 15 minutes.

The questionnaire comprised of three parts. The first part contained 9 short questions related to the participants' background and their English language proficiency. The questions elicited the participants age when they started learning English, whether they had learnt English outside formal schooling and whether they had spent time in an English-speaking

environment. They were also asked to specify when they enrolled in the MA TEFL program and whether they have graduated. The next question asked the participants to evaluate, on the A1 to C2 CEFR scales of language proficiency, their level of English for each of the four skills (spoken interaction, listening/comprehension, reading, writing) and the level of their grammatical accuracy. The participants were also asked if they had ever spent time in an English-speaking country or had taken part in a mobility program and, whether and how it affected their English language proficiency. In the final two questions, the participants were asked to estimate their average final grade in all of the undergraduate English language development courses, state whether they had taken any English language development courses at the graduate level and specify which course(s).

The second part comprised of 51 Likert scale questions, more specifically, adapted statements from the CEFR, by means of which the participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements on a 1-5 scale with the following distribution: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 - neutral, 4 – agree, 5 - strongly agree. The statements that had been taken taken from the CEFR were related to the participants' speaking, writing, reading, listening, understanding, pronunciation, teaching skills, grammatical accuracy and error awareness.

The third part and the final part, consisted of 11 open-ended questions related to the participants' teaching experience, language proficiency, and the connection between the two. The participants were asked about their opinion regarding the necessary English language skills and competences for teaching EFL, to express whether they considered themselves proficient enough to teach EFL and to elaborate on their answers. The subsequent open-ended questions investigated the participants' teaching experience during the teaching practicum and the pre-service training. As for their ability to use English, they were asked what they felt

most and least confident about and were invited to list the language-related difficulties that they had encountered while teaching during the pre-service training. The participants were also asked to comment on the difficulties that they had encountered while teaching, and to identify classroom tasks and activities that were particularly difficult or easy to carry out. One of the questions, also elicited the participants' opinion on which aspects of the English language they would need to develop in order to teach more effectively. The set of three questions that followed were related to the effectiveness of the mentors in the pre-service training and elicited whether the mentors provided feedback on the participants' use of English language, their language errors and their overall language skills and competencies for teaching English. All the three questions included a space for additional comments and explanations. The final set of questions focused on the students' attitudes towards the MA TEFL program and its role in the development of students' language proficiency for teaching. The participants had to identify what helped them most to develop their language proficiency, give their opinion on whether there should be more language skills development courses in the MA and BA programs and explain their answers. The participants were also asked to compare how difficult it was to teach English and their other major. In the final question they were invited to offer additional comments and share their concerns about their English language proficiency and teaching EFL. All of the open-ended survey responses were reproduced verbatim.

4.6 Results

Firstly, the results of the general info open-ended questions will be presented. The majority of the participants (77.5%) started learning English in the elementary school. A large number of them (67.7%) have never learnt English outside elementary school because that

they did not have the chance to attend extra courses, they lacked interest or felt that it was not necessary:

I did not learn English at a language school because I was not that interested in learning any other languages at that point. (T 4)

I didn't feel it was necessary. (T 9)

I didn't have the chance to attend extra courses. (T 23)

I didn't have the need to enroll into any language school outside elementary/high school. (T 16)

A few participants reported that they started learning English informally, through music, cartoons etc.:

I only officially learned English in school, everything else was through my own interests via music, films and youtube videos. (T 6)

I only learned English at school and at home. (T 29)

I learned English through cartoons and with my father before I started learning it in the elementary school. (T 23)

The participants were asked to rate their level of English language from A1 to C2 CEFR levels for each of the four skills and the level of their grammatical accuracy. The results show that the participants' level for each of the skills is at the C1 or C2 level. The majority rated each of the four skills to be on the C2 level, while grammatical accuracy was equally divided between C1 and C2 levels. The results can be seen in the figure below.

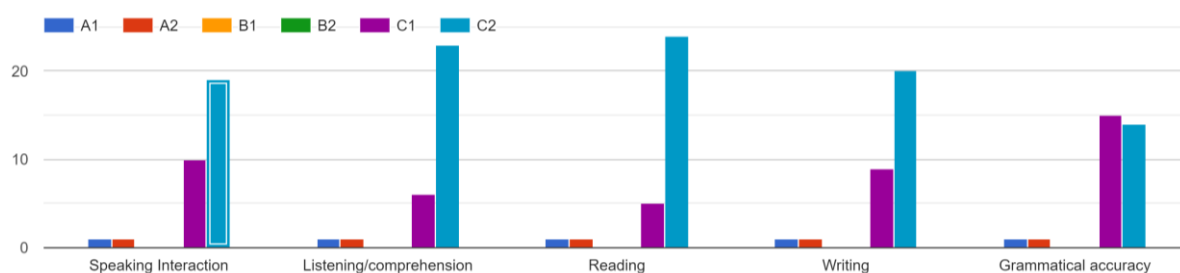


Figure 1: Participants' self assessment of English language skills

Only a minority (19.4%) of participants reported that they had spent some time in an English-speaking country, although the majority believe that spending time in an English-speaking country helped improve different aspects of their language proficiency:

I spent three weeks in Scotland which helped me speak with a more proper accent. (T 13)

I think it decreases my anxiety when it comes to speaking skills. (T 8)

I gained additional communicational skills that pertain more specifically to communicating with native speakers as opposed to business or academic communication. This involves more slang, dialect comprehension, etc. (T 25)

A few participants (25.8%) had taken part in a mobility program (e.g. Erasmus+) at a university where lectures were held in English. When asked where the mobility took place and how it affected their language proficiency development, most participants stated that it had no particular impact on their language proficiency:

Twice in Romania (Erasmus+ project lasting 2 weeks). No particular effect on my language proficiency. (T 6)

Poland, it made me aware that even "broken" English can work. (T 15)

In Czech Republic; no noticeable changes in language proficiency development. I have received the same scores on OLS (Online Linguistic Support) (T 27)

Poland, it was a final year of my studies so there was no development, just active usage (T 12)

Finland, the language just got polished (T 5)

It mostly enhanced the willingness to communicate (speaking in English in person) and the ability to comprehend different accents of English. When it comes to overall proficiency, I am convinced that it is approximately the same level as before the mobility. (T 30)

However, some participants reported that taking part in a mobility program has somewhat increased their language proficiency:

Reading and speaking skills in literary courses (T 4)

Wroclaw, Poland. It didn't develop my English in the sense that it enriched my vocabulary and grammar, but rather made me adapt and use simpler, to the point English to communicate with other people for whom English is a 2nd language. There were very few native speakers from, for example, the UK or USA. (T 14)

In the following question, the participants were asked to state their average grade in English language development courses at the BA level. The grades ranged from C to A. The majority of the participants stated that their average grade was B (61.4%), followed by 29% of participants, who stated that their average grade was C, 6.4% answered A and one participant could not remember.

When it comes to the language development courses that are offered at the MA level, 64.5% of the participants reported that they had not taken any such course, while 35.5% reported that they had. When asked to specify which course, all of the participants stated Academic writing 1 or 2, which were, at that time, the only language development courses at the MA level. The participants who had taken the courses were then asked to explain whether they had benefited from it. The participants who stated that they had somewhat benefited from

the courses explained that their English improved mostly in terms of written proficiency, vocabulary, organizational skills, writing style and proofreading:

Academic writing 1. Only in the field of writing. (T 4)

I think that I have because I've learned some new ways of expressing myself as well as the rules of writing and speaking on an academic level. (T 16)

I have learned how to structure and organize essays better. Moreover, I've learned how to properly configure thesis for my future papers. (T 8)

I think I have but am not sure. Such courses helped greatly with the development of my academic writing skills, esp. essays and dissertations. (T 21)

It was Academic writing 1 and I think that it somewhat helped me in improving my language skills but nothing drastically. I've learnt some useful sentence structures and some vocabulary, as well as the importance of proofreading the work (drafts) several times. (T 28)

Academic writing. I think I have benefited from in sense of broadening my English vocabulary as well as style of writing. (T 31)

Academic writing 1. Some of the principles have stuck with me e.g. Thinking about your audience when writing, keeping in mind your style of writing, having a clear thesis statement. (T 12)

Both. My memory is hazy, but I think there were some benefits in terms of writing an organized essay where I had to state and develop my thoughts, but it was also a course where the grades seemed a bit arbitrary and student mistakes weren't clarified and discussed enough. (T 7)

Yes, I took academic writing and I actually found out how to improve my writing. (T 20)

There were two participants who stated that the course had not helped them improve their English. One of the participants answered:

I have taken both courses. Honestly, the benefits are slim to none. (T 15)

The results of the second part of study are summed up in terms of mean scores for Likert scale questions and summaries of the participants' answers to the open-ended questions. The Likert scale questions have been subdivided into categories that concern the linguistic competence of an English language teacher, with respect to speaking, writing, reading, listening, understanding, pronunciation, English for teaching, grammatical accuracy and error awareness. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

#	Question	Mean
	SPEAKING	3.93
1	I can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the students to notice and remember significant points.	4.45
2	I can give clear, smoothly flowing, elaborate and often memorable descriptions.	4.48
3	I can communicate clearly detailed distinctions between ideas, concepts and things that closely resemble one other.	4.51
4	I can give clear instructions on carrying out a task.	4.67
5	I can present a complex topic confidently and articulately to an audience unfamiliar with it, structuring and adapting the talk flexibly to meet the students' needs.	4.25
6	I can handle difficult questioning.	4.19
7	I have a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning.	4.22
8	I feel confident using English to teach English as a foreign language.	4.45
9	I have excellent communication skills.	4.06
10	I can reformulate ideas in differing linguistic forms to give emphasis, to differentiate according to the situation, interlocutor etc. and to eliminate ambiguity.	4.29
11	I am fully accurate when I speak English.	3.93
12	I make mistakes when I use English in the EFL classroom.	2.90
13	I am fully fluent when I speak English.	3.96
14	I have difficulty using English fluently in the EFL	1.67

	classroom.	
15	I have difficulty interacting in the EFL classroom.	1.54
16	I am afraid that I will make mistakes when I speak in front of a class.	2.54
17	I can explain grammatical structures in English.	4.25
18	I can provide examples in English.	4.74
19	I can provide synonyms in English.	4.80
20	I am able to answer accurately to the students' questions.	4.41
21	I have a wide vocabulary range.	4.22
	UNDERSTANDING	4.12
22	I can understand with ease virtually any kind of spoken language.	4.12
	PRONUNCIATION	4.25
23	I can articulate virtually all the sounds of the English language with clarity and precision.	4.25
	WRITING	4.33
24	I can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.	4.38
25	My writing is orthographically free of error.	4.0
26	I can use appropriate conventions when writing in English.	4.25
27	I can use appropriate language for different text types.	4.38
28	I can understand virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings.	4.48
29	I can express myself in an appropriate tone and style in virtually any type of formal and informal written interaction.	4.32
30	I can summarise clearly and fluently in well-structured language the significant ideas presented in complex texts.	4.48
31	I can describe in detail my personal interpretation of a work, outlining my reactions to certain features and explaining their significance.	4.29
32	I can switch between formal and informal registers without effort.	4.41
	READING	4.48

33	I can read virtually all forms of the written language including classical or colloquial literary and non-literary writings in different genres, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.	4.48
TEACHING		4.31
34	I can establish a supportive environment for sharing ideas and practice by providing clear explanations and encouraging people to explore and discuss the issue they are encountering, relating it to their experience.	4.19
35	I can use spoken English for teaching purposes effectively.	4.51
36	I can guide a discussion effectively.	4.29
37	I can facilitate understanding of a complex issue by explaining the relationship of parts to the whole and encourage different ways of approaching it.	4.19
38	I can maintain the use of target language in the classroom.	4.12
39	I can select adequate materials for my students.	4.19
40	I can adapt my teaching style to the level of the students' knowledge of language.	4.06
41	I can give effective feedback to my students.	4.29
42	I provide a good language model for my students.	4.35
43	I have an appropriate level of proficiency to teach EFL.	4.41
44	I have the necessary language skills to teach EFL in grammar schools.	4.22
45	I have the necessary language skills to teach EFL in elementary schools.	4.58
46	I am confident in using English for communication in the classroom.	4.64
GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY		4.16
47)	I maintain consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while my attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).	4.16
ERROR-AWARENESS		3.23
48)	I am aware of the errors that I make while teaching.	4.32
49)	I sometimes make grammatical errors while teaching.	3.22

50)	I sometimes make pronunciation errors while teaching.	2.93
51)	I sometimes make spelling errors while teaching.	2.45

Table 1: Likert-scale questions – Responses by questions

The participants generally agree with 44 out of 51 CEFR statements, with the mean score over 3.5. The statements that the participants disagree with concern making errors and encountering difficulties, because the participants generally feel that they do not make a lot of language-related errors while teaching.

Generally, the participants feel most competent in reading, writing and teaching skills, followed by pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, understanding and speaking. As it can be seen from the table above, the participants do not have difficulties with interacting in the EFL classroom. They consider that they have an appropriate level of proficiency in English to be good language models to the students and feel confident using it in the classroom but are still aware of the errors that they make while teaching.

The participants also feel confident in giving instructions, providing examples, explaining and answering the students' questions, guiding discussions, selecting adequate materials and providing effective feedback to the students.

Finally, the results of the third part of the questionnaire will be examined. The participants' answers on 11 open-ended questions related to their teaching experience and language proficiency is analyzed below.

In the first question, the participants were asked to state the English language skills and competences that are necessary for teaching EFL. Although the participants considered different aspects to be the most important, there were some competencies that the majority of the participants pointed out. These include linguistic competence, good communicative skills,

the ability to adapt to the students' needs and abilities, good pronunciation and the ability to select and prepare adequate materials:

An appropriate level of language proficiency and confidence in teaching the language skills. The ability to adapt to students' needs and language level, the ability to find and/or create appropriate learning material for the students. The EFL teacher should also encourage spoken communication and discussions. (T 9)

There is too many to list them all here, but the most important are proficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, writing and pronunciation (I think these skills are even more important than culture at first). Aside of these four basic skills, the most important is the skill of conveying knowledge. It is crucial to observe the students and their habits along with their interactional patterns and then to design an effective lesson to promote their development in respect to all these factors. (T 12)

I find speaking skills to be of the highest necessity, as they are crucial for giving instructions, explaining nuances in meaning, leading discussions; in short, communication skills. Clearly, this does not exclude other skills; listening, which is also necessary for communicating with the students, reading and writing, in situations where it is required to provide the students with feedback and instructions. (T 21)

General proficiency, accuracy, command of the English language both in written and spoken form. I'd say a clear, comprehensible accent (native-like or not) is also a huge plus. Also, knowledge of the "theory" of the language-grammar forms, pronunciation explanations and things like that. (T 25)

Extensive vocabulary, great handle on grammar, communication skills, ability to adapt and use language in a way that is understandable to your students, ability to explain complex ideas and grammatical structures in a pithy and precise way without overt simplification. (T 26)

When asked if proficient enough to teach EFL, 30 participants (96.8%) answered yes, while 1 participant (3.2%) answered no, and the majority stated that the TEFL program at the University of Rijeka proved to be an adequate preparation for their teaching career:

I believe that the EFL program at the University has prepared me to be a competent teacher of English in elementary and secondary schools, but there is always room for improvement and acquire other competencies that will help me to do my job more efficiently. (T 11)

I think we've gone through a thorough preparation and we are ready to teach. Of course, there is much to be learned, but we do have the basis (theoretical knowledge and some experience) which can guide us in the future. (T 19)

Because I have had sufficient training and have been provided with great theoretical knowledge of the system during my MA studies (T 29)

The participants stated that, when it comes to English language proficiency, they felt most competent in speaking and communicative skills, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Other responses included reading and listening comprehension, the ability to motivate students and the ability to select adequate learning materials.

On the other hand, the areas that most participants felt least competent were grammatical knowledge and the ability to teach grammar. Specifically, what they found challenging was the ability to adapt to various levels of student knowledge, spelling, articles, prepositions, idioms, phrasal verbs, translation.

As for the difficulties they had encountered when teaching in the pre-service training, the most frequent difficulties were related to adapting their language to the students' level of English and teaching grammar:

Sometimes it was difficult to guess the level of proficiency of the students in order to use the vocabulary appropriate to their level. Also, sometimes it was difficult to think of the "easier", more common words to use rather than the ones we were used to be able to use in the academic environment, but are, perhaps, not familiar to (younger) students. (T 6)

Understanding the students' level of English and their predefined knowledge which led to me using too abstract or too simplified vocabulary. (T 11)

I was sometimes unable to determine students' English language level of proficiency, so I provided them with tasks that were too difficult for them. (T 2)

Teaching grammar requires more awareness and learning than expected. (T1)

Other responses included giving clear instructions, making errors, anxiety, teaching young learners, teaching mixed ability classes, encouraging discussions and motivating students.

When asked to describe a particularly difficult task or activity that had to be carried out in the classroom, the participants provided different answers. A large number encountered difficulties related to teaching grammar:

I think that teaching grammar structures is always a challenge because it is more abstract and distant to students so you need to implement different strategies to try to explain it because the students use different ways of understanding the same concept. (T 16)

No task was profoundly difficult, I guess I would have to say teaching grammar to elementary school children. In the 5th grade, students are exposed for the first time to such things as Present Simple and 3rd person -s and this is very hard for them to learn and apply regularly. (T 13)

Teaching grammar without stating the rules, just by using the examples. (T 7)

Making grammar interesting. (T 15)

Teaching grammar i.e. accomplishing the free use within students after the exercise part was completed. (T 26)

Apart from difficulties related to teaching grammar, giving clear instructions, generating interest and adapting the language to the needs of the students were also considered to be difficult tasks:

For me the most difficult task was when I had to do the listening assignment and halfway through the task I realized I haven't explained my students what they had to do and they were just sitting there, staring at me without any clue what to do. (T 11)

Presenting the topic I am not very interested in. (T 8)

The most difficult task was teaching first graders new vocabulary items, because I stayed on a too high of a level and forgot to make it more fun for them. (T 25)

It was related to classroom management. I had to hold a lesson in elementary school, to 8th graders who were obviously disinterested in anything I was saying although I was trying to make them more interested. (T 30)

As for tasks that were easy to carry out in class, most of the participants felt that teaching vocabulary was the least demanding:

Presenting new vocabulary. I printed out new vocabulary items and their definitions, and had the students come to the blackboard and match the words to the definitions. (T 2)

Any sort of vocabulary work. (T 13)

I think that teaching vocabulary is something that is easier to carry out because you may use different tools to explain it (show pictures, draw, show videos, act it out, etc.) unlike e.g. grammar which is more abstract and complex. (T 9)

Apart from teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension tasks, listening comprehension tasks, selecting materials and monitoring group work were also deemed to be fairly easy activities.

To teach more effectively in English, the participants' stated that they would need to better develop the following: knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, speaking skills and fluency in general. One participant stated that confidence was the most important aspect when it comes to effective teaching

I believe that my biggest problem is self-confidence: when I talk to students, I don't have any problems, but when I have to talk to native speakers or older EFL teachers, I fear I might make a mistake. Funny thing is, this is the same problem my students have - they have no problem talking to their peers in English, but they get nervous when they are supposed to talk to me or other EFL teachers. (T 30)

During the pre-service training in elementary and high schools, the participants were assigned a mentor, whose role was to guide, support and supervise their work. The majority (71%) of the participants stated that their mentor provided feedback on their use of English whereas a smaller number (29%) of participants claimed that their mentor did not provide feedback on their language use. One participant commented that he/she received no feedback whatsoever.

The participants who did not receive any form of language feedback explained that the focus was mainly on methodology:

If by mentor you mean teachers in the schools where I carried out my Pre-service training, then no. They commented more extensively on teaching techniques, on how we organized our classes, how we handled the students and on the usefulness of the activities used in class. They already know that we know English, the focus is strictly on how to become a teacher - knowing something and transferring knowledge to others in a meaningful and impactful way are two different things. (T 31)

My mentors only focused on my teaching and my performance in the classroom. (T 6)

Usually the feedback that we have acquired was focused on our instruction giving and student inclusion in the tasks. In general, the mentors found our language use to be adequate and appropriate. (T 12)

The majority (71%) of the participants said that their mentor pointed out specific language errors, while 29% said that the mentor did not. The most common language errors

that the mentors noticed and mentioned were related to grammar and word order (in indirect speech).

When asked whether their mentor commented on their overall language skills and competencies during the pre-service training, 51.6% participants answered affirmatively, while 48.4% pointed out that their mentors did not provide them with feedback related to their use of English in class. Some participants reported that the mentors were satisfied with their language proficiency:

As stated before, both mentors agreed I possess a very good command of English in general that are needed to teach. I should improve my skills on personal level as I feel I have a lot to learn, even though the skills I have are adequate for teaching in the classroom. (T 29)

She mostly said it was a good level of English with good flow and proficiency. (T 26)

My group was adequately competent in English, so I guess the mentor didn't feel the need to comment. (T 8)

I was praised on my language use. (T 12)

Others stated that the mentors regularly pointed out the language-related errors:

My mentor only pointed out concrete errors that I made. She didn't make any further comments on my knowledge of language. (T 15)

Both of them always commented on my fluency and gave suggestions what words I should or shouldn't often use. (T 10)

However, one participant emphasized the fact that being proficient is not key to being a successful teacher:

Like I said previously, the focus is on becoming a teacher and how to transfer your knowledge and skills to those who don't possess them. It's expected of you to know English

extensively, teaching is much more than being proficient in a language - you have to know how to adapt to your students and use certain tools and skills to impart knowledge. (T 20)

A few participants stated that they only received feedback related to their teaching skills and one participant reported not having received any feedback at all.

When asked to compare teaching EFL to their other major in terms of difficulty, the responses varied. A large number of participants found teaching EFL to be easier and often more creative and fun (54.8%). The participants who found teaching EFL to be less demanding consider it so because of the following reasons:

Teaching EFL is easier because I have a much better command over English than my other major. (T 12)

EFL for sure! It is not a piece of cake, but it is somehow more natural, spontaneous. Maybe it has to do with our mentors and their attitude towards teaching. Our English mentors were very supportive, helpful and encouraging, and it was quite the opposite with our mentors from the other major. (T 20)

Efl teaching is easier since the German language is more complex and is not as distributed in the media as English is. (T 6)

English is easier than Croatian because it's more free and focused on language use, rather than facts (T 13)

EFL allows for more creativity and freedom in choice of topics, but some parts of it are boring when compared to my other major. (T 25)

English is easier than Philosophy because it has a well developed teaching methodology and it is more fun. (T 16)

The participants who stated that their other major was easier to teach gave the following explanations:

It's more difficult because I am not interested in teaching English whatsoever. (T 8)

Philosophy seems easier. (18)

Teaching the other subject is easier because teaching in everyone's mother tongue is always easier, there's less room for misunderstanding and unclarity, etc. However, I find teaching in English much more interesting because it's super dynamic, the subject lends itself well to many different approaches, topics, activities and so on. It's less restricted and therefore more enjoyable. (T 4)

I find teaching EFL to be more difficult; there are students with vastly different skills and you have to find ways to adapt to both sides. (T 27)

A large number of participants answered that both are equally difficult as they have more and less demanding aspects, while some of the participants could not compare teaching English to their other major, because their other major could not be taught at schools (e.g. pedagogy).

The participants were also asked to identify what had helped them develop their language proficiency during the studies. The most common answers were extensive reading in English and English language courses. Some of the other factors included writing, speaking, presentations, the media and classroom interaction.

The majority (77.4%) of the participants stated that there should be more language skills development courses at the MA program, while 22.6% maintain that there should not be. The most common explanation for introducing language courses at the MA level was that the development of language proficiency is neglected at the MA level and that students and EFL teachers need to explicitly work on their language skills throughout their life:

It seems pointless to stop language skills development after 3 years, since language skills are developed throughout the entire lifetime. (T 16)

I believe that the emphasis in our MA program is only on the pedagogical and psychological part of the teaching profession, and that the language part is neglected. (T 6)

It is important that we are highly proficient and get the number of errors we make down to a minimum. Kids these days command over a great deal of English and can sometimes outdo us. (T 15)

Even though the overall competence of MA students may be sufficient for them to teach English as a foreign language, language development should never stop and can always be better, but also become worse if the practice stops. Therefore, those courses are definitely needed. (T 23)

Almost no emphasis is put on language development at this stage. (T 28)

The participants who stated that language development courses were not essential at the MA level mostly believe that the students should have already developed their language proficiency at the BA level:

By M.A. students should have mastered the language to a sufficient degree. The number and quality of standing courses is fine. (T 2)

I think that if you do enough on the B.A. level, you can dedicate the M.A. programme entirely to working on research and/or teaching skills. (T 18)

By the time we reach the M.A. program, we should already have good language skills. (T 25)

I think that the students should be more concentrated on learning English during their B. A. programme and M. A. programme should develop their teaching skills. (T 9)

Several participants suggested that there should be courses which integrate both language development and ELT methodology:

Definitely. English language courses should be a part of the M.A. program. A course that unifies both language skills development and the methods for teaching those language skills would be excellent. (T 30)

I would love to see more courses teaching us grammar and how to teach it. (T 11)

When asked to say whether there should be more language development courses offered at the BA level, the participants opted almost equally for both “yes” and “no”. The participants (58.1%) who stated that there should be a greater focus on language gave the following explanations:

I think yes because the earlier they start the better the students will become. (T 15)

I believe that future teachers should develop the highest possible level of all language skills throughout their studies. (T 21)

It is essential to offer as many as possible in order to prepare students for the M.A. program which does not put enough focus on language development. (T 6)

A large number of participants found that more emphasis should be put on developing speaking skills:

It is too easy to avoid using English and thus developing it. We need more speaking focused courses. (T 2)

It always good to speak as much as you can. (T 16)

We don't speak enough. (T 8)

There need to be more speaking/communication courses. (T 25)

There is little opportunity to really practice and develop speaking/communication skills. (T 29)

More focus should be placed on writing and especially speaking. (T 12)

As for the participants' additional comments, questions and concerns related to English language proficiency and teaching EFL, most of them expressed the need for more classroom practice and language-related courses:

More classroom practice and more language courses are needed in our MA program! Based on my experience, I strongly believe that there should be fewer pedagogical and psychological courses in our MA program, and much more language courses, and at least one whole semester of pre-service training. (T 26)

We need more practicum/pre-service training. Throughout the whole academic year, with more hours spent in classrooms. (T 16)

I have to add that I think that students should have practicum earlier during the studies because it could help them to deal with their problems earlier. (T 5)

Despite not being a language-related skill, one participant pointed out an important prerequisite for being an efficient teacher, and that is, enthusiasm:

As with anything, teaching a language requires first and foremost an understanding of why it is meaningful to teach it and the accompanying enthusiasm. Pupils who see a teacher who does not care about what he is teaching will have a much lesser motivation to learn. (T 30)

5. Discussion

Having reviewed the results, the observations retrieved from the data presented above will be discussed in relation to three aspects: the participants' linguistic proficiency, reflections on the MA TEFL program and the participants' experiences during the pre-service training.

When it comes to effective language teaching, the participants believe the following skills to be the most important: linguistic competence, good communicative skills, the ability to adapt to the students' needs and abilities, good pronunciation and the ability to select and prepare adequate materials. If we look at Richards' (2010) language-specific competencies that a language teacher needs for effective teaching, it is evident that the skills identified by the participants, correlate with those proposed by Richards. Specifically, he states that teachers should be able to maintain fluent use of the target language, use appropriate classroom language, provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty, and select target-language resources (e.g. newspapers, magazines, internet websites), among others.

In contrast to the study by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999), who found that 72% of non-native graduates thought of their limited language proficiency as a major limitation that impeded their teaching, 96.8% of the participants of the present study consider themselves to be proficient enough to teach EFL. However, they feel more competent to teach in elementary school than in grammar school, which suggests that the participants might have some insecurities regarding their proficiency.

Although mention has been that less proficient teachers are more likely to use the student's native language (Young et al, 2014, Souriyavongsa et al, 2013), the fact that the participants' stated that they felt most competent in speaking and communicative skills, might demonstrate that the students of the MA TEFL program feel confident when it comes to using English in class. This finding is in contrast with the findings of Şallı-Çopur (2008), where one of the competencies that the graduates felt they needed most improvement was spoken use of English. The area that the participants felt a little less, but still competent when it comes to teaching EFL, is teaching grammar. In fact, grammatical knowledge was also the only skill on which the participants' self-perceived level was equally divided between C1 and C2, while

each of the four skills was at the C2 level. The results from the Likert-scale questions show that the participants think of themselves to be competent in all of the four skills, with a score of over 3.5 for each of the four skills, as well as of grammatical accuracy, understanding, pronunciation and teaching skills. They also claim to be generally aware of the language-specific errors that occur during teaching. The mean score of 3.22 indicates that the participants sometimes do make grammatical errors while teaching, even though they think their grammatical accuracy is at the C1 level.

The participants' generally feel that more English language development courses should be offered at the MA level (77.4%), and some pointed out that more emphasis should be put on courses that would help develop their speaking skills. A similar finding was presented by Martinez Agudo (2017), who reported that the students were concerned about their lack of language awareness due to lack of communicative practice during the teaching program. Interestingly, the participants of the present study report that they feel competent to teach EFL, but still have the need for more courses related to English language development.

Except for the BA level English language courses, extensive reading and writing were also found to have a beneficial effect on the development of English proficiency. Another factor had a beneficial effect on the development of the participants' language proficiency, is spending time in an English-speaking environment, although taking part in Erasmus mobility programs was not reported to have such an effect. This is probably due to the fact that the mobility takes place in non-English speaking countries and the students do not receive extensive input in English and do not have adequate input in English. An example that was brought out by one of the participants is said that participating in an Erasmus program made him/her feel that "even broken English can work" supports this argument. This is probably due to the fact that mostly non-native English-speaking students participated in the Erasmus

program, and the language that they used was not academic and formal, but rather informal and characterized by errors and inaccuracies, with the main goal not being fluency, but mutual comprehension.

As for the development of English language proficiency at the MA level, the participants who had taken the course Academic writing 1 reported development in the areas of written proficiency, vocabulary, organizational skills, writing style and proofreading. The students generally think that there should be more language development related courses at the MA program and that linguistic proficiency should be developed throughout their studies. An interesting finding was pointed out by several participants: the need for courses which would incorporate both the development of English language proficiency and English language teaching methodology component. For example, courses that teach grammar and how to teach it. Overall there was consensus that students needed more classroom experience.

Regarding the practical component in the MA TEFL program, the participants were asked about their experience in the pre-service training. Some of the most important findings are as it follows. The language-specific challenges that the participants encountered were mostly related to adapting their language to the students' level of English and teaching grammar. The tasks that were said to be the most linguistically demanding according to the participants are teaching grammar, giving clear instructions and adapting the language to the needs of the students. The abovementioned tasks might be considered demanding due to the fact that the participants need more classroom experience that would give them the opportunity to practice teaching grammar, giving clear instructions and adapting the language to the students' needs. The least demanding tasks were reported to be teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension tasks, listening comprehension tasks, selecting materials and monitoring group work. It could be that the students considered these tasks to be easy because

they had the chance to practice teaching the four skills in the Practicum part of the Methodology course. During Practicum, the participants also had the opportunity to think of new ways of designing classroom activities and selecting or developing tasks and materials for the students, which could be why these tasks did not pose problems for them. During the pre-service training, participants stated that their mentor provided feedback on their use of English, while the rest of the participants stated that they did not receive language-related feedback. This could be due to the fact that the students were sufficiently proficient or that the mentors did not want to lower the students' self-esteem by pointing out errors. Possibly the mentors were not comfortable giving feedback on language or thought it was the Faculty's responsibility to develop the students' language skills and they only had to focus on teaching skills. Probably the mentors did not give extensive feedback as the majority of the participants stated that their mentors were satisfied with the students' English language proficiency, while the most frequent language errors that the mentors corrected were related to grammar and word order. Another important finding is that except the need for language improvement related courses, the students feel that the MA TEFL program should include more classroom practice, a finding that was also pointed out by Martinez Agudo (2017). Such a course would allow them to practice teaching and practice their language skills in authentic teaching situations.

6. Concluding remarks and implications

In the light of the discussion regarding the language skills and competencies of EFL teachers, this paper aimed to provide insights into student teachers' and novice teachers' experiences, attitudes and self-perceived linguistic competencies when it comes to teaching "English through English" (Richards, 2017: 14). Another aim was to establish whether

sufficient attentions was given to English language development in the BA program and the MA TEFL program.

The findings suggest that the participants generally perceive themselves to be competent enough in English to teach EFL, in particular in elementary school. The areas that they feel most competent include speaking and communicative skills, pronunciation and vocabulary, while they feel least competent in teaching grammar and adapting their language to the level of the students. As it can be seen from the participants' responses to the Likert-scale questions, all the statements were rated higher than 3.5 which suggest that they consider themselves to be competent in all aspects of English, including the four skills, grammatical accuracy, understanding, pronunciation and teaching skills and are aware of the language-specific errors that occur during teaching. Despite the fact that the participants consider their linguistic competence to be at an adequate level and that the pre-service mentors often praised their level of English, the participants stress the need more language-improvement courses at the MA TEFL program. The fact that a large number of participants also reported that there should be more language development courses at the BA level indicates that they might not be so confident in their English skills and that they need more language training. What could be done in order to assure better English language skills is to assess students' needs and incorporate more language-improvement related courses in the MA TEFL program. Another possible implication would be to encourage mentors to provide student teachers with feedback on classroom language use during the pre-service training.

As for the limitations of this study, the small sample makes it difficult to generalize the reported attitudes and self-perceptions. Furthermore, some participants have already graduated and have been working at schools at the time the questionnaire was distributed and, therefore, probably had some difficulties remembering the pre-service training. The fact that

some participants have already been working at schools brings us to another limitation of the study, which is the fact that the participants vary in teaching experience. Also, the MA TEFL program has changed recently to include more practical training, which resulted in the participants having different experiences with the program.

The study could be expanded to an even greater number of students of TEFL programs across Croatia. It would offer a larger and a more realistic view on the linguistic proficiency of student teachers and novice teachers in Croatia. Moreover, the participants have shown to give contradictory answers on some of the questions. The study could be extended even more by adapting the questionnaire and distributing it among mentors, who may be able to provide a more in-depth insight into the proficiency of student teachers.

The findings could be relevant to future teachers of EFL, as well as to educators designing the syllabi of TEFL programs, in order to help student teachers and novice teachers approach their teaching experiences with more self-esteem and to prepare them for teaching EFL effectively. Finally, I hope that the present study has raised awareness about student teachers' and novice teachers' linguistic competencies for teaching EFL, there is still need for further research.

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Appendix A

Research questionnaire

The aim of the research that I am conducting as a part of my master's thesis in TEFL at the University of Rijeka, is to examine the linguistic competencies that student teachers need to possess in order to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) effectively. The following questionnaire is anonymous and will be used exclusively for the purpose this study. There are no right or wrong answers, what I am looking for is to gather information on student teachers' perceptions on their English language proficiency and their use of English for teaching purposes. I would appreciate if you could take the time to complete the questionnaire, which should take about 15 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions or would like to receive the results, please contact Katarina Paušić (katarina.pausic0@gmail.com)

Thank you for participating in the research.

First Part: Background Info

- 1) How old were you when you started learning English?
- 2) Did you learn English at a language school (outside elementary school or high school)?
Yes No
Please explain:
- 3) When did you enroll in the MA TEFL program?
- 4) Have you graduated? Y N
If not, which year of study are you enrolled in at present?
- 5) What is the level of your English language competence?

Speaking interaction	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Listening/comprehension	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Reading	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Writing	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Grammatical accuracy	A1	A1	B1	B2	C1	C2
- 6) Did you spend some time in any of the English-speaking countries?

Yes No

If yes, please state how long you were abroad and whether it has helped you develop your language proficiency, and how?

- 7) Have you taken part in a mobility program (e.g. Erasmus+) at a university where the lectures were held in English?

Yes No

If yes, please state where and whether this has helped you develop your English language proficiency:

- 8) What was your average grade in English language courses (English language 1, English language 2, English language 3, English language 4, English language 5, English language 6)?
- 9) Have you taken a course related to the development of English language competencies at the graduate level (e.g. Academic writing 1, 2)?

Yes No

If yes, which?

Please explain whether you have benefited from the course.

Second part: Likert-scale statements

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 indicates that you strongly agree with the statement and 1 that you strongly disagree, please rate to what extent you agree with each statement.

Survey scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree

#	Question					
1	I can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the students to notice and remember significant points.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I can give clear, smoothly flowing, elaborate and often memorable descriptions.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I can communicate clearly detailed distinctions between ideas, concepts and things that closely resemble one other.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I can give clear instructions on carrying out a task.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I can present a complex topic confidently and articulately to an audience unfamiliar with it, structuring and adapting the	1	2	3	4	5

	talk flexibly to meet the students' needs.	
6	I can handle difficult questioning.	1 2 3 4 5
7	I have a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning.	1 2 3 4 5
8	I feel confident using English to teach English as a foreign language.	1 2 3 4 5
9	I have excellent communication skills.	1 2 3 4 5
10	I can reformulate ideas in differing linguistic forms to give emphasis, to differentiate according to the situation, interlocutor etc. and to eliminate ambiguity.	1 2 3 4 5
11	I am fully accurate when I speak English.	1 2 3 4 5
12	I make mistakes when I use English in the EFL classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
13	I am fully fluent when I speak English.	1 2 3 4 5
14	I have difficulty using English fluently in the EFL classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
15	I have difficulty interacting in the EFL classroom.	1 2 3 4 5
16	I am afraid that I will make mistakes when I speak in front of a class.	1 2 3 4 5
17	I can explain grammatical structures in English.	1 2 3 4 5
18	I can provide examples in English.	1 2 3 4 5
19	I can provide synonyms in English.	1 2 3 4 5
20	I am able to answer accurately to the students' questions.	1 2 3 4 5
21	I have a wide vocabulary range.	1 2 3 4 5
22	I can understand with ease virtually any kind of spoken language.	1 2 3 4 5
23	I can articulate virtually all the sounds of the English language with clarity and precision.	1 2 3 4 5
24	I can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.	1 2 3 4 5
25	My writing is orthographically free of error.	1 2 3 4 5

26	I can use appropriate conventions when writing in English.	1	2	3	4	5
27	I can use appropriate language for different text types.	1	2	3	4	5
28	I can understand virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings.	1	2	3	4	5
29	I can express myself in an appropriate tone and style in virtually any type of formal and informal written interaction.	1	2	3	4	5
30	I can summarise clearly and fluently in well-structured language the significant ideas presented in complex texts.	1	2	3	4	5
31	I can describe in detail my personal interpretation of a work, outlining my reactions to certain features and explaining their significance.	1	2	3	4	5
32	I can switch between formal and informal registers without effort.	1	2	3	4	5
33	I can read virtually all forms of the written language including classical or colloquial literary and non-literary writings in different genres, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.	1	2	3	4	5
34	I can establish a supportive environment for sharing ideas and practice by providing clear explanations and encouraging people to explore and discuss the issue they are encountering, relating it to their experience.	1	2	3	4	5
35	I can use spoken English for teaching purposes effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
36	I can guide a discussion effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
37	I can facilitate understanding of a complex issue by explaining the relationship of parts to the whole and encourage different ways of approaching it.	1	2	3	4	5
38	I can maintain the use of target language in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
39	I can select adequate materials for my students.	1	2	3	4	5
40	I can adapt my teaching style to the level of the students' knowledge of language.	1	2	3	4	5
41	I can give effective feedback to my students.	1	2	3	4	5

42	I provide a good language model for my students.	1	2	3	4	5
43	I have an appropriate level of proficiency to teach EFL.	1	2	3	4	5
44	I have the necessary language skills to teach EFL in grammar schools.	1	2	3	4	5
45	I have the necessary language skills to teach EFL in elementary schools.	1	2	3	4	5
46	I am confident in using English for communication in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
47	I maintain consistent grammatical control of complex language, even while my attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in forward planning, in monitoring others' reactions).	1	2	3	4	5
48	I am aware of the errors that I make while teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
49	I sometimes make grammatical errors while teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
50	I sometimes make pronunciation errors while teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
51	I sometimes make spelling errors while teaching.	1	2	3	4	5

Third part: Open-ended questions

Please answer the questions below based on your experience as a student teacher.

- 1) What language skills and competences are necessary for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL)?
- 2) What language-related difficulties have you encountered while teaching in the Practicum (as a part of the methodology course)?
- 3) What language-related difficulties have you encountered while teaching during your pre-service training?
- 4) What was the easiest task you have faced in the EFL classroom?
- 5) What aspects of language would you need to develop in order to teach more effectively in English?
- 6) Did your mentor provide feedback on your use of English language during the pre-service training?

Yes No

Please explain your answer:

7) When you compare teaching EFL and teaching your other major/subject, which is easier/more difficult and why?

8) What has helped you most to develop your language proficiency during your studies?

9) Do you need more courses in language skills development during the M.A. program?

Yes No

Please explain your answer:

10) Do you need more courses in language skills development during the B.A. program?

Yes No

Please explain your answer:

11) Do you have any additional comments, questions, or concerns related to English language proficiency and teaching EFL you would like to share?