


Main Challenges in the Training of Language Competence of Preservice Teachers of English as a Foreign Language: A Qualitative Study			Linguistics
		Keywords: pre-service teachers, linguistic and methodological training, approaches of FLL, language competence, language training, perceptions of prospective teachers of English as a Foreign Language.	
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Abstract			
<p>This paper investigates students' perception on the linguistic training received at the Degree in Primary Education (specialization in English) at a Spanish university. The paper is intended to analyse the perception of preservice teachers regarding the language training in L2 received in the academic programmes adapted to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The research objective is twofold: first, the paper is set to analyse students' insights on their language training and fill a gap in the scientific literature, since no empirical research has been devoted to study the view of preservice teachers on their language training in the new degrees. Second, the study aims at opening new insights into the type of language training and the methodological approaches in language subjects in the Degree of Primary Education. The research relies on a sample of 4 participants who were interviewed in the academic year 2015 / 2016. The paper uses a qualitative approach aiming to collect information that leads to a better understanding of perceptions of prospective teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Spain. The research tool was a structured interview adapted from previous instruments and tested in a pilot stage. The main finding of the research is that the participants of the study underline the relevance of achieving a good communicative competence in the foreign language, as this promotes their self-esteem and confidence in the classroom and stimulates the interaction with their students by using the L2. In addition, preservice teachers also stress the importance of learning suitable vocabulary for teaching in Primary Education. The current investigation underlines the paramount role of the communicative competence in the L2 to build teachers' professional development.</p>			

Introduction

The implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) – the so called “Bologna Process” –, has led Spanish universities to face significant challenges in the last decade. The new degree programmes aim at providing a more “professionalizing” and custom-made training to promote the integration of university graduates into the labour market. Moreover, the convergence of higher education in Europe underlines the relevance of commanding foreign languages as a tool for social interaction; in pursuing this aim, institutional efforts have been devoted to foster societal multilingualism and individual plurilingualism (European Commission, 2008).

Arguably, the future of education in Europe is associated with the degrees in Education offered by universities, as these programmes qualify teachers to train the future citizens of the European Union (Dulce, Tarancón & Pascual, 2011). Research on language teacher training should be prioritized in Spain, as the country lags behind other European member states in the command of foreign languages (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; Eurydice, 2006; 2012). However, there is a dearth of research investigating the language competence of graduates in the faculties of Education. Similarly, the linguistic and methodological training of preservice teachers has been ignored so far.

In Spain, universities have adapted the old *Diplomaturas* – or three-year degrees that qualified teachers to work in Elementary or Primary Education – into the new *Grados* – or four-year degrees, which are envisaged to specialize teachers in specific areas or subjects–.

The current university system was implemented in 2010 following standard procedures that led to the design of compatible and similar programmes at undergraduate and graduate level (Pallisera et al., 2010).

Most degrees in Primary Education in the Spanish system have been organised as follows: they comprise 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) distributed in four years, and students have the possibility to choose among several tracks: Foreign Languages, Physical Education, Musical Education, and Special Educational Needs. Students who specialize in foreign languages choose between English and French, and complete 4 subjects: 2 courses on L2 (English or French), and 2 on methodology and language teaching. The foreign language courses (18 ECTS in total) are intended to provide students with appropriate language skills so they are able to teach English / French as a foreign language in Primary Education. Graduate students must reach a B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In the 2 subjects on methodology / language teaching, students learn about the approaches of foreign language learning, as well as the challenges of teaching languages at early ages.

This new scheme aims at providing students with fundamental skills and competences to teach a foreign language in Primary Education. The design of this new degrees has been criticized by some scholars who are reluctant about their nature and effectiveness: for instance, Fernández, Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2010) consider that the current degrees qualify teachers to be general practitioners rather than specialists. This criticism is seconded by Amengual (2013) and Rubio and Martínez (2013), who claim that the new academic programme seems to favour a generalist orientation more than a specialist training, as opposed to current school demands which have been made explicit in the guidelines provided by the Council of Europe (2002).

The development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has triggered major changes in the way languages are learnt and taught across Europe. The CEFR emphasizes the development of the communicative competence, as it promotes the engagement of students in communicative tasks in the classroom setting, as well as the learning of languages from early stages (Council of Europe, 2002). In order to meet these objectives, practitioners are required a B2 to teach foreign languages in Primary schools. Thus, English teachers need a high language competence, especially in their oral skills since they should be able to deal with any linguistic situation, such as giving instructions, coping with disruptive behaviour, or communicating with their students in the L2 outside the classroom (Amengual, 2013). The new social panorama demands that citizens are able to communicate in foreign languages in a variety of contexts (including here the professional and the personal dimension).

Consequently, teachers should be able to stimulate students' communicative competence from early stages, and this requires that university programmes provide specific skills and competences to stimulate language learning. However, it has been claimed that the new "English streams" (the specialization programmes within the degrees in Primary Education) do not focus adequately on the linguistic training of preservice Primary school English teachers (Amengual, 2007, 2013).

Barrios (2006) discusses that teacher training programmes do not provide English teachers with the suitable language competence that allows them to teach the L2 successfully in Primary Education. In the same vein, Amengual (2013) explains that the current programmes prepare teachers with a generalist orientation; therefore, the linguistic training offered at university does not train student-teachers with the necessary English language proficiency to present and use the language adequately. Moreover, the number of credits devoted to English has decreased with the new programmes, and the linguistic requirements are less demanding. In former degrees, student-teachers took 52.5 English credits, while this figure accounts for 36 ECTS within the EHEA. Furthermore, the specific linguistic and methodological courses required to complete the English track correspond to 15% of the total credits of the degree. The lack of credits devoted to the specific training in language teaching in the new academic programmes may have an impact on the preparation of preservice teachers: in a nutshell, graduates complete a degree that qualifies to teach at Primary school but does not prepare them for the school demands (Rubio & Martínez, 2013). Besides, preservice teachers are aware of their insufficient linguistic preparation, especially in spoken English, since they consider that the linguistic training received does not allow them to teach English effectively (Amengual, 2013).

The development of a suitable language competence in the L2 is not only important from a linguistic point of view, but also as regards the psychological well-being of teachers, as it clearly fosters their confidence and self-efficacy. Commanding the L2 is of paramount importance for teachers, as this is the subject they are entitled to teach; therefore, having sounded skills in the foreign language will reduce their anxiety in the classroom and will boost their self-assurance (Bandura, 1997; Berry, 1990).

Amengual (2007) emphasizes that teachers who are proficient in English are more confident, and show better emotional control over certain elements (i.e. anxiety, stress, fears) that may affect their teaching. Berry (1990, p. 99) comments that teachers' English proficiency should be an objective in the teaching programmes, since a good linguistic training increases teachers' self-reliance in their own preparation, facilitates the use of English in the classroom, and extends their methodological repertoire.

In this framework, the present investigation analyses the perception of 4 preservice teachers on the language training received in the degree of Primary Education in a Spanish university. The main objective is to study the insights of prospective teachers on the language training received in the new programmes; besides, the paper will unveil which are the main difficulties and challenges of participants in the L2.

Based on the results of the analysis, the paper will discuss the possible implications for the current degree programmes and the language training of preservice teachers of foreign languages in Primary Education.

Materials and Methods

The present study was carried out in the academic year 2015 / 2016 in a public institution of higher education in Spain.¹ The population of the study comprised 28 students registered in the Practicum (their teaching period) of the 4th year of the degree of Primary Education (specialization in English). All the students enrolled in this subject took a language placement test that assessed their competence in English. The results of this test allowed the researchers to classify students according to the levels established by the CERF; four groups were created for the A2, B1, B2, and C1 levels, as there were no students with A1 or C2. This initial sampling process was followed by a random selection in which 4 students (1 per level) were chosen to participate in the current study. The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

Participant	Age	Level of English
Student 1	23	A2
Student 2	21	B1
Student 3	21	B2
Student 4	21	C1

Table 1 – Age and level of English of the participants of the study².

Structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants of the study. Individual interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in May 2016, after participants completed their teaching period. Interviews lasted for 20 minutes and were designed following the guidelines by Rodríguez Gómez, Gil Flores and García Jiménez (1996), and Ruiz Olabuénaga (1999). The interview was validated by five teachers (three Primary school teachers and two university lecturers): their suggestions were included in the interviews, which were once again submitted for a second review; after the experts' approval, a final validation process was carried out through a pilot study with a group of students with similar characteristics to the research sample. The results obtained were satisfactory and the tools were accepted as valid for the current research.

The interview was divided in two blocks: 1) “Personal data”, where participants provided personal information (e.g. gender, age, level of English) and other details related to their motivation towards becoming teachers of English (reasons to choose the degree, trips to English speaking countries, and language attitudes towards the L2), and 2) “Pre-service teacher and language competence” where participants provided data related to students' opinion on the language training received in the degree of Primary Education, their self-assessed language competence, and their perception on the language requirements, needs, and challenges of teachers of English in Primary Education.

¹ Details have been removed for peer review.

² All students were informed about the nature and aims of the current research, and participants agreed to collaborate with the authors of the paper. All ethical guidelines have been followed when writing the current article and the personal data of preservice teachers have been kept confidential.

Results

Next, the most relevant results of the interview analyses are presented. Category-based thematic content analysis techniques have been utilized (Bardin, 1986), and the categories have been defined deductively. ATLAS-TI v.6 was used for the analysis of qualitative data. The results presented in the following section are grouped in three dimensions: a) assessment of participants' language competence; b) language training received at the university; and c) use of the L2 in the school.

	Language competence	Language training	Use of the L2 in the school
Student 1	I need to improve my English, especially my oral skills.	I learnt a lot.	English is used in any interaction between teacher and students. Students are encouraged to use English.
Student 2	My English is good, my written skills –writing and reading- are good. I need to improve my speaking skills.	I find it difficult to cover all the content in such a short time. I miss aspects such as specific vocabulary of the teaching profession.	English is used communicatively. Great use of the oral skills, the speaking skill. Great emphasis on pronunciation.
Student 3	I think it is ok, I can communicate. But, I would like to improve my oral skills.	I think it is ok.	The teachers use English all the time and they encourage students to use it.
Student 4	Well, I haven't learnt my English at university. I learnt it at language schools before I began this teaching degree.	The problem is that there is very little time to teach all the content, to create opportunities to practice the language and to teach the specific vocabulary we need to use within teaching contexts.	English is used in every classroom situation.

Table 2 – Participants perception on the dimensions of the study.

Discussion

After having analysed the interviews, the three dimensions mentioned above are discussed in this section: In terms of their language competence, participants with A2 and B1 consider they should improve their competence in the L2, in particular, as regards their oral skills. Student 1 (A2) comments “I need to improve a lot, especially my oral skills”. Student 2 (B1) describes her English competence as “Ok”, and then adds “I need to improve my speaking skills”. These participants realize that their command in the foreign language is not good; both use the word “improve” to show their desire of progress. They are aware of the essential role of English in the foreign language lessons, where the L2 has become the language of instruction. From the participants' words, researchers conclude that they seem to be self-conscious of their command of spoken English. And, they believe that English teachers should show a high command in the foreign language, especially in their oral skills since they should be able to deal with any linguistic situation in the classroom: this may include coping with students' linguistic behaviour, using the L2 outside the classroom, stimulating students' interaction with their classmates, setting routines and habits, and so on. The degree in Primary Education being scrutinized in this research is similar to most programmes in Spain, as it establishes that graduate students should achieve a B2 in English.

The perception reported by participants whose level is lower than B2 confirms that A1, A2, and B1 levels do not endorse teachers with the language competence required to deliver English lessons in Primary Education. The participant with A2 explains “No, I do not see myself capable to carry on a class in English. I need more linguistic training”. Moreover, the limited training received as regards their oral skills is not in line with the recommendations of the Council of Europe, which emphasize the individuals’ communicative competence from early ages (Amengual, 2013); this is underlined by the commentary of the participant with a B1, who remarks “My English should be more fluent and I should improve my pronunciation”. According to the perception of the participant with B2, who claims “I think I am ready to teach”, and the informant with C1, who declares “Linguistically speaking, I think I am ready”, it can be stated that participants with B2 or higher are more confident on their language skills and see themselves capable to teach English in Primary Education; furthermore, they consider they can use the L2 as a tool to communicate with their students and they are confident in their capabilities to foster this interaction.

According to their linguistic preparations, the informants of this study stress the need to acquire specific vocabulary for the teaching profession. In this vein, the participant with B1 states “I miss aspects such as specific vocabulary of the teaching profession”, and the informant with C1 expounds “... there is very little time to teach the specific vocabulary we need to use within teaching contexts”. Both students show concern with the linguistic training received. This statement is supported by prior studies which revealed that the language training at university may not provide preservice teachers with the specific vocabulary and skills they need in the classroom (Amengual, 2007; 2013; Barrios, 2006).

Another important consideration is that the preservice teachers interviewed for this research estimate that their language preparation is insufficient due to the short time devoted to learning the foreign language. In other words, they consider there are no sufficient language courses in the degree, and the exposure to the L2 is very limited, as it transpires from the explanation of the participant with C1: “The problem is that there is very little time to teach all the content, to create opportunities to practice the language and to teach the specific vocabulary we need to use within teaching contexts”. This perception supported by Amengual (2013), who notes that 80.2% of the students interviewed in her research consider that the foreign language track in the degree of Education does not suit the specific knowledge and skills required to teach an L2 in a Primary school. Regarding the use of the foreign language in the classroom, the four students interviewed enhance the relevance of using the L2 as the language of instruction when teaching a foreign language. In fact, they report they used the L2 to communicate with their students in their Practicum, opposed to their teachers in Primary Education (who used Spanish to teach English). Besides, they comment that current in-service primary teachers use the L2 as a language of instruction and encourage their students to use it in every interaction. Informants emphasize the use of the L2; for example, the participant with A2 indicates “English is used in any interaction between teacher and students”; the participant with B1 also notes “English is used communicatively”. The participant with B2 remarks how teachers stimulate the use of the L2 in the classroom “teachers encourage students to use English.”

Finally, the informant with C1 recognizes that the foreign language is the language used in the English classroom “English is used in every classroom situation”. According to the participants of the study, the recommendation of the Council of Europe (2002) to promote the use of English as a vehicle of communication from early ages is being followed at schools of Primary Education. Participants highlight the dual role of the English language within the Primary school as a subject to be taught, as well as a language of instruction. This perception mirrors the current situation in Spain, where Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has flourished in the last decade, especially in Primary Education (Escobar, 2013; Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). Participants underline the good communicative competence of Primary school students in the foreign language; in fact, they establish comparisons between the language competence they had in English when they were in Primary Education, and the level of their students in the Practicum stating that, today, young learners possess much higher skills in the L2. In particular, participants identify spoken communication and vocabulary as the two main weaknesses they had in Primary Education when compared with their current students. Nowadays, pupils of Primary Education in Spain are more fluent: probably, this improvement is due to the higher exposition to the L2 and the fact they use English as a vehicle for communication in the classroom (and also, outside formal education). Therefore, preservice teachers realize that schools demand teachers who possess a strong communicative competence (especially, as regards their oral productive skills), so they can serve as language models for their students.

In conclusion, this paper analyses the perception of preservice teachers of Primary Education on the language training received at the university, and their views on the language competence required to become teachers of English as a foreign language. The present study adds to the previous literature by examining the perception of the students enrolled in the degree in Primary Education (specialization in English) resulting from the adaptation to the European Higher Education Area. The training of language teachers in Spain requires further investigation, as the command of foreign languages is consistently identified as one of the main weaknesses of the educational system in the country. In addition, the scarce attention paid in the new academic programmes language and methodology subjects suggests the training of graduates should be assessed in relation to their capacity to teach the L2. The current research presents an exploratory study, which analyses four interviews following a qualitative approach. More studies are welcome in this area, as there is a paucity of research in the training of language teachers in Spain; therefore, longitudinal studies analysing the evolution of students’ language competence could contribute to a better understanding of the main challenges and difficulties perceived by prospective teachers. Moreover, research projects analysing larger samples and studies using quantitative or mixed research designs are also required. The main finding of the paper is that students consider the language training received is insufficient to teach English as a foreign language in Primary Education. This conclusion obeys to the lack of attention to the L2 in the new academic programmes, where students are less exposed to the foreign language (in contrast with the aims of the EHEA and the European convergence, which demands more contact with foreign languages). In particular, students consider their spoken skills and the lack of specific vocabulary are the main shortcomings in their language preparation.

Therefore, the new teaching programmes should increase the number of credits with the aim to implement the oral skills of preservice teachers and equip them with the resources needed to deliver their lessons efficiently: this includes teaching the L2, but also using this language to promote interaction among their students, classroom management, arranging activities in the class, and foster the use of the L2 outside formal educational settings. The current paper stresses the relevance of language training in the academic programmes of Education. Courses on language and methodology (language training, applied linguistics, and so on) should have more relevant positions in the academic programmes of Primary Education, as they are fundamental in the training of the language teachers of the future.

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