

Perception of English Beginning Teachers in Middle Schools About Teaching Competencies

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Abstract

This paper is trying to make an effort to get a glimpse of English beginning teachers' perception about teaching competencies. 142 beginning teachers from 70 middle schools in 8 cities in Guangdong Province were taken as the samples. They were asked to rank the items of teaching competencies about the importance and the lack of the competencies. As a result, the top five important teaching competencies are English pedagogical knowledge, Class management skills, Doing teaching reflection, Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques and Knowledge of subject matter. Meanwhile, participants believed the five items including Class management skills, Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques, Doing teaching reflection, Assessing teaching and learning and Having knowledge of students' learning situation are what they need most to improve. As for field dimension, English language comprehensive competencies are considered as the most important ones for beginning teachers; when it comes to the shortage, Assessment and evaluation is rated in the first place, which means beginning teachers are most lacking in.

Key words: English beginning teachers; Teaching competencies; Perception, Importance; Shortage

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INTRODUCTION

Having outstanding and comprehensive teaching competency is necessary to successfully complete teaching work in middle schools. The level of teachers' teaching competency is directly related to the quality of teaching, including the teaching effects and teaching efficiency.

Teaching competency has been a heated research topic for a long time. Much research has been done on the teachers' teaching competency items from the perspective of all teachers, however, not much research is done from the angle of the developmental period of teachers and the certain subject. According to CNKI, a most widely-used database in China, from January 1st, 1980 to 2015, there are 3,680 articles on teaching competency, but only 192 articles talk about the teaching competency of English teachers, and only 45 of them are about teaching competencies of English beginning teachers' or English new teachers. With more and more research on teachers' professional development, researchers are paying more attention to the beginning teachers.

Teaching competencies are considered as comprehensive individual characteristics, which refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes to support and to meet the needs of the effective teaching performance in various teaching environment (Dineke, 2004). A Chinese scholar, Sun (2004), believes that teachers' teaching competencies are to ensure the effectiveness of teaching, and to achieve the expected teaching goal, which includes teaching planning and design, class organization and management, verbal expression, evaluation and feedback, adjustment and control, the understanding and communication, scientific research and other comprehensive competencies needed in the whole process of teaching.

Perception is of great significance in the attainment and practice of competencies during the professional

development of beginning teachers. Having finished the initial teacher training program, beginning teachers have already established certain beliefs and value of teaching competencies to some degree. Their perception is sure to play a significant part in developing teaching competencies to be a competent teacher. With the clear perception about teaching competencies, beginning teachers are able to realize the importance and functions of competencies, so as to raise their awareness and build up confidence to promote the development of teaching competencies.

1. WHAT IS A BEGINNING TEACHER?

Usually teachers who are experiencing their first three teaching years are considered as beginning teachers because it takes three years for a teacher to finish teaching a round of Junior/Senior 1 to 3. Being in the induction phase or career adaptation, which is the critical period of growth and development, the first three years of beginning teachers is also considered as a difficult period and test of the transition.

Beginning teachers often meet with the different problems in teaching owing to the lack of teaching experience and being in the adaptation of the teaching career. For example, it is not easy for beginning teachers to help the students who always get poor academic performances and to stimulate their interest in learning or to have effective activities organization and class management. What's more, there is not enough time to do research on teaching and students' learning. There maybe a lack of knowledge of subject matter, effective use of textbooks and curriculum standard, various teaching methods. Besides, it is difficult for beginning teachers to tell students' exact learning level individually and to evaluate their work quickly and exactly.

Table 1
Teaching Competencies of Teachers in Middle Schools

Kinds	Items
Teaching competencies I	Mastering and using teaching syllabus, Using teaching materials and reference books appropriately, Writing teaching plans and practicing teaching
Teaching competencies II	Having teaching wisdom, Achieving the teaching goal, Choosing and using teaching methods, Stimulating students' interest in learning and guiding students to grasp learning methods, Guiding students to carry on learning transfer
Teaching competencies III	Creating the best teaching situation; Ask adequate questions or showing good examples in teaching, Designing blackboard writing, Doing teaching reflection, Making a conclusion of teaching and combination of the teaching ways, Setting the course assignment
Teaching competencies IV	Making teaching aids and demonstrating operation, Using modern technology

2.2 About the Teaching Competencies of English Teachers

Zeng (1998), the scholar who first and most comprehensively put forward the teaching competencies of English teachers, believed the requirements should

2. PRIOR RESEARCH FINDINGS RELATED TO TEACHING COMPETENCIES OF ENGLISH BEGINNING TEACHERS

2.1 About Teaching Competencies

Teaching competencies, the key and vital competencies of a teacher, are of great importance to every teacher. What teaching competencies should English teachers obtain to cultivate 21st century's talents? Different researchers have various opinions. The Primary and Secondary School Teachers' Professional Standards (Trial Edition) are the national standard for the teachers of all subjects. Based on it, as an English teacher in the middle school, he or she should obtain competencies in four fields: (a) Teaching design; (b) Teaching implementation; (c) Assessment & Evaluation; (d) Individual professional development. According to another programmatic document An Outline of Middle School English teachers' Qualification Exam, English teachers' essential teaching competencies is required in five fields including English knowledge of subject matter, English pedagogical knowledge, Teaching design, Teaching implementation and Teaching evaluation.

In Hong Kong (Panel, 2008), teaching competencies are explained in the following four fields of Subject content knowledge, Curriculum and pedagogical knowledge, Teaching strategies, medium, language expression and Assessment and evaluation.

In mainland, the research on the items of teaching competencies is always a heated topic. Chen (1988), Shen (1998), Ren (2004), Zhao (2010), Zhou (2012), put forward the detailed items of middle school teachers. As Table 1 shows, according to Luo and Li (2000), whose ideas are quoted most-widely, teaching competencies are a combination of four kinds of competencies which are some different items.

include: a) Have a skilled foreign language using ability, solid and broad language knowledge. b) Be good at creating an active and harmonious classroom learning environment to stimulate interest in learning, c) Understand students' demands and adjust the teaching

according to students' needs. d) Have a clear teaching target and organize teaching activities according to the target. e) Be good at finding out the teaching contents of humanistic connotation. f) Give students good, accurate and fluent language skills training. g) Seize opportunities to create learning opportunities for students. 8) Be good at fostering students' ability to learn and guide students to find suitable learning methods. h) Enhance students' understanding of English language and its application system. i) Make sure of teachers' position in teaching.

According to the prior study, teaching competencies combine a variety of categories which are needed in the teaching process. Different subject asks for different teaching competencies. In different stage of a teachers' career life, teachers need to develop different teaching competencies. Therefore, when talking about the English beginning teachers' teaching competencies, it is necessary to find out the combination of different items. Twenty-four items were identified as the overall teaching competencies according to the prior study which is related to the middle school English teachers' teaching competencies. 23 competency items of five fields are listed in the following table (Table 3).

3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

English teaching is a challenging operational process which relies on a set of teaching competencies items. This study focuses on the perception of English beginning teachers about the essential teaching competencies of English teaching in middle schools. The objectives of the study are as follows.

- a) To find out the perception of English beginning teachers about the importance of teaching competencies.
- b) To find out the perception of English beginning teachers about the shortage of their actual teaching competencies.

Table 3
The Results of Questionnaire

Fields	Teaching competencies	Importance O (M)	Shortage O (M)
English language comprehensive competencies	1.Knowledge of subject matter	5 (16.80)	17 (9.28)
	2.English pedagogical knowledge	1 (19.46)	7 (14.26)
	3.Having a knowledge of students' learning situation	9 (14.24)	5 (15.85)
	4. Analyzing and utilizing texts	6 (16.13)	11 (12.56)
Teaching design	5.Understanding and utilizing the curriculum standard	18 (8.47)	18 (8.97)
	6.Selecting and utilizing teaching materials	14 (10.51)	10 (12.73)
	7. Designing teaching plans	12 (12.72)	15 (10.16)

To be continued

- c) Try to analyze the phenomena and find out the reasons.

4. METHODOLOGY

142 English beginning teachers were taken from 70 middle schools in 8 cities in Guangdong province as the samples for the study (see Table 1). Participants were asked to write down the basic information and rank 23 items of teaching competencies which the author considered essential for beginning teachers to be competent in the job as an English teacher (see Table 2). They were asked to rank these competencies in descending order from 1 to 23 according to the importance and lack of the competencies. The competency item placed at number one was given a score of 23 and the one placed at the bottom was given one score. Mean of each competency item was calculated by using the following formulae.

Mean = Total scores of each competency item / Number of beginning teachers

Table 2
Basic Information of Surveyed Beginning Teachers

Economy status	Cities	The surveyed schools	The surveyed teachers T(J+S)
Developed	Guangzhou	2	4(3+1)
Developed	Foshan	2	3(2+1)
Developed	Shenzhen	5	15(12+3)
Developed	Dongguan	2	6(4+2)
Developed	Huizhou	2	4(2+2)
Developing	Yangjiang	3	10(6+4)
Developing	Zhanjiang	47	76(41+35)
Developing	Meizhou	7	24(15+9)
Total		70	142(85+57)

Note. T=Total. J=Junior Middle School; S=Senior High School.)

Continued

Fields	Teaching competencies	Importance O (M)	Shortage O (M)
Teaching implementation	8.Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques	4 (17.19)	2 (17.59)
	9. Class management skills	2 (18.54)	1 (18.32)
	10.Analyzing and correcting English mistakes	10 (13.78)	16 (9.90)
	11.Choosing and using the modern technology	22 (4.23)	21 (7.03)
	12.Raising adequate questions	15 (10.15)	12 (12.14)
	13. Explaining and interpreting	7 (15.63)	8 (13.70)
	14. Orientating teacher’s role	17 (9.42)	13 (11.64)
	15.Creating English-learning atmosphere	13 (11.39)	14 (10.98)
Assessment and evaluation	16. Assigning English homework	21 (4.75)	23 (5.85)
	17. Blackboard writing	23 (3.28)	22 (6.47)
	18.Measuring teaching and learning	20 (6.44)	9 (13.39)
	19. Assessing teaching and learning	8 (14.90)	4 (16.65)
Individual professional development	20. Doing teaching reflection	3 (18.01)	6 (15.48)
	21. Doing research on teaching	11 (13.31)	3 (16.87)
	22.Autonomous learning for professional development	16 (9.63)	19 (8.32)
	23. Cooperating with others	19 (7.02)	20 (7.86)

Note. O=Order; M=Mean.

Table 4
Mean of Each Field

Fields	Order (mean) of importance	Order (mean) of shortage
English language comprehensive competencies	1 (17.50)	4 (11.77)
Teaching design	2 (12.41)	3 (12.05)
Teaching implementation	4 (10.90)	5 (11.36)
Assessment and evaluation	5 (10.84)	1 (15.02)
Individual professional development	3 (12.00)	2 (12.13)

5. RESULTS

According to Table 3, English pedagogical knowledge, Class management skills and Doing teaching reflection are the top three items. That’s to say, beginning teachers attach great importance to them. Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques and Knowledge of subject matter find place in No.4 and No.5. They do not rate highly the competencies like Creating English-learning atmosphere, Selecting and utilizing teaching materials, Raising adequate questions and Autonomous learning for professional development. Meanwhile, competencies like Analyzing and correcting English mistakes, Doing research on teaching and Designing teaching plans are ranking in the middle order as

indicated. As for the shortage, the top three items are Class management skills, Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques and Doing research on teaching. Beginning teachers are confident of the competencies like Choosing and using the modern technology, Blackboard writing and Assigning English homework, which are believed at the least three important teaching competencies. On the contrary, Doing research on teaching, which isn’t rated highly according to importance, is a competency that most beginning teachers are lacking in.

From Table 4, English language comprehensive competencies are considered as the most important ones for beginning teachers, and it is good to find that such important competencies are likely to be owned by beginning teachers. Meanwhile the means of Teaching design (12.41) and Individual professional development (12.00) are very close. It is shown that the rest of two fields, Teaching implementation and Assessment and evaluation, get almost the same mean. When comes to the shortage, Assessment and evaluation is rated in the first place, which means beginning teachers require them most, even though it is considered the least important one for beginning teachers. It is obvious to see that the means of the scores that refer to shortage of teaching competencies in the other four fields closely vary from 11.36 to 12.13. Teaching implementation is in the fifth place, which

means beginning teachers don't think they are short of the competency during teaching implementation.

6. DISCUSSION

●Participants have ranked Knowledge of subject matter and English pedagogical knowledge as foremost teaching competencies. These competencies are considered as the basis and foundation for English teachers, which are also acknowledged by many researchers. Kalra (1977) put forward the idea that quality of teaching is influenced by sound knowledge of subject matter and application of psychological principles by the teacher. In addition, Kohll (1992) pointed out that a competent teacher embodies knowledge of subject matter, having an understanding of the needs of society and factors with impacts on education.

●The shortage of Class management skills is ranked in the first place, which is likely to mean that English beginning teachers are in greatest need of it during teaching. The competency is practical and useful for guaranteeing every teacher to teach smoothly in the class, where teaching is a kind of special communication between a teacher and students. Using appropriate, cultured and encouraging verbal and non-verbal language to communicate is able to create a harmonious atmosphere and to stimulate students to perform well. Discrimination, sarcasm, abuse and rebuke are not allowed in today's classroom. A motivated environment can be created if students are self-disciplined. Ur (1996) stated that discipline aids teacher in smooth conduction of class by facilitating encouraging situations in the class. Spirthall (1994) has ever stated the importance of both verbal and non verbal communication in the class by a teacher. Mukhopadhyay (1994) pointed out that the effective communication skills lead students towards meaningful behavior and help the teacher in attaining educational goals. Good class communication skills are always helping the teacher to build up a trustworthy relationship with colleges, parents, leaders, convincing them of his or her capabilities.

●In July, 2001, the English Curriculum Standard for Full-time Compulsory Education and Common Senior Middle Schools were issued in the form of experimental sketch, which is the programmatic document that stipulates its curriculum level and structure. The new curriculum reform has been carried out for 11 years since 2004 so as to attract teachers' great attention to the philosophy and functions of curriculum standard. Beginning teachers have had the related course to learn about the curriculum standard during pre-service education, so it is no wonder that understanding and utilizing the curriculum standard has been an essential competency which beginning teachers are familiar, though it is ranked No. 19 by the importance.

●Choosing and utilizing proper teaching methods and techniques plays an important role in the class. At the same time, beginning teachers are in great need of it. There is no doubt that this competency needs the growth of beginning teachers' practical experience and theoretical attainment, which is not easy to own in the beginning period of the teaching career. Having paid the attention to it, beginning teachers are able to try their best to develop it more quickly.

●Teaching reflection has been ranked in a vital place according to the result, which is obvious to prove the importance of reflective thinking during the professional improvement and development. Teaching Reflection is the key to being a scholar-teacher or expert-teacher for a beginning teacher. English teachers re-understand, reflect, indicate and evaluate any problems in the process of English teaching. Writing reflective journal helps beginning teachers to turn tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, therefore they might have a close examination of their teaching competency. Beginning teachers, for one thing, can reflect on English teaching problems, and explore the characteristics of English learning; for another, enrich education teaching theory, improve the ability of English teaching and find their own shortcomings

●However, as another common and useful way that can promote teachers' professional development, Doing research has not been ranked in a foremost place, but most of beginning teachers are lack of it. As beginning teachers in the starting point, they have something more needful than doing research which requires a certain amount of teaching experience as research foundation. It is known to all that doing research is a time-consuming way that requires research awareness, methods and perseverance. For beginning teachers in the adaption of career, their primary goal is to teach students well enough first. In the process of doing personal practice, beginning teachers research on the education teaching process, so as to increase their practical wisdom, and all these need the guidance of education theory. Schools should be actively involved in beginning teacher' development, strengthen the initial training, so as to deepen practice for providing opportunities for them to do research.

●It is a bit surprising that the competency of teaching design isn't ranking in a high position, which is usually considered to be a very important one for a lot of prior research. There is one reason that is thought to explain this "unusual" phenomenon. Nowadays, teachers don't need to design teaching by themselves because they can easily get the excellent teaching designs and PPT for every lesson from the Internet or book providers who wants teachers to persuade students to subscribe to the reference books. Beginning teachers no longer need to do all the teaching design in details step by step. All they do be just

adding, deleting, adjusting the PPT or even copying the design without any correction, which is thought to be a usual way that saves time but lowers the competency of teaching design. Owing to the same reason, beginning teachers think lowly of Selecting and utilizing teaching materials. It is really not good for the professional development.

•Competencies like Choosing and using modern technology, Blackboard writing and Assigning homework are not thought highly of by the participants. English beginning teachers have confidence in being technology savvy so that modern technology can find entrance in the classroom and can be exploited for the benefit of the learners. However, this competency is placed at the lowest rank by the beginning teachers. Reasons for this can be that beginning teachers belong to that generation of technology. Whether blackboard handwriting is beautiful or not is not important, only if there are not any mistakes in writing. Most of beginning teachers think like that. Homework is considered a good way to evaluate students' learning, but with the convenience of reference books and English exercise books, beginning teachers seem to just assign the homework according to the given ones.

•The mean of English language comprehensive competencies is in the first place according to the importance, while beginning teachers mainly lack the competency of Assessment and evaluation. It is probably because there are only two items in both fields. Another reason is that English language comprehensive competencies as a kind of basis that develops from the pre-service period, the knowledge of Assessment and evaluation hardly came into practice during teaching practice in the college. While Choosing and using the modern technology, Assigning English homework and Blackboard writing these three items which are listed in the lowest place are likely to lower the mean of Teaching implementation.

CONCLUSION

English teaching is considered as a multifaceted activity as well as a combination of language, culture and subject, which require a solid foundation of broad knowledge and excellent skills. A beginning teacher might be gifted with some natural endowments to be a competent teacher, but knowledge of subject matter and application of English pedagogical knowledge develops professional acumen and profound understanding of students' behavior and characteristics. It is good to see beginning teachers think highly of English language comprehensive competencies.

Pre-service education in normal colleges or universities is the foundation and important development stage of teaching competencies formation of beginning teachers,

where they focus on learning and mastering the knowledge of subject matter, educational theory, basic knowledge and teaching skills. Teaching practice under the guidance of the experienced teacher is a way of conversing theory to practice, correctly master the teaching skills, professional theory knowledge and apply to the teaching practice, for the formation of teacher's teaching competencies to lay a good foundation. After graduation, being a real teacher, without guidance of teachers, beginning teachers have to depend on themselves to face different problems in teaching, so it is common and usual to find challenges and difficulties on account of the lack of some teaching competencies.

Initial teacher training program can address the issue of individual differences with respect to beginning teachers by designing curriculum in such a way that stress is on competency development. For this, improvement in microteaching techniques and practice teaching sessions is necessary. Focusing attention on beginning teachers through continuous comprehensive evaluation throughout the training period is a prerequisite for an efficient teacher training program.

With the perception of importance and shortage of teaching competencies, beginning teachers would have clear mind to develop teaching competencies in teaching. Besides personal professional developmental awareness, during the beginning phase of the teaching career, middle schools also have responsibilities to help beginning teachers with their growth for the sake of better teaching effectiveness and efficiency.

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