THE IMPACT OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT ON DEVELOPING EFL STUDENT-TEACHERS' LANGUAGE COMPETENCES AS DOMAIN-SPECIFIC

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Abstract: *The paper reports on the outcomes of research carried out at a North Macedonian public university aimed at developing the language competences of prospective EFL teachers through formative assessment. For the study's purposes, a CEFR-based assessment tool was designed for teacher, peer and self-assessment of the ETP (English-for-teaching purposes) competences of fourth year student-teachers (n=15) micro-teaching lower year students. Fluency, accuracy, interaction, stimulating the development of ideas, and addressing audiences were the formative assessment criteria used to check if there was progress from the first to the third micro-teaching session as a result of formative feedback and assessment training. Additionally, two surveys for student-teachers and peer-assessors were used aimed at exploring: a) the effects of formative feedback on students' language competences and teaching skills; b) the effects of formative assessment training on students' peer- and self-assessment skills; and c) the professional and personal benefits of formative assessment training for students.*

Apart from many personal benefits from the project, findings revealed positive effects of formative assessment on students' language competences and teaching skills; specifically on the awareness of the complexity of ETP competences and the skills for tackling various classroom, assessment and material design challenges.

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Introduction

The trend for professionalization, standardization and quality assurance in English language teaching has been marked by a surge of interest in defining the knowledge base of English language teaching and the specifics that underlie the effective profiling of teacher expertise. Despite the fact that different components of teacher knowledge have been highlighted by different theoretical frameworks (Tsui, 2003), EFL teacher language proficiency has been widely recognized as a crucial component of teacher knowledge, especially for nonnative English-speaking teachers.

Notwithstanding the burgeoning interest in exploring and raising the level of language proficiency requisite for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), it has been noted that EFL learners worldwide fail to develop "a useable knowledge of English" (Wedell, 2011, as cited in Freeman et al., 2015, p. 129). The failure to ensure quality instruction has mainly been attributed to teachers' inadequate command of the target language (Freeman et al., 2015) which has been traced back to the fact that second language teacher education programs are not very successful at developing the language capacities of pre-service teachers necessary for effective teaching (Sešek, 2007; Ngyen & Hang, 2021). Therefore, awareness is increasingly being raised of the importance of improving the language development component of teacher education programs (Kahmi-Stein, 2009; Gu & Papageorgiu, 2016).

The relevance of this study is related to what Gallavan and Kottler (2009) emphasized, that if students have options and greater control over their own learning, then their motivation and commitment towards achieving success strengthens. Considering the potential of formative assessment to stimulate learning motivation and success, addressed in the next part of this paper, and in line with the findings of a needs-analysis study into the language needs of prospective and novice EFL teachers (Nikolovska, 2017), we designed the present study.

This small-scale research was carried out at a public university in the Republic of North Macedonia with the purpose of assessing and developing pre-service teachers' English-for-teaching purposes proficiency in an Assessment-for-Learning framework aligned with the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018). This article explains the procedure of implementing a CEFR-informed assessment instrument which served as the basis for self-, peer- and teacher-assessment of pre-service English teachers' language competences needed for teaching English as a foreign language. Moreover, it casts light on the effects of formative assessment on student-teachers' classroom language proficiency (henceforth - English for-teaching-purposes - ETP) and teaching skills and on the effects of training the students in using the assessment scales.

Theoretical background

EFL teachers' language proficiency as domain-specific

English teacher language proficiency is a multifaceted construct which represents a crucial component of teacher expertise. Diverse conceptualizations of language proficiency which cast light on different aspects of this multidimensional construct have been proposed (Karas & Faez, 2020). According to a broadly accepted definition language proficiency is "what someone can do/knows in relation to the application of the subject in the real world" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 183).

Not only is the definition of language proficiency problematic, but the question of how teacher language proficiency should be developed and assessed has also been the grounds of debate among scholars. It has been argued that teachers need to reach a threshold level of proficiency in order to be able to teach effectively although this threshold level has not been clearly determined as it seems to be context-dependent.

Teachers' advanced general English proficiency has been perceived as an essential prerequisite for effective teaching and student learning (Cullen, 2002; Freeman et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2013). It has been found out that teachers' poor command of the target language is a serious obstacle to their ability to communicate content and manage classroom interaction (Sešek, 2007). In addition, teachers with lower language proficiency are more dependent on textbooks, less able to adapt teaching resources and to engage in improvisational teaching (Mitchell, 1988, as cited in Richards, 2017). Consequently, the insufficient target language proficiency largely undermines teachers' self-confidence and authority in the classroom (Cullen, 2002).

Another researched aspect is teacher preparedness in the domain of language proficiency reported as inadequate in a number of educational contexts (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Peacock, 2009; Gu & Papageorgiu, 2016; Hadi, 2019). However, most studies do not mention the degree to which an advanced proficiency level is achieved. The inadequate language command of English language teachers may be attributed to the focus on general English proficiency and the lack of training in classroom English in pre-service teacher education (Sešek, 2007; Freeman et al., 2015; Richards, 2017).

It has been suggested that in order to be able to teach effectively, language teachers need to develop a range of specialist language skills in addition to their general or global language proficiency (Elder, 2001; Freeman et al., 2015). While general language proficiency entails what "normal language users might be expected to be able to do in the context of both formal and informal communication" (Elder, 2001, p. 152), the specialist language skills refer to specific metalinguistic terminology

and discourse competences for effective delivery of classroom content such as command of directives, questioning techniques, rhetorical signaling devices and simplification strategies which are essential in communicating content and establishing classroom procedures (ibid.).

The present study contributes to the small body of research (Sešek, 2005, 2007; Richards, 2017; Freeman et al., 2015; Wang, 2021; Rütti-Joy, 2022) that takes an English for specific purposes (ESP) approach to researching EFL teacher language competences by conceptualizing them as domain-specific, i.e. in keeping with the specificity of the discourse pertinent to the teaching profession. The specific features of classroom English that distinguish it from the discourse of other professional domains comprise: distinct uses of prosody, the ability to use and adapt metalanguage appropriately, the need to achieve proficiency in speaking as more important than proficiency in the other language skills whereas lexis is less context-specific (Sešek, 2005).

The role of formative assessment in developing EFL learners' language competences

Teaching is undoubtedly a complex activity, and without some clarification and framing of the target competences it is difficult to assess future teachers' quality and identify the professional development they may need. Teacher and student assessment is an inevitable segment of any educational process. It is a multiplex skill, especially when it is done among students who are trained to become future teachers, due to the different student individual development, different levels of motivation and aptitude as well as the complex interactions they are involved in.

From the various assessment methods, in this paper we focus on the formative assessment or Assessment-for-learning since it is related to a continuous monitoring of student development which is an inevitable part of teacher preparation. Formative assessment, although not a magic formula that can solve all educational challenges, offers tools for developing high performance teacher skills and for providing students with knowledge and opportunities for lifelong learning (Black & William, 1998). Specifically, in the ELT field, teachers provide students with formative assessment feedback in order to help them in the process of developing their language competences. Simultaneously, teachers improve and adapt their teaching and their material preparation. Feedback, an essential aspect of formative assessment, should be timely, positive and specific with suggestions for students on how to improve future performance. Effective feedback is closely related to clear criteria regarding expectations for student performance, to transparent learning process, and to modelling "learning to learn" skills for students (OECD, 2003).

Formative assessment promotes lifelong learning, higher levels of student achievement and greater equity of student outcomes. The two major types of formative assessment are peer-assessment and self-assessment. According to McMillan and Hearn (2008), self-assessment provides the learners with the skill to evaluate their efforts invested into the task in order to fulfill it successfully. In both peer- and self-assessment learners are trained to evaluate their achievement in an objective manner and determine whether they succeeded in meeting the requirements and criteria. To strengthen this claim we can add Black and William's original definition of formative assessment that it encompasses "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black & William, 1998, p. 2). Although these two assessment types allow flexibility, the final decision concerning the final grade ultimately belongs to the teacher. However, the positive side is that during the formative assessment students are autonomous learners, involved in learning how to be equal participants in the assessment of their own learning.

Previous research also points out the fact that self-assessment allows learners to evaluate the effort they have invested in the learning process on the basis of specified goals they need to reach in order to be successful (McMillian & Hearn, 2008). Another important aspect is objectivity, and as Johnson and Gelfand (2013) state, formative assessment, particularly self-assessment prepares learners to be able to objectively evaluate their achievements by striving to meet the requirements and be prepared for real life challenges. Ross (2006) claims that teachers should be encouraged to use self-assessment because of the increased student engagement and because self-assessment offers additional information related to the readiness of the learner to complete the assigned tasks during class time. Moreover, self-assessment gives teachers a greater sense of the value of self-assessment, of the student and teacher involvement in the evaluation process and in subsequent decisions about the areas of their work teachers need to improve (Borgmeier, Loman & Hara, 2016).

Regarding the connection between self-assessment and learning outcomes, review studies reveal that self-assessment improves the quality of students' learning and their academic performance across subjects and grade levels (e.g. Yan et al., 2021) increasing their self-confidence. It also has a positive impact on their self-regulated learning strategies and motivational variables such as self-efficacy (Panadero et al., 2017). Other researchers acknowledge that self-assessment may contribute to student learning by involving students in monitoring the learning process, facilitating reflection on the learning outcomes and experiencing successful performance (Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2013; Yan, 2020).

In contrast to self-assessment, peer-assessment offers a higher degree of social interaction, due to the fact that students need to cooperate and help one another. However, peer-assessment, as observation and research showed, causes unease in some learners. Even when it is structured and guided, some students being aware of their proficiency level and comparing themselves to the proficiency levels of their peers feel uncomfortable to comment on better students' tasks and achievements. Topping et al. (2017, p. 122) explain peer-assessment as "an assessment tool which allows learners to think about and determine the level of quality of their peers' work, and thus to expand their own knowledge by providing detailed and comprehensive comments and notes." The way in which feedback is provided is very important because the process has negative washback for some students, causing them to feel anxiety and embarrassment. To avoid this, it is essential for teachers to train students in giving constructive feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

All types of PA have positive cognitive and affective benefits related to student performance, professional competences, critical thinking and reflection (see Double, McGrane & Hopfenbeck, 2020). Among the most prominent affective benefits are: group work interest, engagement and motivation, and attitude building. In previous research it was found that students perceive PA as a valuable learning experience and feel as equal members of the learning community; then, PA is associated with positive effects on student attitude, responsibility and ownership of the learning process.

Also, peer-assessment holds benefits for teachers such as decrease in workload, more efficient evaluation processes and better managing of administrative tasks.

Overall, peer-assessment helps to expand the learners' social skills, which they will need in life outside the academic contexts. Assessment depends on self-confidence. The more self-confident students are to give feedback to peers, the more efficient the whole learning process is for both, the assessor and the assessed. Research revealed that students become more able to gain confidence in peer assessment with practice and become more efficient when exchanging and discussing observations (Spiller, 2009). The importance of training for improvement of peer assessment skills before engaging in assessment activities has been explored by Liu and Li (2014), who conclude that if students are trained in peer assessment, then there is greater alignment between students' and teacher's grading and the quality of observations of peer's work is improved. In the same vein, Thomas, Martin and Pleasants (2011) prove that teachers should minimize their authority in the assessment process and lead students to assess themselves after having prepared standards for the peer assessment, standards which guide students to think carefully about the activity for which they will be assessed.

The study

Study aims, design and methodology

As mentioned earlier, the primary aim of the current research was to enhance student-teachers' ETP by creating and implementing a formative CEFR-based assessment tool, as curricula and syllabuses in the Republic of North Macedonia are designed in harmony with the CEFR. Taking into account that the exit proficiency level for high school graduates in the Republic of North Macedonia is B2 (Council of Europe, 2001) and that the benchmark for English teacher graduates in Europe (Cardenas & Chaves, 2013) is C1 level (Council of Europe, 2001), C1 was set as the threshold exit level necessary for effective teaching at primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, the research planned as a semester-long project sought to provide student-teachers with experience in teaching adult learners in addition to teaching primary and high school students as a part of the Teaching Practicum.

The research was performed at a public university in the Republic of North Macedonia, at the Department of English language and literature, in March - December 2019. The participants were four professors of English as a Foreign Language and Applied Linguistics and one professor of ELT Methodology as well as 40 fourth-year pre-service teachers who volunteered to participate in the project.

The project consisted of four stages. In the **first stage** the five professors of EFL designed an assessment instrument aligned with the CEFR (2001 and 2018) which was used for teacher, peer and self-assessment of student-teachers' ETP competences. The instrument was revised after being previously piloted for a semester in 2017.

A starting point in developing the assessment was conceptualizing classroom English as performing three functions: *instructional and regulative* (Bernstein, 1990, as cited in Richards, 2017), and *dialogic* (Alexander, 2008, ibid.), each of which is realized through specific classroom acts related to specific language functions. These functions of teacher talk were operationalized through the following assessment criteria: *accuracy, fluency, interaction, stimulating the development of ideas and addressing audiences.*

The assessment was based on a three-level rating method (only B2, C1 and C2 proficiency levels were included) with level C1 as the threshold level necessary for effective teaching. Can-do descriptors were developed by the project team describing performance at each of the three levels for each of the five criteria (see the assessment instrument in the Appendix). The scales were customized from the CEFR (2001) and the CEFR Companion Volume (2018). It is worth

noting that the assessment tool was created as a result of revising and modifying an earlier version we piloted in 2017.

In the **second stage**, each of the five professors mentored three student-teachers and five student-assessors while carrying out three mentoring cycles. The mentoring process involved training the mentees in using the assessment criteria designed for teacher assessment, self- and peer-assessment as well as organizing three micro-teaching/ mentoring cycles.

The third stage consisted of carrying out three mentoring cycles. In each micro-teaching cycle the mentor and the five student-assessors observed and assessed each of the three student-teachers' micro-teaching a 15-20 minute segment of a Modern English lesson to lower year students or an ELT Methodology lesson to their peers. Each student-teacher chose three aspects of language competence (*interaction*, *stimulating the development of ideas* or *addressing audiences*) to work on in addition to *accuracy* and *fluency* and they planned each of their classes focusing on those aspects. Next, both the mentor and the peer-assessors gave the student-teachers oral and written feedback on their performance regarding the selected assessment criteria and improved performance was documented. After each lesson segment, the student-teachers used the assessment instrument for self-assessment. At the post-observation conferences the mentors encouraged the student-teachers to self-analyze the weaknesses and strengths of their language and teaching competences based on the feedback they had received. Furthermore, the student-teachers were guided to reflect on their problematic areas and suggestions were made on how to improve them in their next teaching session. The same procedure was applied for all the three class segments, and the results were then compared and contrasted.

In the **fourth stage**, two surveys were distributed, one for student-teachers and another one for student-assessors for the purpose of collecting data regarding several research questions and evaluating the project results. The following two research questions will be discussed here:

RQ 1: What are the effects of formative assessment (teacher, peer and self-assessment) on pre-service teachers' language competences and teaching skills?

RQ 2: What are the professional and personal benefits of formative assessment training for pre-service teachers?

Then, the data were analyzed by means of descriptive statistical methods and interpreted. The same assessment checklists were used for self-, peer and teacher assessment.

Data analysis, results and discussion

Analysis of the data and discussion of the findings related to RQ1

The first research question explored the effects of formative assessment (teacher, peer and self-assessment feedback) on pre-service teachers' language competences and teaching skills. Data was collected by observing and assessing three separate class performances to determine whether students' language competences and teaching skills progressed from the first to the last class as a result of formative assessment regarding the five assessment criteria. The students earned the grades B2, C1 or C2 according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018). Supplementary sources of data were two surveys – one for the student-teachers and another one for the student-assessors aimed at evaluating the project results.

Regarding the first criterion, *accuracy*, the analysis showed that almost half of the student-teachers were at C1 level of proficiency and they maintained that level throughout the three classes. This seemed expected, as student-teachers were in year 4 (final year) of their studies and the curriculum had been adapted to that level. In addition, two students accomplished a C2 level and one a B2 level, which they sustained throughout the three classes.

Generally, the level of accuracy was expected to remain stable during the three class performances, especially because the time span between them was relatively short (about two-three weeks). According to Pasternak and Bailey (2004) pronunciation, as a segment of language competence, is stable and cannot change easily, while vocabulary is easier to enrich.

The analysis, however, showed that there are still some factors which may have influenced the performance in terms of accuracy, as two student-teachers progressed from C1 to C2 level and three from B2 to C1 level from the first to the third teaching session[1]. According to the self-reported data, the feedback the trainees received from their mentors and the student-assessors seems to have helped them put under control some of the factors that affected their performance during the first class, such as: the stress and anxiety as a result of the challenge they were facing, the unfamiliarity with the students as well as the fact that they were closely observed and assessed by their colleagues and mentors. It is a well-known fact that language mistakes often result from psychological factors, such as stress and lack of self-confidence.

In regards to the second criterion, *fluency*, the analysis generally confirmed our expectations for 4th year students' level of language competence. One third of the student-teachers (5 out of 15) were at C1 level, while three of them repeatedly

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1. It needs to be pointed out that all assessment of students' competences was based on the descriptors in the instrument designed for this study.

accomplished a C2 level of proficiency. However, the analysis did indicate progress in a few students' performances: from B2 to C1 (4 students) and from C1 to C2 (2 students). Again, as the self-reported survey data revealed, they were influenced by certain inhibiting factors during the first class, which they managed to put under control in the next micro-teaching sessions owing to practice, feedback and possibly to students' perceptions of micro-teaching as an authentic task relevant to their future profession.

Concerning the third criterion, *interaction*, the focus was on how the student-teachers managed to initiate and facilitate student-student and teacher-student interaction. The results showed that two students (out of 5) maintained the same proficiency level throughout the three classes (the first C1 and the other one C2 level). One student demonstrated a C1 level during the first class, then B2 during the second one and then again a C1 level during the third class assessment, while two students managed to improve their level from C1 to C2 from the first to the third class performance. It transpired from the survey results that the feedback students received impacted and improved their performance.

The fourth criterion, *stimulating the development of ideas* emphasizes the memory, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation and creation skills and is based on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives (Bloom, 1956), revised in 2001 (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The student-teachers mainly attempted to develop learners' ideas and critical thinking skills by asking the learners questions which stimulate thinking and reasoning and then giving feedback. Student-teachers' language proficiency regarding this criterion improved the most. Four out of five students raised their level from B2 to C1 or C2, and only one maintained the same level (C1) throughout the three classes. Understandably, the training they received during the Methodology classes as well as their critical self-analysis and the feedback from the assessors and the mentor had a positive effect on their performance.

Finally, the analysis of the student-teachers' performance with respect to the last criterion, *addressing audiences*, revealed that two out of five students kept the same level throughout the three classes (C1 and C2), while three students improved their performance (from B2 to C1 and from C1 to C2 level). The fact that the student-teachers got acquainted with the class they taught (which, as a result, made them more relaxed in consequent classes), as well as the feedback received from the assessors and the mentor, must have had a positive effect on their performance. Their age and high level of language competence should not be ignored as well, as they were an asset in introducing and presenting complex topics, and giving instructions by adapting the metalanguage to students' needs.

On the whole, the overall results obtained by summing up student-teachers' language proficiency grades throughout their three class performances showed

that they generally maintained their level of *fluency* and *accuracy* (at C1 level mostly) during the three classes, but most of them improved their performance with respect to the other three criteria: *interaction* (increased from C1 to C2 level), *stimulating the development of ideas* (increased from B2 to C1 level), and *addressing audiences* (remained C1).

In the next part of this section attention is drawn to the role of formative feedback in developing student-teachers' language competences and teaching skills based on the self-reported data from a survey in which the 15 student-teachers and 19 (of the 25) student-assessors participated. The survey was distributed online and it consisted of open-ended questions. It indicated that most of the student-teachers (13) considered the feedback very helpful as it made them more aware and self-critical concerning the complexity and accuracy of the language they use:

(1) *The feedback had a positive effect on my English proficiency for teaching purposes – it made me more critical of how I phrased my explanations and spurred me to think of exactly how I wanted to set up my questions, which also impacted my overall proficiency.*

Nevertheless, there was a small number of students (2) who considered the feedback comments irrelevant, subjective, and with a negative psychological impact on their self-confidence. In spite of the handful of critical comments on the effects of feedback which was not tactful, it still indicates that students' should systematically be trained on how they should give constructive feedback.

In terms of the influence of peer-feedback on the improvement of their teaching skills, most student-teachers regarded it as very useful (43%) or useful (53%). In addition, they stated that their mentors' feedback gave them better directions in terms of the teaching aspects they needed to improve. Generally, they felt they were becoming better professionals with each class, more aware of the use of various teaching strategies, more focused on giving constructive feedback and on active listening; better at asking questions, introducing discussions and more aware of their body language.

Students' comments were in alignment with what previous research had already confirmed, i.e. that feedback is essential for the learning process as well as for achieving success because it directs and motivates students in their path to self-development (Brinko, 1993; Butler & Winne, 1995).

Furthermore, we asked student-teachers to reflect on the impact of self-assessment on their development as future teachers. They stated that initially they were rather skeptical and afraid to be honest with themselves about their weaknesses and doubted their abilities to assess themselves correctly which resonates with the findings of previous studies (Andrade & Du, 2007):

(2) *At first glance I was overwhelmed by the idea to assess my own teaching. I thought that I will not have the guts to be completely honest with myself on how well or how bad I was during the process, not even to mention how stressful it was for me to note where I could improve my own teaching...*

However, with time their experience with self-assessment improved and they became more objective, their motivation, responsibility and teaching skills developed, which resulted in heightened awareness of their strengths and weaknesses:

(3) *Self-assessment increased our motivation and interest level for better academic performance. It helped us to be more critical and we learnt how to be more responsible for our own learning.*

(4) *Self-assessing requires a fair amount of self-awareness which helps you realize your strengths and weaknesses, and is extremely helpful in every aspect of life, and that translates to teaching as well.*

Judging from their responses, it can be concluded that student-teachers' experience with self-assessment was exceptionally positive, which was expected following previous studies (Andrade & Boulay, 2003; Andrade, Du & Wang, 2008). The benefits they mentioned, such as: identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the learning process, increased metacognitive awareness and motivation for learning, development of critical thinking skills and taking responsibility for their own learning as well as improved learning outcomes and confidence have already been confirmed by other authors (Double, McGrane & Hopfenbeck, 2020; Panadero & Alonso Tapia, 2013) and are key for developing students' autonomy (Skillings & Ferrell, 2000). The results also showed that, in order for students to become more confident in self-assessment, it needs to be embedded in regular classroom activities and students should be trained in how to do it properly (Goodrich, 1996).

One of the most significant parameters which define the success of formative assessment is the clarity of the criteria, i.e. descriptors and students' training, before they use them (Wanner & Palmer, 2018; Weaver, 1995). Studies have also shown that the more experience the students gain with assessment tools, the more positive their disposition is towards them (Wanner & Palmer, 2018).

Analysis of the data and discussion of the findings related to RQ2

The second research question delved into the professional and personal benefits of formative assessment training for pre-service teachers based on classroom observation and on the self-reported data from the surveys. Firstly, the student-teachers listed multiple advantages related to the enhancement of their teaching skills, among which the realization that: assessment is an essential component

of teaching; teaching is a complex process entailing different aspects which need to be considered; there are different ways a class could be organized and planned; teachers should try to use a variety of language expressions in class embodied in the assessed criteria; and, the project experience enabled them to connect theoretical with practical knowledge of ELT Methodology.

Regarding the impact of being trained in how to use the assessment criteria on their assessment skills development, the student-assessors mentioned honing their assessment skills as the chief benefit which encompassed: learning to assess more clearly and objectively and becoming more appreciative of their role as future assessors. Additionally, they highlighted the following benefits from formative assessment training: increasing their understanding of different dimensions of teaching; improving their listening and reflection skills; awareness of positive and negative feedback; developing empathy with students-teachers; refining their perception and use of ETP, as well as developing greater love for their profession by realizing that their opinion is valued.

Being aware of the importance of precise and on-time information regarding the project aims, assessment criteria and tasks, at the beginning of the project we informed all participants about these issues. In response to the question if this influenced their teaching, almost all student-teachers (13 out of 15) answered positively. In general, knowing what the focus of the assessment was, helped them prepare better for the class which resulted in feeling more successful and confident. As previous research has pointed out (McMillan & Hearn, 2008), students' familiarity with the assessment criteria improves their understanding of the specified goals to be reached and the desired outcomes, leading to greater investment in the learning process and better success.

As formative assessment training also implies instructing students how to give constructive feedback, the need to train students in giving constructive feedback is paramount, as asserted by earlier studies (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and by our research.

In the end, the students emphasized the experience they gained, both **professional**, like: development of their language competences necessary for effective teaching as reflected in the assessment criteria; better classroom management and communication skills, improved material design and lesson planning skills and **personal,** such as: self-confidence, persistence, self-awareness, awareness of what the students learnt, tolerance, empathy and creativity.

Through both research questions, our study proved that language teachers need to develop a range of specialist language skills of ETP in addition to their general language proficiency, which aligns with the studies by Elder (2001) and Freeman et al. (2015).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings of the present study corroborate with the findings of related research on the effects of formative assessment on EFL learners' language competences. The analysis of the results revealed that teacher, peer and self-assessment feedback provided students with a valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses regarding their language competences and teaching skills, mapping the pathways of their self-development. Further, the students viewed timely, constructive feedback as indispensable for promoting learning, which mirrors the findings of prior research. Engaging in reflecting on their own performance and acting on teacher and peer feedback fostered future teachers' critical thinking and self-reflection skills, which are vital for their continuing professional development. Students' active involvement in the assessment process as well as in planning the lesson segments and designing the teaching materials increased their ability to take ownership of the learning process which is key to raising motivation and attaining success. Also, apart from the professional gains from participating in the ETP project, a range of personal benefits were identified such as becoming more confident, empathetic, persistent and creative.

Training the student-teachers and student-assessors in applying the assessment criteria heightened their understanding of the intricacies of the assessment process and the complexity of teacher competences and skills. The focus on the domain-specific side of student-teachers' language competences, specifically on their ability to facilitate interaction, address audiences and stimulate critical thinking, as indicated in the relevant assessment criteria, raised students' awareness of their language competences from the perspective of their future profession.

The findings, though not generalizable due to the small number of participants, the short training period and the short time span of the study, may be taken into account in planning the language component of teacher training programs and in designing CEFR-related assessment instruments for monitoring, assessing and developing student-teachers' language competences.

Finally, the potential of formative assessment to promote learning and personal growth can briefly be summed up by the realization that, as a participant in our study put it, the improvement which traces the path to students' overall professional development is of greater importance than the assessment itself.

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Appendix

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING PRE-SERVICE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' LANGUAGE COMPETENCES

CRITERION 1: ACCURACY

C2

Maintains consistent control of complex language (grammatical, lexical and phonological), even while attention is otherwise engaged (e.g. in monitoring others' reactions to the content presented). Intelligibility is not affected in any way by features of accent that may be retained from other language(s).

C1

Consistently maintains a high degree of accuracy (grammatical, lexical and phonological); errors are rare, difficult to spot and generally corrected when they do occur. Some features of accent retained from other language(s) may be noticeable, but they do not affect intelligibility most of the time.

B2

Shows a relatively high degree of language control (grammatical, lexical and phonological). Occasionally makes errors which may cause misunderstanding, and can correct most of their mistakes. Some features of accent retained from other language(s) may be noticeable, which occasionally affect intelligibility.

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CRITERION 2: FLUENCY

C2

Can express themselves spontaneously at length with a natural colloquial flow, avoiding or backtracking around any difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it.

C1

Can express themselves fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Only a conceptually difficult (unfamiliar) subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language.

B2

Can produce stretches of language fairly smoothly; although they can be hesitant as they search for patterns and expressions, there are few noticeably long pauses.

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CRITERION 3: INTERACTION

C2

Can initiate and facilitate interaction with ease and skill, picking up and using non-verbal and intonational cues effortlessly.

Can take on different roles to support student-student and student-teacher interaction (resource person, mediator, supervisor, etc.) and provide appropriate individualized support.

Can recognize undercurrents (digression) in interaction and can intervene diplomatically in order to redirect talk, prevent one person dominating or to confront disruptive behavior.

C1

Can initiate and facilitate interaction almost effortlessly.

Can take on different roles to support student-student and student-teacher interaction (resource person, mediator, supervisor, etc.) most of the time.

Can recognize undercurrents (digression) in interaction and can intervene tactfully most of the time in order to redirect talk if necessary.

B2

Can manage interaction with certain effort.

Can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension, inviting others in etc.

Can intervene with occasional lack of tact in order to focus people's attention on the task.

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CRITERION 4: STIMULATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDEAS

C2

Can effectively stimulate critical and creative thinking by asking targeting questions.

Can stimulate students to ask challenging questions.

Can give appropriate feedback that encourages speakers to expand on their thinking and elaborate on their reasoning (e.g. hypothesizing, inferring, analyzing, justifying, and predicting).

C1

Can stimulate critical and creative thinking by asking targeting questions.

Can give feedback that encourages speakers to expand on their thinking and support their ideas with facts.

B2

Can formulate questions which not always stimulate critical and creative thinking.

Can give feedback that *not* always encourages speakers to expand on their thinking and justify their opinions.

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CRITERION 5: ADDRESSING AUDIENCES

C2

Can present complex topics and concepts confidently and articulately, fully adapting metalanguage to meet learners' needs.

Can introduce lesson topics, task instructions and transitions effortlessly.

C1

Can mainly successfully present complex topics and concepts adapting metalanguage to meet learners' needs.

Can introduce lesson topics, task instructions and transitions almost effortlessly.

B2

Can present complex topics and concepts with relative ease.

Can adapt metalanguage to meet learners' needs most of the time.

Can introduce lesson topics, task instructions and transitions not always clearly.

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