



Teaching Me Softly. A Research Study on Language Educators' Must-Have Skills According to a Group of Prospective Teachers

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Abstract Recent years have seen the propagation of soft skills in education and professional training, including teacher education. However, few studies investigate language educators' beliefs about these skills within the theoretical framework of teacher cognition. This paper contributes to this research field by discussing the results of a study aimed at investigating the beliefs of a group of prospective teachers about the professional skills that language educators should possess. Data were gathered through a scenario-based task and a learning diary, followed by a mixed-method analysis. Results show that, while empathy is by large the most relevant skill for the participants, other people-oriented and task-oriented skills are frequently mentioned. A correlation was also found between skills' frequency and priority in the dataset and the professional background of the participants, some of whom also work as teachers or private tutors.

Keywords Educational linguistics. Soft skills. Language teacher education. Teacher cognition. Case study.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Research Design. – 3 Results and Discussion. – 4 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

This paper will present the results of a study conducted among a group of graduate students enrolled in a Master's Degree at the University of Parma with the purpose of investigating their beliefs about the must-have professional qualities for a language teacher. The study lies at the crossroads of educational and psychological research on soft skills on the one hand, and language teacher cognition on the other. This section provides some theoretical background to the study.

The term 'soft skills' is widely used in the business world, where it defines the characteristics needed to get hired and retain a position. The term was introduced in the early 1970s in the US army training manual which described the skills needed for leadership and stressed the pivotal role of communication and interpersonal skills (Mesler 2019). Recent years have also seen a trend towards giving these skills a more prominent role in education due to their importance in the workplace.

The concept has been developed in opposition to the so-called 'hard skills', i.e., technical skills learned through education or hands-on experience which are specific to a profession. For an English language teacher, being proficient in English and possessing a solid methodological competence are examples of hard skills, while managing stress and relational conflicts are examples of soft skills needed in the teaching profession.

Although this distinction might appear straightforward, some theoretical issues arise when it comes to approaching the topic from a scientific point of view. First and foremost, 'soft skills' is not the only term used in the literature. Another common term is 'social-emotional skills', which is rooted in Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences and Goleman's model of emotional intelligence; these theories formed the scientific background for a popular educational movement which aims to stimulate social-emotional learning at school in the USA (see Corcoran et al. 2018 for a review) for both intrinsic reasons (e.g., promoting learners' wellbeing) and extrinsic causes (e.g., improving academic outcomes). Moreover, in the business world, the concept has been recently rebranded to 'power skills' in order to overcome the rigid soft/hard divide. As the entrepreneur Josh Bersin wrote in 2019 on his online blog,¹ "hard skills are soft (they change all the time, are constantly being obsoleted, and are relatively easy to learn), and soft skills are hard (they are difficult to build, critical, and take extreme effort to obtain)". Consequently, soft skills are being renamed power skills to highlight the idea that

1 See *Let's Stop Talking About Soft Skills: They're PowerSkills*: <https://joshbersin.com/2019/10/lets-stop-talking-about-soft-skills-theyre-power-skills/>.

they empower workers. Alternative labels can also be found in official documents of international organizations, such as life skills (WHO 1993), key-competences for lifelong learning (UE 2006), and the 7 C's (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2002).

Another critical issue is the overriding fuzziness of their meaning. Let us consider the following definitions.

Attributes of emotion, volition, behavior and skills that are considered of high value for both educational careers and later societal functioning. (Scheerens et al. 2020, 21)

Characteristics, attributes, and competences needed to teach children as well as interact with colleagues and parents. The list is limitless and may vary from person to person, or even day to day. (Mesler 2019, 1)

Notably, although the very expression 'soft skills' explicitly refers to abilities, the definitions also include terms such as 'attributes' or 'characteristics', which imply aspects of personality. Moreover, soft skills are often conceptualized as 'dispositions'. However, in the field of psychology, dispositions refer to an action possibility that a system is expected to manifest in specific situations. De Groot and Medendorp also divide dispositions into habits, inclinations, and skills. Habits are simply described as observable behavioral patterns, while inclinations correspond to an individual's personality traits. Skills are defined as follows:

Person P is seen as possessing a set of underlying characteristics Ch, which together make up a potentiality Po, which enables P to manifest reactions R, which are counted as performance at a certain level, in a certain domain D, in a particular period of life Pe, and in situations of a particular type S. (De Groot, Medendorp 1986, 120)

This distinction is relevant because, while personality has been proven to be 50% genetic (Iacono, McGue 2002) and there is hardly any evidence that personality traits can be changed by clinical or educational interventions (see Scheerens et al. 2020 for a review), skills are believed to be more malleable. In fact, some meta-analyses (e.g., Durlak et al. 2011; Korpershoek et al. 2016) showed that educational interventions on social-emotional skills have a significant size-effect (> 0.20) immediately after program completion, although for follow-up measures the result was much lower. For a correct interpretation of these data, it is worth noting that all the reviewed studies used self-reports for data collection and sometimes did not control pretest differences. Also, the follow-up dropping result could

be explained according to De Groot and Medendorp's theory, as individuals' potential is strictly connected to their characteristics, which could be difficult to modify in the long term. In general, these studies support the idea that the notion of soft skills should be restricted to observable performance in specific situations, while aspects of personality should be left out. This casts some theoretical doubts on the OECD trend (2015) to explicitly connect soft skills to the so-called Big Five personality factors (openness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and extraversion).

Another issue is that, while definitions are meant to delimit the scope of a topic, the types and number of soft skills seems to be limitless, and there is not much agreement on a prototypical list of them. For example, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills identifies 7 key-competences (the so-called 7 C's), 6 of which fall into the domain of soft skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information and media literacy, cross-cultural understanding, career and learning self-reliance), while AlmaLaurea elaborated a list of 14 skills which only partially matches to the 7 C's. For the present study, only the categories discussed in the educational literature were considered for data analysis.

As we have seen thus far, most educational research on this topic focuses on programs to develop learners' soft skills. However, recent years have seen a growing interest in the soft skills that teachers should possess to face the educational challenges of the 21st century (see Manchini et al. 2022 for a scoping review). Studies on this topic have been conducted in Italy as well (see Biasi et al. 2019; Altomari et al. 2022), particularly with the purpose of validating research tools to assess these skills. However, despite systematically using self-report cards and questionnaires for this purpose, these studies tend to describe the results in terms of objective presence/absence of teachers' skills instead of informants' *perception* of their own skills. The difference is relevant because these studies could be better framed into the realm of teacher cognition research, whose purpose is:

understanding, with reference to the personal, professional, sociocultural and historical dimensions of the teachers' lives, how becoming, being and developing as a teacher is shaped by (and in turn shapes) what teachers (individually and collectively) think and feel about all aspects of their work. (Borg 2019, 4)

Over the last 30 years there has been prolific research on language teacher cognition, which has changed from a relatively new and undeveloped area into a significant and well-researched field of inquiry. Due to space constraints, it is not possible to provide an overview of the relevant literature in the field, but up-to-date reviews are available (e.g., Li 2025). The following study is rooted in this

research tradition in that it explicitly aims at exploring the beliefs of group of student teachers on the competences that language educators should possess. This perspective is relevant because research supports the idea that previous experiences as learners influence teachers' beliefs on their profession (Borg 2003).

2 Research Design

This section outlines the aims and methods used for this study, while the next section will discuss the outcomes.

2.1 Research Aims

The study investigates the beliefs of a group of prospective teachers on the key competences that language educators should possess to function effectively, in order to verify the extent to which they match with the most mentioned soft skills in the educational literature on the subject matter. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

- a. What kind of skills are regarded as a priority for an ideal professional profile of language teachers?
- b. Does previous experience as language teachers influence the participants' beliefs?
- c. Does a specific educational training on soft skills modify in some way the participants' initial answers?

2.2 Participants

The informants were a group of 100 graduate students enrolled in the first year of a master's degree on Language Sciences and Cultural Studies for Special Needs at the University of Parma in Italy, which has a strong focus on inclusive language education.

At the very beginning of their learning experience within the Degree, a questionnaire was administered to collect data on the participants' personal background (age, gender, nationality, linguistic repertoire, teaching experience). 88% of the participants were female, while the average age was 25.5 years. Most informants were Italian, but 15% of the sample included international students from a variety of countries (Germany, Iran, Morocco, Russia, United Kingdom, Ukraine).

Interestingly, 74% of the participants had some professional experience as teachers or private tutors. All of them declared that they would see themselves as language teachers in the future.

Data were collected at the beginning of three academic years, so the final sample is the sum of three distinct cohorts of students. Data were then aggregated for the analysis because, as Table 1 shows, the composition of the three cohorts was relatively similar (except for the age factor).

Table 1 Composition of the research sample

| A.Y. | Participants | Gender | Age | Nationality | Teaching experience |
|---------|--------------|--------------------|-------|-------------|-----------------------|
| 2021-22 | 25 | F = 92% M = 8% | 26,80 | ITA = 80% | YES = 76% NO = 24% |
| 2022-23 | 26 | F = 92% M = 8% | 26,69 | ITA = 81% | YES = 66% NO = 34% |
| 2023-24 | 49 | F = 78% M = 22% | 24,31 | ITA = 86% | YES = 78% NO = 22% |

2.3 Research Instruments and Procedures

To collect data for research question (A), a scenario-based task was administered during the first lesson of a 15-hour course entitled *Soft Skills for Language Teachers and Learners*, which also corresponded to the first teaching unit of the whole master's degree. The task instructions were the following:

You are a school headmaster, and you are about to interview a group of candidates for a position in foreign language teaching. Identify 6 key-competences that the candidates must possess to be considered excellent teachers. Motivate your answers and put the competences in an order of priority.

Data were analyzed with a mixed method. As a preliminary step, since participants did not receive any ready-made list of competences to choose from, a thematic analysis of the professional skills mentioned by the informants was conducted to group them together according to the categories suggested in the literature, particularly those discussed by Mesler (2019) and Scheerens et al. (2020). Two principles were followed: 1) semantic similarity (e.g., adaptability and flexibility were grouped together as the two concepts overlap semantically); 2) belonging to the same conceptual category (e.g., "relational skills", "being friendly" or "social competence" were labelled as 'interpersonal skills', while "reflect upon yourself" or "self-awareness" were labelled as 'intrapersonal skills').

As regards quantitative analysis, a frequency count was carried out to determine the number of times each professional skill appeared in

the dataset. Moreover, to capture the degree of priority declared by the informants for each skill, a 'priority count' method was introduced, which consisted of a six-point decreasing rating scale applied to the data according to the position that participants assigned to each competence listed. Each skill was assigned 6 points whenever it was ranked at the top of the chart, 5 points whenever it was placed second etc. For instance, if competence X was ranked first, fifth and sixth by three different informants, it would receive 6, 2 and 1 point respectively, which would make up a total score of 9 points. This calculation method made it possible to elaborate two separate lists of competences, one ranked by mere frequency and the other by priority. Finally, the dataset was also analyzed qualitatively by exploring the motivations that informants provided for their choices.

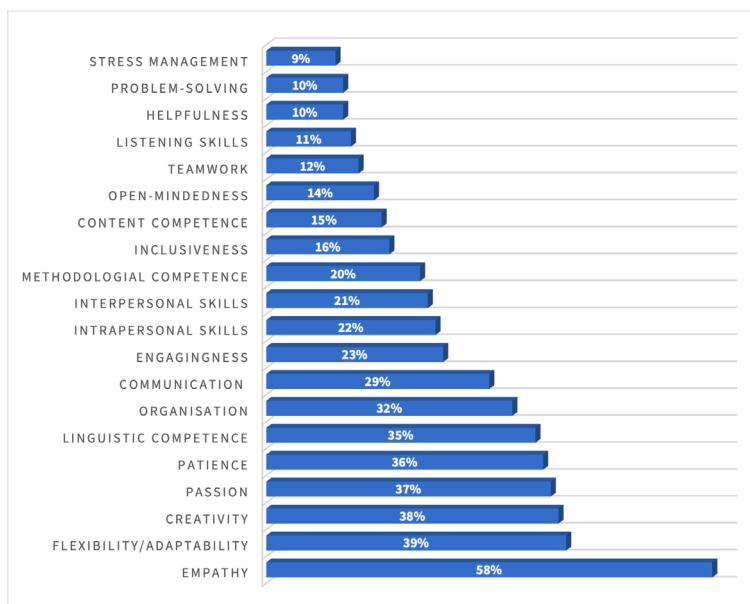
Regarding research question (B), the variable of previous teaching experience was controlled by subdividing the informants into three sub-categories: 25 learners with no previous experience, 27 students with experience as teachers, and 27 participants with experience as private tutors. The rationale behind this choice was that teachers and tutors work in different educational environments (most importantly, tutors build one-to-one relations with their tutees), which might require partially different skills. The answers of each subgroup to the scenario-based task were analyzed separately and then compared to identify trends emerging from frequency and priority counting.

About research question (C), after completing the task, all the participants took the 15-hour course entitled *Soft Skills for Language Teachers and Learners* which aimed at raising their awareness on the importance of these skills in the teaching profession. The lessons were based on case study methodology and critical classroom discourse analysis, so they revolved around written stories which present real teaching dilemmas and problems in real details (Wade 2000), as well as classroom interaction transcripts showing communicative and relational issues (Rex, Schiller 2009). The choice for these methods was meant to stimulate a variety of skills, such as self-reflection, emotional competence, critical thinking, teamwork, and creativity. The participants were encouraged to keep a learning diary to keep track of their thoughts and their progress.

Therefore, data for research question (C) were collected by analyzing the participants' learning diary. The learning diary was completed by 57% of the overall sample. Although this did not allow for a comprehensive view of the impact of the training experience on the overall sample, it does provide reliable data on a portion of the participants who were truly willing to reflect upon their learning experience.

3 Results and Discussion

This section will discuss the key outcomes of the study. Research question (A) investigated the participants' beliefs about the priority professional skills for an ideal language teacher. Graph 1 shows the 20 most frequently mentioned skills.



Graph 1 Professional skills ordered by frequency

Interestingly, only one of the top 10 competences can be ascribed to the realm of hard skills (namely, linguistic competence, which was mentioned by approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the informants); the other hard skills found in the dataset are methodological competence and content competence (an umbrella term used in this study to refer to L2 cultural and literary knowledge mentioned by the participants), which both fall out of the top 10 chart. Extract (1) shows that for some participants linguistic competence entails both the foreign language and their own native language, which reveals that most informants envision themselves as non-native language teachers. Their answers could have been influenced by their learning experience, as in Italian schools language educators are not native speakers and teaching usually include comparisons between the foreign and the native language. Moreover, extract (2) provides an insightful example of a non-native-speakerist perspective on linguistic competence:

1. Good knowledge of both the foreign language to be studied and the students' native language. The teacher should be able to make comparisons between the two languages, in order to explain learners' errors.
2. They should show that they are not perfect, they may be very competent in their language but they don't know for sure every word on the dictionary and they probably had their difficulties in learning a new language too.

Graph 1 also shows that people-oriented skills are a priority for the informants; in fact, empathy is by far the most mentioned, but also patience, communication and engagingness are considered essential for approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the sample. Notably, the list also includes abilities which are somehow connected with empathy, such as listening skills and interpersonal competence. In motivating their answers, most participants highlighted that empathy enables teachers to make learners feel comfortable in class (extract 3) and appreciate students' diversity (extract 4). Also, empathy is seen as an essential skill for building positive relations (extract 5):

3. Because if the teacher is emphatic, as a consequence students feel free to ask questions, to ask for an advice in particular situations.
4. Every student is different: different learning styles, memory types, but also personality, interests, cultural and social background, especially in our contemporary multicultural classes. Teachers need to be receptive to every clue that allows them to understand how to deal with students in the best way possible. For instance, if a student is particularly silent and does not participate, we need to first figure out the reason for this behavior, in order to identify the best solution. Maybe he/she has been having some problems at home and needs to be motivated even more, to feel understood. Sometimes, a word of comfort or a short conversation to check if everything is going well with our students, can go a long way. An in-depth comprehension of how to handle our students will affect the way lessons are managed. Therefore, it is important to be empathic so that we can maximize opportunities for learning.
5. Students are human, try to talk with them and see them as what they are, and help them when they need someone to talk with. Try to create a place where they can feel safe.

Task-oriented skills are equally relevant, given the quite high rates of competences such as flexibility/adaptability, creativity, and organization. Interestingly, the participants tended to view the first two skills as different resources for the same purpose: adjusting one's methodology to the learners' needs and face unexpected events. The following extracts show that the aims of these two skills seem to overlap, as examples (6) and (7) refer to creativity, while examples (8) and (9) refer to flexibility/adaptability.

6. Teachers should be able to quickly and easily adjust their teaching methods to meet the needs of all of their students, rather than just those who learn in a traditional way.
7. It is important to find innovative solutions in order to adjust changing students' needs and to tackle problems.
8. Breakdowns and accidents happen on a daily basis. Teachers need to be creative in coming up with suitable alternatives in order to bring the lesson back on track. Flexibility is also necessary to tailor lessons to the students' needs and interests.
9. Deeply linked to the organizational skills, is flexibility that would prevent the teacher from focusing on the previously prepared lessons too much, thus forgetting about the 'magic' that could spontaneously happen in the classroom.

Overall, for the participants an ideal language teacher is a professional who is able to connect with their students, respect their learning pace and engage them in learning activities, but also to think outside the box with the purpose of adjusting to different situations and solving problems creatively. Interestingly, the teaching profession seems to be perceived as an individualistic activity, as teamwork rarely appears in the dataset. The informant's previous learning experience might have influenced this particular answer; in fact, the idea of teaching as an individualistic profession might be the result of exposure to teaching methods not based on collaboration among students (e.g., cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching) or teachers (e.g., CLIL).

Moreover, according to the informants, language teachers must be passionate about their job and inclusive; however, these aspects cannot be considered proper skills (see section 1), as passion falls within the realm of personal characteristics while inclusiveness is an excessively vague concept which includes a set of skills both hard (e.g., specific methodological competence) and soft (e.g., inclusive communication). About passion, the thematic analysis of

the motivations expressed by the participants confirms that this is viewed more as a prerequisite than a proper skill:

10. Teachers who are in love with their work are more efficient and careful while planning activities and will find different ways to teach the language.
11. Teaching must be one's calling: I think you should be ashamed of choosing this job for any other reason than passion. [...] A teacher who doesn't care about his job and his students, one who is only doing this job to 'make ends meet', only manages to convey some concepts (oftentimes not even that). On the contrary, a passionate teacher succeeds in communicating his love for knowledge and, consequently, inspires students to further investigate some topics at home in their own free time.

The priority count method applied to the dataset provides a slightly different picture. Table 2 reports the most mentioned skills ordered by priority, i.e., considering the position assigned by the informants in their personal top 6 chart. While empathy remains by large the top skill, other competences have gained prominence at the expense of others.

First, linguistic competence achieved one of the highest scores, which means that when mentioned in the dataset it is usually assigned a very high position. Other hard skills, such as content competence and methodological competence gained some positions with respect to Graph 1 because, although mentioned less often, they are usually placed in high positions by the participants.

Second, as a general trend, a comparison between Table 2 and Graph 1 shows that people-oriented skills (particularly empathy, patience, and communication) are usually prioritized to the detriment of task-oriented skills (flexibility/adaptability, creativity, and organization).

Third, one can notice that in Table 2 intrapersonal skills, i.e., competences related to self-reflection, lost some positions, while a new skill, time management, appears at the bottom of the chart. This means that intrapersonal skills, although frequently mentioned, usually obtained a lower ranking in the participants' personal charts, while time management, which rarely appears in the dataset, is generally prioritized by the informants who mentioned it. Interestingly, teamwork is not even included in Table 2, because not only was it rarely mentioned but it was also usually assigned a low position. This confirms the hypothesis that the sample tends to see teaching as an individualistic profession.

Table 2 Professional skills ordered by priority

| Position | Skill | Points | Position in Graph 1 |
|----------|---------------------------|--------|---------------------|
| 1. | Empathy | 259 | 1 |
| 2. | Passion | 161 | 4 |
| 3. | Linguistic competence | 160 | 6 |
| 4. | Patience | 131 | 5 |
| 5. | Communication | 120 | 8 |
| 6. | Flexibility/adaptability | 115 | 2 |
| 7. | Creativity | 107 | 3 |
| 8. | Organization | 105 | 7 |
| 9. | Engagingness | 73 | 9 |
| 10. | Interpersonal skills | 72 | 11 |
| 11. | Methodological competence | 71 | 12 |
| 12. | Content competence | 66 | 14 |
| 13. | Inclusiveness | 64 | 13 |
| 14. | Intrapersonal skills | 61 | 10 |
| 15. | Open-mindedness | 53 | 15 |
| 16. | Listening skills | 41 | 16 |
| 17. | Problem-solving | 39 | 19 |
| 18. | Helpfulness | 31 | 18 |
| 19. | Stress management | 30 | 20 |
| 20. | Time management | 29 | - |

Research question (B) investigated whether previous experience as language educators could influence the participants' beliefs. The results of the frequency count method applied to the answers of the three subgroups are summarized in Table 3. Since the division in subgroups affected the absolute number of answers, only skills that appear at least 5 times in each dataset (corresponding to approximately 20% of subsample) have been considered frequent enough to be included in the table.

Table 3 Professional skills among subgroups ordered by frequency

| Group A (NO EXPERIENCE) | Group B (TEACHERS) | Group C (TUTORS) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Empathy (60%) | Empathy (59%) | Empathy (59%) |
| Patience (44%) | Linguistic competence (48%) | Patience (52%) |
| Passion (40%) | Communication (44%) | Flexibility/adaptability (48%) |
| Creativity (36%) | Organization (37%) | Passion (44%) |
| Flexibility/ adaptability (35%) | Creativity (33%) | Linguistic competence (41%) |
| | Flexibility/adaptability (33%) | |

| | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Intrapersonal skills (33%) | Passion (30%) | Organization (33%) |
| Linguistic competence (32%) | Engagingness (26%) | Engagingness (30%) |
| Organization (32%) | Patience (26%) | |
| Communication (28%) | Methodological competence (22%) | Creativity (26%) |
| Interpersonal skills (28%) | Content competence (22%) | Interpersonal skills (26%) |
| Engagingness (20%) | Stress management (20%) | Communication (20%) |

Table 3 shows that empathy was the most frequently mentioned skill across the datasets. However, a closer look at the three lists reveals some differences among the groups. In fact, although the types of skills mentioned by groups A and C are almost the same, frequency ratings are partially different. More specifically, group C gave more prominence to patience, flexibility/adaptability, and engagingness; these skills seem to be closely connected to the individual work of tutors, who usually operate with struggling learners whose profile is often characterized by learning difficulties or disorders, and negative attitudes towards school. Group B's list is qualitatively different because it includes three hard skills, namely linguistic, methodological, and content competence (the former of which is mentioned by half of the informants), as well as stress management. Interestingly, except for linguistic competence, the other hard skills and stress management did not even appear in the other groups' list. Moreover, quantitative differences are also noticeable, as communication and organization were given more prominence, while relational skills seem to have been given less importance (for example, interpersonal skills are not even present in the list, and patience is less frequently mentioned). Participants with some work experience seem more aware of the different types of skills at play in the teaching profession (particularly, the balance between hard and soft skills), although they underestimate relational skills.

The same datasets analyzed by the priority count method provide a slightly different picture for Groups A and B, since some skills have been prioritized at the expense of others. For example, linguistic competence was assigned a high score because, although it was only mentioned by $\frac{1}{3}$ of the subsample [tab. 3], it was usually placed in first or second position. The same applies to Group C. Another relevant aspect is that Group A's list of must-have skills is the only one which includes intrapersonal skills, while introspection surprisingly does not look like a priority for those informants with on-field experience. Group C's dataset ordered by priority corroborates the idea that relational skills are perceived as the most relevant to function as a tutor. In fact, empathy received the highest score among the

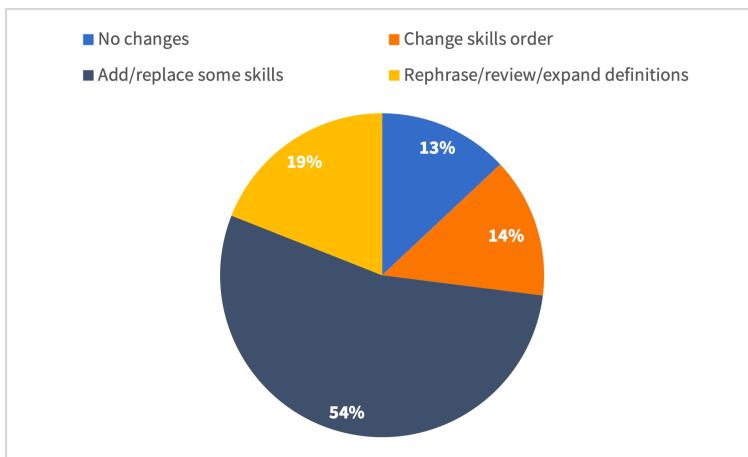
three groups, because not only was it mentioned by almost 60% of the subsample, but it was also usually assigned the first or second position. This group's list also includes other relational skills, such as patience, engagingness and listening skills. Notably, group C is also the one that more frequently mentioned 'inclusiveness' as a soft skill, which can be interpreted as the result of their direct experience with struggling learners.

The data discussed so far can also be interpreted according to De Groot and Medendorp's theory, which views skills as specific performance in a particular period of life, and in particular situations. For example, the prominence assigned to intrapersonal skills by Group A might be due to their period of life, as they had just enrolled in a particular master's degree because they wanted to become teachers, but since they lacked any teaching experience, they were more prone to self-reflecting, introspecting and projecting their ideal professional selves into the scenario-based task assigned.

Table 4 Professional skills among subgroups ordered by priority

| Group A (NO EXPERIENCE) | Group B (TEACHERS) | Group C (TUTORS) |
|--|--|---|
| Empathy (66) | Empathy (63) | Empathy (83) |
| Patience (45) | Linguistic competence (56) | Linguistic competence (49) Patience (49) |
| Linguistic competence (37) | Communication (52) | Passion (43) |
| Passion (36) | Passion (45) | Flexibility/adaptability (38) |
| Creativity (31) | Organization (38) | Engagingness (26) Organization (26) |
| Intrapersonal skills (30) | Content competence (31) | Communication (22) |
| Communication (26) | Engagingness (30) | Listening skills (20) |
| Flexibility/adaptability (24) Organization (24) | Patience (26) | Inclusiveness (18) |
| Interpersonal skills (22) Engagingness (22) | Creativity (24) Flexibility/adaptability (24) | Interpersonal skills (17) |

Research question (C) investigated whether a specific teaching intervention on soft skills could retrospectively modify the participants' initial answers to the scenario-based task. As already mentioned, after submitting the task, all the informants attended a 15-hour hands-on course on soft skills for language teaching and learning. 57% them also kept a learning diary. Useful data to answer this question come from the final section of the diary, which explicitly encouraged learners to reflect upon their answers to the scenario-based task and, if necessary, modify them in light of what they had learnt during the course. Graph 2 shows the results of data analysis.



Graph 2 Retrospective reflections upon the scenario-based task

Only 13% of the participants who kept a diary declared that they would not change their answers. Looking at their task, one can notice that most of them usually mentioned and assigned a very high ranking to passion, which is not a proper skill, and various competences which fall into the realm of hard skills (“good preparation”, “pedagogical competence”, “subject knowledge”, “cultural skills”, “language competence”). Therefore, the course seemingly made little impact on the beliefs of this portion of the sample. Interestingly, 74% of these informants lack any previous teaching experience, so they might not be aware of the practical implications of soft skills in their future professional career yet.

14% of the informants would change the order of the competences they had identified in the scenario-based task. Some of them explained that they would give more importance to soft skills:

12. At the beginning of this module, I believed that a good teacher was only a person, who could effectively convey concepts and topics to his or her students, always trying to be respectful towards them. At the end of this module, I realize that a teacher is much more than that.

13. When I was asked to create a hierarchical sequence of key-competences a teacher should possess, I wrote 6 skills in an order that seemed to attribute more importance to hard skills and content knowledge. These two elements are undoubtedly necessary in order to be a good teacher but I believe that they should not necessarily be considered superior to skills such as

self-reflection, outside-of-the-box thinking, flexibility and time management as well as communicational and (inward/outward) emotional competences. In conclusion, I have understood that there is a whole range of invisible skills that are separate from notions and that are often not perceived by learners but whose absence is felt and has consequences on student acquisition, teacher perception, teacher-learner relationship and the overall classroom environment.

More than half of the informants who kept a diary declared that they would add or replace some skills in their personal chart. This was also by far the most common option for informants without any teaching experience (67%). The most frequently mentioned skills to be added were classroom interactional competence (14 times), flexibility (11), creativity (8), empathy (7) and self-reflection (7). The introduction of classroom interactional competence in the list can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the course content, which explicitly used notions from classroom discourse analysis. The fact that empathy is frequently referred to is also noteworthy, considering that it already resulted as the top skill for most participants (see Fig. 1 and Tables 1-4). Interestingly, some informants also reflected upon the fact that empathy is just one side of a multifaceted emotional competence:

14. When I wrote the composition task, I mostly concentrated on how the teacher should understand the students' emotions and needs but I didn't take into consideration that also teachers have emotions that could interfere with the teaching and learning process. For this reason, I now consider fundamental for a teacher the ability to reflect on one's own feelings and actions in order to learn how to control them.

Finally, 19% of the informants declared that they would not change the skills they had identified, but rather refine their own definitions. Notably, this is the most common option for informants with some teaching experience (33%). A possible interpretation is that, thanks to their on-field professional experience, they were already aware of the importance of soft skills, but the course gave them the conceptual tools to refine their ideas through a more scientific approach to the topic. Evidence of this interpretation comes from the following diary extracts:

15. I think my initial idea of a good teacher was a more generic view of a someone who teaches creatively, can empathize with students and problem solve if needed. Therefore, I think I was aware of some soft skills needed for a successful teacher but had no idea about different categories of soft skills and hadn't

read so many different cases of different teachers and analyzing their conduct in the classroom.

16. At the end of the course, I discovered that I was aware of the essential features a teacher should have, but I didn't know how to express them correctly. Moreover, the words I used in the composition task are experience-based and vague - I couldn't generalize. So, one thing I would substitute is the terms I used to convey my message. For example, in the composition task,² I wrote that my Spanish professor "[...] was not tolerant about classes matters - not bringing homework, skipping oral or written texts with silly excuses, etc. - but he was always ready to help his students whenever they needed a hand, for both personal and classes matters." Today I would say he had strong people-oriented and task-oriented skills because he knew how to establish a communicative bond with us and be flexible.

4 Conclusions

This paper presented the results of a study on the beliefs of a group of prospective teachers about the key competences for language educators. From the point of view of teacher cognition research, data revealed that the ideal language teacher is a professional with strong people-oriented skills (particularly empathy) and task-oriented skills (e.g., flexibility/adaptability and creativity), which are by far the most frequently mentioned in the dataset. However, considering the position assigned by the participants to each skill in their own personal chart, linguistic competence (which is a hard skill) and passion (which is not a proper skill) resulted as the most relevant abilities after empathy.

Data also suggest that previous or current teaching experience partially influenced the informants' answers. For instance, those participants who worked as private tutors prioritized relational skills (empathy, patience, engagingness, listening skills), while those with some experience as teachers included more hard skills, as well as stress management, in their own personal chart. These findings seem consistent with previous studies in the field of teacher cognition.

Finally, the data also support the idea that the follow-up training on soft skills has made some impact on the informants' beliefs, as it

2 The informant is now referring to a writing composition task assigned at the beginning of the course, which encouraged learners to think about a teacher that they liked and another that they did not like, thus reflecting upon their different competences.

enabled them to renegotiate their list of skills in terms of priority, meaning and definition.

These outcomes cannot be generalized due to some intrinsic methodological limitations, such as the lack of a control group or a more defined pre-test/post-test design, which could not be implemented in the educational context where data were collected. However, the study could be the starting point for future research; one direction could be collecting more data on larger samples of language educators at different points of their career, to set up a cross-sectional or longitudinal study which explores the extent to which their system of beliefs changes in different periods of their professional life. This kind of research has important implications for the field of teacher education, as professional development programs can be truly transformative only if they do not ignore their students' ideas about the kind of teachers they wish to become.

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