

The distinctive characteristics of foreign language teachers

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This paper aims to extend our understanding of what it means to be a language teacher by examining ways in which language teachers are seen to be different to teachers of other subjects. Language teachers' distinctiveness was defined by over 200 practising and prospective language teachers from a range of contexts, and the analysis also included the opinions of specialists in mathematics, history, science and chemistry on the extent to which characteristics claimed to be distinctive of language teachers applied to these other subjects. The findings of the study suggest that language teachers are seen to be distinctive in terms of the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher–learner relationships, and contrasts between native and non-native speakers. The study also raises methodological and conceptual issues of relevance to further research into this area. Key amongst these are the need to define language teachers' distinctive characteristics with reference to specific contexts rather than globally, the importance of comparisons between insider views on such distinctiveness and those from outside language teaching, and the value of comparative studies of actual classroom practices of language teaching and other subjects.

I Introduction

This paper reports an exploratory study into the distinctive characteristics of language teachers, specifically of teachers of English as a foreign language. A basic assumption here is that it should be possible to distinguish teachers of different subjects from each other in ways which go beyond simple references to their diverse subject matters. A second assumption is that this is a key issue for teacher educators; language teacher education presupposes an understanding of what specifically it

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means to be a language teacher, and therefore insight into the distinctive characteristics of language teachers is central to the work of language teacher educators. I will start by discussing the literature that informed the research I present here. A description of the principles and procedures involved in the conduct of the research follows, and the findings are then presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of key issues to emerge from this work and suggestions for continuing research into this topic.

Two framing comments are necessary before proceeding. First, teachers of English as a foreign language are taken here to be individuals involved in supporting the learning of the English language by learners whose contact with this language in their own countries is limited largely to the classroom. Second, it may be helpful to point out from the outset that although the focus of this study is on the characteristics of language *teachers*, the findings suggest that these cannot be considered in isolation of the characteristics of language *teaching*. The paper, therefore, does ultimately explore both teachers and teaching.

1 Language teachers' characteristics

Two areas of literature informed the research I present here: (a) work on disciplinary characteristics and (b) studies of the good language teacher. I discuss each of these in turn below.

a Disciplinary characteristics: The study of the characteristics of academic disciplines is an established field of enquiry in psychology and education (e.g. Becher and Trowler, 2001; Biglan, 1973; Hativa and Marincovich, 1995). Most of this work has been conducted in university settings, and, as Neumann (2001) highlights in her review, there is evidence of a range of ways in which teaching practices at university level may vary across disciplines (e.g. 'hard' disciplines, such as physics and engineering, emphasize cognitive goals such as learning facts, while 'soft areas', such as humanities and education, focus more on general knowledge, character development and effective thinking skills).

Work on disciplinary characteristics outside university settings has focused largely on learners rather than teachers (but see Langer, 1994). The same is true in the field of language teaching (e.g. Mori, 1999), though one exception here is Hammadou and Bernhardt (1987: 305),

who discuss what they call ‘the unique art of being a foreign language teacher’. Within a North American context, they argue that

Being a foreign language teacher is in many ways unique within the profession of teaching. Becoming a foreign language teacher, too, is a different process from that which other future teachers experience. This reality is rooted in the subject matter of foreign language itself. In foreign language teaching, the content and the process for learning the content are the same. In other words, in foreign language teaching the medium is the message.

(1987: 302)

Five factors that distinguish the experience of foreign language (FL) teachers from that of teachers of other subjects are proposed by these authors. These factors are as follows:

- 1) *The nature of the subject matter itself.* FL teaching is the only subject where effective instruction requires the teacher to use a medium the students do not yet understand.
- 2) *The interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction.* Effective FL instruction requires interaction patterns such as group work which are desirable, but not necessary for effective instruction in other subjects.
- 3) *The challenge for teachers of increasing their knowledge of the subject.* Language teachers teach communication, not facts. In other subjects, teachers can increase their subject matter knowledge through books, but it is harder for FL teachers to maintain and increase their knowledge of the FL because doing so requires regular opportunities for them to engage in FL communication.
- 4) *Isolation.* FL teachers experience more than teachers of other subjects feelings of isolation resulting from the absence of colleagues teaching the same subject.
- 5) *The need for outside support for learning the subject.* For effective instruction, FL teachers must seek ways of providing extracurricular activities through which naturalistic learning environments can be created. Such activities are less of a necessity in other subjects.

No empirical support is provided for the above claims, and I highlight them here not to argue for their validity but as an example (and a rare one it would seem) of the manner in which language teachers’ distinctive characteristics have been conceptualized.

For the same reason, the work of Grossman and Shulman (1994: 4), who comment specifically on the special nature of the subject matter

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of English, is also relevant here. They say it is less amenable to definition than others, quoting an earlier paper by Grossman (1993) to argue that

As an inherently ambiguous subject, which is less hierarchically organized than is math and encompasses a variety of subdomains, English may offer teachers greater freedom within the confines of the classroom. As it would be difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to cover all of the territory encompassed by the subject of English, teachers may necessarily select the purposes and areas they plan to emphasize in their classrooms. The inherent complexity of the subject, with its separate domains and subcomponents, may also offer teachers greater autonomy in developing curriculum.

(1994: 4)

The two studies discussed above highlight a range of issues which may be relevant to understanding language teachers' distinctiveness. Both suggest that the nature of the subject matter is a significant dimension to consider, while Hammadou and Bernhardt's work indicates that language teachers' may also be characterized by a distinctive pedagogy as well as by particular emotional or social concerns (i.e. isolation).

b The good language teacher: While the work on disciplinary characteristics discussed above provides the main theoretical motivation for this study, research on the good language teacher is also relevant here in highlighting ways in which language teachers' characteristics have been conceptualized. I will therefore comment briefly on this work. Girard (1977), for example, presented a list based on the views of language learners and which included items such as: makes his course interesting, teaches good pronunciation, explains clearly, speaks good English, shows the same interest in all the pupils, makes the pupils participate and shows great patience. Prodromou (1991) presented a much longer list of characteristics valued by learners; examples cited were friendly, gave good notes, played games, told jokes, did not push weak learners and was more like a comedian. Brosh (1996) identified the desirable characteristics of the effective language teacher as perceived by foreign language teachers and students in Israel. The following five characteristics emerged overall as those felt to be most desirable by the participants in this study:

- knowledge and command of the target language;
- ability to organize, explain and clarify, as well as to arouse and sustain interest and motivation among students;

- fairness to students by showing neither favouritism nor prejudice;
- availability to students.

It should be noted that the majority of items appearing here reflect the results of research into the characteristics of good teachers more generally (see, for example, studies by Hay McBer, 2000; Walls *et al.*, 2002). This is not particularly surprising as language teachers are after all teachers and will therefore embody characteristics of the teaching profession more generally. Also, the purpose of these studies was not so much to define what was *distinctive* about language teachers but to identify what learners and teachers felt were *effective* or *desirable* characteristics. None the less, this research does highlight a range of issues which may be relevant to the study of language teachers' distinctive characteristics. Particularly salient here are references to teachers' personal characteristics; additionally, there are many references to characteristics related to teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the learners.

This introduction, then, has located the present study within an existing broader area of inquiry into disciplinary characteristics. It has also indicated that little work of this kind, focusing specifically on language teachers, has been conducted. The work that has been done in this respect, together with that into the good language teacher, does, however, demonstrate that the notion of language teachers' characteristics is complex and multi-dimensional, and a range of different perspectives from which language teachers' distinctiveness might be defined was identified. The research described in this paper aimed to uncover which particular dimensions would be salient when practising and prospective language teachers themselves were asked to describe the ways in which they believed language teachers to be distinctive and when the perspectives of specialists in other subjects were also considered. *Language teachers* is used throughout this paper to refer to teachers of English as a foreign language, as defined earlier.

II Method

In terms of underlying methodological principles, the research presented here reflects a preference for interpretive modes of inquiry (see, for example, Ernest, 1994 for a discussion) and a belief in the value of

individuals' perspectives on the phenomenon under study (examining what teachers think and believe has in recent years furthered our understanding of language teaching – see, for example, Borg, 2003). The research design adopted was *flexible*, as opposed to *fixed* (Robson, 2002). A fundamental difference between these two approaches lies in the extent to which design decisions can evolve as the study proceeds, with the flexible option of 'allowing for and anticipating changes in strategies, procedures, ways of generating data [which are] responsive to the circumstances of the particular study' (Schwandt, 1997: 34). Given the exploratory nature of this study and the lack of established empirical and methodological frameworks for work of this kind, this design was appropriate here, allowing decisions about data collection at each stage of the study to be informed by and responsive to the findings emerging from preceding phases. A flexible design does, of course, still need to be implemented in a principled manner and, as intended in the account that follows, reported in such a way that the reasoning behind the decisions at each stage of the process is made explicit.

1 Key concepts

The key concept in this study was the notion of language teachers' characteristics. As illustrated earlier, this is a broad concept which can be defined from a number of perspectives highlighted in existing research on language teaching. Teachers' characteristics can thus, for example, be defined in terms of personal qualities, pedagogical skills, classroom practices, subject matter and psychological constructs such as knowledge and attitudes. No *a priori* decisions were made here about which of these particular perspectives to focus on. The concept of teachers' characteristics was thus operationalized broadly as respondents' reported perceptions of the ways in which language teachers were different to teachers of other subjects. Such an inclusive notion of this key concept is justified given that one central goal of the study was to obtain insight into respondents' perspectives on the distinctive characteristics of language teachers.

2 Research questions

The work on disciplinary characteristics, which was discussed earlier, suggested one overall research question for this study: in what ways are

language teachers perceived to be distinctive – i.e. different to teachers of other subjects? In this exploratory study, then, my goal was to examine this research question, to deepen my understanding of concepts and issues relevant to it, and to develop insights for subsequent research on it. Furthermore, as Maxwell (1996: 49) argues, in interpretive work, ‘specific questions are generally the *result* of an interactive design process, rather than being the starting point for that process’. Thus the overall question was broken down into the following more specific ones as the work proceeded and each set of data was analysed:

- Which particular dimensions of teachers’ characteristics are salient in the distinctiveness of language teachers as reported by the respondents?
- Do perceptions of distinctiveness seem related in any way to respondents’ backgrounds, such as amount of teaching experience or educational context?
- To what extent do specialists outside language teaching feel that the distinctive characteristics of language teachers perceived by language teachers also apply to teachers in the specialist areas?

3 *Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected in a range of contexts, with a variety of individuals and using different procedures. Such variety is acknowledged as a factor contributing to the validity of research having a qualitative orientation (see, for example, the discussion of triangulation in Maxwell, 1996).

Five different groups of participants, described below, contributed to this study. The selection of groups was purposive (Patton, 1990: 169–86), defined as a strategy in which participants are included in a study on the basis of their ability, as judged by the researcher, to provide information relevant to the central purposes of the research. Thus four of the five groups were chosen on the basis that they had experience of the phenomenon under study here, i.e. experience of teaching and/or learning English as a foreign language. To obtain a range of perspectives, two groups were experienced teachers while two were in training. Additionally, a fifth group of subject specialists from outside language teaching was included to provide an interdisciplinary perspective on the topic being examined.

What follows is a description of the five groups of participants in turn together with the data collection and analysis procedures used with each.

a Teachers on a postgraduate course in TESOL: The first group of respondents functioned as pilot group which enabled me to assess whether the topic was one worth pursuing and, assuming it was, to generate some initial ideas to build on in subsequent phases of data collection. This group consisted of 20 teachers on a postgraduate course in TESOL studying at the author's university. These were all practising teachers of English as a foreign language from a range of contexts around the world. They had 3–14 years of experience, were predominantly non-native speakers of English, and were registered on an MA course in TESOL. These teachers attended periodic seminars on issues of relevance to language teaching, and one of these seminars was run by myself on the theme of 'What makes language teachers different?' During the seminar, the participants discussed this question, first in groups then in plenary. My role in the discussion was to provide the background to the topic, to set up and facilitate the small-group and plenary discussions, and to make written notes of the points emerging during the latter. Following the session, I used these notes to produce a list of eight distinctive characteristics of language teachers. This initial analysis suggested that the topic was one worth exploring further.

b Language teacher conference delegates: The second group of participants consisted of 29 delegates at a workshop entitled 'What makes language teachers different?', which I ran at an international language teachers' conference in the UK. This group consisted mainly of experienced teachers of English as a foreign language, working in a variety of settings in the UK and Europe. During the workshop, I presented to the participants the list of characteristics emerging from my work with the postgraduate teachers and asked them to critique and to add to this list. Participants engaged in oral discussion, recorded their observations in writing and handed their written comments in at the end of the session. Each set of written comments was transferred verbatim to two grids. The first contained respondents' comments on the original list and was divided into eight sections, one for each of the eight original items. This grid provided information about the volume of comments on

each original item as well as about the opinions given by respondents on these items. The second grid contained a list of 25 additional distinctive characteristics of language teachers suggested by the respondents. A thematic analysis of this diverse list suggested broad categories, such as 'subject matter' and 'methodology', into which the characteristics could be organized. As a result of the analysis of the data from these respondents, I drew up a revised, extended list of 18 distinctive characteristics of language teachers.

c Subject specialists: The inclusion of the subject specialists in the study was prompted by the analysis of the first two sets of data, which, as illustrated below, contained a number of characteristics which *prima facie* could not be justifiably claimed to be unique to language teachers. To consider the value of an interdisciplinary perspective here, then, four subject specialist teacher educators at the author's university, one each in science, chemistry, mathematics and history, were asked to comment on the extent to which they felt each of the items in the extended list of characteristics might also apply to their own fields. Each specialist was sent the list of characteristics by e-mail, with instructions, and their responses were e-mailed back. The data generated by this group did suggest that an interdisciplinary perspective can be a useful element in continuing studies of language teachers' distinctiveness. The analysis of the data from this group is explained with the findings below.

d Hungarian pre-service teachers of English: The first two groups of language teachers in the study were practising teachers from a range of different language teaching contexts. In addition, the perceptions of language teachers' distinctiveness held by two, more homogenous, groups of prospective teachers were also elicited. The first group consisted of 151 Hungarian pre-service teachers of English. They responded in writing to the question 'Do you think there are any differences between a language teacher and a teacher of any other subject? If YES, what differences are there?'

The responses to the second part of this question were analysed qualitatively. This involved a process of tabulating, free coding and categorizing the written responses (for discussions of some principles of qualitative data analysis, see Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Tesch, 1990). All written responses were first transferred in full and

sequentially into a grid, and content analysis was then applied to this grid to code the responses according to the specific distinctive characteristics they referred to. The coded responses were subsequently sorted into broader categories.

e Slovene undergraduates in English: The final group of participants in this study consisted of 24 Slovene undergraduate students studying English, who would all have the option, later in their programme, of qualifying as teachers of English. At the time of the study, these students were studying English content (language and literature) and had no experience of teaching themselves. The data collected from these participants consisted of essays of 150–300 words on the topic ‘What makes language teachers different?’ Students were regularly asked to complete writing assignments on their course and this data collection technique was thus felt to be one they would be familiar with. Data were analysed qualitatively, using a similar procedure to that adopted with the Hungarian responses. The main difference here was that each respondent wrote extensively on the topic and thus larger chunks of text needed to be extracted, tabulated, coded and categorized.

III Findings

I will now present the findings that emerged from the analysis of the data collected at each stage outlined above. The generalization of these findings beyond the groups studied is not a concern here; what is more important, both in this section and in the subsequent discussion, is understanding how language teachers’ distinctiveness is perceived by the respondents in this study and what these findings suggest – substantively, conceptually and methodologically – for continuing research into this topic.

1 Teachers on a postgraduate course in TESOL

The discussion with postgraduate teachers yielded the following list of distinctive characteristics of language teachers and of their work:

- 1) *Cognitively mature learners engage in conceptually undemanding activities.* In language learning there is often a gap between the level of knowledge or skill the learner is being asked to demonstrate, and the more general cognitive ability of the learner.

- 2) *English language teaching methodology is more progressive than other subjects.* The field of English language teaching is more advanced and innovative in its approach to teaching and learning.
- 3) *Incorrect learner output in language teaching is more acceptable.* Language teachers accept learners' errors more than teachers of other subjects.
- 4) *Language teachers are compared to native speakers.* The ability of non-native language teachers is often equated with their proficiency in the language relative to native speakers.
- 5) *Language teaching is a political activity.* Language teaching has a dimension of power, and control, inducting learners into ways of thinking and being which reflect those of the target culture.
- 6) *Oral production plays a central role.* More than in any other subject, speaking is fundamental to language teaching.
- 7) *The subject and the medium for teaching it are one and the same.* Unlike other subjects where there is a clear distinction between what is being learnt and how it is being learned, in language teaching content and process are one.
- 8) *The subject matter of language teaching is harder to define.* The content of language teaching is more complex and varied than that of other subjects.

Several themes that recur throughout this study were introduced here. In particular, point 4 introduced the distinction between native and non-native teachers of English, while points 7 and 8 related to the nature of the subject matter in language teaching. As this paper shows, one of the most commonly cited reasons for the uniqueness of language teachers is the subject matter: two aspects of this were highlighted here – the unity of content and medium, and the complexity and variety of the content – but others emerged from subsequent data sets.

This first data set also highlighted the fact that in order to identify what was unique about language teachers, the postgraduate teachers also described what was distinctive about language teaching. This suggests that teachers are defined by the nature of their work and that articulating the distinctive features of the language teacher must also include reference to aspects of their work, such as methods, learners and learning processes, which may contribute to this distinctiveness. The blurring of the distinction between teachers and teaching is one which recurs

throughout the data, and reflects points made earlier about the many interrelated perspectives from which language teachers' distinctiveness can be defined.

2 Conference delegates

The conference delegates were presented with the list of eight statements above and asked both to critique it and to suggest additional distinctive characteristics of language teachers.

a Critique of original list: The delegates were asked to comment only on those items they did not feel were distinctive characteristics of language teachers, and to explain their views. Of the eight statements, three in particular (1, 2 and 6) generated many responses. Brief comments on these follow.

- *Cognitively mature learners engage in conceptually undemanding activities.* Several delegates suggested other subjects, such as crafts, technology and adult numeracy, where there might be a gap between the level of knowledge or skill the learner was being asked to demonstrate, and their more general cognitive ability. Others disagreed altogether with the assumption behind this statement, arguing that 'language learning is never undemanding – it always involves conceptual demands'.
- *ELT methodology is more progressive than other subjects.* This statement generated numerous responses from the delegates, many of which disputed the methodological distinctiveness of language teaching. 'Why is language teaching more progressive than, for example, history teaching? I really think this is not true', one delegate commented. Another wrote that 'in Germany, religious studies in secondary school is more innovative than language teaching. I would borrow ideas from this subject for my language classes'. Another dismissed the claim to progressiveness altogether: 'ELT is not progressive – a lot of half-baked ideas get put out into the profession and this may actually stultify progress'. None the less, there were also several comments supporting the view that there was something unique about language teaching methodology, though 'progressive' was not always seen as the ideal term to capture this uniqueness.

- *Oral production plays a central role.* A number of problems were pointed out with this statement as a distinctive characteristic of language teachers' work. For instance, it was pointed out that 'in many ELT contexts oral production is not essential. For example, in Brazil, reading in English is what matters'. This comment points to the role that context may play in the way teachers' distinctiveness is viewed, an issue that will be returned to later.

For the remaining items in the original list of eight, few or no disagreements were voiced.

b Further characteristics: Conference delegates were also asked to suggest additional distinctive characteristics of language teachers, resulting in a list of 25 items. Some reflect those identified by the post-graduate teachers, such as the comparisons, often unfavourable, that non-native teachers endure in respect of native speakers. There were also in this list items that once again refer to the uniqueness of the subject matter of language teaching; it includes 'holistic growth', 'skills development', 'inter-cultural skills, social skills, and autonomy', and thus is seen to be broader than other subjects where the focus is limited to specific content. Beliefs about the special methodological diversity of language teaching reappeared here too. Additionally, distinctive characteristics of language teachers were suggested in relation to the especially practical outcomes of their work, the low status of the subject, the wider range of knowledge required by teachers, and the fact that foreign language learners already know their mother tongue. The wide range of qualifications for and routes into English language teaching were also mentioned here as a distinctive characteristic of this field. One final point to make about this list relates to the sheer range of issues it covered. This was perhaps a reflection of the heterogeneity of this group, in particular diverse the range of contexts in which the respondents worked as language teachers.

3 *Subject specialists*

On the basis of the analysis of data from the two groups of participants reported on above, I drew up an extended list of 18 statements about the distinctive characteristics of language teachers. Included in this list were

items generally accepted by the two previous groups as distinctive of language teachers (e.g. the unity of content and medium) and items that, despite some disagreement, reflected commonly held views about language teaching (e.g. regarding the acceptability of errors). To provide an interdisciplinary perspective on the phenomenon under study, these statements were submitted to four specialists in science, chemistry, mathematics and history. The specialists were asked to comment on the extent to which they felt each of these characteristics applied to teachers of their respective subjects.

Responses to each item provided by the subject specialists were coded according to whether they indicated that the phenomenon described existed in their subject (Yes), had some parallels (Partly), or did not exist (No). These responses are presented in Table 1. According to the notation used here, 'No' answers indicate that a statement was felt by the specialists not to characterize the work of teachers in their subjects. The distinctiveness to language teachers of a characteristic, then, can be discerned according to the overall number of 'No' answers it received out of a maximum of four. Statements 5, 10 and 12 stand out here as in each case all four specialists felt there that similar phenomena did not exist in their subjects. The first of these relates to the distinction between non-native teachers and native speakers referred to earlier. The second refers to the fact the foreign language learners already know their first language; they will have prior experience of developing mother tongue linguistic proficiency, which may provide points of reference for the process of foreign language learning. The specialists could not see parallels in their own areas. The third statement all specialists felt did not apply to their subjects related to the expeditious routes through which a language teaching qualification could be obtained.

A second group of items emerge here as being characteristics largely distinct to language teachers. These were items where three out of four specialists felt the phenomena described in the statements did not apply to their subjects. Statements 1, 6, 11, 14, 15, 16 and 17 constitute this group. In five of these it was the mathematics specialist who felt a characteristic did or might apply to his field; for the other two it was the history specialist who felt the characteristics applied to teachers in his subject. For example, for Statement 1, regarding the acceptability of errors, the mathematics specialist felt that incorrect output was acceptable in his subject. He explained his responses as follows: 'Even though

Table 1 Subject specialists' views on the relevance to their own subjects of statements about the distinctive characteristics of language teachers

Language teachers	Science	History	Chemistry	Maths
1. Whereas in most other subjects incorrect 'output' or 'products' by the learner are not acceptable, in language teaching 'errors' are seen as a natural and even desirable part of the learning process.	No	No	No	Yes
2. Language teaching is the only field where teachers may be teaching a subject they never formally learned at school.	Yes	No	Yes	No
3. Language teaching is the only field where a distinction between native and non-native teachers exists.	No	No	Partly	Partly
4. The range of competing methodologies and methodological shifts in language teaching over the years outweighs similar phenomena in other subject areas.	Partly	Partly	Partly	Yes
5. Professionally trained non-native language teachers are often compared unfavourably to native speakers, even when the latter are not professionally trained.	No	No	No	No
6. In language teaching, the subject and the medium for teaching it are one and the same, especially in multilingual groups where English is the only common language	No	No	No	Undecided
7. Driven by powerful commercial forces, language teaching is characterized by a proliferation of teaching and learning resources unparalleled in other subjects.	Partly	No	Yes	Undecided
8. Language teaching is the only subject where learners want to get internationally recognized qualifications, especially those which will enable them to study at universities in the UK and the USA.	Undecided	No	No	Yes

(continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Language teachers	Science	History	Chemistry	Maths
9. In other subjects, declarative knowledge about the subject is fundamental to effective teaching; in language teaching, knowing how to speak the language (procedural knowledge) is as important for teachers as knowing about the language.	Partly	Yes	No	Yes
10. All language learners have already learned their first language.	No	No	No	No
11. Language teaching is characterized by the existence of a huge private sector.	No	No	No	Partly
12. In many places in the world, the basic professional qualification for working in language teaching is a 4-week certificate course.	No	No	No	No
13. In subjects such as mathematics and science, learners are happy to learn and apply formulae without worrying about their underlying rationale; in language teaching, in contrast, teachers are under pressure from learners to explain the rationale for grammatical rules.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Undecided
14. Especially in the state sector, language teachers are seen as low-status, by learners and colleagues, compared with subjects such as science and mathematics.	No	Yes	No	No
15. The student body in language teaching consists of a much larger proportion of adults than other subjects.	No	Partly	No	No
16. Language teaching is characterized by a wide variety of specialized areas relating to the learners' goals – e.g. English for Specific Purposes, English for Science and Technology, English for Academic Purposes.	No	No	No	Partly

(continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Language teachers	Science	History	Chemistry	Maths
17. Language teaching is a subject with practical outcomes not characteristic of other subjects. As one teacher said, maths graduates will not apply Pythagoras when they go shopping.	No	No	No	Undecided
18. Language teachers must teach the target culture – i.e. British or American culture. This notion of a ‘target culture’ does not have parallels in other subjects.	Partly	Partly	Partly	Undecided

Note: No = similar phenomenon does not exist in specialist’s area; Yes = similar phenomenon exists in specialist’s area; Partly = phenomenon may have some parallels in specialist’s area; Undecided = respondent did not or felt unable to provide an answer

it may be seen as an absolute (right or wrong) subject, maths in school ... is learnt through errors. From a constructivist point of view (but I’m not a constructivist) pupils *ONLY* learn when they make mistakes.’ And for Statement 14, about the low status of language teachers, the history teacher wrote: ‘Unfortunately this would be true of History too. However I think that it is more the subject (rather than the teachers) which is seen as low-status. Not relevant to the contemporary world of technology, computers, employment.’ Of the eight statements not mentioned here so far, three (2, 3 and 8) received ‘No’ answers by two specialists, two statements (7 and 9) received only one ‘No’, while the remaining statements (4, 13 and 18) did not receive any ‘No’ answers. Interestingly, given language teachers’ comments about the fact that teaching culture distinguishes them from others subjects, three of the specialists suggested parallels in their own subjects. Both the science and chemistry specialists, for example, wrote about science education as induction into a culture and science as a culture.

4 Hungarian and Slovene undergraduates

In the Hungarian group, over 82% of the 151 respondents answered ‘yes’ to the question ‘Do you think there are any differences between being a language teacher and a teacher of any other subject?’

Respondents were also asked to explain their answer. These written accounts were examined individually for extracts in which the distinctiveness of language teachers and their work was described and/or contrasted to teaching in other subjects. A qualitative content analysis of these extracts suggested six major areas in which language teachers were seen to be distinct. These areas were as follows:

- methods, activities and materials
- the content of teaching
- the nature of language
- relationships with learners
- non-native issues
- language teachers' traits.

A qualitative analysis of the essays written by the Slovene group about the distinctive characteristics of language teachers generated a similar list of categories; language teachers' traits was the only one of the six above which was not present in these data. Given these similarities, I will discuss the findings for the Hungarian and Slovene groups together, commenting on the six categories above in turn and citing data from both groups of respondents in the process.

a Methods, activities and materials: Numerous comments made by these respondents reflected the belief that the methods, activities and materials used by or available to language teachers were different to those in other subjects. Typical comments from the Hungarian data were as follows:

- In language teaching, 'you should be able to use a variety of exercises such as spoken ones, games, songs, whereas if you are a literature teacher or history teacher you just tell the facts and that's all'.
- 'An English teacher has different exercises than that of a maths teacher. These can be more enjoyable, funny and lifelike (it is good).'

Similar beliefs recurred in the Slovene data. The perceived limitations of other curricular areas in relation to methods and materials were explained by one Slovene respondent in terms of a fundamental lack of flexibility in the subject matter of these areas: 'Teachers of subjects such as Maths, Chemistry or Geography have a rather limited choice of materials, methods and techniques to be used in the classroom, which is

probably due to the rigidity and the static nature of these subjects.’ A number of the comments made by the prospective teachers about the distinctiveness of the methods, activities and materials language teachers use appear to be naïve and I will comment on this issue in the discussion section below.

b The content of teaching: The special nature of the content of language teaching was the second key area of language teachers’ distinctiveness to emerge here. Comments repeatedly stated that language teaching means much more than teaching the language; it involves teaching ‘the culture behind the language’ and knowledge related to ‘all spheres of life (education, politics, history, linguistics)’; it is not just about studying topics, but also about developing ‘communication related skills’; and, as one respondent wrote, it is not solely about teaching facts: ‘teachers of all languages differ from those of other subjects. The reason for this is that they do not acknowledge pupils with facts, formulas, terminology’. In contrast, as another student wrote, ‘in literature or history lessons students have to reproduce what has been said by the teacher’. Again, a number of these generalisations are questionable (though, as argued below, they do make a valuable contribution to the task of conceptualizing further research of this kind).

c The nature of language: The Hungarian and Slovene respondents also referred to the special nature of language to explain their belief that language teachers were different to teachers of other subjects. Three key points emerged. First, that language is constantly changing. As one student imaginatively put it:

Other sciences like mathematics and physics have rules, which have been written in ancient times by mathematicians such as Pythagoras. These rules do not change; neither do the laws of physics. But language has a flux. It is constantly developing, changing, expanding. It is like an anthill that was built throughout history and stands before us as we see it on the outside. Inside, huge changes occur within a single hour.

According to these respondents, the dynamic nature of their subject matter has unique implications for language teachers; in particular, it places ‘incessant demands’ for learning on them and thus makes it harder for them to remain up-to-date with their subject.

The second key point to emerge here regarding the nature of language was that knowing a language is the result of extensive study, whereas

other subjects can be mastered much more quickly. As one student teacher wrote,

You can't learn for a [language] lesson you are going to teach just 1–2 lessons before. I mean, if you have to substitute a teacher in another lesson, you can learn the subject the previous night but you can't learn a language in a week or in a night. If you don't speak a language well, you can't teach it. If you don't know chemistry well, you can still teach it by learning 1–2 lessons ahead of the students.

The third point here was that language is distinct from other subjects because of its immediate and long-term practical relevance. 'You use a foreign language even after you leave school but when do you use the chemistry formulas in your everyday life?' was the way one individual expressed this common sentiment.

d Relationships with learners: Both sets of data being discussed here also reflected a common belief that language teachers' relationships with their learners were closer, more relaxed, and generally more positive than those between teachers and learners in other subjects. Thus, one Hungarian respondent stated that 'a language teacher has got more opportunities to get to know his/her students and both teachers and students are more involved personally than they are in a maths or geography class'. This view was explained largely in terms of the fact that 'during language classes students often have to talk about their own experiences, their life': a strict, formal, and impersonal attitude on the part of the teacher would counteract attempts to engage students in this kind of meaningful communication. Similar sentiments recurred in the Slovene data:

In the fourth grade ... the English teacher seemed much more approachable... In fact, the majority of English teachers I have known, in comparison with teachers of other subjects, were more inclined to making a personal contact with their students or pupils; they talked a lot about themselves, which perhaps in their pupils' eyes made them more human and nicer.

e Non-native issues: The fifth major distinction in both the Hungarian and Slovene data between language teachers and other teachers stems from two issues: the status of the former as a non-native speaker of the language being taught, and the perceived need to teach through the foreign language itself. Other teachers use their native language and can therefore concentrate on what they are saying and what they are doing.

Language teachers, though, must also focus on how they are saying what they say. This is an issue several respondents felt made the work of language teachers unique. As one comment explained, ‘I have to always think through what I say to not make any mistakes. It’s harder because it’s not my mother language and needs more concentration.’

The need to operate in the classroom through the medium of a foreign language had, according to these respondents, other special implications for language teachers:

- language teachers spend more time preparing lessons as they must think carefully about how to explain things in a foreign language in a way learners understand;
- language teachers’ use of the foreign language may create a distance between them and the learners which other teachers, who use the learners’ mother tongue, may not experience;

f Language teachers’ traits: Finally, in the Hungarian data it was commonly claimed that language teachers required particular traits. A list of terms describing these reads as follows: creative, sense of humour, flexible, ‘actor’ type, motivating, enthusiastic, communicate freely and radiate positive feeling. There was no suggestion that other teachers did not require such qualities; the argument, though, was that these were almost essential for language teachers compared to perhaps desirable for other teachers.

III Discussion

1 Key distinctive characteristics

Table 2 summarizes the key distinctive characteristics of language teachers and of their work identified in this study. This list brings together items raised by the more experienced teachers in the first two groups (and moderated by the subject specialists) and those identified by the less experienced teachers in the final two groups. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the value of this list is not that it provides a conclusive answer to the research question with which this work started, but that it highlights a range of perspectives from which language teachers’ distinctiveness may be perceived. As previously mentioned, respondents’ accounts of what makes language teachers distinct blurred the

Table 2. Summary of distinctive characteristics of language teachers

Theme	Distinctiveness
The nature of the subject	Language is more dynamic than other subjects and has more practical relevance to real life.
The content of teaching	Unique in scope and complexity. Teaching a language extends beyond teaching grammar, vocabulary and the four skills and includes a wide range of other issues such as culture, communication skills and learning skills.
Methodology	The methodology of language teaching is more diverse and aimed at creating contexts for communication and maximizing student involvement.
Teacher–learner relationships	In language teaching there is more communication between teacher and learners and more scope for learners to work on themes which are of personal relevance.
Non-native issues	In language teaching, teachers and learners operate through a language other than their mother tongue. Teachers are also compared to native speakers of the language.
Teachers' characteristics	For language teachers, characteristics such as creativity, flexibility and enthusiasm are essential.
Training	A wide diversity of recognized language teaching qualifications exist, some as short as four weeks in duration.
Status	Language and language teachers are often awarded lower status than subjects and teachers of other languages.
Errors	Incorrect output by language learners is more acceptable than in other subjects.
Student Body	Many more adults study languages than other subjects.
Commercialization	Language teaching is driven by commercial forces more than other subjects.

distinction between language teachers and language teaching; this is evident from the items in Table 2 and suggests that teachers are defined to a large extent by the subjects they teach and the practices perceived to be prevalent in the teaching of those subjects.

The first six items in the list were those most commonly referred to overall in respondents' accounts of what makes languages teachers different, but of course variations here in group size and data collection procedures preclude the conclusion that these items are in any general

way more significant than others in the list. In any case, discussions of significance will need to be grounded in the analyses of particular language teaching contexts, for, as argued below, the distinctiveness of language teachers is likely to be conceived in differing ways in different contexts. This list of distinctive characteristics, though, does advance our understanding of what specifically it means to be a language teacher and provides direction for continuing work of this kind.

The characteristics emerging here reflect several points highlighted in the literature that was discussed earlier. Of Hammadou and Bernhardt's (1987) five distinguishing characteristics of language teachers, the first three (unity of medium and content; interactive nature of language teaching; challenges to teachers of language change) were identified here. The final two, regarding isolation and the need for extra-curricular activities, were not. Grossman and Shulman's (1994) comments on the unique scope and complexity of English as a subject were also reflected in many of the views expressed by participants in this study. The themes in Table 2 also reflect some of those highlighted in studies of the good language teacher (e.g. references to teacher–learner relationships and teachers' personal qualities), though a number of themes emerging here (e.g. errors, student body, status, commercialization) do not relate in any direct way to the areas of literature reviewed at the start of this paper. Some do also find parallels elsewhere in the literature. For example, the belief that language teachers develop particularly close relationships with their students parallels a finding from Murray and Renaud (1995) who, in a university setting, found that professors in the humanities and the arts valued their rapport with students and student participation more than those in the sciences. The work of Medgyes (1999), too, analyses the condition of the non-native language teacher and discusses many of the perceptions emerging here. Overall, the findings of this study provide further evidence of the multi-dimensionality of the concept of language teachers' characteristics and highlight a range of specific dimensions that may provide the basis of further focused study of the ways in which language teachers are different to teachers of other subjects.

2 Distinctiveness as context-dependent

The data evidenced many comments about other subjects which reflected limited understandings of these. For example, the common

claim in the data that history or literature deal solely with facts and rely on lecturing would be an unfair general characterization of these subjects. On the one hand we may discard such apparently naïve replies as obviously misguided and put these down to lack of experience or understanding. On the other, and this is my view, we may acknowledge that such perceptions reflect the lived experience respondents have had of the phenomena (in this case, the different school subjects) they are commenting on. From this perspective, their comments are naïve only if we treat them as generalizations; accepted as first-hand reflections on personal experience, such comments constitute valuable insights into the ways in which particular subjects are viewed in particular contexts. Given the many comments about history, for example, in the Hungarian data, one can only conclude that learning this subject at school had for these student teachers provided stark contrasts with their experience of learning languages. Their characterization of history as factual, non-interactive, lecture-driven and based on rote learning, though clearly not inevitably true of history everywhere, was clearly true for many of them.

This analysis suggests that 'What makes language teachers different?' is a question which we can productively pursue with reference to specific contexts and through the perceptions and experiences of individuals in particular educational settings. This position acknowledges that the language teacher is not a monolithic phenomenon amenable to globally meaningful definition. Rather, language teachers' distinctiveness is a socially constructed phenomenon that may be defined in various ways in different contexts. Thus the similarities in the data from Hungary and Slovenia in this paper may reflect common elements in these countries' educational systems; it would be interesting to assess the extent, though, to which language teachers and their work would be defined in similar ways in diverse contexts such as Japan and Oman, for example. One might expect the language teacher in those countries to be defined in ways more consonant with their specific contexts, rather than according to the western perspective that has emerged here. The impact on the findings of respondents' experiences, not just of learning and teaching languages, but of educational and professional backgrounds generally, is also suggested by a comparison of the more and less experienced participants. Though there was much overlap here, in defining language teachers' distinctiveness the more experienced groups focused less narrowly on teachers' personal qualities and methods and more on a

wide range of other issues not mentioned at all by the less experienced groups (e.g. the status of the language teacher or the knowledge base of language teaching). One can speculate that the salience of such issues in the experienced teachers' responses is related to their own lived experiences as language teachers, though given the heterogeneity of this group it is not possible here to be more specific about potential antecedents for these views about what distinguishes language teachers. So while the responses from the experienced teachers here also hint at the impact on their perceptions of their lived experiences as language teachers, the sheer range of responses from this group also suggests that the study of homogenous groups of individuals (such as those from Hungary and Slovenia) is a more productive strategy to adopt in further work of this kind. This is a logical conclusion given my comments above about the importance of studying language teachers' distinctiveness in localized and context specific ways.

For the purposes of teacher education, I would argue that these localized accounts of the language teachers' distinct characteristics are particularly valuable. Language teacher educators often prepare teachers for specific contexts (e.g. state secondary schools in Hungary) and, in terms of raising trainees' awareness of local perceptions of their job, accounts of the distinctive characteristics of teachers derived from these specific contexts constitute a rich source of data. Additionally, teacher educators who gain insight into the perceptions their own student teachers have about the distinctiveness of language teachers may identify in those perceptions areas for closer attention during the training programme.

3 Continuing research

To conclude this discussion I will comment briefly on two methodological issues – regarding participants and data – and one conceptual point relevant to continuing work of this kind. In terms of participants, the insider perspectives provided by practising and prospective language teachers were clearly central here to an understanding of how language teachers are seen to be different. This work also suggests, though, as shown in research on disciplinary differences generally, that the comparative perspective provided by subject specialists outside language teaching can also make an important contribution to work of this

kind. Additionally, given the acknowledged contribution which insight into learners' perceptions can make to an understanding of the language teaching classroom (see, for example, Barkhuizen, 1998), the study of language learners' views of language teachers' distinctiveness should also be considered in future research.

The data for this study were elicited orally and through a range of written tasks. An additional form of data collection which could contribute to further the study of this topic is classroom observation, particularly observations of classrooms in different subjects (as suggested, for example, by the work of Hativa, 1995; Langer, 1994). Such work would enable the study of language teachers in any particular context to be grounded in an understanding of distinctive forms of practical action.

A respondent in this study posed this question: 'it is logical that the teacher makes the subject. But does the subject make the teacher?' This takes us back to a basic epistemological question which merits further attention – what is it about the subject matter of language itself which distinguishes it, and hence its teachers, from other subjects? The flux of language and the unity of content and medium in language teaching emerge from this paper as issues which are felt to make language teachers' work unique. Developing more sophisticated conceptualizations of language's special nature vis-à-vis other subjects is another way of better understanding the uniqueness of language teachers. A deeper understanding of the nature of language relative to other subjects would also allow us to better assess the relevance to language teaching of conceptualizations of teacher knowledge developed in other subjects. Freeman (2002), for example, has suggested that because of the special relationship between content and medium in language teaching, the widely used concept of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), which amalgamates teachers' knowledge of a subject and of how to teach it, may not be wholly applicable to our field. Grossman and Shulman (1994) themselves acknowledge this issue in their observation that most existing notions of teacher knowledge come from domains characterized by paradigmatic knowledge (e.g. science and mathematics) and that these may not be ideally suited to an understanding of areas, such as English, which are defined more by narrative ways of knowing. Further exploration of this issue constitutes another strand of inquiry relevant in continuing investigations of language teachers' distinctiveness.

IV Conclusion

This paper has argued that as language teacher education presupposes an understanding of what specifically it means to be a language teacher, an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of language teachers is of importance to our field. On the basis of data collected from over 200 individuals in a range of contexts, specific ways in which language teachers and their work are perceived to be unique were then identified. Key themes emerging here were the dynamic nature of language, the scope and complexity of the content of language teaching, the range of materials, methods and activities available to language teachers, the especially close relationships between language teachers and learners, and issues relating to the status of native and non-native language teachers. It was argued that while these themes provide direction for future research, the specific ways in which language teachers are seen to be distinct may vary in different contexts. On the basis of this exploratory work, it is thus my view that continuing research of this kind will be most productive and of most practical value to teacher educators when it is grounded in specific language teaching contexts. Methodologically, comparisons with other subjects and analyses of both beliefs and classroom practices are two measures which this work suggests can enhance future investigations of what is it that makes language teachers different. Finally, to complement a socially constructed perspective on the study of what being a language teacher means, continued epistemological analyses of the nature of language as a subject are also desirable.

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