

Aspiring to inspire: A study on student teachers' early beliefs about the language teaching profession

Line Krogager Andersen

Aarhus University, Denmark
krogager@cc.au.dk

Søren Hattesen Balle

Professionshøjskolen Absalon, Denmark
shb@pha.dk

Susana S. Fernández

Aarhus University, Denmark
romssf@cc.au.dk

Annette Søndergaard Gregersen

Københavns Professionshøjskole, Denmark
asgr@kp.dk

Camilla Franziska Hansen

UCSyd, Denmark
cfha@ucsyd.dk

Merete Olsen

Professionshøjskolen Absalon, Denmark
mol@pha.dk

Abstract

During the past decades, language teaching and learning has been under political pressure in Denmark, being framed in the media as unnecessary. At universities and university colleges, language programs have been shut down and reduced continually, but some young people aspire to become language teachers, nonetheless. This study investigates their thoughts and ideas about the language teaching profession, about language teaching and learning and about the role of languages in the world through a qualitative and quantitative survey of 109 student teachers at the beginning of their language teacher training. Conceptually and methodologically, the study draws on prior research in the fields of teacher cognition and considers its findings in this context. Overall, the future teacher respondents in the study place a great deal of focus on student motivation and wellbeing and seem to adhere to prevalent concepts in Danish curricula such as communicative language teaching, differentiation and interculturality. Nonetheless, even at this early point in their studies, some concerns emerge in relation to self-efficacy and student motivation, pointing to the fact that students are well aware of the current status of languages in society and the influence this may have on their future students' attitudes and engagement.

Keywords: language teacher education, student teacher beliefs, student teacher cognition, student motivation, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Language education in Denmark has been under political pressure for decades. Language programs have been shut down continually during the past 25 years, and the number of students who choose to study more than two foreign languages at upper secondary level or to take their language studies to a higher level has decreased significantly (Barfod Lund et al. 2023; Rambøll, 2020). In this context it seems relevant to pose the question: What drives anyone to become a language teacher? In an international context, Kubanyiova (2018) argues that the role of language teachers has significantly changed and that the teachers of tomorrow need to be aware of the political context of language teaching, and to be *responsive* in the educational encounters of the classroom. According to Kubanyiova (2018:53), to achieve this, teacher education “might be usefully informed by research that has looked more closely at how language teachers make sense of themselves, their students and their teaching worlds and how their sense making shapes language learning opportunities for their students.”

Kubanyiova argues for the relevance of research into *teacher cognition* and *beliefs* which has shown teachers’ ideas and conceptualisations of language and language teaching to be highly influential of their later teaching practices (Borg, 2018). Beliefs and ideas about language and language teaching are intimately connected to the formation of a language teacher identity (Kubanyiova, 2016). It is therefore crucial for teacher education to be aware of the future teachers’ beliefs to enable the creation of a positive language teacher identity among student teachers (Kubanyiova, 2020).

In this article, we contribute to the field of teacher cognition studies by researching future language teachers’ beliefs at the beginning of their studies. This provides a perspective on their initial ideas and expectations and highlights specific needs that must be addressed in teacher education. In our study, we include both future teachers of English and of Languages Other than English (LOTE), the latter a less studied target group in the teacher cognition and in the general language pedagogy literature. We address these future teachers’ beliefs through the following research question:

RQ: What are future teachers’ beliefs about language and language teaching at the beginning of teacher education?

At the same time, we intend to exploit the benefits that teacher cognition studies may bring to teacher education. We do this by focusing on student beliefs prior to their pedagogical training, so that our results can inform targeted initiatives in teacher education, e.g. in order to respond to these students’ wishes about their teacher education as well as fears about their future profession.

1.2. Background: Language teacher education in Denmark

In Denmark, teacher education for primary and lower secondary school (*folkeskole*, ISCED levels 1-2) is provided by University Colleges, leading to a BA after 4 years of study and teaching practice (240 ECTS credits). As part of teacher education, students specialize in three subjects, choosing initially among Danish, Mathematics, and English (50 ECTS), and later selecting two further subjects such as: German (35 ECTS), French (35 ECTS) or English (35 ECTS) – or any other school subject.

Language teachers for upper secondary school (*gymnasium*, ISCED level 3) are educated at university and choose two subjects with no restrictions regarding subject combination. They may opt for two language subjects (e.g. English and Spanish) or a language subject and something else (e.g. Spanish and Mathematics). They take a 5-year MA, majoring in one of their subjects and minoring in the other. Towards the end of their studies, they may opt for teacher training, and a semester oriented towards language teaching. By this time, they have significant subject matter

knowledge about the language in question (including knowledge of literature and culture), but presumably no prior knowledge about teaching. Once they have a permanent position at an upper secondary school, they take pedagogical in-service training.

Language teacher education draws on different curricula in these different contexts, however, there are some common tendencies which are also reflected in the modern languages curricula for primary and secondary school: a clear orientation towards a functional and communicative approach (Leth Andersen & Skovgaard Andersen, 2024), and a recognition of the close connection between language and culture (*languaculture*; Gregersen, 2019a; Risager, 2006; Wikkelsøe, 2010). Furthermore, there is a strong focus on oracy, particularly within the primary and lower secondary school curricula (Gregersen, 2019b), as well as a continuing orientation towards affordances for participation, student wellbeing and student-centered teaching (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019, a-f).

2. Teacher cognition as a research field

As an academic discipline, research on teachers' knowledge and beliefs emerged during the 1970s, coinciding with an enhanced recognition of the pivotal role teachers play in learners' cognitive development (Hattie, 2003) and the dissipation of a prior notion that teachers simply adhere to a predetermined pedagogical recipe. Rather, they actively engage in iterative processes of planning, executing, and evaluating their instructional methods (Blömeke, 2022; Hattie, 2003). Research made it evident that teachers engage in crucial decision-making within the classroom context, and as illustrated by Wang et al.'s bibliometrical analysis (2024), research interest has dramatically increased since the establishment of the field, particularly throughout the past decade.

A pioneer in the study of *language teacher cognition* was Simon Borg, who defined the concept as “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think” (Borg, 2003, p. 18). Borg (2015, p. 35) characterized teacher cognition as complex, dynamic and often unconscious. This complexity refers to the different types of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that educators possess, spanning from the macrolevel of society and intercultural and international relations to knowledge about the national educational setting and the microlevel of the local educational institution they work at. Beside these types of factual knowledge, teachers possess different kinds of pedagogical knowledge, both general and subject-specific, acquired through education as well as practice. In the case of language teachers, a knowledge and mastery of the language they teach, including oral and written skills, and of the historical, cultural and social aspects of their target language's sphere of influence are key elements of *pedagogical content knowledge* (Metz, 2021; Shulman, 1986).

Teachers' knowledge interacts with their *beliefs* (Fives & Buehl, 2012), i.e. their personal convictions regarding teaching, learning and their roles as educators, and even their emotions (Barcelos, 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2018). Teacher beliefs do not necessarily align with research-based knowledge about language teaching, but are shaped by socially and culturally formed norms and ideas (Kubanyiova, 2018), *lived experience* of language (Busch, 2017), dreams or visions of one's *ideal teacher self* (Kubanyiova, 2015) or even fears of the teacher one does not want to be (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020). All of this influences teachers' classroom practice, as does *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1994), i.e. the teacher's confidence in their own knowledge and abilities. Feelings of low self-efficacy have been found to make teachers avoid certain topics or knowledge areas. For example, Borg (2015) reports that language teachers may avoid teaching grammar if they do not feel confident in answering learner questions. Ultimately, as shown in Sabarwal et al.'s (2022) meta study, teacher beliefs may have a real impact on student outcomes.

Both teachers' knowledge and beliefs (for a critique of the "messiness" of these concepts see Pajares (1992) or Fives & Buehl (2012)) play crucial roles in shaping teaching practices, and a further layer of complexity is added by research showing that not all beliefs are of equal importance. Some researchers describe this as a hierarchical organization of beliefs combining *core beliefs*, which are long-lived and deeply rooted, on the one side, and newer and more ductile *peripheral beliefs*, on the other (Gabillon, 2012). Typically, core beliefs are of a general pedagogical nature (e.g. related to issues of teacher and learner interaction), while peripheral beliefs can relate to subject-specific issues (e.g. about how grammar is best learnt, Phipps & Borg, 2009, or about multilingualism, Haukås, 2016).

Other researchers prefer to describe the relationship between different, contrasting beliefs not in terms of a hierarchy, but rather of different dimensions (Krogager Andersen, 2021) or a complex system of beliefs (Feryok, 2021). Whereas the hierarchical description of belief systems suggests that a conflict between different beliefs will be solved by hierarchy and the core beliefs will tend to prevail, the more complexity-oriented descriptions draw on ideas of attractor states (Feryok, 2021) or situational relevance (Krogager Andersen, 2021).

Irrespective of the conceptualization of the belief system, however, studies have illustrated repeatedly how belief conflicts make teachers feel compelled to disregard some of their beliefs in practice, as illustrated by Vijayarathan (2017), who found that the teachers gave priority to learner well-being over their own beliefs regarding the importance of feedback for learning, and refrained from giving feedback. Similarly, Andersen & Fernández (2021) found that teachers catered to their learners' needs regarding exams more than to their own convictions of what good language teaching is.

Research has shown that some beliefs may arise long before a person starts their professional teacher training and in some instances can be traced all the way back to childhood classroom experiences, and has dubbed this phenomenon the *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975; Rosas-Maldonado, 2021). Borg (2015, p. 88) claims that these early experiences have a strong influence on novice teachers but may continue to exert an influence throughout a teacher's whole professional life, which is why exploring student teachers' beliefs at the beginning of teacher training is a crucial component for the continuous development of teacher education.

2.1. Research methods and areas of interest

The complexity of teacher cognition outlined above is reflected in the range of different research methods used within the field (Barnard & Burns, 2012), including both quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies. Quantitative instruments for data collection such as questionnaires and tests allow for relatively easy access to quantitative data from sizable cohorts of teachers. Conversely, qualitative data collection instruments such as open questions in surveys, individual or group interviews, diaries, autobiographies, reflection essays, concept maps, metaphor selections, and even drawings may grant a deeper understanding. Classroom observations may supplement these instruments, enabling a comparison between espoused beliefs and actual classroom practices. In the research landscape of language teacher cognition, studies have concentrated on various areas of interest, such as specific aspects of language teaching and learning. Notably, numerous studies delve into teachers' beliefs regarding grammar instruction (e.g. Borg, 1998a, 1998b, 2001; Borg & Burns, 2008; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Graus & Coppen, 2016; Askland, 2018; Nilsson et al, 2019; Kabel, Christensen & Brok, 2019; Fitriyani et al, 2020; Andersen, 2021, Andersen & Fernández, 2021; Cabot, 2022). Additionally, although to a lesser extent, other domains, such as literacy (e.g. Graden, 1996; Meijer, Verloop & Beijaard, 1999; Kuzborska, 2011), orality (e.g. Vijayarathan, 2017; Tucek, 2021; Warsame, 2021), feedback and assessment (e.g. Agudo, 2014; Kjærgaard, 2018; Frisch, 2021; Csöreg, 2022; Hilden et al., 2022), intercultural competence (e.g. Gregersen 2007; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Xiaohui & Li, 2011; Fernández, 2015;

Svarstad, 2016; Pettersson, 2019; Löbl, 2022), plurilingual identity and education (e.g. Haukås, 2016; Falk & Lindqvist, 2022; Krogager Andersen, 2019; 2021; Möller-Omrani & Sivertsen, 2022; Putjata & Koster, 2023; Vilköy & Haukås, 2023) or differentiation (e.g. Rasmussen, 2021) have also received attention.

A different set of studies have taken a broader approach, aiming to unveil the general beliefs of student teachers or discern differences between experienced and novice educators (Cota Grijalva & Ruiz-Esparza Barajas, 2013; Ormeño & Rosas, 2015; Fernández, 2019; Fernández & Pozzo, 2021). Such a perspective is adopted in the present study, focusing on understanding various aspects of the early cognitions of future generations of language teachers in Denmark as part of our commitment to teacher education. The aspects in focus are: beliefs about language(s), language teaching and learning, ideals about the good language teacher and beliefs about language students. These are areas that we, in the light of previous research, see as crucial for the development of a new generation of language teachers (see also Kubanyiova, 2018).

3. Methods and data

The study has been conducted as a quantitative and qualitative questionnaire study (see Appendix) of 109 student teachers at Danish universities and university colleges. The survey was constructed in survey x-act and distributed by teacher educators, and consisted of the following sections: background information (such as age, gender, institutional affiliation, educational and professional background and language studied), a qualitative section on views of language, motivation, dreams and worries about the language teaching profession and expectations from teacher education, and a quantitative section of items adapted from other questionnaires frequently used in this field (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2020). These items gauge the relationship between student teachers' beliefs and widely accepted research-based knowledge about language learning and teaching. They were supplemented by a few extra items focusing on beliefs about multilingualism and translanguaging, areas of rising importance in Nordic teacher education, and increasingly investigated in relations to teacher and student teacher cognition (Haukås, 2016, 2022; Holmen & Thise, 2021; Möller-Omrani & Sivertsen, 2022).

3.1 Participants

The study includes two groups of student teachers: a) future primary and lower secondary school teachers, b) future upper secondary school teachers. The students were recruited from teacher education institutions and universities in all the different regions of Denmark. Since the aim was to investigate student teachers' beliefs about language and language teaching at the earliest possible point in time in relation to their language teacher education, we have collected data from students in their first semester of language teacher education (in the case of primary and lower secondary school student teachers) and in the semester where they choose a teacher profile (in the case of upper secondary school student teachers). In the case of primary and lower secondary school student teachers, some choose from the very beginning to become English teachers, and start language teacher education in their first semester, whereas others choose German, French or Danish as a Second Language later, starting their language teacher training at this point. However, by this time, these student teachers of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) will have some general pedagogical knowledge and subject-specific knowledge about the teaching of other subjects. Although this means that the different groups have different levels of experience as student teachers, we have chosen the earliest possible timing for each chosen language subject, since our aim was to explore their beliefs at the beginning of their studies. Therefore, the student teachers in question are all considered to be at the beginning of their language teacher education. An overview of the participants is provided in Table 1. Please note that some of the participants take more than one language subject, which is why the columns do not add up.

Table 1 Participants and language subjects

Institutional affiliation	Danish	Danish as a second language	English	French	German	Spanish	Total
University language degree	8	0	18	4	7	3	25
University college	12	1	71	16	8	0	87
Total	20	1	89	20	15	3	109

3.2 Coding and analysis

The data collection in this study is theoretically grounded, meaning that the questions are designed to elucidate certain theoretically grounded focal points such as language views, conceptualizations of the role of the teacher, dreams and concerns related to the teaching profession, etc. However, in coding, we have applied an inductive category formation: the material was analyzed end-to-end by all participating researchers, who each marked the relevant statements for each category and formulated themes they saw as relevant. For instance, a statement such as “it is fun to see the expression of culture in idiomatic expressions and proverbs” was marked within the broad category “views of language,” and gave rise to the theme “languaculture”. Some statements were assigned more than one code. Based on a joint discussion, the final coding categories were selected and explicitly described, and after testing these codes on an extract of the data, the entire material was divided into sections, each coded by at least two researchers, who then reconciled their coding. Finally, emerging themes were analyzed and interpreted in relation to existing research knowledge and our theoretical starting point.

3.3 Data management, ethics and limitation

Data was collected and processed in anonymized form and stored on a university server, in adherence to university practices and GDPR guidelines. Information about GDPR and the right to withdraw consent was provided via an approved information letter, available as a link on the first page of the questionnaire. Participants were given the option of providing their email address for possible future interviews, in which case anonymity was waived.

Given the design of the study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the recruitment of participants was carried out through teacher educators, which may have resulted in a self-selection bias, as more motivated students may have been more inclined to respond to the questionnaire. Also, the uneven distribution of students across language subjects restricts the extent to which meaningful comparisons can be made between different language groups.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative items with open-ended qualitative questions in the questionnaire. While this design provided valuable insights into both students’ beliefs about language(s) and their ideals about good language teaching, the qualitative dimension could have been strengthened by follow-up interviews. Such interviews would have allowed for greater depth, enabling us to probe more fully into particular issues and to further explore themes that emerged in the questionnaire responses.

Finally, the sample size and the national scope of the study limit the generalizability of the findings. However, since the qualitative component is not primarily concerned with statistical generalization but rather with gaining a deeper understanding of student teachers’ beliefs and perspectives, this

limitation is of less concern. Instead, the value of the study lies in the insights it provides into early beliefs of language teachers and the ways in which student teachers in the Danish context conceptualize language and language teaching.

4. Findings

Aiming to provide a relevant answer for our RQ, *What are future teachers' beliefs about language and language teaching at the beginning of teacher education?*, we have organized our findings into the following sections:

- a) an introductory overview of the quantitative findings
- b) a thematic analysis organized into the following subsections mirroring our inductively formed themes:
 - beliefs about language
 - beliefs about language learning and teaching
 - ideals of what it means to be a good language teacher
 - beliefs about language learners

4.1 Overview of tendencies in the quantitative data

The quantitative items (see Appendix) may be grouped in sections which gauge similar assumptions. For this purpose, our questionnaire contained statements that can be related to different views of language learning (e.g. behavioristic, sociocultural, etc.). The first section aims at uncovering what may be dubbed behaviorist assumptions about language learning through the following items: a) foreign languages may be learned through imitation and repetition, b) errors must be corrected immediately to prevent bad habits, and c) when students talk in class, they get contaminated by each other's errors. For the first of these items, we see over half the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, whereas for the latter two, this proportion is below 20 %.

Three other items explore student teachers' assumptions of language learning in relation to languaculture ("it is important to be familiar with the culture to speak a foreign language"), the role of grammar ("to learn a foreign language is mostly about learning grammar rules") and the communicative approach ("it is important that students use language actively to solve collaborative tasks"). These items show a striking support for a communicative approach, with 96 % of student teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing with the last item – the remaining 3 % have chosen the neutral option (neither/or). Correspondingly, 58 % disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that language learning is mostly about grammar, although 9 % do agree with this statement. The importance of culture in language learning also sees some support, although less striking (52 % agree or strongly agree and 28 % choose the neutral option). The support of the communicative approach at this early stage in the students' academic career is surprising, considering that communicative language teaching is reported to falter in Denmark (Barfod Lund et al., 2023; Andersen & Fernández, 2021).

Four items deal with classroom language and learners' linguistic repertoires in different ways: a) "It is important only to speak the target language(s) in class", b) "Grammar teaching should always be in Danish", c) "Students should be allowed to use all the languages that they know in language class" and d) "Most errors that students make are due to negative influence from their first language". The results in this section are somewhat unclear, since 44 % agree or strongly agree that errors are primarily due to transfer, around 49 % consider the exclusive use of the target language important or very important, and, correspondingly, a group of 45 % disagree or strongly disagree that grammar should always be taught in Danish. All of these statements may suggest a strong focus on the target language and some extent of monolingual bias. However, 52 % also agree or strongly

agree that students should be allowed to use all the languages they know in class, thus supporting a plurilingual or translanguaging stance, but perhaps conflicting with their focus on target language use, as expressed in their other responses. To some extent, this mirrors Möller-Omrani & Sivertsen's (2022) findings for Norwegian preservice teachers who seem increasingly positive towards pluralistic approaches. This suggests a certain change in teachers' beliefs about multilingualism and translanguaging, since previous studies by Haukås (2012; 2016) suggested a more sceptical stance towards such approaches among in-service teachers.

A smaller section of only two items focuses on learner factors: motivation and language aptitude. Both of these were considered very important by student teachers, in fact 54 % strongly agreed and 37 % agreed that "The most important factor for success in language learning is motivation". However, 83 % also agreed or strongly agreed that "Some people have a special knack for learning languages", an assumption which points in a slightly different direction – namely that aptitude may be considered more important than motivation.

A single item in the quantitative section zoomed in specifically on the teacher: "Good target language proficiency is the most important factor in becoming a qualified teacher." 37 % of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this item, indicating that student teachers consider this important, but clearly also see other characteristics as important.

4.2 Beliefs about language

In this section, we delve into participants' perspectives and reflections on *language*. We consider the exploration of student teachers' beliefs about the nature of language important, since teachers' conceptualisation of language has been shown to have an influence on language teaching practices (Andrews & Lin, 2018).

A recurrent motif in the qualitative data is the theme of *intercultural communication*, a finding in line with the strong support for a communicative approach to language teaching found in the quantitative section. Respondents find the prospect of engaging with individuals from diverse nations and cultures intriguing and enriching, regarding language as a conduit for enhanced cross-cultural comprehension. The cultural dimension of language, e.g. the way unique cultural nuances manifest linguistically, also seems to captivate student teachers' curiosity.

*It is good to learn other languages in order to succeed in the world. One can travel, gain insight into the culture of other countries.*¹ (PLS/EN)

Respondents further emphasize the *usefulness* of mastering multiple languages and the capacity to interact with a broad spectrum of the global population, particularly through English as a lingua franca. Some posit that heightened intercultural awareness offers insights into one's own cultural background, fostering self-discovery and self-knowledge on both individual and societal levels, reflecting an appreciation for the socio-cultural dimensions of language and the ways in which linguistic competence facilitates intercultural communication and engagement with diverse social contexts.

Language learning is perceived as fostering *linguistic reflexivity and awareness*. Moreover, some respondents point out the pedagogical potential in cultivating a global perspective among learners and preparing them for success in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Through languages, one becomes a global citizen by acquiring tools to comprehend and navigate the relevant country/countries using that specific language. (PLS/FR)

[Language] is a gateway to multiple identities. Finally, language is a gateway to new worlds, i.e. other ways of understanding social life. (PLS/EN).

Some respondents express an interest in the comparative and contrastive perspectives on language, relishing the opportunity to compare different linguistic systems and navigate the complexities of linguistic diversity. For others, their interest lies in the practical advantages of language proficiency, such as enhanced communicative capabilities and the acquisition of specialized vocabulary and grammatical structures. Overall, our data show a broad spectrum of beliefs about language as both a personal passion and a powerful tool for self-expression, identity formation, and cultural understanding as well as more specific, personal interests in grammar, music or vocabulary.

4.3 Beliefs about language learning and teaching

The aim of this section is to bring together those aspects of language learning and teaching that our respondents highlight and find important. Regardless of whether they are training to be PLS or US teachers, whether they are students of English, German, French or Spanish, the section will initially attempt to identify any predominant thoughts and conceptualizations of language learning and teaching that cut across these different groups of students. Despite our focus on the overall trends, some marked differences also stand out and will be discussed with reference to the educational context of each specific category of student teacher.

The most outstanding feature of our results is that almost all respondents view *motivation*, particularly *intrinsic* motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), as an essential element of language learning. For instance, in response to the question why they have chosen to become language teachers, their own motivation for and joy of learning languages seems to be the main driving force, and what they wish to pass on to their own future language students. Among the many statements to that effect, we find ones such as the following:

I am quite a fan of the language and hence quite good at it. [...] I have an idea that my playful and sometimes silly personality will make learning a new language fun and promote acquisition. (PLS/EN)

Language learning is framed as an avenue for personal and professional development, student teachers viewing language proficiency as part of their identity, and language learning aptitude as innate (as is reflected in the quantitative data, too):

I can't say exactly what interests me, but since I was little I have had a flair for languages and sought out everything to do with language and still do so today. (PLS/EN)

Most of the respondents in the English cohorts have had positive experiences learning English in different contexts – from gaming, schooling, family, education, travelling and exchanges, etc. They refer to positive experiences in school and teachers who were ‘good examples’ in using inclusive methods, authentic materials, communicative approaches and being highly motivating for their learning processes as pupils. The amount of language experience outside the classroom is more limited for the other languages – while some of the student teachers may have lived or studied abroad, others explicitly state that it is okay not to have that kind of experience:

I have no relation to France or any francophone country through work or family. Still, I think I am a good French teacher. Maybe exactly because I am in the same boat as my students and I can show them the language learning strategies that work for me. (PLS/FR)

Motivation is mentioned by student teachers not only in connection with their own past language learning experiences but also in relation to their expectations for their studies and their future jobs

as professional teachers. They talk about motivation as a factor that is affected by self-esteem, identity, attitudes, intercultural competence, skills, and language learning confidence, and they highlight the role of motivation in reference to their relation to teachers, learners and fellow student teachers.

This emphasis on motivation seems to affect respondents' views on their language teacher education and their notion of the ideal language teacher, as elaborated in the next section. The influence of the motivation theme on respondents' ideas about language teaching is reflected in statements about their intention as future language teachers to choose content and approaches that are motivating for the students. Some respondents explicitly worry about being unable to motivate their students for language learning. That is why they wish for their education to furnish them with the knowledge and skills that will allow them to design language teaching that is motivating.

Another theme permeating many of the responses is the question of errors and how to deal with them in language teaching. The respondents agree across the board that errors play a crucial role in the language learning process and stress their intention to allow for errors and to create a learning environment that feels safe enough for students to risk making errors. Some of the respondents even emphasize the importance of errors to the language learning process and mention that errors are linked to students' hypothesis testing (Ellis, 2012) in the language they are learning. Especially among the university students there seems to be a consensus that errors form part of the language learning process and should be dealt with constructively by the teacher. One of the respondents puts it this way:

To me, a good language teacher is someone who is not out to expose students' errors, and who makes room for the errors that will inevitably occur when learning a new language. (US/EN)

Interestingly, although some of the teacher training students studying English refer to errors as part of the language learning process in accordance with interlanguage theories of language learning (Han & Tarone, 2014), some also underscore the importance of grammatical accuracy and knowledge, which seems to point to a stronger focus on forms (Ellis, 2012). Perhaps this may be explained by the fact that these respondents are freshman students who, as opposed to the other cohorts of respondents, have not at all been introduced to theories of language learning yet. Despite this difference between teacher students of English and the rest of the respondents, all of them seem to share a view of language learning and teaching that takes its point of departure in a communicative approach to learning.

Many of the respondents suggest that the *active use of the language* is one of the most central elements of language teaching. Several respondents emphasize the development of communicative competence and oral and written language production, and we find a tendency to highlight that the goal of language teaching is to help learners to communicate with other people across borders and cultures, corresponding to the Danish curricula (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019 a-f).

4.4 Ideals of the good language teacher

The student teachers' ideas about being a good language teacher emerge indirectly from their hopes and expectations in relation to teacher education and their worries and concerns in relation to their future profession. Their descriptions span widely, and there is a great deal of individual variation but also some clear trends which relate to both *language proficiency*, *pedagogical content knowledge*, *relational competence* and *teacher personality*.

In correspondence with the overwhelming focus on motivation in relation to language learning, the good language teacher is generally described as *motivating*, *engaged* and, in some cases, even *passionate*. Student teachers use expressions such as "making learning fun", "motivating students to

talk”, and “making students aspire to progress”. Such a teacher is described as a good role model, both in terms of language proficiency, engagement and taking a relaxed attitude to errors. In fact, many respondents underscore the importance of not correcting students “too much” or “aggressively” or focusing too much “on rules and grammar”. There are exceptions: One respondent describes the good language teacher as “somebody who knows how to motivate students and analyze their errors so they are not repeated”.

The *teachers’ relationship to the learners* emerges as an important subtheme, and the good language teacher is described as engaged in the students, seeing things from their perspective, generally supportive and able to differentiate between students, providing help to those who need it, and not judging students by their grades but recognizing their individual strengths and difficulties. Some student teachers develop this in more detail by mentioning how teachers should avoid stereotyping students and take an interest in students’ linguistic repertoires beyond the target language.

Respondents further emphasize pedagogical content knowledge about language learning and teaching, lesson planning, differentiation, interactive and communicative teaching, and the ability to use creative and varied teaching activities, playful learning and physical activity. There is a clear focus on student-centered learning, and some student teachers explicitly state that a teacher should have clear goals for each student and be able to help students progress towards these goals. The range of content matter knowledge that respondents expect from a good teacher is not as explicit – there is some mentioning of proficiency in general, of fluency, a good pronunciation, vocabulary and knowledge about culture and grammar. Individual respondents from the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) group even mention aspects like multimodality, interculturality, language learning strategies and the role of AI in the classroom.

Most of the subthemes emerge across the different groups of respondents, but some seem more clearly linked to specific groups, like French student teachers emphasizing the importance of a broader focus on the Francophonie rather than just France in the French classroom. Similarly, future upper secondary teachers point to content matter goals appropriate of upper secondary school, such as a social science angle in English.

Many of the student teachers mention *prior teachers as role models*, one of them in a quote which nicely sums up the whole data set:

Summing up: having had a good language teacher and a bad language teacher has motivated me not to become like the bad language teacher but like the good language teacher, focusing on pronunciation and the ability to communicate to start off. (PLS/EN)

This quote illustrates how the student teachers’ conceptualizations of the good language teacher emerge not only as dreams and aspirations but also in a negative form of the teacher one dreads becoming, as phrased by one English student teacher:

Becoming the bad-tempered and boring English teacher, whose students don’t benefit from class at all. Using the same syllabus for all classes. (PLS/EN)

Both of these quotes underscore the enduring importance of student teachers’ positive and negative past experiences as language learners in ways reminiscent of Rosas-Maldonado et al.’s (2021) study.

Other respondents describe *worries related to self-efficacy*, like “Do I have the knowledge and skills needed to engage and include all students?”, “Do I know enough grammar?”, “Is my English/German good enough?”. Some of these worries are quite specific and reflect the student

teachers' fears in relation to the specific language they will be teaching, phrased by one respondent in relation to outsiders' expectations of a German teacher:

That I never make any mistakes in German. I cannot reach that level. There is way too much case marking which is impossible for me as a non-native speaker. (PLS/GER)

This is an interesting quote in that it points both to the student teachers' self-efficacy and the question of language accuracy, which is simultaneously framed as important from the outsider's perspective and impossible from the insider's perspective. Although the *native speaker standard* does not emerge as a general perspective, it surfaces here, and in the following quote from a future upper secondary English teacher:

[I worry about] how challenging the grammar will be and whether my accent will be considered 'different to that of a native English speaker'. (US/EN)

In both cases, the student teachers do not seem to adhere to the native speaker ideal, but they identify it as a potential threat to their own language teacher identities.

A final and recurring point is the student teachers' worry about student motivation, underscoring the importance of the initial characterization of the good language teacher as motivating. Eloquently blending concerns about the future and an aspirational description of a future professional self, one student teacher writes:

My greatest worry in becoming a language teacher is whether I will be able to enable students' academic development and bring them along on a fun and adventurous linguistic journey through teaching. (PLS/EN)

4.5 Beliefs about language learners

Who are the imagined future students of the respondents? Through their answers to questions about teaching and learning and about their dreams and fears concerning their future professions, a complex picture of their imagined future students emerges.

The generally prevalent focus on fun and creating a good atmosphere in the language classroom (see sections 4.3 and 4.4) seems related to a recurrent focus on creating a sense of safety and tolerance in the learning environment, evidently seeing students as whole people whose affective states must be taken into account. As one respondent puts it, "speaking another language puts students in a vulnerable position," and it is important that learners feel safe and sufficiently relaxed to be willing to communicate in another language. Respondents thus emphasize the importance of creating a classroom environment where learners feel safe and unafraid to speak the target language. They discuss how to motivate learners, differentiate among them and many also refer to the importance of "capturing the interests of the learners".

Through these considerations, *an individualized and personalized image of a learner* emerges. Different learners may have different needs, both academically and socially, and the teacher has to take this into account. A recurrent focus is on the ability of the teacher to help learners understand difficult content, and some student teachers worry that they will not be able to keep all learners motivated, especially considering the range of proficiency levels in the classroom. Differentiation plays an important role, and several respondents indicate that all students should be given the opportunity to participate in the language classroom according to their individual skills, levels and needs. All in all, quite an egalitarian view of the teacher-learner relationship emerges, phrased by one respondent as follows:

[A good teacher is...] someone who approaches his/her students on an equal footing and creates a safe space where everyone feels comfortable contributing in class. (PLS/FR)

There is a general focus on learners' wellbeing and on the teacher's role in engaging them by teaching in varied and creative ways, suggesting that student teachers *do not expect learners necessarily to be intrinsically motivated*. In fact, several student teachers express a fear that learners will not be motivated or think class is fun, as phrased by one aspiring French teacher:

My greatest worry in relation to becoming a language teacher is that students aren't motivated to learn the language and have only chosen it because they didn't want German. (PLS/FR)

This quote reflects a recurring worry that students are uninterested in LOTE languages, that they may even "hate" German as suggested by another respondent, and will opt out of their L3 as soon as possible. Similar concerns are identified among student teachers in a recent report by the National Centre for Modern Languages (NCFE, 2024), suggesting that they may be pervasive at a larger scale beyond our data.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our study includes student teachers from different contexts, and although they are all at the beginning of their language teacher education, some are further along in their general teacher education than others, and some have more experience with language learning than others. Furthermore, some have chosen language teacher education due to a lifelong dream and a love of languages, whereas others just wanted to become teachers and chose English over mathematics. This variability may not be fully expressed when recounting the full data set thematically, as we have done in the previous sections.

Nevertheless, our findings show that the beginning student teachers' ideas about language, language learning and teaching to some extent reflect perceptions found in recent Danish reports focusing on students in primary and secondary school (Barfod Lund et al., 2023), emphasizing the focus on motivation, differentiation, communication and student-centered teaching. Their strong interest in intercultural communication even at the beginning of their language teacher studies could be a reflection of their own language learning experiences in and outside of school, since this is in line with PLS and US language curricula (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019 a-f). However, a 2023 report from the National Centre for Modern Languages (Barfod Lund et al., 2023) gives a different impression, describing how learners experience less of a communicative approach than what might be expected on the basis of curricula, and other studies (Fernández, 2019; Andersen & Fernández, 2021) have previously shown these specific aspects of language teaching to be sparsely represented in school practice. Taking this into account, these student teachers' appreciation of the communicative approach might also reflect something they did not experience but longed for.

Alternatively, the apparent inconsistency between support for communicative language teaching and other studies showing a lack thereof may reflect that these ideas prevail among both future and in-service teachers but that the realities of everyday teaching, including lack of time and exam requirements, to some extent prevent teachers from teaching in the way they would like to (Andersen & Fernández, 2021; Kubanyiova, 2016; Mottelson, 2010; Fernández, 2019). Such an interpretation could be supported by Fernández (2019) who in a Danish US context found communicatively oriented espoused beliefs as in the present study, but an inability to practice communicative language teaching a year after graduation expressed by participants.

We cannot know whether this interpretation is correct here, since we only have access to the future language teachers' *professed beliefs* (Borg, 2018) – what they say themselves. Whether or not this

will ultimately be reflected in an *enactment* (Borg, 2018; Krogager Andersen, 2021) of such beliefs, we cannot know on the basis of our data. In fact, teacher cognition research tells us that even experienced teachers may sometimes be unaware of why they make certain choices in the classroom (Henriksen et al., 2020).

From our data, a clear picture of an ideal future language teacher emerges: an engaged, motivated and playful teacher whose students are happy and active, and ultimately good at the language concerned. This vision is very much in line with what Ruohotie-Lyhty and Pitkänen-Huhta (2020) found in the Finnish context, where a good atmosphere created by the teacher's relationship to the learners was at the core, and with the most recent NCFF reports (NCFF, 2024). In our study, even the fears and worries of the future teachers to a large extent focused on the students and the teacher-student relationship: "what if I become a boring teacher who cannot motivate my students?" This pervasive focus on students and their motivation and wellbeing, also reflected in the recurrent focus on differentiation (see also Rasmussen, 2021), seems to be in line with earlier findings by Vijayarathan (2017) and Krogager Andersen (2021), who both point to in-service teachers choosing to focus on students' wellbeing over teaching content in situated contexts. Considering our findings in this light, we wonder whether one might in the Danish context consider this focus on students' well-being a core belief for language teachers which is well established even before they engage in language teacher education. This could be a topic for future research.

Despite the tendency in our data that future language teachers' ideas about language, language teaching and learning align well with Danish curricula in terms of their orientation towards a communicative approach, interculturality, global citizenship, identity building and relevance for students' lives, we do also see other images of more traditional approaches to language teaching and a native speaker standard cropping up. Furthermore, it is interesting to see the student teachers' awareness of both newer approaches to language teaching, such as the plurilingual ones (Kjærbaek & Krogager Andersen, 2024), and of the societal discourses about students being unmotivated for language learning in general, and for German in particular. This illustrates how student teachers, even at the beginning of their language teacher studies, have quite well-founded beliefs about language learning and teaching.

5.1 Implications for language teacher education

These findings imply that language teacher education must take into account student teachers' pre-existing beliefs about language and language teaching and learning, and that teacher education must take into consideration how knowledge and beliefs may develop continually throughout the teacher's professional life, an idea expressed in the Danish context as the "developing practitioner" (Henriksen et al, 2020), a notion expanding on Schön's (1983) idea of the "reflective practitioner".

Daryai-Hansen & Henriksen (2017) and Henriksen et al. (2020) pose the idea that continuous reflection both in teacher education and throughout one's career may enhance pedagogical development and lead to palpable improvement in the educational system, drawing on inspiration from Dewey's *experience pedagogy* (1933), Schön's (1983) *reflection-in-action* and Illeris' (2013) *personal lifelong learning*.

Reflecting on the interaction between knowledge, practical experience, feelings, and thoughts, both individually and in collaboration with colleagues can provide benefits to teachers by fostering enhanced self-awareness. Particularly early-career teachers may be overwhelmed by demands from e.g. new official curricula, school authorities or new teaching materials and, at the same time, they have scarce time and resources to implement the changes required or even the pedagogy they would like themselves. Henriksen et al. (2020) advocate for the systematic use of reflection exercises in teacher education, and, adapting data collection instruments from the field of teacher cognition studies into pedagogical tools. In the context of this study, it is our hope that requiring respondents

to reflect on their perspectives on language, language learning and teaching, their roles as future educators and their learners' characteristics will be fruitful for their individual teacher identity development besides contributing to our general knowledge of the field.

The six areas of reflection proposed by Henriksen et al. (2020), about knowledge, beliefs, feelings, practice, gained experience and innovation, are relevant already in the course of teacher education, and an important contribution of this study might be to underscore the importance of introducing language teacher reflexivity already in the beginning stages of language teacher education. Our results show that future teachers have many relevant ideas and aspirations for their future teaching, but to be able to integrate these ideas with their evolving theoretical knowledge and future teaching experience is no mean feat and may require continuous support from teacher educators.

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Endnotes

1) All quotes have been translated by the authors from Danish into English. Respondent groups are referenced by the cohort they belong to: PLS (future primary and lower secondary teachers), US (future upper secondary school teachers), combined with an abbreviation of the languages they study.

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Appendix

