Social competencies of Polish and Turkish ELT students: A cross-cultural study

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Abstract

Social competencies can be defined as the capabilities enabling individuals "to live together in the world" (Arendt, 1958) and they comprise aspects of interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies. They are conceptualized differently in different disciplines even then no consensus exists on their definition (cf. Schoon, 2009). In psychology competencies of this kind are viewed as personality traits (Sarason, 1981) which can be manifested in such capabilities as empathy, tolerance, conscientiousness, ability to cooperate, as a dynamic construct involving the ability to adjust to interact in specific circumstances (Argyle, 1994; Tajfel, 1981), as people's belief about their efficacy (Bandura, 1997), as social (Gardner, 1999) or even emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). In the case of pedagogy, they refer to lifelong, intercultural and social learning. Every future English teacher should realise the importance of social skills. This is because their future career as teachers they will have to hold numerous conversations, plan activities, ask questions, listen to learners, collaborate on assignments, and engage in a host of other social behaviors that allow them to connect to learners as well as other teachers and make the

most of learning opportunities. The purpose of our study is twofold. First, we aimed to find out how ELT students from Poland and Turkey perceive social skills relevant to English language teaching. To this aim, we asked an open-ended question about the social skills an English teacher should have. Our second purpose was to measure and analyze social skills among future Polish and Turkish English teachers. In order to measure these skills, we decided to use the *Social Skills Inventory* (SSI), designed by Riggio and Carney (2003). It is a 90-item instrument which measures social skills in six domains and provides a total score to reflect a global level of social skill development indicative of overall social competence or social intelligence. The obtained data will allow us to find out what the level of emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity and social control among future Polish and Turkish students is and what impact it may have on teaching.

Keywords: social competences; social skills; teacher education, cross-cultural differences

1. Introduction

Each prospective English teacher should realise the importance of social skills, which could broadly be defined as capabilities allowing individuals "to live together in the world" (Arendt, 1958), including facets of interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies (cf. Schoon, 2009). In their future career as teachers, teacher trainees are supposed to carry out conversations, plan activities, ask questions, listen to learners, collaborate on assignments, and engage in a host of other social behaviours allowing them to connect to learners as well as other teachers and make the most of learning opportunities. Defined as *social competences*, abilities of this kind are conceptualized differently in different disciplines, and even within specific disciplines no agreement exists on their definition (cf. Schoon, 2009). In psychology social competencies are seen as personality traits that can relate to different capabilities, such as empathy, tolerance, conscientiousness, the ability to cooperate, or as a dynamic construct involving the ability to adjust to and interact in specific circumstances (Sarason, 1981). On the other hand, Argyle (1985) claims that social competencies comprise interactions between individual characteristics, social demands and situational characteristics. They have to be understood as relativistic, since very different social competencies are required and valued in different contexts.

Whenever we think about social competencies, we need to adapt them to appropriate contexts, whether formal or informal. Social competencies can

also be perceived from the cognitive perspective. Bandura (1986, p. 18) concentrates on social cognitive theory according to which "people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by external stimuli. Rather, human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic reciprocity in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other". When trying to define social competencies, one cannot forget about the emotional perspective. Goleman (1995) defines social competencies as emotional competencies, or learned capabilities based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance. Our emotional intelligence determines our potential for learning practical skills based on five elements: self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships. One of the most recent definitions of social competencies is offered by Bierman (2004, p. 141), for whom "social competence is a capacity to coordinate adaptive responses flexibly to various interpersonal demands, and to organize social behavior in different social contexts in a manner beneficial to oneself and consistent with social conventions and morals". Bierman (2004) recognizes the importance of 'oneself'. On the one hand, certain behaviors should be adapted to various contexts but, on the other hand, these behaviors should be beneficial to oneself. This view of social competences is very close to the behaviors very often represented by young people nowadays. Broderick and Blewitt (2010) mention four categories of foundational social competencies: (1) *affective processes* (including empathy, valuing relationships, and sense of belonging), (2) *cognitive processes* (including cognitive ability, perspective taking, and making moral judgments), (3) *social skills* (including making eye contact, using appropriate language, or asking appropriate questions), and (4*) high social self-concept* (including an understanding of how an individual conceives self-concept in relation to others in specific contexts). Social competencies cannot be only perceived as affective or social processes; in fact, they are more complex consisting of many various skills. Moreover, Reichard and Riggion (2008, p. 171) claim that "social skills represent a broader range of abilities that is most closely linked to the construct of social intelligence. They include the following: the ability to express oneself in social interactions, the ability to read and understand different social situations, knowledge of social roles, norms, and scripts, interpersonal problem solving skills, and social role-playing skills". On the other hand, "emotional skills are related to the ability to accurately express, read and understand emotions; all of which are components of emotional intelligence" (2008, p. 170).

In the present paper, we would like present the findings of a study related to the social competencies of Polish and Turkish ELT students. Firstly, a brief description of the previous research on social and emotional skills will be presented.

Secondly, a description of the current study together with its aims and research questions will be provided. Then the results of the study will be discussed and, finally, conclusions and future teaching implications will be presented.

2. Previous research on emotional and social skills

Research on social skills was mainly conducted among clinical populations (Curran & Monti, 1982; Trower et al., 1978). Most of the researchers used some social skills assessment tools in order to be able to understand certain behaviors of patients with psychological problems. Subsequently, researchers started examining the role of emotional and social skills in social interaction and interpersonal relationships, such as effective communication in marriages (e.g., Gottman, 1982; Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Gottman & Portefield, 1981). According to the research, the ability to express emotions, either positive or negative, has a huge impact on the condition of marriage itself. Possessing emotional and social skills was also associated with higher quality of social relationships (Riggio et al., 2003; Riggion & Zimmerman, 1991). Moreover, it was found that deficits in emotional skills may lead to the breakdown of families or any kind of relationships (cf. Perez & Riggio, 2003; Philippot et al., 2003). Research on emotional skills associated with investigation of nonverbal and emotional communication (Friedman, 1979; Riggio, 2006; Rosenthal, 1979) led to the research on emotional intelligence referred to as EI or EQ (Caruso et al., 2002; Goleman, 1995, 1998; Mayer et al., 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 2004). When investigating emotional intelligence, researchers proposed a model of emotional abilities as follows:

(1) *identifying emotions*, which involves the ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others, as well as the ability to express emotions;
(2) *using emotions to facilitate thinking*, where emotions are applied to enhance thinking processes and harness the power of positive moods;
(3) *understanding emotions*, including the complexities and subtleties of emotions as well as their interrelationships;
(4) *managing emotions*, which involves skills in regulating and controlling felt emotions in a positive fashion.

This model helps us understand our emotions and deal with them in all areas of our life. As for classroom research on the role of social skills, it has been demonstrated that social skills are extremely important, and both teachers and learners should be made aware of them (e.g., Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998; Gresham, 1998; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Mathur & Rutherford, 1996; Sugai, 1996). Teachers who tend to lack social competencies have more problems with classroom management and, what is more, they tend to be dissatisfied with their jobs. On the other hand, learners who lack social competencies

tend to get involved into conflicts with their peers more often than learners who possess social competencies.

In order to understand how important social skills in teaching are, it is worth exploring at the teaching pyramid provided by Fox et al. (2003, p. 2), which describes a primary level of universal practices. According to the model, everything is built on positive relationships with children, families and colleagues, which demonstrates that it is extremely important to create supportive environments in which we function. Social and emotional teaching strategies come next. At this level, teachers should pay attention to social and emotional facets because many learners need explicit instructions to ensure the development of competence in social and emotional literacy. Even when teachers establish positive relationships, implement classroom preventive practices and use explicit teaching strategies, there may still be learners who will continually display challenging behavior. This is when intensive individualized interventions come.

Table 1. General social skills (based on Gresham, Sugai, & Homer, 2001).

GENERAL SOCIAL SKILLS USED BY TEACHERS
Being on time
Using appropriate loudness and tone of voice
Encouraging everyone to participate
Learning and using people's names
Looking at the person who is speaking
Making eye contact with others when speaking
Checking one's own understanding
Asking appropriate questions
Describing one's own feelings when appropriate
Keeping remarks to an appropriate length
Building on others' comments and ideas
Supporting others, both verbally and nonverbally
Asking for assistance
Participating appropriately in a small talk
Initiating and responding to humour

Based on categories taken from Gresham, Sugai and Homer (2001), certain dimensions of social skills for teachers have been established. As can be seen from Table 1, even being on time, using an appropriate tone of voice or remembering learners' names can turn out to have a tremendous influence on the relationships between learners and teachers. Learners pay attention to teachers' behavior, they want to be respected and treated individually and thus making an eye contact or participating in a small talk can change the atmosphere in class, students' attitudes and motivation. Unfortunately, many teachers may not be aware of how important social competencies are, therefore, teacher training courses taught at universities should provide them with such knowledge.

3. The study

The purpose of this particular study was twofold. First, we aimed to find out how students from Poland and Turkey perceive social skills relevant to English language teaching (ELT). To this aim, we asked an open-ended question about the social skills an English teacher should have. Our second purpose was to measure and analyze the social skills among future Polish and Turkish English teachers. In order to measure such skills we decided to use the *Social Skills Inventory* (SSI), designed by Riggio and Carney (2003). The SSI is a 90-item instrument, which measures social skills in six domains and provides a total score to reflect a global level of social skill development, indicative of overall social competence or social intelligence. The data allowed us to find out what the level of emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity and social control among future Polish and Turkish students was and what impact it might have on their teaching.

3.1. Research questions

The current study is based on the analysis of the role of social skills among Polish and Turkish ELT university students. The aim of the study was to: (1) find out how ELT students from Poland and Turkey perceive social skills relevant to English language teaching, and (2) measure and analyze social the skills among future Polish and Turkish teachers of English. To be more specific, the following research questions were addressed:

- How different do Polish and Turkish ELT students perceive social skills? Do cultural differences in this respect affect the perception of social skills?
- Do Polish and Turkish ELT students differ in their levels of social competences? If this is the case, what is the source of the difference?

3.2. Participants

The participants were 100 students from the ELT Department of Çukurova University, Adana, Turkey. These were fourth-year (senior) students specializing in TEFL. The second group of participants were 100 students from the English Department at University of Silesia, Poland. The students were fourth- or fifth-year students, also specializing in TEFL.

3.3. Data collection instrument

In order to collect the data, *the Social Skills Inventory* (SSI), designed by Riggio and Carney (2003) and consisting of 90-items measuring social skills in six domains, was employed. The inventory includes six subsections related to emotional expressiveness, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressiveness, social sensitivity and social control subsections. It is based on a framework of emotional and social skills and leadership, which distinguishes: (1) *emotional expressiveness* – skills in communicating nonverbally, especially in sending emotional messages, nonverbal expression of attitudes, dominance, and interpersonal orientation, (2) *emotional sensitivity* – skill in receiving and interpreting the emotional and nonverbal communication of others, (3) *emotional control* – skill in controlling and regulating one's own emotional and nonverbal displays, especially conveying or masking emotions on cue, (4) *social expressiveness* – skill in verbal expression and the ability to engage others in social discourse, (5) *social sensitivity* – skill in interpreting the verbal communication of others, ability to understand social situations, social norms, and roles, and (6) *social control* – skill in role-playing and social self-presentation. At the time of data collection, the students were also asked answer the following open-ended question to obtain data on their perceptions, that is *What social skills should an English teacher have?* The students were provided with clear instructions on how to fill in the inventory, it took them about 30 minutes and they were not requested to identify themselves in any way.

3.4. Results

In order to obtain answers to the research questions posed, we conducted an analyses of how Polish and Turkish ELT students perceive the social skills. The analysis of the data revealed that both groups of students pointed to similar features in their definitions of social skills and skills of this kind that a language teacher should possess.

As displayed in Figure 1, both Polish and Turkish students indicated their awareness with the use of relevant keywords pertaining to the social skills an EFL teacher is supposed to have. Among these, *having communication skills*, *tolerance*, *good relations with students*, *empathy*, *leadership*, and *supportive behavior for classroom atmosphere* were ranked highest. The skills indicated by the participants were categorized according to the domains of the social skills inventory proposed by Riggio and Carney (2003). This categorization revealed that the participants' responses referred to all domains covered in the inventory, representing sensitivity, expressiveness, and control at two levels, namely, social and emotional. They stated, for instance, that teacher should:

- have tolerance and build rapport with students, which shows *emotional sensitivity*;
- use body language, which represents *emotional expressiveness*;
- manage emotions, which implies *emotional control*;
- show respect to students, which represents *social sensitivity*;
- be equipped with communication skills, which represents *social Expressiveness*;
- have leadership skill, which indicates *social control*.

Figure 1. Content analysis cloud of the open-ended question.

Table 2. Levels of social competence of the Polish and Turkish students on SSI.

SSI	Expressivity		Sensitivity		Control	
	M Polish	*M* Turkish	*M* Polish	*M* Turkish	*M* Polish	*M* Turkish
Emotional	45.89	43.38	45.71	48.01	44.26	44.40
Social	42.50	46.39	45.21	46.56	49.41	46.75

Our second research questions focused on the level of social competence manifested by the students in both groups. As shown in Table 2, there was little difference between the Polish and Turkish participants in this respect. When the data in Table 3, displaying the cut-off scores of the inventory is considered together with the means for both groups of students, it can be stated that the Polish and Turkish participants fall into the medium category on all the dimensions measured.

Table 4. Cut-off scores for adults according to SIS.

SIS category cutoffs	Expressivity			Sensitivity			Control		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Emotional	39.78	39.70-56.36	56.36	42.13	42.30-58.25	58.25	36.41	36.41-51.51	51.51
Social	34.28	34.28-56.46	56.46	37.56	37.56-55.50	55.50	42.34	42.34-63.36	63.36

When it comes to *emotional expressivity*, an average score is an indication of being an expressive individual who is fairly animated and energetic in conveying one's feelings and emotions. As for *social expressivity*, an individual with a medium score has the traits of being verbally articulate but is in need of improvement in initiating and guiding the conversations involved. Being average in terms of *emotional* and *social sensitivity*, one can be considered to be moderately effective in receiving and decoding verbal and nonverbal signals from others. When *emotional control* is considered, average score indicates poor skills in managing and monitoring personal emotions. Finally, having average *social control* skills can be interpreted as knowing how to act in a variety of situations.

4. Discussion

Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, the Polish and Turkish trainee teachers manifested similar levels of social and communication skills and, as mentioned before, their levels of social competences revealed some shortcomings. It can thus be assumed that both in Polish and Turkish cultural settings, the profile of a prospective teacher indicates an individual with expressive and social skills but constrained abilities in functioning as a socially competent teacher. However, the social skills of teachers have been recognized as critical to learning and achievement. It is argued that teachers with high levels of social competence are better able to develop and manage nurturing relationships with their students, manage behavior in their classrooms, serve as behavioral role models and regulate their own emotions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). According to Eccles and Roeser (1999), socially and emotionally competent teachers set the tone of the classroom by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students, designing lessons that build on student strengths and abilities that promote intrinsic motivation and encouraging cooperation. Likewise, La Paro and Pianta (2003) state that the behaviors of socially and emotionally competent teachers are associated with optimal classroom climate which is characterized by low levels of conflict and disruptive behavior, smooth transitions from one type of activity to another, appropriate expressions of emotion, respectful

communication and problem-solving, strong interest and focus on task, as well as supportiveness and responsiveness to individual differences and students' needs.

Following this line of reasoning, we could claim that the social skills of teachers play an important role in developing and maintaining a supportive teacher-student relationship and ensuring effective classroom management. When language classrooms are taken into account, teachers' ability to build a non-threatening environment conducive to learning through effective classroom management plays a central role. As Williams and Burden (1997) argue, the nature of the learning context and the personal interactions that occur within the language classrooms have a profound influence upon whether, what and how an individual learns the target language. They add that language classrooms oriented towards building relationships contribute to creating learner satisfaction and interest in the subject matter. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) also state that the success of classroom learning is very much dependent on how students relate to each other, what the classroom climate is like, what roles the teacher and the learners play and, more generally, how well students can cooperate and communicate with each other. From this point of view, the social skills of language teachers could be considered as an important contributor to the development of supportive relationships because relationship management is a core dimension of social and emotional competence (cf. Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg (2004).

In addition to building supportive relationships with students, the social and emotional competence of teachers also plays an important role in effective classroom management. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) state that teachers equipped with high social and emotional competence are likely to be more effective classroom managers through skillfully using their emotional expressions and verbal support to promote enthusiasm and enjoyment of learning by understanding the dynamics of the classroom situation. Similarly, Weinstein and Evertson (2006) argue that teachers with social skills use management strategies which are consistent with a view of classrooms as places for active and student-centered learning. Creating warm and safe classroom climates promoted by effective classroom management skills is one of the qualifications of language teachers for improving student learning (CEFR, 2001). In this regard, social competence is highly relevant to language education. The process of language learning is a dynamic and multifaceted system (Dörnyei, 2009) and within the complexity of the language classroom environment, the social skills of language teachers are imperative. In more concrete terms, as the current study also emphasizes, language teachers should have the ability to interpret the manifestations of learners' emotional states and be able to act on the affective context to make it more supportive of the learning process (Wedell & Malderez, 2013). Besides being emotionally sensitive and acting accordingly, language teachers also

need to be sensitive to verbal messages and have ample ability in verbal expression as this is needed for effective communication. Unfortunately, skills of this kind do not constitute part of teacher training programs. The findings of this study clearly show that more emphasis should be placed on developing future language teachers' social skills. These skills must be enhanced because an ideal, socially competent teacher profile is such that includes certain qualities. These include being comfortable in speaking before large groups, being expressive in face, voice, and gesture, being emphatic, being adept in providing a secure classroom atmosphere in social and emotional terms, being able to hide negative feelings (anger, exhaustion, etc.) which could be reflected in body language, being able to avoid condescending behavior, having the capacity for initiating humor, being invigorating, and displaying an overt attitude.

5. Conclusion and implications

As seen in *European profile for language teacher education* (Kelly, 2004), social competence has been identified as one of the key indicators to be targeted in adopting the role of a teacher, not only a language teacher but also as a teacher of social and communication skills. Among the skills teachers should be equipped with is the ability to respond to individual needs of learners, to create an inclusive classroom environment, to foster classroom interaction so as to achieve learning objectives, to be able to appreciate and tolerate diverse traits, to create an embracing ambiance, and to adapt the most appropriate approach to classroom management. Although research findings indicate that social competences comprise interactions between individual characteristics, social demands and situational characteristics, our findings revealed no remarkable differences in this respect between the teacher trainees from the two distinctive cultures. In other words, we observed that similar social skills were valued by the Polish and Turkish students and that similar social behaviors were manifested. As the analysis of the inventory responses showed that the students did not display full-fledged social capabilities, such competences should be clearly defined for EFL settings and included in the curriculum as a stand-alone component to be taught explicitly and assessed accordingly.

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