The Competencies of an English Teacher: Beginning Student Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a survey conducted with first year Education students at a Queensland university on the levels of competency in literacies expected for teachers in schools. Eight aspects were chosen to be examined to discover the skill levels students thought to be essential for effective teaching and to compare these with their estimation of their own skill level; spelling and grammar competency rated the highest, ICT/computing and visual aspects the lowest for teachers. Students rated their own spelling competency at the highest level and knowledge of genre the lowest. They were asked how they intended to develop their competency skill whilst undergoing teacher training; the written comments were analysed phenomenographically exposing students' conceptions of skill development as occurring through discrete and concrete experiences and processes of study, learning, and practise. There is no acknowledgement of the influence of the contextual knowledge in which competencies are founded.

Introduction

There is little argument that student teachers applying for teacher registration need to hold and demonstrate competency in literacy and numeracy. Training institutions offer a range of support resources and services to help students adopt good learning habits, develop and refine their skills, but these are underused (Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2010). To engage students more advantageously in attaining these competencies knowledge of their understandings is first needed. The academic content of the degree course at a Queensland university does little to direct how academic and practical deficiencies could be remedied. This setting gave rise to the initiative for this study and was followed by informed dialogue with beginning pre-service teachers showing a diversity of opinions of the competence required to be a professional educator.

The Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education (2003) stated that "There is increasing demand in all occupations and in the community generally for well-educated, creative and enterprising people who communicate well, show initiative, work effectively together and demonstrate high levels of competence and responsibility"(Prioritising Science, Technology and Mathematics Education, para. 2) and suggested that one of two "requirements to meet for a fully functioning system of professional learning for Australia's teachers [is] recognition and reward for teachers who demonstrate advanced competencies and continued professional development" (The Professional Learning Continuum, para. 8).

Quality or excellence in teaching is being benchmarked by various state, national and international professional teaching and accreditation standards. The Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2008) rewards university teachers who have "made a broad and deep contribution to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching" (p. 7) by "inspiring and motivating students through high-level communication, presentation and interpersonal skills" (p. 9).

To facilitate this, objective competency frameworks for teachers were devised by a number of bodies in Australia (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1998; Ministerial Advisory Council on Teacher Education and Quality of Teaching, 1994; National Project on the Quality of

Teaching and Learning, 1996; WA Department of Education and Training, 2004) but there was little joint agreement. A useful but generic definition of teacher competency is that it is "a demonstration of observable professional behaviour in a certain given context ... guided by a mixture of knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics" (Ministry of National Education, Turkey, 2007, p. 1). Whether teacher competency is defined by a checklist or a "more holistic approach which foregrounds complexity, reflection and critique" (p. 7), it is clear that a competency in *literacy,* however defined, is a foundational concern for teachers with Queensland registration standards stating that "teachers are committed to … modelling effective language, literacy and numeracy skills" (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006, p. 8). This is not just for primary teachers, who cover the full range of teaching areas in a classroom, but includes secondary teachers who "not only need to be conversant with their own subject areas, general teaching methods and subject-specific pedagogic strategies; they also need to know how to teach literacy" (Milton, Rohl, & House, 2007, p. 2).

The recent Masters report (2009) draws attention to the need for teachers' competency, particularly as regards to literacy, stating that "the Inquiry noted 'some skepticism among practising teachers about the personal literacy standards of new graduates'" (p. 62). The expectation is that a teacher must be competent, indeed the Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, House of Representatives (2007) categorically states that "all students who will graduate with a qualification in education will have demonstrated that they have high level literacy ... skills" (pp. xxiv-xxv).

How these competencies are selected, defined, and tested attracts debate and their enforced demonstration as a requirement for teacher registration in Queensland, as suggested by Recommendation 1 in the Masters report (2009); "That all aspiring primary teachers be required to demonstrate through test performances, as a condition of registration, that they meet threshold levels of knowledge about the teaching of literacy" (p. x), has raised much controversy, not all of it academic. The definition of literacy agreed to by both State and Federal ministers (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs) in 1997 and currently cited by many Australian education sites (e.g. ACT Education and Training, Tasmania Department of Education, Early Childhood Australia) is:

> *Literacy* is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts. It also involves the integration of speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking with reading and writing, and includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different social situations. (p. 13)

In the Australian Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs report *Australian Literacies: Informing National Policy on Literacy Education,* Lo Bianco and Freebody (1997) emphasised that "it is crucial to support a broad-ranging notion of literacy as a repertoire of capabilities which comprises the various linguistic and intellectual resources which learners need to function at the highest and broadest levels of literacy" (pp. vi-vii). This is also the current understanding of the Queensland Studies Authority [QSA] (2009) that "literacy refers to the capabilities that work together so individuals can effectively understand, use and make meaning in both traditional and new communications technologies across different contexts" (p. 43). Information technologies have extended the range of literacies needed by teachers as their "visual, audial, gestural and spatial patterns are available to interacting humans as potential 'meaning-making' tools and information and communications technologies draw on these in combinations which generate original literacies for their utilisation" (Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997, p. 7). Because of this literacy no longer resides entirely within the domain of the English curriculum but "literacy is underpinned by English [and] students' literacy capabilities are therefore developed through and alongside their learning in English" (QSA, 2009, p. 43).

There is no question that literacy in its various forms is a fundamental of preservice teacher education with the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration (2001) acknowledging that

"universities recognise that planning for preservice teacher education in literacy is ongoing and dynamic" (p. 68).

Studies exploring the topic of teacher competencies have been carried out with secondary teachers - beginning and senior - (Louden et al., 2005; Milton et al., 2007) and primary teachers (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001). The personal skills of final year preservice teachers (So, Cheng, & Tsang, 1996) have also been researched and the development of literacy levels of student teachers has been assessed over their degree program (Devereaux & Wilson, 2008). Further, students were asked to give "their beliefs concerning the *importance* of teaching KAL [knowledge about language], *what kind of KAL* should be taught and *how it* should be taught in schools" (Harper & Rennie, 2008, p. 26). Although preservice students' assessment of their tertiary teachers is of on-going interest in the literature (Burdsal & Harrison, 2008; Frick, Chadra, Watson, Wang & Green, 2009; Shevlin, 2000) it does not include their perception of excellence in the literacy skills of qualified school teachers.

At a secondary level there are studies citing school students' perceptions of the *good practice* of their teachers covering such points as "presentation must be interesting and exciting …the [music] teacher's interpersonal style or posture … the way they communicate and their expectations, commitment and encouragement" (Leung & Wong, 2005, p. 3). Forrester-Jones (2003) found that tertiary students commented on the enthusiasm of their lecturers as well and "a good rapport between students and teachers also ranked highly, ... qualitative comments further exemplified good communication skills and approachability as important teaching traits" (p. 65), however no literature could be found on pre-service student teachers' perceptions of the skills English teachers should have.

The argument for undertaking this study is in line with the findings of the Bradley *Review of Australian Higher Education* (2009) that Australian institutions need to ensure a provision of *high quality* education for a diverse student population to deal with the challenges of the new millennium (pp. xi-xvii). It specifically addresses the point made by Harper and Rennie (2008) in their study of preservice teachers' knowledge of language, that, "in order to build pre-service courses more effectively, we need to understand what pre-service teachers already know about language when they enter our courses and how important they consider this knowledge will be in their future teaching careers" (p. 23). Although the focus is somewhat different the "need to know more about the knowledge and values that pre-service teachers bring with them when they enter a teacher education course" (p. 23) expresses the same thought.

Methodology

The project was undertaken using a mix of methodologies. The ratings of teacher and student literacy competencies were quantitatively gathered in a written opinion survey using a 1-5 Likert scale, the results of which are shown in simple comparative charts (Fig. 1-5). Written comments describing how students expected to develop their competencies were qualitatively collated and analysed using a phenomenographic approach.

Although initially used to explore aspects of learning by Ference Marton, Roger Säljö, Lars-Öwe Dahlgren, and Lennart Svensson in the 1970s, phenomenographic methodologies are now used to examine a range of phenomenon where "the focus is on describing the qualitatively different ways people approach and perceive particular tasks in relation to particular contexts" (Prosser, 2000, p. 35). Such an approach allows investigation of the many conceptions held of a particular event or idea as "a complex of the different ways in which it can be experienced" (Marton, 2000, p. 105). This is done by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions so "as to allow the interviewees to decide on those aspects of the question which appear most relevant to them" (Bowden, 2000, p. 8). The findings are presented as a "logically structured complex of the different ways of experiencing an object ... called the outcome space of the object" (p. 105), usually a visual diagram.

The Study

The aim of this study was to ascertain how beginning preservice education students perceived the need for school teacher competence in a range of literacies and their own comparative level of skill in the same areas and how they would seek to develop such skills during their teacher training. The study received institutional ethical agreement and participants were guaranteed anonymity at each stage of the data collection, collation, analysis and reporting. Relevant conventional demographic information was gathered to provide a snapshot of the student cohort.

The Participants

A Likert response survey and written commentary was conducted with first year education students on their first Orientation day in semester one 2006 before they had been introduced to course material. Fifty-five secondary (English specialists) and 254 primary (on two campuses), (309) students in total of the 419 enrolled responded – a rate of 74% (see Tab. 1) although not every student answered every question. Ages ranged from 17 to 47 years with a ratio of 16% males to 84% females. All had attained at least a pass in Senior English and the requisite tertiary entrance level to be offered a place in the program. In addition 16% had post-school study including Bachelor programs in a range of disciplines. Sixty-three per cent indicated that they had undertaken some work experience requiring vocational levels of literacy before enrolling in the education program.

	Primary campus A (PrimA)	Primary campus B (PrimB)	Secondary English (Sec)	Total
Enrolled	112	198	109	419
Responded	99 (88%)	155 (78%)	55 (50%)	309 (74%)
Age	17-46	17-47	17-30	17-47
Average age	21.40	21.78	17.75	21.78
Male/female	13/87%	11/89%	33/66%	16/84%
State school/other	48/52%	55/45%	66/34%	55/45%
Post-school study	13%	19%	11%	16%
Work experience	74%	57%	56%	63%

Table 1: respondent demographics

Survey Questions

From the literature and curriculum syllabi eight aspects underpinning literacy were identified:
- (i) verbal and nonverbal (e.g. communicating, informing, persuading, etc. through debate, presentations etc.);
- (ii) reading/ viewing/ listening (e.g. interpreting, analysing, etc.);
- (iii) visual (e.g. graphics, composition, etc.) ;
- (iv) genre (e.g. form - essay, report, letter, etc.);
- (v) structure (e.g. paragraphs, sentences, etc.) ;
- (vi) grammar;
- (vii) spelling; and
- (viii) ICT / computing skills (e.g. word processing, powerpoint, multimedia, hypertext, etc.).

The survey asked students to indicate the level of skill (1 - low to 5- extremely good) they believed a competent teacher in their area of study (primary or secondary English) needed to possess; the level of skill which they considered they had as beginning teacher trainees; and how they intended to develop their skills further.

Survey Data (1) Teacher Skills

As expected students considered that teacher skills in all eight aspects (Fig. 1) should be at a level 4 or 5 in a series of Likert ratings where 5 is considered *extremely good*. In order of importance these percentages were: spelling (86.33%); grammar (86.09%); structure (79.80%); reading/viewing/ listening (75.99%); verbal and non-verbal (65.80%); and genre (63.37%) at a level 5 with ICT/computing (48.83%) and visual (48.5%) at level 4. It is possible that visual and ICT/computing may be seen as not falling within the role of the general classroom primary or secondary English teacher, but viewed as specialist topics to be dealt with in Art or Design or ICT areas.
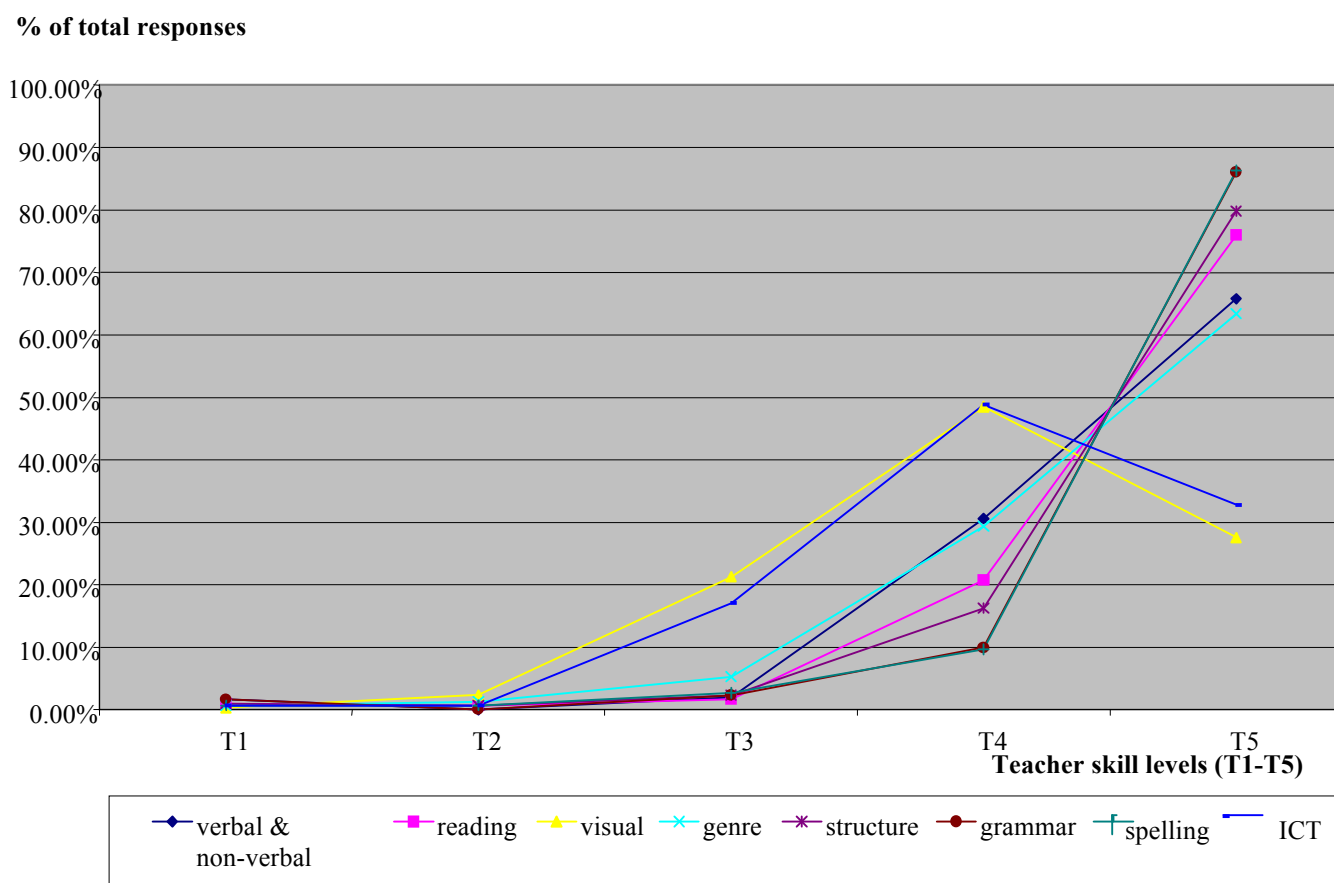
% of total responses

Figure 1: respondent ratings of expected teacher skills
Note: spelling and grammar are overlaid in the chart

Where the importance of teacher skills in any aspect was rated at a 1 or 2 by a student, his or her profile of responses was examined across the eight categories. The three cohorts were identified as Primary A (PrimA), Primary B (PrimB) and Secondary (Sec) with participants being allocated a cohort identifier and numbered. One response was invalid as Sec13 had rated verbal and non-verbal as 1, 2 and 5. Four students submitted questionable responses rating a number of teacher skills at a level 1 or 2 – PrimB30 rated all at this level, PrimA105 and Sec 14 seven of the eight, and PrimA90 six of the eight. Of the others, the categories verbal and non-verbal, reading/viewing/ listening and grammar received a level 1 rating from the same student (PrimA68); genre a level 1 rating from PrimA134 and a level 2 from PrimA55; structure, spelling, and ICT a level 2 rating from PrimA134, PrimA68, and Sec12 respectively. Seven of the categories received 4 - 6 ratings in total of a level 1 or 2 including the responses from students who gave questionably low ratings across the board with the category of visual skills, apart from one level 1 rating from the student who marked this across all categories, receiving seven (2%) level 2 ratings.

That verbal and non-verbal, reading/viewing/listening, genre, structure, grammar, and spelling are all rated at such a low level suggests that students may have read the Likert ratings incorrectly or that the students are making an attitudinal point about their personal dislike of such areas. Upcraft, Crissman Ishler, and Swing (2005) advise that "some first-year students may exhibit immature behaviours … such as purposefully marking all the wrong answers on a survey, … or giving inadequate effort because of sleep deprivation" and suggest "appropriate cleaning of data to remove or control for these unusual data points" (p. 488).

Survey Data (2) Student Skills

The majority of students rate their own skills in all eight areas (Fig. 2) at a level 3 or 4, where 1 is *low* and 5 is *extremely good*: grammar (41%) and spelling (40.33%) at a level 4 with verbal and non-verbal (57.84%); genre (50%); visual (45.67%); structure (42%); reading/viewing/listening (41.91%); and ICT/computing (37.54%) at level 3. Significant numbers of students indicated that they felt their visual (25%), ICT/computing (19.93%), genre (14%), verbal and non-verbal (12.09%), and grammar (10.33%) skills were low at a level 1 or 2.
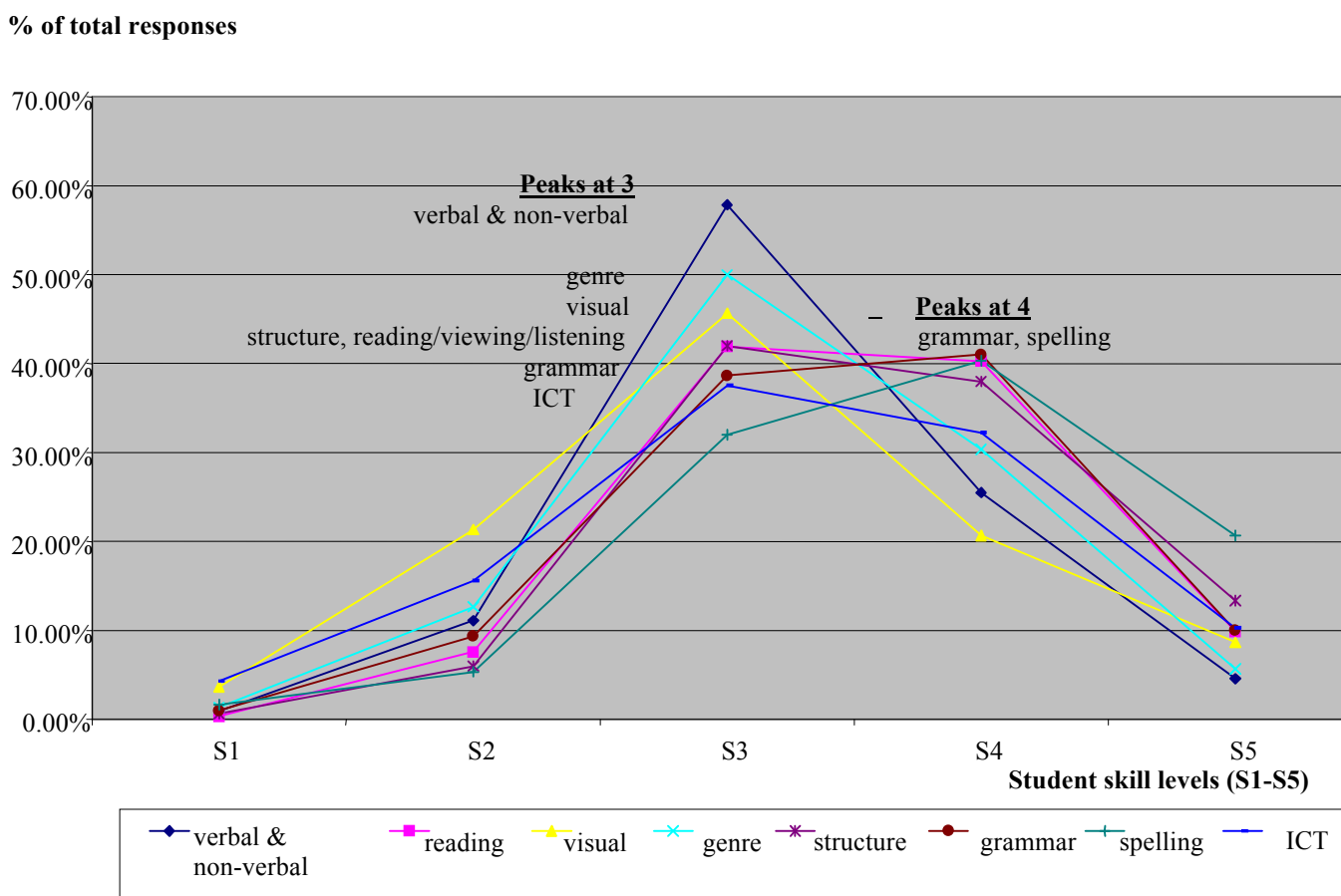
Figure 2: student skills - respondent ratings of their own skills

In comparing teacher expected skills and student held skills, it can be seen that the majority of beginning students feel that they do not have the levels of skill they expect qualified teachers to have in spelling, grammar, structure, reading/viewing/listening, verbal and non-verbal, and genre (level 5); ICT/computing, visual (level 4). Students rate spelling and grammar the highest in expected teacher skills (level 5) as well as their own skills but at a lower level (level 4). The closeness of these ratings suggest spelling and grammar are seen as the focus of English teaching with students believing they already have good skills in these aspects but are expecting to refine them further before graduating.

Students then rate structure, reading/viewing/listening, verbal/non-verbal, genre as the next highest expected teacher skills still at a level 5 with their own levels for this at a 3. These are evidently seen as important skills for English teachers and as students rate themselves as reasonable they expect to develop these skills to a much higher level during their studies. ICT/computing and visual rated the lowest for teachers although still a level 4 (good) with their own levels for both at a 3. However in order of student skill levels visual was third in level 3 with 25% rating themselves as a level 1 or 2 whilst ICT was lowest in level 3 with 19.93% rated themselves at a level 1 or 2. These two skills showed a marked low level of student confidence in their own skills.

One Example: Spelling.

The highest level of competency for teachers (level 5 - *extremely good*) in spelling was rated by more students (86.33%) than any of the other competencies and so serves as a good example in explaining the comparisons made.

Of the students 61% feel they have level 4 or 5 skill in spelling and 51% a level 4 or 5 skill in grammar whereas they expect competent teachers to hold both at a level 5. This lack of students' personal skill is borne out by an analysis of the short answer responses to other questions in the survey. This showed a substantial number of writing inadequacies in 43% of respondents which evidenced variance from standard English writing practice in spelling, structure and grammar, sometimes repeatedly (Tab. 2). Identification of these took into account that these were *bullet type* condensed replies, and that not every student responded to every question.

	Spelling errors	Structural and grammatical errors	No errors
Primary campus A	36%	50%	34%
Primary campus B	30%	69%	25%
Secondary	23%	53%	23%
Total	63%	60%	57%

Table 2: writing errors in responses

By way of example, structural and grammatical errors were displayed in such responses as:
The ability to convey and communicate affectively language.
Way of writing, how it is put together.
Literacy defines what reading and writing actually is.
A form of words constructed to indicate a way of communicating between individuals.
The comprehension required to aptly understand written and nonwritten stimuli.
The role of literacy is to enable children how to read.
… to teach people skills to read and communicate through vast resourses.
Literacy plays an important role in helping learn and fully understand the material.
The role of literacy in education is to help better communicate.
A good understand of literacey enables easier exchange of knowledge from teacher to student.
It is a high role in learning and education as it's the base of everything.
I did not be taught enough.
Such lack of skill is noted by Harper and Rennie (2008) in their study of first year student teachers whom they say "showed limited understandings in their ability to analyse the parts and structure of sentences, and their limited knowledge of metalinguistic terms which did not seem to extend past the basic concepts of 'noun', 'verb' and 'adjective'" (p. 27).

By age group the number of errors to non-errors (Tab. 3) is 72% (17-19 years), 75% (20-29 years), 62% (30-39 years), and 75% (40-47 years). In the under 20 age group the percentage of

errors to non-errors is much the same to within 2% whether primary, secondary, male or female. This seems to indicate that a poor ability to write well is not dependent on sex or tied to a selection of program. In the 20-29 age group primary and secondary are within 2% but there is a difference of 5% of more males with errors and 5% of females with no errors. The 30-39 and 40-49 age groups were both all primary students, the latter all females. The 30-39 year old students showed a 7.50% decrease in males with errors but an increase of 7.5% of females with errors. The data does not furnish statistical evidence with which to draw any firm conclusions regarding basic written literacy competency and age or sex. However it is interesting to note that in Queensland there were quite significant English curriculum changes in 1994 (affecting students under 28) and again in 2004 (affecting students aged 17 and 18). This data would suggest these have been positive changes.

	Age	Primary	Secondary	Male	Female	Total	Total responses
No errors	17-19	36 = 77%	11 = 23%	7 = 15%	40 = 85%	47 = 28%	
Errors		94 = 76%	29 = 25%	19 = 16%	104 = 85%	123 = 72%	170
No errors	20-29	12 = 86%	2 = 14%	2 = 14%	12 = 86%	14 = 25%	
Errors		38 = 88%	5 = 12%	8 = 19%	35 = 81%	43 = 75%	57
No errors	30-39	10 = 100%	0	2 = 20%	8 = 80%	10 = 38%	
Errors		16 = 100%	0	2 = 12.50%	14 = 87.5	16 = 62%	26
No errors	40-47	2 = 100%	0	0	2 = 100%	2 = 25%	
Errors		6 = 100%	0	0	6 = 100%	6 = 75%	8

Table 3: demographic breakdown of errors and non-errors

Teachers are expected, by 86% of the surveyed students, to have the highest competency (level 5 – *extremely good)* in spelling (Fig. 3). 294 responses were tabled (Tab. 4) comparing teacher expected skills and student held skills and comments made by students about how they intended to develop their skills to match those they expected from a qualified teacher.

	Expected teacher skill level				
	1	2	3	4	5
Student rating of their own skills					
1	0	0	0	1	3
2	0	0	1 = 12.5%	4 = 16%	11 = 4%
3	2 = 100%	2 = 100%	6 = 75%	15 = 52%	70 = 28%
4	0	0	0	8 = 28%	110 = 44%
5	0	0	1 = 12.5%	1 = 4%	59 = 24%
Total at teacher levels	2	2	8	29	250

Table 4: expected teacher skill level and student rating of their own skills

Figure 3 presents the number of student responses shown grouped against each expected teacher skill level. Students' ratings of their own levels of spelling (levels S1 -S5, left to right) are indicated by 5 bars in each grouping, the height indicating student numbers. Only the grouping at expected teacher skill level 3 (T3) shows a correlation of the majority of students' rating themselves also as a level 3 which is what they expect a teacher to hold with this being only 3% of the total responses in the spelling category it is not statistically significant. The other groupings at expected teacher skill levels (T1, T2, T4, T5) show no apparent connection between the rating students give themselves and their expectation of the level of skill a competent teacher should have; for example, only 28% of students (eight individuals) who expect a teacher to hold a level 4 in spelling also rate themselves as a level 4 with 68% (20 students) rating themselves lower; 24% (59 students) who rate themselves at the level of a teacher at level 5 and 76% (194 students) rate themselves lower.
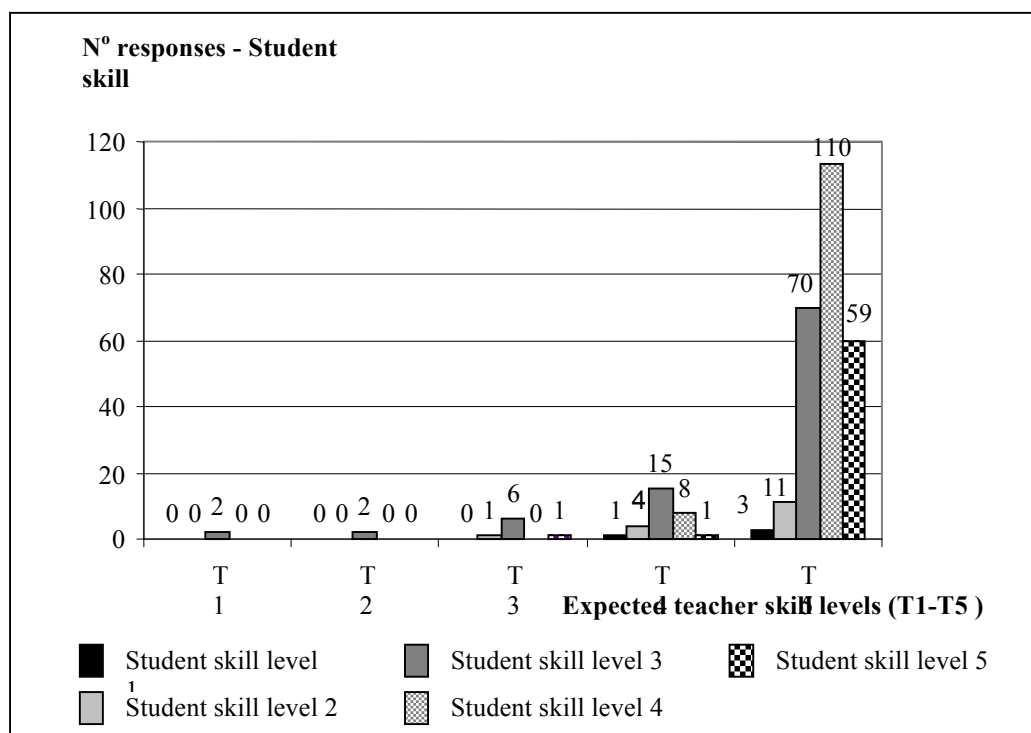
N° responses - Student skill

Figure 3: spelling skills – students' own skill level and the expected teacher level

The majority of students commented in the survey that they would develop their spelling by self-correcting assignment work through using a dictionary and editing processes. Reading is advanced as another strategy to improve spelling skills, albeit as a passive process. There is no reference to actively learning spelling through an extension of vocabulary or expanding a contextual knowledge of Latin roots and no mention of any expectations that university study programs will provide instruction that will help in their development.

Students who rated themselves as a level 5 said that they "get lots of help" and constantly use a dictionary. Students who rated themselves at level 4 emphasised practise as a way of improving saying "practise makes perfect" and that they "intend to improve skills through further practise". They also referred to reading as a means of improving spelling stating that they needed to "read more" and engage in "further reading of novels/texts" as well as intending to "read over work more thoroughly" and in particular to "reread rough drafts". Connections were made between developing spelling skills and "being involved and ready to try anything" and "making the most of learning at university and participating in tutorials".

Students who rated themselves at level 3 also expressed the need to use a dictionary (equated with being a "best friend") and technology, to read "more" and with "a university influence", and aimed to "write more" and to acknowledge the value of "checking" and writing "drafts and having someone edit this work". More generally they believed they could learn this skill from "others' experience", "feedback from teaching staff", "extra study", "working harder" and would benefit from individualised tuition. Students who rated themselves at level 2 offered only practice, reading, and using a dictionary as ways to develop their spelling skills. There were no comments made by students who rated themselves as a level 1.

Comparisons Across All Competencies

Responses expecting a teacher's level to be a 1 or 2 are few. All students rating any expected teacher competency at a level 3 were examined to identify what level they rated themselves in the same competency. Figure 4 shows that the majority of students expecting this level of teacher skill rate themselves at an equivalent level of 3 (S3 - 40-75%) for all except grammar where they rate themselves equally as level 1, 2, 3, and 5 but mainly at the higher level of

4 (33%). It would appear that these students are stating that they have already attained the level of competency that they feel a teacher should have but that it is only a *mid* level of 3 rather than expecting an *extremely good* level of 5. This may be a sad reflection of the low entry scores to pre-service training and cynical public debate about literacy skills in schools.
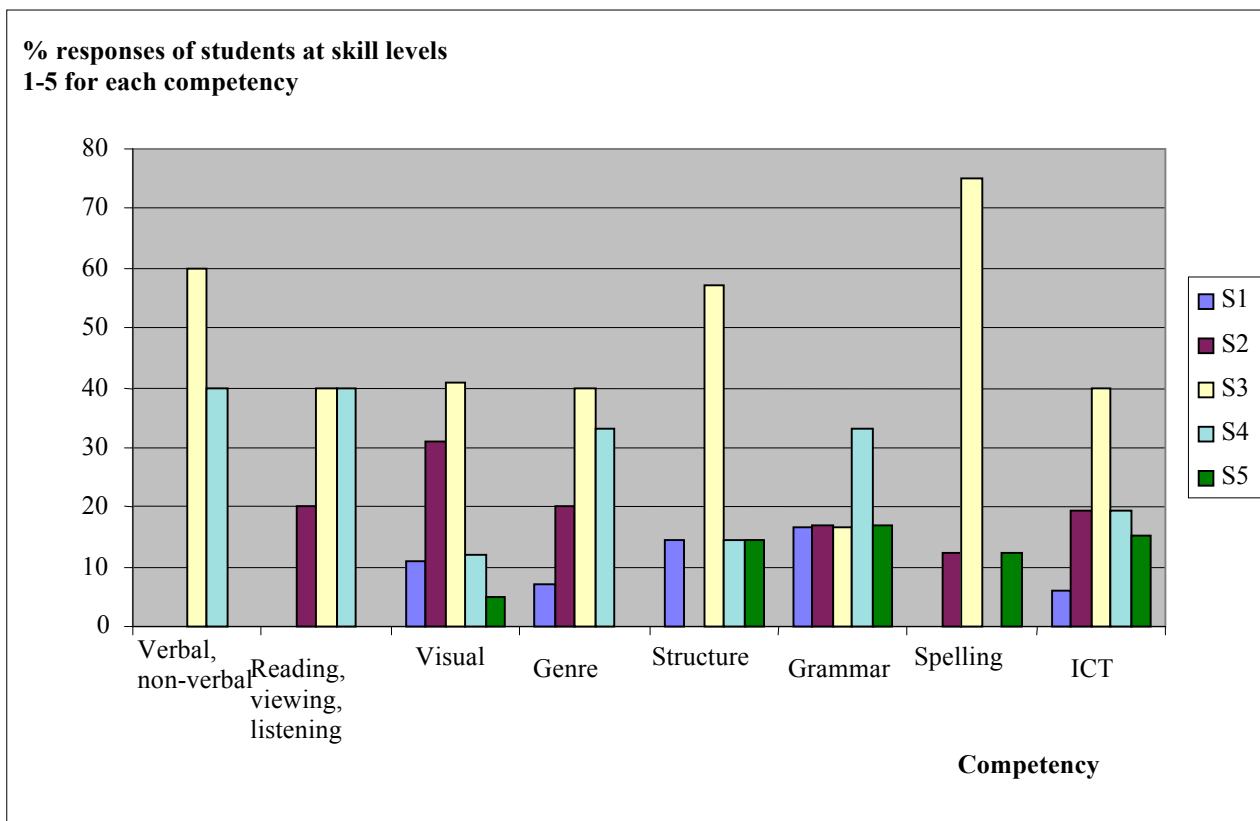

% responses of students at skill levels 1-5 for each competency

Figure 4: competencies compared - expected teacher skill level 3

The students who expected teacher skills to be at level 4 in any competency were compared. Figure 5 shows that the majority of students expecting this level of teacher skill rate themselves at a lower level with only a third of students rating their skill level as equivalent in reading, viewing and listening and 38% in ICT (S4 ☐).
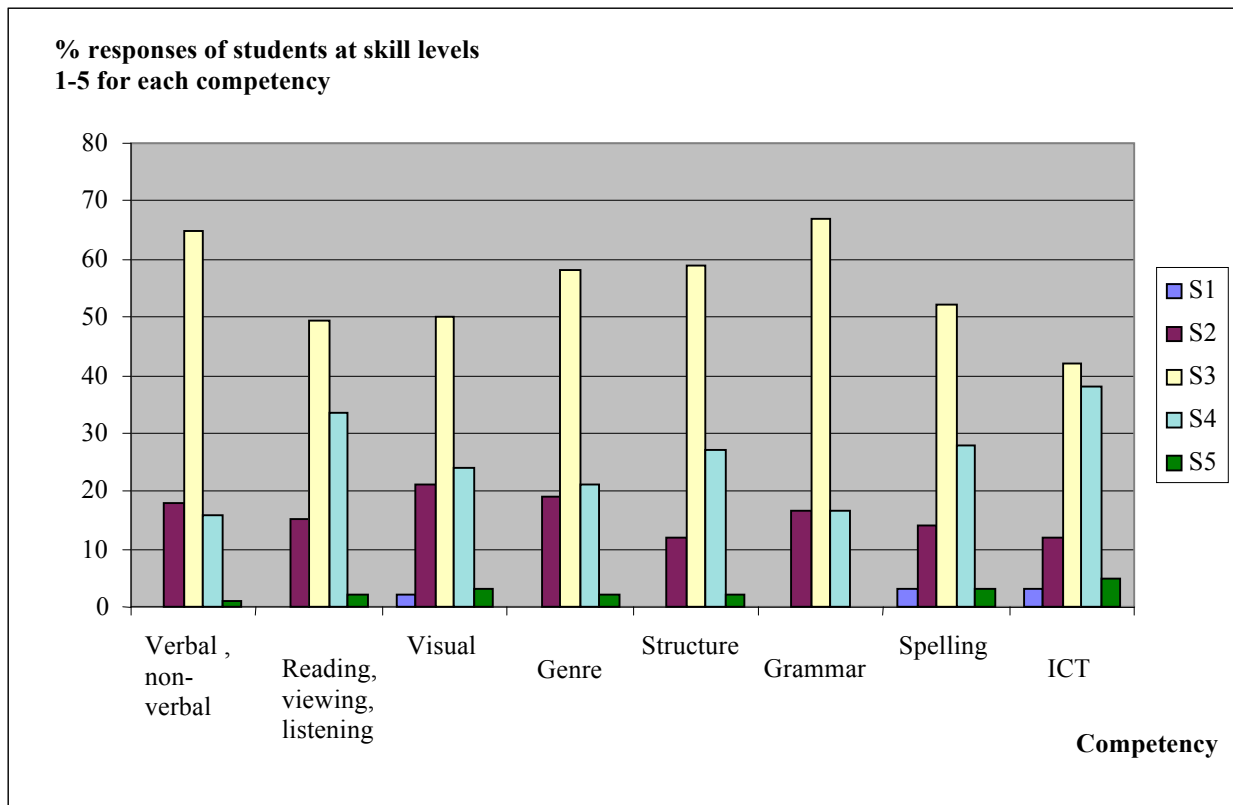
Figure 5: competencies compared - expected teacher skill level 4

Similarly the majority of students expecting a level 5 teacher skill rate themselves in the same competency at a much lower level with only 23% of students rating their skill level as equivalent only in visual and spelling (S5 ▮).
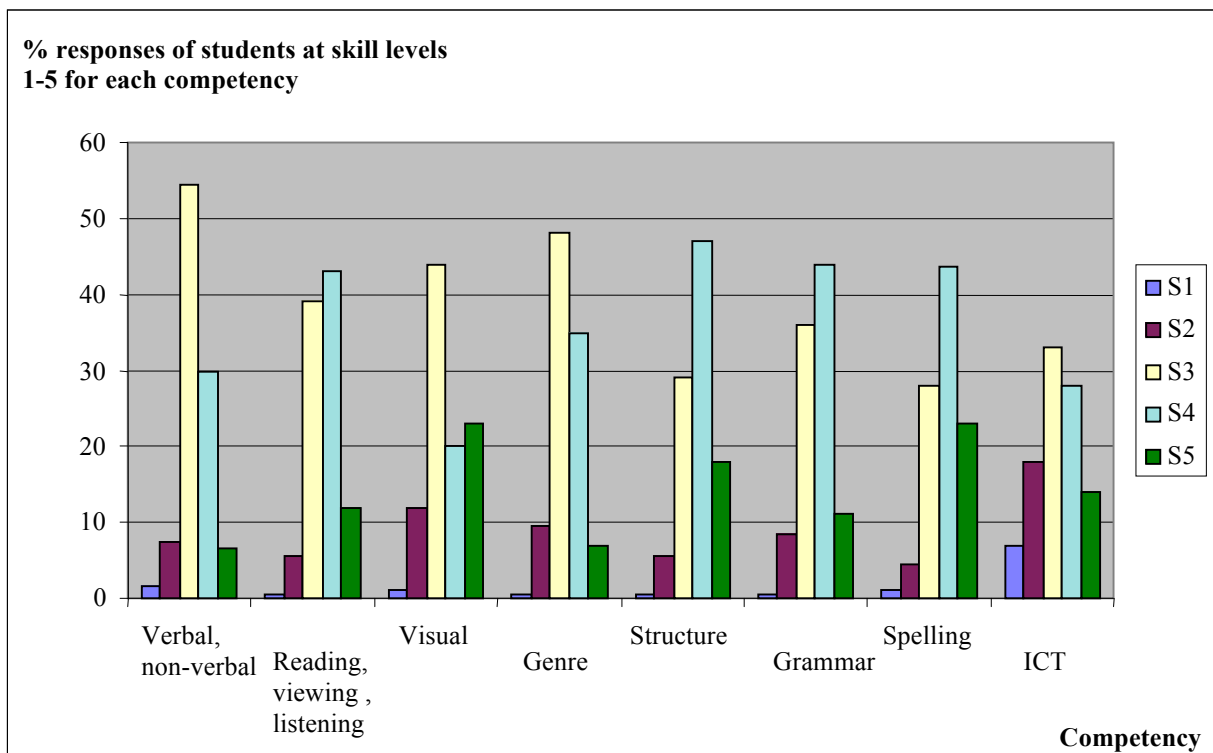

Figure 6: competencies compared - expected teacher skill level 5

Survey Data (3) Development of Skills

All written comments made by students regarding how they would develop skills in each of the eight aspects were collated and phenomenographically sorted into concept clusters known as *categories of description*. The data is of the collective experience and is equally valid whether stated by one person or more (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 323). The sorting process is one of reiteration and comparison as "definitions for categories are tested against the data, adjusted, retested, and adjusted again. There is, however, a decreasing rate of change, and eventually the whole system of meanings is stabilized" (Marton, 1986, p. 43). Categories are labeled using selected terminology from their responses which define the "core meanings" (Marton, 1986, p. 43). In this study these were identified as:

- practise – "I intend to improve my skills through further practise of these skills", "will develop skills with more use";
- experience – "more experience, more examples to learn from, analysing others", "gaining confidence";
- learning – "learn how to communicate better and more effectively", "extra study";
- personal-development – "build more self confidence", "pay particular attention to areas that I feel that I may be lacking or quite unsure about";
- university opportunities – "course participation", "through interaction with others"
- understanding – "by understanding my subject";
- studying/working – "work really hard, use resources to check work and improve", "study up on the different styles of writing";
- knowledge – "re-educate myself on paragraphs, punctuation etc.", "know more about it"; and
- specific strategies – "doing more drafts", "revising techniques", "listening, note taking and absorbing text".

The composition of each category with respect to the aspect of competency is shown below (Tab. 5).

Categories of description	Verbal and non-verbal	Reading, viewing, listening	Visual	Genre	Structure	Grammar	Spelling	ICT/ computing
Practise	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Experience	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	X
Learning	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Personal-development	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
University opportunities	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Understanding	X	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Studying	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Knowledge	-	-	X	X	X	-	X	X
Specific strategies	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	X

Table 5: categories of descriptions and expected teacher competencies

The phenomenographic technique used to illustrate the ways in which the cohort conceive the phenomenon of the development of literacy skills is the construction of an *Outcome Space* which presents the identified concepts in a hierarchical form. Identification of the conceptions of these students is not in itself new but by mapping them and showing their relationships to each other insight may be gained which "can help in the planning of learning experiences which will lead students to a more powerful understanding of the phenomenon under study, and of other similar phenomena" (Bowden, 2000, p. 4). In this case this is how pre-service student teachers plan to develop the competencies they feel are important for English teachers. What is not expressed may also be of interest. In searching for a way to relate the conceptions the broadest schema is that they

sit on a continuum between concrete and abstract. This is not new in the domain of learning and an adapted version (Chapman, 2006) of Kolb's cycle of learning (1984) – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation – presents a suitable y-axis for the mapping. As the phenomenon under exploration is one of developing a group of competencies or skills, this is an appropriate x-axis – from *no skill* to having *all skills*. The conceptions are then placed with respect to the two axes (Fig. 7). The outcome space is a representation of the phenomenon, as it shows "a complex of the different ways in which it can be experienced [and how they are] logically related to each other, [as] … experiences of the same object" (Marton, 2000, p. 105).

Thus the development of competency in the literacies, as seen by beginning education students, is achievable through studying, learning, and practise with the University providing opportunities for this to take place. The responses within these categories indicate that this is seen as mainly a by-product of involvement with all coursework rather than as a topic or subject focus. The emphasis is on these modes of learning being part of a self-motivated personal development. Some students stated that they would use specific strategies which ranged from "more reading" to "using a dictionary" to "better drafting and editing" and taking courses on grammar, ICT and so on. Out of the total 429 comments "knowledge" or "knowing" was only referred to seven times:

- "know more about it" (visual competency);
- "learn the genres, don't know them well but know of them" (genre competency);
- "need to remember how to construct referencing" (genre competency);
- "get up-to-date with different genres, texts etc." (genre competency);
- "reading more books on how the proper procedure is done" (genre competency);
- "re-educate myself on paragraphs, punctuation etc." (structure competency); and
- "in this day and age I believe it's vital to be able to perform adiquately [sic] on a computer and will try to obtain this ASAP" (ICT/computing competency).

The term *understanding* was only used passively once in the statement "by understanding my subject".
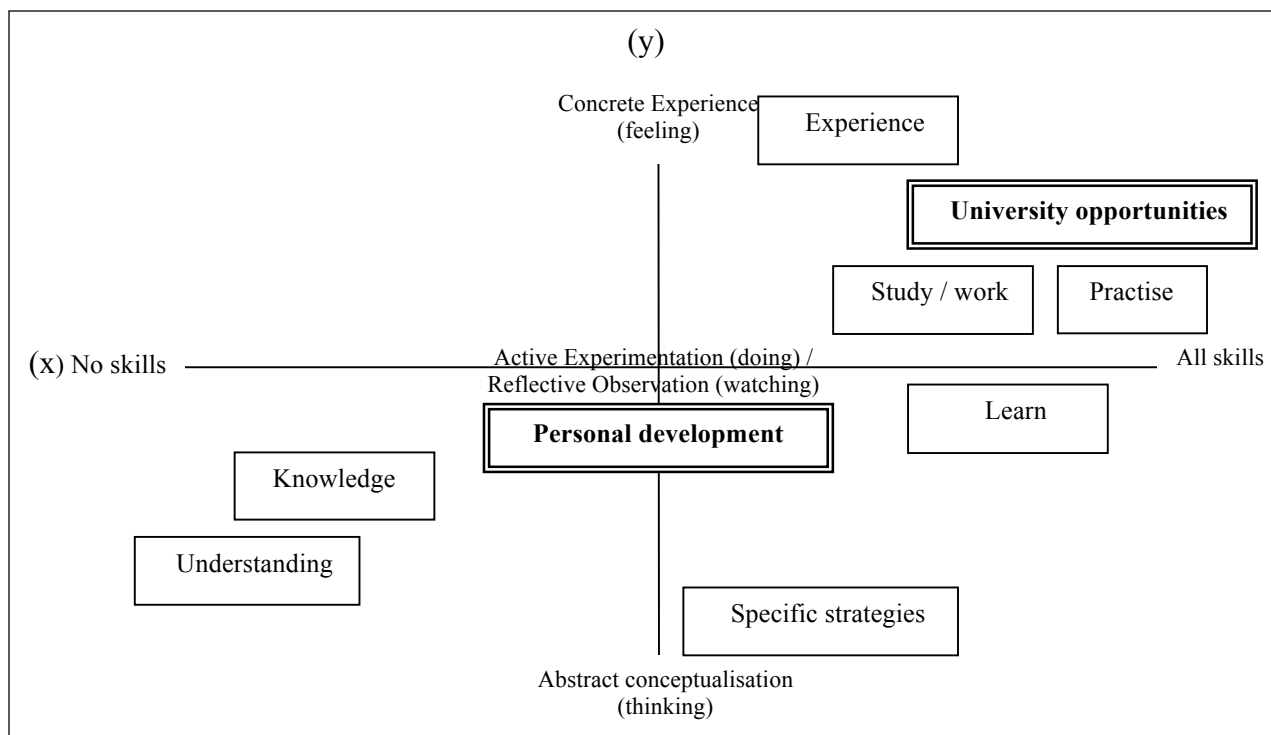

Figure 7: outcome space – development of competency

Summary and Discussion

In this study 309 responses were received from nearly three-quarters of the cohort of students starting primary and secondary (English specialists) teacher training who were predominately female with an average age of 18-22 yrs. Most have not undertaken post-school study, but those that have are from wide-ranging disciplines. More than half have work experience in roles requiring vocation levels of literacy competence.

The findings of this study illustrated by the Outcome Space based on Kolb's cycle of learning (1984) show that beginning preservice teaching students generally have a naïve and simplistic view of the gaining of competence seemingly an osmotic assimilation requiring little organised planning.

The conclusion drawn above in *Survey Data (2)* is that responses to the question of spelling are shown to hold true across all aspects of skills; the belief is that such skills can be developed through discrete concrete experience or through some vague, as yet unidentified process, of study, learning, or practise. There was little awareness that to accomplish a mastery of such skills also requires familiarity and understanding of the contextual knowledge in which the competencies are founded which, as Herrmann and Sarracino found in a 1992 study (as cited in Young, Grant, Montbriand, & Therriault, 2001, p. 44), originate "from a variety of theoretical perspectives … skill-based learning, cognition, metacognition, and the whole language philosophy".

To be effective learners students need to be motivated to engage enthusiastically with the support and services which are offered to them (Meyer & Turner, 2006; Reeve, 2005; Huitt, 2001) explicitly to help them develop and refine literacy competencies. This study shows that students have a limited vision of how this may be achieved and need to be taught to consider the *abstract conceptualisation* underpinning an understanding of the *concrete* competencies and to be informed about the role that such strategies as group work and peer mentoring, learning contracts, bridging programs, and formative assessment can play in this learning process. In considering the findings and how they might be used in planning first year pre-service courses to inform students who hold the above conceptions presented in the outcome space there are several related issues.

Firstly, even students who are successful in passing their tertiary studies do not necessarily have high levels of proficiency in literacy as indicated by the National Survey of America's College Students (Baer, Cook, & Baldi, 2007) which found that only 38% of graduating students of a 4 year program were considered proficient in literacy related to writing prose and 40% in writing documents (p. 14) compared to 13% of the general population. In Australia, the rating of people who achieved a level 3 considered to be the "minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, para. 6) in prose and document literacy after 16 -20 years of education (equivalent to a undergraduate degree) is 80% and even after 21 years or more of formal study only score between 40 to 43% (Education status, para. 2) at the highest level of proficiency (Level 4/5). The gaining of a higher education qualification is not a guarantee of high levels of literacy proficiency. In particular there is concern over beginning teachers' "levels of competence and confidence in literacy skills" (Masters, 2009, p. ix). Milton et al. (2007) found in an Australia-wide survey that only half of the 303 teacher respondents felt that their pre-service courses had adequately developed their understandings and skills in spelling and grammar, but were more positive (70-75%) about other areas such as reading, genre knowledge and critical literacy (p. 6).

Secondly, first year students hold a belief that their last year at school will be "the hardest thing they will ever do" (p. 24) and that higher education study, although requiring a lot of work, actually will not be difficult to deal with (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). The literacy requirements of academia may be new to many students but the realization is usually in response to a specific need and is seen to be the individual's responsibility (Newell-Jones, Osborne, & Massey, 2005, p. 4). This is usually assessment centred and grade driven being a reaction to poor results. Kuh (2005), a leading researcher in the first year experience, advises that institutions and academic staff should not assume that "first-year students will use the programs and services offered to

encourage their involvement" (p. 102) including academic literacy support as they are often labeled *remedial* and received negatively.

Thirdly, it should be noted that in a study of student teachers the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration (2001) found that "preservice teachers consistently rated their degree of preparedness [of literacy] at a higher level and more confidently than did supervising teachers" (p. 64) as did So, Cheng, and Tsang (1996), although they found that this self approbation diminishes after the students completed their final practicum (p. 50).

This study confirms the findings of the Committee for the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (2005) which commented that as well as a need for student teachers to be taught explicit literacy skills including grammar and spelling, they also "needed to learn how language works" (p.110); that is the bigger picture. Devereaux and Wilson (2008) argue for a "course-wide approach" over the length of the degree to develop teacher trainee students' literacy skills saying that "they need to develop the capacity to move between discourses and across genres, making meaning in different fields and for different audiences" (p. 121), that is, learning "new academic and professional literacy practices, as well as extending and enriching their 'everyday' literacies" (pp. 121-122).

Knowing that students perceive learning in the manner identified in this paper would indicate that a new framework for pedagogy is overdue and should be introduced sooner rather than later in teacher training courses, and that the mechanism of motivated self learning be addressed more effectively. With no disrespect to teaching staff it is to be hoped that there are immediate lessons to be learned from the above findings.

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