

# Oral and written competencies in first year education students: an analysis of self-evaluation narratives on the transition from High School to University

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## Competencias orales y escritas en formación de docentes de primer año: un análisis de narrativas de autoevaluaciones de la etapa de transición

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### Abstract:

**INTRODUCTION.** This article presents a study concerning Norwegian trainee teachers' understanding of their oral and written competencies in higher education. The study focused on first year Education students as they prepared to become school or kindergarten teachers. The study aimed to explore student teachers' perceptions of their own performance in meeting the oral and written objectives of the academy. **METHOD.** The study sample included part-time and full-time students in the degree of education pursuing to teach in kindergartens and full-time master's students pursuing to be primary and secondary school teachers. **RESULTS.** The findings in this analysis of student teachers' experience concerning oral and written competencies, as expressed in sixty-seven narratives, indicated that they experienced

### Resumen:

**INTRODUCCIÓN.** El artículo presenta un estudio sobre la comprensión de los estudiantes docentes noruegos de sus competencias orales y escritas en la educación superior, centrándose en los estudiantes en sus estudios iniciales de formación docente mientras se preparan para convertirse en maestros de escuela o maestros de jardín de infancia. El estudio busca una visión más profunda de las percepciones de los docentes estudiantes sobre su propio desempeño al cumplir los objetivos orales y escritos de la academia. **MÉTODO.** El estudio incluye las siguientes categorías estudiantes de educación: estudiantes de medio tiempo a nivel de licenciatura que buscan enseñar kindergarten, así como estudiantes de kindergarten de tiempo completo y estudiantes de maestría de tiempo completo que buscan ser educadores de primaria y

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high degrees of mastery for oral competency but lower levels for written competency. Furthermore, students struggled with what they described as hidden or unclear expectations related to academic text production. DISCUSSION. Based on four specific findings, the authors proposed further investigation of students' experiences in mastering language competencies. These findings on Norway will have parallels to other professional education programs elsewhere in Europe.

**Keywords:**

Teacher Education; Trainee Teacher; Competencies; Formation; Transition from High School to University.

secundaria. RESULTADOS. Los hallazgos en este análisis de la experiencia de los estudiantes docentes, con respecto a las competencias orales y escritas expresadas en sesenta y siete narrativas, indicaron que experimentaron un alto grado de dominio de la competencia oral pero niveles más bajos para la competencia escrita. Además, los estudiantes lucharon con lo que describieron como expectativas ocultas o poco claras relacionadas con la producción de textos académicos. DISCUSIÓN. Sobre la base de cuatro resultados especiales, los autores proponen una investigación adicional de las experiencias de los estudiantes en el dominio de las competencias lingüísticas. Estos hallazgos de Noruega tendrán paralelos a otros programas de educación en otras partes de Europa.

**Palabras clave:**

Formación docente; Profesor docente; Competencias; Formación; Etapa de transición.

**Résumé:**

INTRODUCTION. L'article présente une étude concernant la compréhension par les élèves enseignants norvégiens de leurs compétences à l'oral et à l'écrit dans l'éducation supérieure, plus spécifiquement sur les étudiants en formation initiale d'enseignant lorsqu'ils se préparent à devenir des enseignants dans les écoles ou les maternelles. L'étude a tenté de mieux comprendre la perception des élèves enseignants de leurs propres performances par les élèves enseignants lorsqu'ils sont confrontés aux objectifs académiques pour l'expression orale et écrite. MÉTHODE. L'échantillon de l'étude comprenait les catégories suivantes d'élèves enseignants : les étudiants à temps partiel au niveau licence souhaitant enseigner en maternelle et les étudiants à plein temps en licence amenés à enseigner en maternelle, ainsi que les étudiants préparant à plein temps un master et souhaitant enseigner dans l'enseignement primaire et secondaire. RESULTATS. Les résultats de cette analyse de l'expérience des élèves enseignants concernant leurs compétences en expression orale et écrite, révélées dans soixante-sept récits, indiquent un niveau élevé de maîtrise pour les compétences orales, mais des niveaux plus faibles pour les compétences à l'écrit. D'autre part, les étudiants étaient confrontés à ce qu'ils qualifiaient d'attentes cachées ou diffuses liées à la production de textes académiques. DISCUSSION. À partir des conclusions de cette étude, les auteurs proposent d'étudier plus en profondeur les expériences des étudiants pour ce qui est de la maîtrise des compétences linguistiques. Des parallèles pourront être établis entre ces conclusions concernant la Norvège et d'autres programmes de formation professionnelle dans d'autres pays d'Europe.

**Mots clés:**

Formation des enseignants; Élève-enseignant; Compétences; Formation; Étape de transition.

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## Introduction

Teacher education programmes focus on specific professions practiced in kindergartens and schools. However, the relevance of most teacher education programmes to professional practice has been questioned (Ministry of Education and Research, MER, 2018a, p. 11). The character of professional education is such that students' experiences and understandings interact across programmes when they practice core tasks they will perform in their profession (Grimen, 2008). Core tasks include communicational competencies, such as academic writing and oral presentation in a learning and teaching context. Teacher education programmes present different experiences for recently entered student teachers, who normally come from upper secondary school. It is the Norwegian government's ambition to permanently strengthen the teaching professions to prepare for a future in which knowledge and competencies will become increasingly important (MER, 2018a, p. 5). Students who pass swiftly through *transitional stages* (Hoel, 2012) from secondary to professional university student experience new expectations and distinct challenges. This transition from upper secondary school to teaching profession programmes at universities represents a relatively complex transitional stage as it relates to oral and written competencies.

The purpose of this study is to identify how the transition into teacher education transpires, from the perspective of students. Specifically, the study examines oral and academic written language competencies of student teachers in the transition to higher education, in two parts: (1) the experiences of first semester student teachers mastering oral competency in the transition from upper secondary school, and (2) these students' experiences mastering written language skills in the transition to the world of university texts. Both oral and written self-evaluated competencies are examined, but the emphasis will be on their professional written competency. Differences between student teachers studied are defined, as are common challenges to achieving oral and written language competencies from the student teacher perspective. This study is part of a larger project and the research question is as follows:

- **How do students in their transitional stage from upper secondary school to teacher education programmes express their own oral and written competencies?**

The concept of competency encompasses the range of skills a person must possess to qualify for a job (Illeris, 2009). This study, where student teachers report on their oral and written competencies, demonstrates that new student teachers express differing understandings of their growing professional identities at university. During their first semester, many struggle with the expectations they face concerning academic and professional writing. However, they typically believe that they have mastered the oral competencies expected of student teachers both in their university classrooms as well as in their first practice periods, in schools and kindergartens.

## Background

In their first semester, student teachers in Norway receive an introduction to academic writing; they also complete a seminar in professional digital competency with topics such as personal learning networks and social media, as well as subject-specific digital study techniques and digital ethics. The Kindergarten Teacher Education (KTE) programme, included in this study, is enshrined in the national framework plan (MER, 2012), while the two bachelor's degrees examined offer the same content in an almost-identical structure. Compared to teacher education practices in other Nordic countries, these programmes follow a special framework comprising six interdisciplinary knowledge areas (Hoydalsvik, 2017) defined specifically for the profession for which the student teachers are preparing (e.g., kindergarten teacher), and as kindergarten is interdisciplinary, teacher education is also built according to a multidisciplinary model. The two Master programmes in School Teacher Education (STE), grades 1–7 and 5–10, also have national framework plans (MER, 2016) similar in content and structure to the kindergarten programmes, with some exceptions. First-year students in both STE-programmes also study a Norwegian subject that targets the intermediate school stage, but this subject is not mandatory in 5–10 education. In management documents, however, the same requirements are set for Norwegian-language competency (Skjong, 2011). In learning outcome formulations for STE and KTE, which include kindergarten teacher students, professional writing in both standards for written Norwegian (nynorsk and bokmaal) is compulsory in the first year. At the time of their self-reporting, STE students had just completed the course exam, but the exam had not yet been ad-

ministered for KTE participants. The purpose of the course is to give the students skills in, and knowledge of, bokmaal and nynorsk in education, but students also develop written skills in different genres within their profession.

Professional competency requirements for student teachers are determined by national legislation. Here, the study focuses on the learning outcomes linked to oral and written competency. Requirements for KTE note the following: 'The program plan should have a progression plan in academic reading and writing that prepares the student for the work on the bachelor thesis' (MER, 2018b). For example, in the local plan, KTE students must demonstrate 'knowledge that makes it possible to find, evaluate, and display information and subject matter, and present this so that it illuminates a problem' under the general competency whereby the student 'masters Norwegian language, both bokmaal and nynorsk, in a qualified manner in the professional context that conveys central subject matter verbally and in writing' (KTE, Volda University College, [VUC] 2018). For this study, the field of knowledge *Language, Text and Mathematics* is of particular interest. In KTE programmes, requirements for kindergarten student teachers are clear and specific, especially for skills related to the oral competency: 'the student can make clear what it will be to be a conscious linguistic role model and interlocutor ... convey text, tell stories, read aloud and sing' (KTE, VUC, 2018). Under the subject *Science Theory and Method*, some local STE plans require that students, on an independent basis, will be able to read and evaluate scientific texts and be able to write academic texts themselves and that they master the skills needed for writing about science and method (STE, VUC, 2018). In order to strengthen language and text competency, students must take the course Professional Writing in Bokmaal and Nynorsk. Under the heading Contents, Context and Progression, emphasis is placed on compulsory professional requirements to train and test basic skills, such as academic writing, reading, oral interaction, and digital competence. The aim of another course that is obligatory for most of the STE-students, Norwegian 1A, The Intermediate stage, is 'to give an introduction to reading education, oral storytelling and orality as basic skills. Oral communication abilities are enhanced through oral and high-level reading. The expected skill is that 'the candidate teaches written bokmaal and nynorsk and can teach pupils in both standards', but one also expects 'good oral communication ability' (STE, VUC, 2018).

## Communicative competences

Communicative competency researchers Jonsmoen and Greek (2012), in their interview-based study of first-year students, found that many of them struggled with academic writing. Although all students completed a formal writing course, Jonsmoen and Greek revealed that, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, programme of study, or level of studies, students needed more and better writing guidance. They had problems interpreting tasks, formulating problems, systematising content, and setting up a clear structure in their written texts. The students wanted guidance that emphasised the writing process and that was concrete and adapted to their individual work (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2012). Student teachers today must achieve competency in writing to give their students a solid writing education and to benefit from their studies. Writing in teacher education must always have this dual aim: to develop the students' writing skills and subsequently to enable them to help their own students achieve written competencies (Skriveresenteret, 2019).

Language is formation. Skjong (2011) points out that language is used as a learning tool and as an instrument, but one should also consider subject-specific language, literacy and knowledge. Is there a contradiction between the two? Skjong believes that it is important to reflect on both the differences and the connections between them. The didactic challenge lies in the fact that teachers must have knowledge of reading, writing, speaking and the specific linguistic tradition of each subject as learning tools. The teacher should be able to utilise all these aspects in teaching and training (Osdal, 2012; Skjong, 2011). Skjong perceives literacy as a prerequisite for participating in society in a qualified manner. It also offers the basis for a newer, integrated understanding of literacy that emphasises the historical understanding crucial for active participation in contemporary life:

To be "literate" will, in fact, mean to understand and to cope, but also be able to reflect on and participate in further developing and changing what culture one is a part of (Skjong, 2011, p. 37).

This broad understanding of literacy is close to a modern understanding of formation (*bildung*) and points out that linguistic competency and

writing competency must be part of general formation. She found that 'the linguistic competency is crucial to cultural understanding because much of the experience and knowledge is precisely mediated as written texts' (Skjong, 2011, p. 38).

When examining how to build the expertise needed to master the teaching profession, it may be interesting to look at a study by Rivas (2014). His study presents an understanding of the new identities that form among teacher students due to changes taking place in social, cultural, political and economic spheres. He found an idealisation of the role of teachers, where the focus is on tasks, routines and assessment; a stronger emphasis is now placed on order and discipline in the classroom. Rivas found that student teachers' experiences constitute the foundations of professional knowledge that ultimately become a fundamental part of building their identity. He asks teacher educators to be critical of the 'neoliberal morality' characterised by practical thinking, activism and short-termism (Rivas, 2014, p. 492).

### **Unspoken expectations**

Hoel (2012) highlights the importance of writing in a new text culture as important identity work for all first-year students. Related difficulties experienced by students, according to Hoel, result from a lack of knowledge and awareness of subject-specific language and texts and of text cultures among higher education student teachers. Hoel (2012) found that this domain was unfamiliar, vague and obscure for students, and investigated how this experience affects academic writing. This tacit knowledge is understood as Polanyi's definition (1958) as the aim of a skilful performance that is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them.

Much of the transition from high school to professional studies depends on the acquisition of tacit knowledge. Many students therefore experience this transition as confusing (Jonsmoen & Greek, 2012). There is great variation among institutions in terms of their requirements for written work, number of submissions and offers of supervision. For example, one institution requires ten study papers to be produced jointly, while another requires only one individually written work in the first semester. The same researchers (Jonsmoen and Greek, 2012) found that students had many similar experiences and perceived writing as a seri-

ous matter because assignments had absolute requirements they 'must adhere to'; they 'must be correct' and 'must learn another new language, the academic one'.

### **Transitional stages**

All teacher education programmes offer professional studies directed at the work of teaching in kindergartens and in schools. This creates new framework conditions for the initial student. In Scandinavia, Ask (2007a) studied this field. Swedish pedagogy in upper secondary schools, which functions as a prelude to university studies, proved to be varied, including the provision of different skills to build the basis for academic writing. The quality of education in upper secondary schools had an impact on both mastery and results in higher education. Broad recruitment to teacher education led to a heterogeneous group of initial students which in turn resulted in wide variations in the students' capacity to write academic texts at *the transitional stage* (Ask, 2007a). She uses this term to describe the transition from secondary school to academic studies. Starting teacher education in a university culture involving many students was characterised as discourse shock (Ask, 2007b). New situations and conditions can feel strange compared with earlier experiences. Hoel (2012) found in her study that transitional stages were particularly challenging when choosing both studies and professions simultaneously. For some, this transition is like a language journey: the academic language is partly linked to a new way of thinking, a more abstract, distant and critical way of thinking, an attitude to reality that is expressed through linguistic abstraction and formulated as theories and concepts (Hoel, 2012).

A stronger emphasis is placed on writing skills for achieving the writing competency in the Framework Plan 2003 and in current teacher education regulations and national guidelines. This applies primarily to writing, as one of five basic skills that exist across all subjects (MER, 2006). This means that all student teachers should be trained in writing, which has consequences for teacher education. Through this reform, all teachers, regardless of subject, were committed to be writing teachers as well. Therefore, the writing competency, which all teachers must achieve, is an interdisciplinary project. The insight and knowledge that students achieve in writing education must be research-based. Writing



can lead to reflection on one's own experiences and formation, and this is seen as part of being acculturated as teachers. Both student teachers and their pupils must be able to express their life values, experiences and integrated knowledge. Lindseth (2009) says that the process of formation must be based on a reflection from the inside out, a visualisation and clarification of experience to expand each individual's pre-understanding.

Student teachers must experience the profession they are entering as relevant and meaningful (Hoydalsvik, 2014). At a transitional phase, it is imperative for students to experience their formation as: (1) clear, understandable, well arranged and structured; (2) manageable – that they experience themselves as having sufficient resources to meet the situations she has been exposed to; and (3) meaningful, and they feel able to participate in their new profession and in their new academic culture (Hoydalsvik, 2014).

### **Writing and oral competencies**

Writing is a complex skill that 'demands that one has control over and can cope with many and partly conflicting demands and problems simultaneously' (Hoel, 2008, p. 61). Writing in higher education requires both genre knowledge and knowledge of the content to be communicated. Students must understand, reflect, make academic choices and work with the actual communication so that they express themselves in a manner appropriate within the subject (Dysthe, Hertzberg & Hoel, 2000). The study programmes set requirements for writing competency, which are related to the content and specificity of each subject. Writing expertise is seen in the context of the intended function of the text. Student teachers' and teacher educators' views of oral skill assessment can reflect how oral competency has been emphasised in the Norwegian school system. Aksnes (2016) claims that oral competency has been handled only superficially in schools, which she sees as a consequence of the decision of the Norwegian parliament not to regulate different spoken languages from as early as 1878. The language of instruction in schools is supposed to be as near as possible to the spoken language of the learners themselves. Because of this, there is a wide tolerance for dialects in Norwegian schools and no spoken language regulations. This can account for the greater focus on written competency than on oral in

teacher education. Aksnes (2016) states that the language of speech and oral communication is not something that should be taught, and that therefore, the potential for the formation of high oral competency has not been appreciated.

Even so, the current framework places more emphasis on basic oral and literacy skills than before. To achieve this, Aksnes (2016) argues that oral skill development should be based on more than feedback on voice use and body language. Rhetoric should become a content element in oral competency, representing a unity of thought and speech, content and form (Aksnes, 2016). Hertzberg (2016) points out that the ability to clearly express ideas has become one of five oral skills. Oral texts should have a communication element and support dialogue. This change in interpretation of oral competency also impacts teacher education. In a study of five educational institutions, Osdal and Madssen (2014) found that after implementation of the 2013 revision, everyone in STE had at least one verbal work requirement.

## **Methodological approach**

In order to incorporate the opinions and experiences of students in their own voice, the method of data collection chosen consisted of sixty-seven student teachers self-reporting in the form of narratives. This data collection method, including the solicitation of volunteers for participation by approaching a whole class, a plan to conduct the study without tracking individual students and compliance with the research principle of anonymity, was accepted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (<https://nsd.no>). Otherwise, validity and reliability for the study were ensured by following the principles and best practices of qualitative research (Cresswell, 2012).

## **Sample**

The participants consisted of student teachers at a teacher education institution in Norway. Sixty-seven students from this institution elected to participate in the study; none of these were students of any of the researchers. For this study, students in two of the institution's teacher education programmes were invited to participate. Some chose not to

participate; others did not meet the sample's basic early education requirement, because only students in the first semester were selected, but the study was conducted at the beginning of the second semester (January 2019). Students were selected from both the master's teacher education programmes for both grades 1–7 and grades 5–10 programmes were selected. In addition, students from kindergarten teacher education were chosen, both from the full-time three-year bachelor's degree and from those who complete four-year part-time education. Students who had already studied for more than one year in a higher education setting could not participate in the study. Some were enrolled directly from high school and others from some years working. All of them entered teacher education as bachelor degree, but some entered a double-degree programme.

### **Implementation of data collection**

After a short analysis of the political governance document, data collection was carried out for a two-week period in January, 2019. The researchers collected data by visiting classrooms, and students who did not want to participate in the study did not attend. Those who had already studied in higher education for more than one year were asked to leave the room as well, as they were not part of the target group. We started by reading a distributed resource sheet of topics on which we wanted students to write about their experiences. To establish themes, students first wrote about their experiences in narrative text for 15–20 minutes. Particularly in the part-time programme for kindergarten teachers, a large percentage of the students had studied earlier, so there were fewer participants. (For more details, see Table 1.)

Table 1

*The data sources as participants, cohorts and numbers of narratives*

<b>Educational Programme</b>	Initial teacher education for school teachers	Initial teacher education for school teachers	Initial teacher education kindergarten teachers(0-6 years old)	Initial teacher education kindergarten teachers (0-6 years old)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (1st-7th grades)</li> <li>• Full-time over 5 years</li> <li>• Master's programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (5th-10th grades)</li> <li>• Full-time over 5 years</li> <li>• Master's programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time over 3 years</li> <li>• Bachelor level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part-time over 4 years</li> <li>• Bachelor level</li> </ul>
<b>Numbers of Narratives, one from each student</b>	17 narratives	24 narratives	6 narratives	20 narratives

## Analysis

Since our informants only had experience from the first semester out of 6, 8 or 10 total semesters in their programmes, this limited experience provided the background for self-reporting. The objective of the study was to analyse the experience expressions in the sixty-seven narratives. Bryman's method of four stages of data analysis was used (Bryman, 2008). In this method, a data-driven analysis of reading and re-reading is conducted first, followed by inductive categorising and re-categorising; the last two stages are deductive, as theoretical perspectives guide a theory-driven analysis. The thematic categories identified through the students' writing were (1) oral competency, (2) grammatical competency, (3) written competency, (4) academic language competency, (5) digital competency and lastly (6) courses. This last category deals with outcomes and experiences of courses in academic writing in the first semester. An ethical dilemma the researchers faced in this study was that, to some extent, we had to adapt quotations from the informants to the current spelling of Norwegian language before we translated the quotes into English to meet a wider European context.

## Findings

Competency building for first-year students has been different for the four programmes, even for students studying at the same institution (Volda

University College). Kindergarten student teachers did not have formal courses related to the themes of *professional writing* and *academic writing*, whereas other student teachers completed courses on both topics. Results of analyses of the 67 narratives are presented in the following paragraphs, organised around the main themes and using actual quotations to illustrate the researchers' interpretations of the most important points. The main findings are that almost all the students are satisfied with their own oral competency but remain unsure of their writing skills, especially academic writing.

### **Writing competency**

The main findings of this section are that the students are uncertain of genre use, textual structure, word selection and text variation using adequate synonyms. Few responses (9 out of 67) were received regarding digital competence and how this can support the students' writing. Although participants in one of the four groups received as much as 50 percent of their education online, this is not referenced as a significant factor that presents special challenges. Some students note that they master searching in electronic dictionaries and instructions using, for example, the library's pages on APA standards. One of those who receives education via a digital platform says:

"With the help of digital tools, you can easily obtain information / laws / articles that may not be in a book" (No. 64, KTE, part-time).

The fact that the students claim that their own digital needs and skills are not being met or appreciated, respectively, in the transition to their professional study, may be indicated by the statement below:

"The digital platforms support my understanding to a low extent. The teaching does not emphasise using digital tools for anything other than writing in the first semester" (No. 31, STE 5-10, the student's underline).

This can be interpreted as the student has a communicative competency that is not understood or further developed during the first semester. The next example supports this reasoning:

“I also feel that the university sometimes forgets that we have grown up in a world of social media, so we know what digital competence is etc.” (No. 18, STE 5-10).

Concerning grammar, some participants confuse orthography and grammar to a certain extent. Some say that they have problems, for example, with single and double consonants and comma rules. Several find it challenging to avoid mixing ‘bokmaal’ and ‘nynorsk.’ Uncertainty of Norwegian orthography and grammar seems to be a common experience.

“There is an expectation that the grammar is ok, and we will by and large receive feedback on content” (No. 20, STE 5-10).

What is written is thus experienced as more important than how it is written. This illustrates one of the unwritten rules concerning writing in academia.

### **Academic writing competency**

Many of the participants experience unclear requirements and expectations of how to write texts as a teacher education student. One noted:

“My meeting with academic writing became a horror experience” (No. 48, KTE part-time).

For her, the words; *challenge* and *problem* are too weak. Another respondent attributes the challenges of academic writing to her lack of knowledge on what a text should be.

“What can be challenging is when we have a written assignment, but we get no information about how they want it to be” (No. 51, KTE part-time).

‘They want’ has been interpreted here as referring to teacher educators who have another understanding of what is correct and how to solve the task. This is another example of a hidden expectation. Another participant points to expectations of what constitutes an academic text:

“When I started the education programme (...), I had not attended school for about 14 years, because I lacked the vocabulary to write in such a way that I felt it was professional enough” (No. 5, STE 1-7).

This statement illustrates that transitional stages relate not only to transition from secondary school to university expectations, but also from work to academic expectations. This participant, who appears to have chosen teaching as a second career, is part of the teacher-student population additionally challenged because what once was learned may no longer be relevant. The same student writes:

“I lack all knowledge of how to make correct references in academic writing, and there has not been enough training in academic writing for students who do not feel comfortable in the role. I spend a good deal of time on writing short texts, because I feel unsure of how it should be done”(No. 5, STE 1-7).

The student teachers also express frustration over different requirements within different subject areas and from different teachers. There is not a common standard. This becomes an additional challenge when new demands need to be met. This explains why this period is perceived as an extraordinarily transitional stage:

“It was an abrupt transition from upper secondary school. The length of the assignments increased considerably (3000 words) and with that, the expectation of writing academically. But what does it mean to write academically? ‘You will learn that along the way’, we are told. Nevertheless, after half a year we sit in the classroom without any answer to what it is” (No. 20, STE 5-10).

Others identify what they find to be the most challenging part when facing the demands of academic language and texts:

“It is not typing errors (being the challenge)but writing more ‘academic’ does not come overnight when starting at university. Writing academically, I experience as unnecessarily complicated, just to appear smart” (No. 22, STE 5-10).

This student experiences that the transitional stage into the academic text world is made unnecessarily complicated. She implies that the use of academic language is away of making oneself ‘appear smart’.On an-

other aspect of the academic language, whether reading or writing texts, another informant notes:

“For every academic text I submit, I get constructive feedback on what I can do better. The fact that the texts are based on the syllabus and not on our own reflections, is completely new. Since we did not do much work on this at upper secondary school, we want further knowledge. Great emphasis is put on variation of text and language, this I find difficult” (No. 15, STE 5-10).

This is interpreted as the assertion that the student percept theory is of greater value in the university than in a secondary school context. Their own reflections are toned down and are not appreciated as before.

“When it comes to writing, I wish we got more examples of how to write correctly. I really struggle with starting a text without seeing an example of how” (No. 49, KTE part-time).

“It is difficult to formulate academic texts without a form or recipe or to describe how it can be done” (No. 12, STE 1-7).

Why academic writing is a required teacher educator learning outcome is not always understood:

“I think academic writing is not very relevant in the teacher profession” (No. 38, STE5-10).

This answer comes from a student early in her education, but academic writing is a requirement that the student experiences as lacking meaning. The new culture with these new requirements does not seem relevant to her. In general, participants express that they have benefited greatly from the courses in academic writing and in professional writing. Several of them found the competency courses very helpful:

“I have to a large extent experienced that courses in academic writing have helped me in my academic language proficiency and text creation” (No. 32, STE 5-10).

“The course has promoted my knowledge in a positive manner” (No. 31, STE 5-10).



Another specific finding reported by many part-time KTE students is the lack of competency-giving courses. They were, however, provided with a digital course, an instructional video added to their learning portal.

“The course in academic writing should preferably be in our ordinary classroom, and not a video we were supposed to watch and understand at home” (No. 59, KTE part-time).

A few of them observed that the courses they had taken the previous semester came too late in the programme. They should have come before the first submission. Others say that there was nothing new; it was rather boring and uninteresting. One or two did not get the help they had expected. Overall, the informants mainly express positive attitudes towards writing. One person commented:

“The situation where I feel that I master the academic language, often occurs when I connect practice to theory. Then it makes sense and feels exciting, interesting and rewarding” (No. 7, STE 1-7).

Otherwise, the students appreciate academic writing courses, even as previously commented on the course came too late in the first semester, especially for the part-time students, for whom the course is experienced as difficult to access because it was given via digitally transmitted lecture, which lacked two-sided communication or opportunities for questions.

## **Oral competency**

A large majority of the student teachers express a positive evaluation of their own oral competencies. In 56 (out of 67) of the narratives that comprise the data material, participants provide assessments of their own oral expertise. Through review of students' classroom experiences reported, it seems many equate oral competency with oral presentations, as participants frequently comment on this form of oral competency. Although, the majority of the respondents indicate a positive assessment of their own oral competency, some report challenges as well:

“I try to speak calmly and clearly when I take my turn to speak in class, but often the nervousness takes over and it becomes blurred” (No.1, STE 1-7).

“When it is our turn to perform, it feels like the words are racing to escape my lips” (No. 60, KTE)

Which aspects of the presentations do they comment on?

“Using my voice, I feel that I modulate it to emphasise important parts of what I say. During the presentation, I try to look at everyone in the class, in addition to the teacher” (No. 2, STE 1-7).

This student wants to detach himself from the script:

“When there is an oral presentation, I never have a script, and therefore depend on communication through improvised language and eye contact with teachers and students” (No. 11, STE 1-7, student underline).

The experience of success with oral presentations seems to be related to group size. Many feel safer in smaller groups but are afraid of larger ones:

“I’m insecure when I perform in front of many people, I fail to concentrate, and my voice becomes unclear. If we split the class, it is much better” (No. 49, KTE).

Some of the students are particularly concerned with dialogue, but with varying degrees of success:

“I let people finish talking without interrupting, because I myself know how annoying it can be” (No.6, STE 1-7).

“Occasionally, I interrupt the conversation. I may have something very important to add to what is being told, but try to interject politely, and ask if it is ok that I add something” (No. 53, KTE).

How do the students experience the classroom, the meeting with pupils?

“I’ve been told that I speak loudly and clearly. I myself have to put great effort into it and create the impression of security in my voice. For me, it has not yet come naturally, but I’m working on it!” (No. 7, STE 1-7).

“As a teacher student, I try to speak in a clear way without having to make unnecessary input to my sentences so that the student’s attention is preserved when needed” (No.38, STE 5-10).

Here first semester students are found in a stage of transition, where practice experience and constructive feedback are in the process of developing a safe professional competency. How do they comment on feedback? The majority reports getting positive and constructive feedback from teacher educators and practice teachers. The narratives give a strong impression that the students are satisfied with and received good, positive feedback on oral presentations and activities thus far:

“After the first semester I have learned a lot about voice use and how you as a teacher should express yourself” (No.14, STE 1-7).

“I made sure to speak loudly, clearly and slowly when I was going to speak in the classroom, so everyone understood. This led to positive feedback from the practice teacher” (No.17, STE 1-7).

This student reports positive experiences in what is basically a difficult situation:

“I am generally not fond of speaking in large groups, which most teachers take into consideration. When I ‘have to,’ I find that both other students and teachers normally show great respect” (No.56, KTE).

Only informant 23 lacks feedback on her oral competency, as she reports on a practice during which little or no feedback was provided:

“We have received few or no feedback on oral competency but even so I think I’m doing well” (No. 23, STE 5-10).

In student groups today, it is common for Norwegian to be the second language for some students. In two narratives, it is obvious that the students have a different first language than Norwegian. This leads to special challenges to achieving oral competency, but this student feels that she masters the situation:

“Because I have another mother tongue, I try to be very conscious to speak slowly and clearly in Norwegian (...). Responses have been positive from both teachers and students” (No. 57, KTE).

The other student is struggling more, but has clear strategies:

“In my presentation, I tried to speak slowly and clearly to think about grammar and sounds that were to be pronounced” (No.55, KTE).

Another student reports:

“When I speak in front of a group, I often speak calmly, and with as little use of dialect as possible” (No. 34, STE 5-10).

Indeed, this last narrative is interesting, as it is quite different. As previously noted, it is not customary to standardise the spoken language in the home nor in the school. No other informants problematise the use of dialect or comment on the norm of the spoken language.

## Discussion and conclusions

This article has aimed to offer an enhanced understanding of oral and written competencies by examining student teacher self-evaluations. The student teachers are studied at a transitional stage, reporting just after their first semester, either prior to or very early in the development of their professional awareness. Our first conclusion at the time of the study is that the student teachers seemed to have an unclear vision of the professional competencies expected of them. Most of the informants had a positive evaluation of their oral competency; because of when in their careers they were asked these questions, their attitudes and assessments may have been shaped primarily by their previous school experiences. Eide (2017) claims that oral competency is less frequently evaluated in Norwegian schools than writing and reading, and he sees this as a result of historical, political, and ideological conditions.

In the Norwegian framework plans oral skill is one of the five basic skills that should be emphasised in school in all subjects and by all teachers, according to the current curriculum. However, there are many

indications that oral competency has not achieved the same position as the other four competencies. Hamre (2017, p. 29) claims that 'Basic oral skills lack a similarly clear research foundation, and among teachers it can be uncertainty linked to both oral and written assessments, both formatively and summative'. Oral competency, especially when it is perceived without so many formal requirements, may suit the culture in which most young people participate. Like Heggen (2005) also found, it seems like the reasons why so many negative experiences are reported in our study, concerning academic and professional writing skills may also be affected by youth culture. Skagen's (2018) interpretation of the cultural and educational researcher Ziehe (2004) in this context is as follows:

Ziehe states that a persistent gap has arisen between the requirements for communication skills and formation placed on teachers, and the youth culture that has gained greater prominence within the school. The pupil's everyday culture has today invaded the school and assumed a position and a place as an authority in the field of knowledge next to the subject traditions (Skagen, 2018).

Heggen (2005) states that professional studies in particular may be characterised by a tension between the youth culture and the professional traditions characterising higher education. The popular culture that most young people are involved in, places cognitive barriers against the unknown and unfamiliar. It seems like that in their formation process, children and young people demand immediate confirmation, if not, they get bored. This is an obstacle for exploring new areas of knowledge in which the learner's ignorance can be revealed (Heggen, 2005). A second conclusion in this study may be that some students seem to be resistant to a transition from one stage to another: from youth culture to the academic culture of teacher education. This seem to indicate internalised barriers against an academic writing culture.

The goal of research in teacher education is to create better conditions for a knowledge-based professional competency. Røed (2017) sees critical formation as necessary to strengthen the teaching profession. He refers to the OECD report 'Education at a Glance', which shows that many important decisions concerning schools are taken by bureaucrats, not by teachers. The largest trade union for teachers in Norway, the Education Federation, is also concerned that a New Public Management

policy approach, governed by politicians and bureaucrats, will displace both the flexibility of teachers and their professional judgment. Teacher must reclaim their roles as professionals (Røed, 2017). This corresponds to the perspective of Rivas (2018), who instructed teacher educators to exercise critical sense in the face of the neoliberal morality characterised by practical thinking, activism and short-termism. Our third conclusion, in terms with Hamre (2017) and Hellesnes (1975) is that to achieve the professional competency needed for this role, students must go through a formation process that is more than adaptation, the goal must be an emancipation process to become political subjects. In practical terms, this means, for example, bringing the students into a research and academic tradition, which among other things, requires academic writing competency. A research-based approach to teacher education, with academic writing and research terminology as important tools, is needed to develop a professional competency. Munthe and Melting (2018, p. 10) claim close to this dilemma;

Research-based learning processes should promote students' independence, analytical skills and critical reflections so that as teachers, they can use new knowledge and further develop themselves, their profession and their workplace after graduation.

Our fourth conclusion is that expectations, uncertainty and invisible requirements seem to be parts of the stage transition from secondary school to higher education. This also involves a transition from youth culture to academic culture which is linked more to writing than to oral competency. A conscious teacher educator who explains the expectations of the academic culture may make the unclear clear, understandable, organised and structured for learners. In addition, student teachers must perceive academic culture as meaningful and thus experience themselves as able to participate in their new profession. However, this study indicates that some of the challenges student teachers appear to face, concerning 'all the unspoken expectations', may be understood as a stage transition that all students experience as they enter the academic world. Furthermore, the challenges described in this study must be more thoroughly researched and subsequent findings implemented in the various contexts of European teacher education.

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