

School Teachers' Perceptions of Similarities and Differences between Teaching English and a Non-Language Subject

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Abstract

Teaching a language subject in school is often referred to as being different and unique compared to teaching a non-language subject. However, the few existing studies examining this claim have mainly investigated the viewpoints of teachers who only teach one language, thus failing to achieve a comparison based on teachers' actual lived experiences of teaching two different subjects. The present study was designed to address this gap by exploring 11 upper secondary school teachers' perceptions of similarities and differences between teaching English and a non-language subject. Austria and Norway were chosen as contexts for the study since both countries qualify state secondary school teachers to teach a minimum of two subjects simultaneously as part of their regular teaching load. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that the teaching of various subjects shares some similarities but is highly influenced by contextual factors. The most striking finding was the perceived different status of subjects across contexts and the consequences of this for teachers and learners. The findings underline the importance of contextualizing data and understanding the ecology in which teaching and learning of any subject or any language takes place.

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INTRODUCTION

In language teaching programs across the globe, there is a notion that teaching languages is unique and different to the teaching of other subjects in multiple ways, for example, “in terms of the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, and teacher-learner relationships” (Borg, 2006, p. 3). However, from practice, there is also evidence that many issues in general education are equally as relevant for language teaching and other domains. In this study, we wanted to explore the perspective of teachers about the ways in which they felt that teaching English is similar or different to teaching other, non-language school subjects.

Whereas teacher education in some contexts prepares secondary school teachers to only teach one subject, e.g., Poland and the UK, teacher education in other contexts prepares teachers to teach multiple subjects. In Austria and Norway, for example, teachers in state secondary schools are trained at university to teach two subjects and, typically, teach two school subjects in parallel during their careers. This places them in the unique position of being able to compare their experiences and perceptions of the teaching of the two subjects. We, therefore, decided to explore how such teachers experience their teaching lives across English and another non-language school subject (non-language subject; NLS) in order to understand what lessons can be drawn across subjects and teaching contexts, and what areas of uniqueness may require special professional development support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Being a teacher of a language subject is often positioned as ‘special’ and unique in multiple ways. Hammadou and Bernhardt (1987, p. 301) claimed that the uniqueness is grounded in the subject matter of the foreign language itself, as “the content and the process for learning the content are the same”. This demands different interaction patterns between the teacher and the learners compared with other subjects, as practicing communication is a goal in and of itself. Furthermore, Hammadou and Bernhardt (1987) proposed that it is more difficult to keep updated on subject matter knowledge in the language subjects, because language is developmental, dynamic, and interactive and not mainly based on memorable facts. In addition, they suggest being a language teacher is more intense as it requires teachers to maintain their language

skills and is more work-intensive due to extra time spent providing opportunities for learners' exposure to language and culture in settings beyond the classroom. Williams (1994) argues that teaching a language is so much more than developing new skills or the learning of new content, as it is directly related to a students' identity formation:

“There is no question that learning a foreign language is different to learning other subjects. This is mainly because of the social nature of such a venture. Language, after all, belongs to a person's whole social being: it is part of one's identity, and is used to convey this identity to other people. The learning of a foreign language involves far more than simply learning skills, or a system of rules, or a grammar; it involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner.”
(p. 77)

The notion that teaching a language involves more than teaching other subjects has led scholars to suggest that teaching languages is more stressful than teaching other subjects. In addition to the factors already mentioned, this is reportedly also due to teachers having to deal with their own and their learners' language anxiety when communicating and using the language in class (Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Horwitz, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Piechurska-Kusiel, 2011). In contrast, Grossman and Shulman (1994) suggest that language teachers also may enjoy more autonomy than other subject teachers, as the complexity of the various language skills in addition to a daunting multitude of possible content and cultural topics, makes it impossible to 'cover' everything. Consequently, this allows for more freedom of choice than, for example, math teachers may have. Yet, the number of studies that have empirically investigated the distinctive characteristics of language teaching is surprisingly limited given its importance for language teacher education and for providing evidence-based professional support to language teachers.

Most of the studies into the characteristics of language teaching has focused on the teaching of English and can be theoretically positioned as research on teachers' and students' beliefs. Borg (2006) has explored the topic asking 200 practicing and pre-service English teachers from diverse settings and teaching backgrounds to reflect on the distinctive characteristics of language teaching. Building on Borg's (2006) study, Afshar, Rahimi, Ghonchehpour, and Saedpanah (2015) asked 135 Iranian English language teachers about what was unique about teaching English. They used a

questionnaire entitled 'Teachers' Distinctive Characteristics' adopted from Borg (2006) as well as interviews with 20 teachers. Finally, Lee (2010) examined the uniqueness of ELT teachers in Japan from the learners' perspective, also using a questionnaire mainly adapted from Borg's study (2006). The participants were 163 college-level ELT students.

The findings from the three studies coincided to some extent. The fact that language is both the medium and the content of lessons was highlighted by all three. Two studies pointed to the greater real-life relevance of English than other subjects (Afshar et al., 2015; Borg, 2006). All three identified the greater complexity of English as a subject. Borg's (2006) and Lee's (2010) participants pointed out that it involved both skills and content teaching, and Ashfar et al.'s (2015) teachers highlighted the greater methodological diversity this implied for the English classrooms. Two of the studies emphasized the more dynamic nature of ELT, which arguably is reflected in the need for teachers to be creative, flexible, and enthusiastic (Borg, 2006) and to both encourage and correct the learners in order to maximize their involvement (Lee, 2010). It was pointed out that errors are tolerated in ELT as a natural part of language development (Borg, 2006). In both Borg (2006) and Ashfar et al. (2015), the communicative nature of the subject was considered to lead to a greater amount of teacher-student interaction, and perhaps more personal interaction, than in other subjects. The findings diverged mainly on two points. The teachers in Borg (2006) felt that English had lower status than other subjects, while the Iranian teachers in Ashfar et al. (2015) found it a high-status subject in their context. In both studies, the teachers considered that commercial forces could influence language teaching, but the Iranian teachers also referred to political forces.

To the best of our knowledge, these are the only studies exploring perceptions of what are the unique characteristics of teaching ELT. A limitation of all these studies is that the participants were not in a position to actually compare English either with the teaching of other languages, or with other subjects. Borg (2006) asked four university subject specialists from other fields to evaluate to what extent the characteristics the English teachers had identified were also typical of teaching their subjects. However, none of these four participants also taught a language and they were not able to personally compare their own experiences across subjects. Furthermore, the three studies referred mainly to perceived differences and left the similarities across subjects largely unexplored.

Only a few studies have examined the commonalities across skill-based subjects and across disciplines. One is the study by Johnson and

Jackson (2006) who examined expertise in teaching different skill-based subjects including music (classical singing), flight simulation, and table tennis. The aim of the project was to explore to what extent language teachers could learn for their own practices from how teachers of these other skill-based subjects approached their pedagogy. They found, for example, that there was a commonality in viewing skill acquisition from an information-processing perspective. This had consequences for comparable pedagogical approaches as well as some similarities in the form of feedback given. However, teachers of other subjects engaged more in performance-related feedback and took a more needs-driven approach than in language teaching which was conceived as being more competence-driven. Mercer and Payer (2020) also reported on an interdisciplinary approach to training pre-service teachers of English and sport. They compared the areas of similarity that the trainers and the students identified over the course of five years of teaching this joint course. These commonalities included (1) the perceived value of promoting positive attitudes toward learning generally; (2) developing a collective team spirit among learners; (3) promoting mastery goals and future visions; (4) fostering effective communication skills; and (5) integrating life skills into the subject (English and sport).

These studies indicate that there are areas of overlap between different subjects as well as dimensions of uniqueness. Yet, there are very few, if any, studies eliciting teachers' own lived experiences of teaching more than one subject and their own perspectives on how the teaching compares. Such insights could be invaluable in challenging the discipline's assumptions and possible blind spots about the supposed 'special character' of language teaching, or ELT specifically, as well as implications for teacher education.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that teachers do not teach their subjects in a vacuum (Hofstadler, Babic, Lämmerer, Mercer, & Oberdorfer, 2021). Teachers' practices are embedded in personal and institutional contexts as part of education systems which include policy and systemic characteristics at international, national, federal, and local institutional levels. The implication is that when we seek to understand teacher beliefs and teachers' lives, we must also understand their ecologies – the social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and teach within.

Our study aims to bring teachers' voices to the fore and enable an appreciation of the ways in which professional development programs could meaningfully draw on interdisciplinary work and insights as relevant. Teachers themselves are in the best position to comment on how the teaching of two subjects is lived and experienced within and across contexts, and it is their perspective we draw on in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to address the following research questions:

1. What similarities and / or differences do secondary-school teachers in Austria and Norway perceive between the teaching of ELT and other non-language school subjects?
2. To what extent do these perceptions vary across geographical contexts?

The Context

The context of this study is Austria and Norway. Participants from Austria and Norway were chosen because secondary schoolteachers in these countries are qualified to teach a minimum of two subjects, and because it is normal for these teachers to be teaching two subjects simultaneously. Furthermore, in both countries English is typically the first foreign language taught in school, and the students' language proficiency is comparably high (Education First, 2020). Both pre-service teacher education programs also contain a general pedagogy component which is not subject-specific. However, whereas Austrian teachers complete a five-year university teacher education with an equal weighting between the two subjects, Norwegian upper secondary teachers usually study their subjects with a specialization in one, with a subject-specific MA thesis. In addition, they complete a one-year teacher education course to qualify as teachers in their respective subjects. Lately, secondary school teachers in Norway can also choose a teacher education program similar to the Austrian model, but this was not the case for the teachers in this study. In both contexts, teachers typically teach the two subjects studied at university although this can vary in terms of the ratio of hours divided between the two subjects depending on the needs of the schools.

Participants

Eleven secondary-school teachers (six from Austria, five from Norway) participated in the study. The teachers were recruited through personal networks and snowball sampling. In the Norwegian context, schools were contacted in which their teachers had not previously collaborated with the Norwegian researcher and were not known to her in any other way. It was reasonable to believe that they could express themselves more freely than if they had been involved with the researcher as teacher trainees or students. In Austria, local schools

TABLE 1
Teacher Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Country	Teaching qualification	Years teaching	NLS	Interview in minutes
Brage	M	Norway	Bachelor	8	Social Science	72
Guro	F	Norway	MA English	12	Social Science	58
Kari	F	Norway	MA History	6	History	63
Tina	F	Norway	MA History	8	History	54
Liv	F	Norway	MA History	11	History	53
Petra	F	Austria	MA Education	13	Biology	48
Beate	F	Austria	MA Education	20	PE	37
Helga	F	Austria	MA Education	28	Music	42
Anna	F	Austria	MA Education	9	History	34
Elena	F	Austria	MA Education	29	Math	74
Monika	F	Austria	MA Education	2	Math	37

were contacted as well as local teachers known by the researcher. Recipients were asked to pass on the call to others in the field. Three of the six Austrian participants were previously known to the researcher and three were not. Although an effect of the researcher-teacher familiarity cannot be ruled out, no quality or issues in the data suggested such an influence.

All the teachers who volunteered to take part, were teaching two compulsory subjects in state secondary schools including English. In Norway, the teachers were teaching in two upper secondary schools. In Austria, they were all teaching in diverse secondary schools. One (Anna) was notably teaching in a bilingual school where English was the working language. All teachers except Brage (Norway) held an MA.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the 11 teacher profiles in terms of academic qualifications, the non-language school subjects that each participant taught, their years of teaching experience, and the length of the interviews.

Data Collection Procedures

Given the absence of research in this area, we designed an exploratory qualitative study. We conducted semi-structured interviews to enable the teachers to share their experiences so that the researchers could probe responses and explore diverse perceptions and contextual variation in depth. Semi-structured interviews are especially suited to exploring topics across settings as they allow for some degree of comparability across interviews, but also remain sufficiently flexible and open to allow unique lines of inquiry to be followed as they emerge.

The topics for the interview protocol were developed based on existing research, but also built on the researchers' previous experiences as teachers and language teacher educators in the two settings which are the focus of this study – Austria and Norway. As the two researchers who conducted the interviews were also working in the local contexts (Austria and Norway respectively), this was helpful at various stages of the study. Firstly, it ensured context-sensitivity in the research design. Secondly, it supported rapport building and enabled the researchers to explore localized issues in teacher education and practice during the interview. Finally, it ensured a nuanced approach to data analysis. Possible local subjectivities were countered by having an international research team, including a researcher not situated in either research context who was able to continually question, probe and challenge any possible blind spots, bias, and subjectivities throughout the research process and writing.

A pilot interview was conducted with a teacher in each of the two countries, transcribed, analyzed, and subsequently discussed by all three researchers. The interview protocol was only moderately adjusted as a result of the pilot, mainly in terms of unclear wordings. The final interview protocol covered seven main sections: autobiography as a teacher; current job satisfaction; teaching procedures (pre-, during, and post-class time); subject responsibilities out of class; explicit comparison of being an ELT and NLS teacher; and any typical teaching experiences for each subject (see Appendix).

Before the interview, the teachers at both sites were contacted via email and asked to complete a basic biodata questionnaire to elucidate their working conditions and specific contextual situation. The interviews took place in a relaxed atmosphere with the researcher allowing the interviewee to continue talking as long as they wanted. The interviews varied in length, lasting between 34 and 74 minutes (54 minutes on average). They were conducted either in the teachers' schools or online depending on the teachers' preferences. Through initial informal warm-up talk, efforts were made to create a comfortable and secure setting for the interviews, and to inform about the purpose of the interview and its exploratory nature. In each case, the researchers emphasized their non-judgmental approach and their sincere interest in and appreciation of the teacher's attitudes and experiences. In total, the interviews generated a corpus of 88,368 words.

Informed written consent was obtained from all the participants, and their anonymity was secured by using pseudonyms and codes for the schools from the point of transcription. All recordings were deleted after the interviews had been transcribed. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS evaluated the use of data in this project and granted ethical permission to conduct the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews were transcribed for content including meaningful pauses, laughter, and silences. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which refers to ‘the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns’ (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). In an initial phase, the transcripts were read several times individually to become well acquainted with the data, to obtain a first overview of the main themes, and to determine the approach to analysis. A first meeting was held in which the researchers discussed together their first identification of the main themes in the data. Using their institutions’ respective tools for qualitative analysis, NVivo and Atlas, each of the three researchers then independently coded the data guided by the agreed themes but also attending to any emergent themes. Given the lack of research on the topic, a primarily inductive approach to content analysis was adopted, although the interview topics and relevant theory were also used as guidance in forming the initial themes. After the first wave of coding, a second online meeting was held to discuss the respective code lists and themes, discuss issues of disagreement, formulate other questions to probe further into the data, and to draw up a refined code list. This procedure was repeated twice more with one further online meeting and one face-to-face meeting until the final analytical themes were collectively agreed upon.

The following major themes with identified sub-categories in brackets emerged from the final round of data analysis:

- subject status (the status of subjects at the national level, the status of the subjects at the school level, parents and learners)
- teacher identity
- professional development
- learner engagement (motivation, relevance, use of the L1/L2)
- approaches to teaching

The final step of the analysis emerged during writing together and involved identifying and agreeing on quotes that could illuminate both overall and contrasting perceptions across subjects and contexts. As indicated earlier, having two researchers with in-depth knowledge of their respective contexts and one researcher with an outsider status in the research team, proved valuable, as this added richness and diverse perspectives to the analysis and contributed to strengthening its validity.

FINDINGS

In the following, each main theme is addressed in turn with comparisons between subjects as well as an explicit reflection on contextual variation across the countries as appropriate.

Subject Status

The interviews revealed that all the teachers were sensitive to the perceived status of their chosen subjects on a national societal level but also within schools. Indeed, this theme of status dominated all the data. However, there are clear differences between the two countries regarding teachers' views on the relative status of English compared with other subjects. In particular, the teachers' responses indicated a perceived lower status for English as a school subject in Norway than in Austria.

The Status of Subjects at the National Level. The Norwegian teachers generally feel that English is given less priority than some other school subjects. In particular, they claim that STEM-subjects enjoy a notably higher status, giving extra points to students if they specialize in these subjects, thus increasing their opportunities in higher education: "English does not give you extra points like the STEM-subjects. There is no external reward from taking English" (Tina). As Kari explains, "as a teacher, I also feel like history and English in general, are less favored than for instance mathematics or natural sciences or whatever." In Austria, English belongs to the core subjects of the school-leaving exam (Matura). As such, the Austrian teachers feel that English enjoys a high status and is taken seriously by both the students and parents. In contrast, some of the Austrian teachers claim that subjects that do not belong to the Matura, such as music or sports, have a status "close to zero" (Helga). However, Monika observes that although she gets relatively high status for teaching two core subjects (English and Math), she feels the teaching profession generally in Austria is low status: "if you teach two core subjects, I guess, you are quite respected, although in the Austrian society you, you don't have much respect anyway as a teacher, unfortunately".

The Status of the Subjects at the School Level. Teachers in both contexts also believe that their respective school administrations signal a clear preference for certain subjects. For example, Norwegian teacher Tina claims that the school is very explicit in its orientation toward STEM-subjects and possibilities of better employment options

with such subjects in the future job market: “And this is a school that’s very driven by what can you GAIN? What does it PAY?” (Tina). Norwegian teacher Liv also feels that the planning of the timetable for the various subjects signals a strong priority for STEM as it is easy to choose a combination of STEM-subjects but difficult to study English in combination with one of them. In Austria, on the other hand, the teachers often feel that the core subject English is clearly prioritized by the school administration. Petra explains: “At my school, English definitely has a better status than biology. So the natural sciences do not play a very important role at my school, I have to say.”

An interesting additional perspective is how these teachers feel their subject is perceived or valued by colleagues. For example, whereas Kari thinks her colleagues in Norway have equal respect for all subjects, Tina feels that her Norwegian colleagues do not take English as seriously as other subjects. In Austria, Beate explains that her colleagues do not see being a PE teacher as particularly demanding when compared with a teacher of a ‘core subject’ – those tested at the final school-leaving exam (Matura):

“I mean, they say ‘Oh, not a lot of work, is it? ((laughs)) Having a great life?’ and then I say ‘Yeah, it’s true, I like it. It’s a good job’ ((laughs)). In society I think it’s different, yes, with English teachers ‘Oh, English, oh my God, with the new Matura’ and ‘Oh my God, you have a lot of work now’ and so on. And they wouldn’t say that to any PE teachers of course. (...) some teachers kind of, look down on you, so they say ‘you don’t work a lot, you just teach sports and geography’, so if you teach two core subjects, I guess, you are quite respected.”

Interestingly, Elena in Austria perceives that there is a status difference also among the core subjects for the Matura, with English having a lower status than Math. She feels that her colleagues show her more respect as a Math teacher because teaching Math is seen as more difficult and intellectually demanding than teaching English.

Parents and Learners. All the Norwegian teachers think that English has a relatively low status among students and parents. They explain that the status of English seems linked to learners’ and parents’ estimations of their language skills; Norwegians typically regard themselves as highly proficient in English, and when the students enter upper secondary school, many of them and their parents feel that there is little more left to learn. However, the teachers report that there is a mismatch between the students’ and their parents’ self-assessments and the evaluation by the teachers. According to Kari, parents especially are taken by surprise when their children fail to get top grades. “They don’t know that to learn a language is actually a lot

more than just to be able to this to ask for directions and that stuff and to be able to read. It's so much more. So they don't know what the subject is all about." Similarly, Liv claims:

But I think recently, or in the last four or five years or so, I sort of detect a certain sense that 'why should we do English? We know English! We have had English in class since we were six years old. What else is there to know?' So it's kind of a, they think it's a bit unnecessary. And a lot of the parents don't realise how advanced English actually is because they remember what it was like when THEY were in school. Or they have an assumption of what it would be like and they are really shocked when we tell them how advanced it really is.

Tina explains: "I would say the subject English has a much lower status than it deserves because we do it from the start and it's sort of EVERYBODY knows English, and what can we use this for."

In contrast, none of the Austrian teachers feel that students or parents overestimate their abilities or feel that learning English is superfluous. However, an interesting parallel can be found for Austrians' views on the subject PE. Beate claims that Austrians are often sporty, and so, "Because they all do sports, everybody does sports, so they know what they are talking about." Similarly, students regard the subject as leisure time, according to Beate. In contrast, the Austrian teachers have sympathy for pupils and parents investing in the core subjects. This also becomes evident on parents' evenings according to Helga and Monika, where parents mainly want to talk with teachers of the core subjects. Monika, teaching the core subjects English and Math, has observed how the parents flock around her compared to teachers of other subjects:

If I see how many parents come to see me at the parents evening and how many parents come to see teachers who teach side subjects that, you can't compare that, so I'm always full, (.) um, all the parents want to speak to the teachers who teach the core subjects and the others are, kind of, less important.

Teacher Identity

Although there were notable differences in how the teachers perceived their experiences of teaching their two different subjects, the overriding sense was that each primarily identified as a teacher. For example, Guro in the Norwegian data explained, "I think I am first and foremost me being a teacher, I think. Because I do things in the same way". Petra in the Austrian data also clarified that, "my individual teaching style - that is similar in both subjects".

This unified sense of self also meant that there were universal themes to their experiences and identities as teachers, which were common across the subjects being taught, especially in terms of finding meaning and purpose in the job. For example, Brage in the Norwegian data explained as follows the driving motivation for both his subjects: “My goal is that as many as possible of my students move on from my classes with at least something of a desire to look into the stuff that we do in class more closely at a later day”. Beate in Austria also stated that the qualities of a good teacher are universal: “I think that’s a good teacher, if you connect to their lives where they are and then take another step, and another step”. Indeed, the notion of taking meaning from preparing students for life was notable for all these teachers across subjects and contexts.

Although the unique contexts of Norway and Austria mean that teachers have two subjects, for most of them one subject tended to be their personal preference or the one that dominated their professional identities. This was seemingly due to either differences in training and academic backgrounds for the Norwegian participants, with a stronger emphasis on one subject than the other, and in Austria the distinction seemed connected more to differences in assigned teaching hours for a specific subject. For example, Anna, who works in Austria, started out after university with a more balanced relationship between her two subject teaching identities but says that now she is teaching mostly history, albeit in the medium of English, she feels that, “history is my number one subject”.

Another notable distinction made by the teachers concerned the workload associated with teaching English. Compared to some other subjects, it was seen as high in terms of work to be done beyond the classroom such as lesson preparation and marking or correction. In the Austrian data, teachers frequently made the distinction between the supposed three core subjects (English, German, and Math) which all students had to take for the school-leaving exam and which were seen as being work intense. Elena, who taught both English and Math, explained: “The only problem is of course the load of work that you have with two main subjects.” Helga also explained that different subjects were paid on different pay scales according to differing perceptions of preparation involved: “when the English teachers are paid 1.2, or something, 1.8 or something like that cause of, of course you have a lot of marking to do, which is fair enough, then religion is 1, history is 1 and Music is 0.9 or something”. This can affect how such teachers feel within their professional roles and the sense of worth they associate with their chosen subjects. A particularly extreme example in the data came from Beate who taught PE as her second subject and who felt that PE teachers were conceived of as working less than other

subjects. However, she explained how much preparation went into sports classes and the vast number of extracurricular responsibilities associated with teaching PE, although she admitted that after class, there was not further marking or corrections every week as with English.

Professional Development

Several teachers commented on a need to maintain their linguistic competences and stay up-to-date in English, which they saw as being a dynamic subject. Beate in Austria explains: “English is never, is always, there’s always something new, especially, over the last five years, because things are changing so rapidly”. Elena too states that, “the language changes and is in the process of changing and what was really not accepted when I was at their age is now perfectly OK”. However, Helga also makes the point that it is not only language skills that have to be maintained; she continues learning and practicing her skills on her musical instruments. Among the Norwegian teachers, Tina explains how she sees history as being a highly contemporary topic: “History is very exciting, and current events”. Those who taught social science also saw it as a dynamic subject with varying content that required the teacher to stay on top of contemporary issues. For example, Guro explains, “the subjects I teach, I still find them relevant and interesting because I feel like the subjects I have are not really static, it’s not like always the same answer, because they always change with time. So, it’s kind of challenging me as a teacher as well that I need to be updated and know what’s going on in the world”. Also in Math, although Elena explains that it stays fundamentally the same and does not change, she feels she needs to keep on top of the diverse topics in Math, especially if she has not taught a specific area for some time: “But it’s also in mathematics, if there are, cause if they really have got already all the, you know, the higher topics, so if I then want to teach one of the topics let’s say, for example, statistics or theory of probability for two years, again I have to work it out.”

Learner Engagement

Another theme in the teachers’ interviews concerned the learners’ engagement in their two subjects (Svalberg, 2018). While there was variability in the teachers’ views and experiences, a number of factors emerged which the teachers felt had the potential to enhance or hinder their learners’ engagement: motivation, relevance, and use of L2.

Motivation. The teachers believe that learners' overall motivation in a subject is influenced by a range of factors. Guro in Norway thinks that social science is popular because it is perceived as being easy and deals with topics the students can relate to. As Brage also explains, students "often choose to specialise in other subjects than English because they believe they have a better shot at getting a better grade in perceived 'easier' subjects". Indeed, several teachers point out that in English students are motivated by grades. The strength of the motivation may depend partly on how close the students are to sitting their final exam. For example, Guro explains that her older students are more involved and ask more questions than the younger students: "I think now their mindset is that they will sit the written exams soon, so they say: 'What if we get the question on the exam regarding this and that? How should we answer?'" So they are more like tuned towards the end result."

In Austria, the educational status of the subject, i.e. whether it is a core subject or not, also seems to have a bearing on motivation. For example, Helga's students have no desire to learn about music. As she explains, "For me music is much more difficult to teach because motivation to learn anything in music is literally zero", but "they want to know English". The motivation is so strong for English that, according to her, they are likely to find independent ways to learn even if they have a bad teacher. Beate comments on the difference between PE and English; in PE there is no threat of a final exam and important grades. While you need to ensure active participation in both subjects, how to motivate learners is thus qualitatively different:

you need their active participation. In English, of course you need it too but it's different. You know, they know, they have to do the assignments and if they don't do it they're in trouble.

Elena, who has nearly 30 years' teaching experience, reflects on changing attitudes in her context in Austria about the importance of English as a subject which makes it easier to ensure students engage or, from a more critical perspective, possibly comply:

somehow the importance of English has completely changed in the technical school because| and also for the parents they think that English is very important and that the students need that.

Relevance. The teachers observe that the perceived relevance of what is being taught also influences learners' willingness to engage. However, even within one subject, there are differing perceptions. For example, Tina considers that relevance is not an issue in English, but she feels the need to make history seem relevant to the learners'

present, and she feels this is harder to do. In contrast, Kari believes that her students already perceive history as relevant to their own lives.

Liv suggests that relevance in an English class can be provided by talking about current events; however, her concern is that students in Norway think they already know enough English, which makes grammar and the corrective feedback she provides seem less relevant and the learners are thus less willing to engage with it. Yet, Kari reports that after the initial “shock” of realizing how much they still need to learn, her Norwegian upper secondary students gradually come to see that the skills they are learning in English are necessary and useful for later, e.g., at university.

In Austria, Anna, who works in the bilingual school, also points out that with increased proficiency, it becomes harder for learners to evaluate what they have learnt and still need to learn in English. In history, she states that the learning objectives are very specific and related to factual knowledge which is readily identifiable to learners. In English, she feels the learning objectives start out being quite specific (e.g., grammar features, vocabulary) but at upper levels, they become more general and vague as “there is no knowledge about certain things, there’s just opinions, interesting facts, ideas, concepts, stuff like that”. According to Anna, there is a danger that learners may not perceive lessons at high levels as being useful for their language development, which in turn can make them less willing to engage.

Use of the L1/L2. For some teachers, particularly in Norway, the use of the L2 is perceived as having the potential to inhibit learners’ engagement. Although Liv’s Norwegian students feel they know enough English, some are still reluctant to speak in the English class. Kari’s experiences are similar as she finds that the learners are unwilling to speak English when they discover the gap between their prior knowledge of English and what the school subject demands. Brage points out that learners’ unwillingness to speak may mean different things in his two subjects. In social science, where they use the L1, it could be fear of getting an answer factually wrong, while in English, the anxiety is more likely related to shortcomings, or perceived shortcomings, in the L2. According to Brage, many students lack the confidence “to use English in the real world” despite, in his view, having the required proficiency. This again, may reflect the high social expectations in Norway of English mastery. Guro also mentions some learners’ reluctance to speak in front of the English class and interprets it as a lack of confidence in their L2. She finds her social science class (which uses the L1) more confident and engaged:

I maybe find them to be more engaged in social science than in English, and it has something to do with the confidence of using English as opposed to they can talk in their mother tongue, Norwegian, so it's easier for them to say what they think, to find the right words to say it. (Guro)

In Austria, Petra teaches biology partly in CLIL mode and reports that the use of the L2 affects not only the learners' willingness to communicate but also the teachers' workload. Petra finds that L2 use in biology reduces her ability to use the textbook and increases preparation time and reduces the amount of learner contributions in both subjects. However, she explains that L2 use in itself is not the only influence on willingness to communicate in biology. It also stems from learners' interest and perceived relevance of the topics under discussion. In English, she explains reluctance to participate actively can depend not only on the learners' perceived proficiency but also their personality factors and interest in the topic.

Approaches to Teaching

Across subjects the teachers made a distinction between what they taught and how they taught it. In terms of the content, English teaching was universally seen as being flexible and open to broad interpretation. All the teachers enjoyed this autonomy in how they interpreted the curriculum and what they taught, whereas in so-called content subjects, the teachers tended to feel the curriculum had to be more rigidly adhered to in terms of topics covered, although the other skill-based subjects such as music and PE were notable exceptions. The other distinction was in planning and the focus on the didactics which some teachers highlighted as playing a greater role in English.

The flexibility of the English curriculum was highlighted as offering potential for great variation. According to Brage, "What I really like about the English curriculum, is that it is super-duper flexible, while the social studies curriculum – not so much." Elena explains that she can tailor English classes to suit her specific learners more easily than in Math by choosing content that matches their personal interests more tightly: "for English it's easier if you find out what, what interests them and somehow there are always things that they are interested in, if you just try to include that in the lessons that can help". Monika describes how much more creative she feels teachers can be when teaching English compared to Math: "in math um, you have to teach what you have to teach ((laughs)), so you are not that free". In the Norwegian data, Tina explains that, "it's much easier to get stuck in too many facts in history, whereas in English,

facts can come later and you can start with the interest. You can be more creative, like that”.

The flexibility of English permitted the integration of topical issues for these teachers. Brage in Norway explains that,

“Those classes I enjoy the most preparing for are those instances where there is something going on in current events that I can do something new of right now, because that gives me the feeling of working with something FRESH (...) basically placing the English curriculum into the context of the world that’s evolving around us right now, rather than English being something that is limited or partially limited by whatever topics their textbook says”.

Tina also commented on the flexibility of teaching English compared to teaching history, “I think it’s easier to integrate English, because the competence aims are so wide, and you can base it on the interests of the pupils or whatever is in the news. Whereas history - there is a lot of history ((laughs)). And history is sort of marked by “we need to go through this””.

A difference in the degree of autonomy in designing English classes was noted across the two countries. In Norway, teaching English to a large degree also involves teaching content covering key topics connected to social issues, literature, and culture. In Austria, the focus is more on language and communicative competence, including socio-cultural competence. This was reflected in teachers’ comments which placed more of a focus on content in Norway which had to be covered in comparison to the conceptualization of English in Austria where the focus was more on the language per se.

DISCUSSION

Previous research has suggested several characteristics of language teaching that makes the teaching of the subject different from teaching non-language subjects, such as the combination of skills and content, a stronger emphasis on identity formation, a closer and more personal contact with students and the stress related to supporting the students’ in overcoming their language anxiety (Borg, 2006; Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Grossman & Schulman, 1994; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Horwitz, 1996; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Piechurska-Kusiel, 2011; Williams, 1994). However, these studies have in common that they have investigated these issues exclusively from the perspective of teachers who only teach one language, English, and who therefore only can report on what they *believe* are the unique characteristics of their subject. Furthermore, they have mainly explored teacher’s beliefs

of the uniqueness of teaching a language within a given context and not to what extent teaching one or more subjects may be experienced differently across contexts. This study, on the other hand, set out to explore how similar or different teaching ELT was from teaching other subjects in the eyes of teachers in Austrian and Norwegian secondary schools who taught two subjects daily and so have an experiential background on which to base their beliefs about teaching the two subjects.

Subject Status

The data were dominated by perceptions of subject status which reportedly affected these teachers as well as their learners. A major finding was that English as a school subject was perceived as having a lower status in Norway than in Austria according to the teachers. In both countries, subject status was linked to future prospects, e.g., school-leaving exams or university entrance. In Norway, however, STEM subjects appeared to be more highly valued socially and within the specific school setting, while in Austria, English was seen as having a relatively higher status due to it being a core subject in the final school-leaving (Matura) exam.

Relevance of English in school

An additional explanation for the relatively low status of English as a school subject in Norway was particularly interesting. Whereas both Norwegians and Austrians are highly proficient in English, ranked as number 5 and 6 respectively among 100 countries (Education First, 2020), the data analysis suggests that learners in the two countries estimate their language skills quite differently. A particular trend reported by the teachers in the Norwegian data concerns the perceptions by learners and parents that they are sufficiently proficient in English. According to the Norwegian teachers, their learners' views of themselves as competent language users makes the subject seem less important and even potentially irrelevant to them in upper secondary school. A possible reason for this in the Norwegian context is that English is widely available and frequently used beyond the classroom. The role of extramural English for language learning has been documented in several studies in the Scandinavian context. Above all, the dominance of English on the internet as used in social media, for internet, and in gaming provides rich exposure to language input and communication, which again contributes to improved language skills

and self-esteem in language use (Brevik, 2016; Sundqvist, 2009; Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015). In Busby's (2015) study, the learners themselves reported feeling that English language media and popular culture were more important than school lessons as a source of their knowledge of English. This has worrying implications for the perceived status of teachers of English as well as learner engagement in these classes. The findings prompt us to reflect on whether perhaps traditional ELT is at risk of becoming irrelevant in the eyes of contemporary learners in some settings and what English language teachers could do to counter this potential threat to their professional roles. One step that is already being taken in Norway is to integrate other competences, such as "health and life skills" and "democracy and citizenship", into the curriculum for English (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). This explicitly broadens the remit of language teachers to teach other competences alongside the linguistic skills and cultural topics typically associated with the subject, and it may increase the perceived importance of the subject from the perspective of the learners.

Learner Language Proficiency and Expectations

A possible additional consequence of the belief that Norwegians generally are good at English is that this may make it potentially more threatening for students to speak up in class and even more embarrassing if they cannot speak as well as everyone expects. In the Norwegian data, teachers repeatedly expressed frustration that students were difficult to motivate to speak in class, despite teachers perceiving the learners as having the proficiency to do so. It is known that the social climate and interactional setting plays a critical role in learners' willingness to communicate (e.g., Cao & Philp, 2006; Pawlak, Mystkowska-Wiertelak, & Bielak, 2016) and this is likely to be the case among the Norwegian students. It is possible that both their apparent overconfidence in their English and yet their reluctance to speak could be due to high social expectations as regards English proficiency. This could be making it hard for them to admit to gaps in knowledge and also putting them at the subsequent risk of losing face by displaying such gaps in competence.

Shared Teacher Identity

Despite the differences which emerged across the two contexts of Norway and Austria, the data analysis also showed notable similarities

in teacher perceptions across subjects. All the participating teachers first and foremost identified as *teachers* and felt that they thought about teaching and interacted with their students in similar ways in their two subjects. Similarly, aspects that may at first be conceived of as unique to language teaching, such as maintaining teacher linguistic skills or the need for student participation in class, were in fact also present in the other subjects represented in these data. For example, all the teachers noted their need to keep up-to-date in their subject skills, however those were conceived, and all the teachers talked about the need to motivate and engage learners in every subject – each with its own set of challenges. It is worth noting that in both Austria and Norway, teachers of all subjects also receive training in general pedagogy and education, which foregrounds the common elements of an educator’s role, as well as subject-specific courses. Therefore, it is possible that in other contexts with more subject-distinct and separate teacher education programs this general teacher identity may not be so pronounced.

Individual Teacher Differences

A final additional caution concerns the scope for individual variation among the teachers. The data showed how even teachers of the same subject combinations working in the same contexts perceived their teaching situations differently. Petra explained this well in her interview: “I have to say very much depends on the person very often. So it’s not subjects, not all the biology teachers do excursions or work practically”. She goes on to explain: “if everyone tries to be authentic and do their best, then there should be, you know, a spectrum of teaching and teachers for the spectrum of pupils”. As such, there is a need to be wary not to generalize across teachers or subjects but rather recognize the potential for unique individuality in how educators perceive their professional roles.

This small-scale, exploratory study does not permit broad generalizations of any kind. Nevertheless, the data did reveal the importance of context as well as the need to acknowledge the uniqueness and individuality of educators. This has important implications to be kept in mind when teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and practices are examined in research. Our study shows that even within such a limited sample, there is considerable individual and contextual diversity. Our findings suggest the need for taking a stronger ecological perspective within research on teachers’ beliefs. This enables us to better understand how individuals are situated within and relate to their various levels of ecology such as class, school, community, education system,

and national culture (e.g., Edwards & Burns, 2016; Hofstadler et al., 2021).

Like most previous researchers, we have chosen to focus on English teachers and teaching. We acknowledge that teaching ELT may differ in some respects from the teaching of other foreign languages. English compared to other foreign languages is often started earlier, is sometimes allotted more hours per week, and is often an obligatory subject. This could lead to differences due to, for example, the learners' level of proficiency and their motivations for studying the language as well as its perceived societal status. The findings show the importance of taking an ecological perspective and understanding the socio-political backdrop of ELT in a particular setting. They also raise worrying questions about the possible future of ELT in settings such as Norway in which the perceived relevance of English as a secondary school subject for learners and, indeed parents could potentially be under threat.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed considerable variation in how these teachers in Austria and Norway perceive the teaching of English and their non-language subjects. The study has made apparent that the teaching of English is not a politically neutral subject in and of itself even within comparable European countries. Instead, there is considerable systemic variation in how the language is positioned, esteemed, and its pedagogy prescribed across contexts. These acts of societal positioning for the language affects all stakeholders, parents, teachers, learners, policy, and society. It raises important questions for research to temper any broad-stroke statements about the state of ELT. Furthermore, it challenges us to reflect on how the teaching of English may perhaps share commonalities as well as aspects of uniqueness with the teaching of other languages as well as other subjects. There is often a tendency to focus on what makes a subject or social group different, yet, we also found commonalities suggesting as Johnson and Jackson (2006) did that there are lessons to be learned across disciplines and skills.

Although we found that in many ways teaching English was not so vastly different to teaching other subjects, it is also potentially unique in the light of contemporary shifts in access to English as a global language and the diverse emergent educational paradigms for the teaching of English. The dominance in the data of the theme of status and perceived relevance of the subject being taught was unexpected as we had anticipated more of a focus on unique didactics and pedagogy. Instead, the emerging story from these data is of teachers who are

working hard to engage learners in all their subjects, aware of the need for each subject to be relevant for learners, seeking to maintain their professional competences in all subjects, but ultimately facing unique societal, governmental, and institutional conditions which create specific challenges for each subject. The uniqueness of teaching English compared to teaching a NLS is reflected in the contextual constraints and affordances surrounding the teaching of each subject, which affect all levels of teacher roles and practices as well as learner engagement. Consequently, if we wish to understand how teachers experience their teaching of a subject, we must do so from an ecological perspective which enables a situated and contextualized view of the subject.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix S1