

The Assessment of German and Austrian Teacher Trainees' Child-Sensitive Language Competence

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Abstract

Today's teachers in inclusive settings face the challenge of working with an increasing number of children and adolescents experiencing psychological and emotional-behavioral difficulties. Among these, children with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to such challenges. Consequently, teachers are expected to assume a dual role that blends psychologist's tasks with their educational responsibilities. This broadened scope of tasks requires the acquisition and use of additional competencies. One key competency is the use of child-sensitive language - a subset of therapeutic discourse that serves to foster desirable psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes in children by promoting a healthy self-concept, positive self-esteem, and emotional resilience. Nevertheless, it remains an open question whether competence in child-sensitive language can be taken for granted among individuals who are fully educated and socially experienced. This study aimed to assess prospective teachers' competence in child-sensitive language and identify corresponding training needs. The sample (N = 660) consisted of 435 teacher trainees from 22 higher education institutions in Germany and 225 from 13 institutions in Austria. The online administration of the Bremer Key - a 13-item situational judgment test developed for this purpose - reveals that only 3% of the prospective teachers in the two countries demonstrate mastery-level competence in child-sensitive language. These findings underscore the urgent need for structured instruction and practice in the use of child-sensitive language within teacher training programs in both countries.

Key words: child-sensitive language, teacher training, situational judgement test

Introduction

Child-sensitive language competence is the understanding of how semantics and pragmatics impact children's psychological and socio-emotional development and the application of this knowledge habitually in verbal interactions with children. It empowers teachers to convey essential messages in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner and communicate empathy, appreciation, and affirmation in an encouraging and supportive tone. Its significance lies in its ability to foster desirable psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes in children by boosting self-confidence, increasing motivation, encouraging autonomy, facilitating the development

of effective emotion regulation, and creating a psychologically safe learning environment where each child is accepted as a unique and worthy individual (Rotschild, 2023, 2025). This competence becomes particularly relevant in light of the rising mental health concerns among school-aged children. In recent years, there has been a marked and consistent increase in the prevalence of psychological disorders within this population. Globally, it is estimated that 10–20% of students are affected by such conditions (Kieling et al., 2011; Polanczyk et al., 2015; Vizard et al., 2020; WHO, 2024). Data of particular relevance to the present study stems from Klasen et al. (2017) and Wagner et al. (2017), who reported prevalence rates of 17% and 24% among young people in Germany and Austria, respectively. Children with learning disabilities can be particularly affected. Their negative self-perceptions and low self-esteem (Caqueo-Urizar et al., 2021; Yakut & Akgul, 2024) put them at risk not only for underachievement but also for socio-emotional dysfunction, as well as behavioral and mental health problems (Carlen et al., 2023; Garaigordobil et al., 2008; Lee & Stone, 2012; Marsh et al., 2004; Preckel et al., 2013; Ybrandt, 2008). Empirical research highlights that children with learning disabilities often face significant challenges in the behavioral-emotional and psychosocial domains. Studies consistently report elevated rates of conduct problems, friendship difficulties, anxiety, and depression within this student population (Aro et al., 2022; Cristofani et al., 2023; Kouvava et al., 2022; Metsala et al., 2017; Nelson & Harwood, 2011; Visser et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2023). The negative consequences of impaired mental health and well-being extend beyond individuals, posing a significant threat to social sustainability. This critical and far-reaching impact was first highlighted in a landmark study by Whiteford and associates (2013), which documented the rising global burden of mental disorders and their growing contribution to disability worldwide. The study emphasized that mental disorders rank among the leading causes of years lived with disability (YLDs), underscoring the urgency for greater global attention to mental health. Reflecting growing international recognition of mental health's importance, the United Nations included mental health in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, marking a historic commitment to prioritizing mental well-being in global development agendas (Votruba et al., 2016). More recently, the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2019 study reaffirmed the severity of this issue: mental disorders accounted for 125.3 million YLDs globally, representing 14.6% of the total non-fatal disease burden across all conditions. Notably, 80.6% of this burden affected individuals of working age (16–65 years), while approximately 9.2% impacted those under 16. Among the younger group, conduct disorders and anxiety disorders were identified as leading contributors (Ferrari et al., 2022).

These findings highlight the urgent need to promote mental health throughout the lifespan, with particular focus on early development during the school years. Educational settings offer vital opportunities for both prevention and intervention. In this context, the use of child-sensitive language emerges as a key tool within teachers' pastoral and social care roles (Humphreys, 1996). Such language can positively influence the inner world of children with learning disabilities, helping them overcome previous negative experiences and supporting healthy, holistic development as well as overall well-being (Rotschild, 2025).

What teachers say - and how they say it - is interpreted by children as reflections of their own attributes, shaping their self-definitions and beliefs about their worth and potential (Burnett, 1999; Burnett & McCrindle, 1999; Craven et al., 1991; Morin, 2005; Purkey, 2000).

Recurring messages constructed in child-sensitive language support children with learning disability in overwriting unfavorable self-cognitions and building healthier self-esteem, ultimately improving how they position themselves in and interact with the world around them (Filippello et al., 2013; Fu et al., 2017; Gartrell, 2003; Han & Park, 2020; Harris & Orth, 2019; Lee & Hankin, 2009; MacLellan, 2014; Sarkova et al., 2013; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008; Zhao et al., 2021). Given these findings, it is evident that child-sensitive communication is not just a beneficial practice but a crucial component in the education and development of children, particularly those with learning disabilities. By consistently applying this approach, educators can significantly influence children's emotional well-being, self-concept, and academic success. The impact extends beyond the classroom, contributing to the lifelong resilience and psychological health of the children it reaches. Therefore, this competence is a key profession-specific skill for teachers, essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment that nurtures every child's potential in today's educational context, where a great diversity of students, each with unique entry characteristics, including special education needs, must be accommodated (Greenberg et al., 2003; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Heasley et al, 2025).

Aim of the Study

This study sought to evaluate the child-sensitive language competence of prospective teachers in Germany and Austria and identify the need for targeted training in this area. It focuses on assessing how well these future educators are prepared to interact with children in a sensitive and effective manner. The study was guided by the following questions: What is the level of child-sensitive communication competence among German and Austrian teacher trainees, and what specific training is required to enhance this competence?

Significance of the Study

The current development in the educational context, with an increasing number of children and adolescents experiencing psychological problems, has led to schools being recognized as crucial environments for promoting mental health (Schulte-Körne, 2016). Hence, teachers, as frontline professionals working closely with children on a daily basis, are increasingly expected to adopt a dual role that blends psychologist's tasks with their educational responsibilities (Greving & Ondracek, 2010). One of the crucial aspects of this dual role is the competent use of therapeutic language, with child-sensitive language being its specialized subset. While certain elements of child-sensitive language - such as empathetic and non-judgmental expressions - may naturally occur in general educated language use, professional contexts such as psychology and education demand a more intentional and skillful use of language as a tool (Kottler, 1991; Ljunggren et al., 2023). This raises the question of which aspects of child-sensitive language are observable in teacher trainees' communication, if any at all, and which require further development through guided instruction and practice. This study aims to address this gap by providing university regents with insights into the specific areas of child-sensitive communication that require targeted instruction and practice within teacher education. By identifying these areas, the study helps advance efforts to better prepare prospective teachers to foster and promote the mental health and psychological well-being of children and adolescents. The integration of child-sensitive language into

teacher training can empower teachers to contribute not only to inclusive and developmentally supportive classroom environments but also to broader objectives of social sustainability - including economic growth, poverty reduction, gender equality, improved health outcomes, and the promotion of peaceful and equitable societies (Goczek et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Vladimirova & Le Blanc, 2016).

Method

Participants

The sample (N=660) consisted of 435 teacher trainees from 22 higher education institutions in Germany and 225 from 13 in Austria. All participants were enrolled in either a Bachelor or Master of Education program at a university or teacher training college, specializing in various subject areas in primary or secondary education. The participants were reached through institutional mailing lists by their professors. The institutions were selected to provide a comprehensive overview of teacher training across both countries.

Assessment Instrument

The Bremer Key (Rotschild, 2024) is an online, multiple-choice situational judgment test with a composite reliability coefficient (ω) of .81, designed to measure pre-service and in-service teachers' child-sensitive language awareness and communication competence. The construct and its components are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
The Construct “Child-Sensitive Language” and its Key Components

Child-Sensitive Language (CSL)	
The language crafted to consider children's cognitive abilities, individuality, emotional sensitivity, and self-perception formation. It respects children’s unique experiences and perspectives, aiming to nurture their self-esteem, confidence, and positive self-image.	
CSL ₁ [Empathetic]	Language that demonstrates an understanding of and sensitivity to a child's emotions and experiences.
CLS ₂ [Non-judgemental]	Language that refrains from making value judgments or criticisms.
CLS ₃ [Non-threatening]	Language that avoids using words, phrases, or tones that may induce fear or anxiety in children.
CLS ₄ [Appreciative]	Language that expresses genuine appreciation and encouragement towards children.
CLS ₅ [Supportive]	Language that offers words of support, reassurance, and guidance to children.

Note. Adapted from Rotschild (2024).

Rotschild (2025) describes child-sensitive language as a complex, latent, multidimensional construct, integrating several distinct yet related lower-level constructs, each characterized by its own set of observable indicators (Law et al., 1998; Johnson et al., 2012). Rather than functioning independently, these constructs interact to create synergies that enhance the overall effectiveness (Carver, 1989) and significance of child-sensitive language.

The various dimensions are operationalized through 13 research-based communication guidelines (Rotschild, 2025) each with either a semantic focus or a pragmatic orientation.

Following administration of the situational judgment test to 660 participants, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to uncover latent dimensions based on item response patterns. Each item's correct response key was developed to reflect a specific communication guideline derived from the literature. By linking the emergent factors to the underlying guidelines represented in the keys of the clustered items, the communication guidelines were empirically assigned to corresponding dimensions of child-sensitive language (see Table 2).

Table 2

The Operationalization of Child-Sensitive Language

CSL Dimension	Operationalizing Communication Guidelines			
CLS ₁	Communicate understanding and acceptance of the child's feelings and experience.		Communicate care and genuine interest in helping.	
CLS ₂	Communicate care and genuine interest in helping.	Do not criticize but guide to solution.	Use neither adjectives nor 'must' or 'should' to comment on or demand change in character or behaviour.	Avoid absolute terms: "always", "never", "all" etc.
CLS ₃	Pose no 'why' question to express dissatisfaction with/ disapproval of behaviour.	Avoid 'if-then' warnings and the use of imperative + alternative/result/reason in your message.	Express non-acceptance of behaviour firmly and concisely without embarrassing, insulting or demeaning the child.	Address problem behaviours with I-statements.

CLS ₄	Formulate feedback as a personal response, using “I think”, “I find it”, “It seems to me”.	Affirm the child's praise-worthy behaviour and talent without inflated praise.	Provide no generic praise, but behaviour-specific feedback, using descriptive words.
CLS ₅	Provide no generic praise, but behaviour-specific feedback, using descriptive words.	Be inviting, offer choices and encourage independent decision making.	

The test presents examinees with 13 authentic classroom situations, as illustrated in Figure 1, and asked to select the best possible verbal reaction from three options. Each correct answer is scored with 1 point.

Figure 1

Sample Test Item

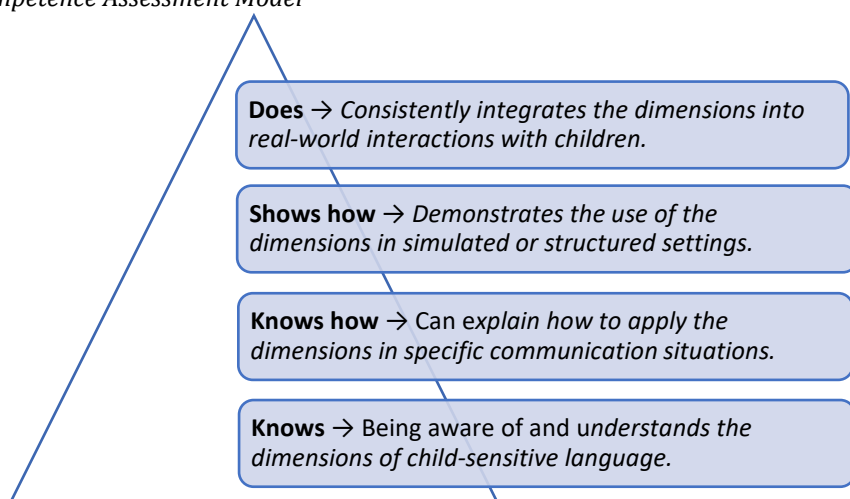
In class, the students have been given an assignment to work on a set of math exercises. Leon, however, is sitting at his desk and hasn't started his work. He seems disengaged, looking around the classroom while other students are working.

- (a) Leon, what can I do to help you get started on your exercises?
- (b) Leon, why aren't you doing the exercises?
- (c) Leon, would you like start doing the exercises?

Note. Adopted from Rotschild (2024).

The test was designed to align with Miller's (1990) Competence Assessment Model (see Figure 2), assessing not only examinees' awareness and understanding of the dimensions of child-sensitive language ("knows") but also their ability to apply this knowledge in practical, context-specific scenarios ("shows how").

Because examinees must actively judge and select the most effective response rather than report typical behavior, the test functions as a maximal performance measure (McDaniel et. al., 2007) - capturing their capacity to perform at their best in realistic situations. Maximal performance measures tend to correlate strongly with cognitive abilities such as reasoning, problem-solving, and applied knowledge, since identifying the "best" response requires both conceptual understanding and sound judgment. Thus, the test draws on examinees' cognitive resources as well as their practical communication competence.

Figure 2*Miller's Competence Assessment Model*

Note. Adapted from Miller (1990).

Although the Bremer Key operates at the “shows how” level and functions as a maximal performance measure, examinees’ results are evaluated against a predefined mastery-level benchmark. This means the test is not only diagnostic of what examinees are capable of under optimal conditions but also evaluative of whether they meet a standard of competence in child-sensitive communication. As such, test scores can be interpreted as indicators of whether an individual has achieved a sufficient level of mastery -beyond merely reflecting relative ability levels or self-reported behavioral tendencies.

Procedure

The test, stored on a server at the Universität Bremen, was activated and made accessible from April 1 to June 30, 2024. The link to it was sent out by email. The students were informed about the purpose of the study and offered the opportunity for voluntary participation. The tests were anonymized; examinees were not required to provide any personal identifiers, ensuring their privacy. Their IP addresses were neither recorded nor stored. Given the minimal ethical considerations and alignment with common educational research practices, no formal requests were made by the participating professors for submission to their respective ethics commissions. This approach minimized potential ethical concerns, rendering additional ethical review unnecessary. The settings were configured to prevent examinees from skipping items, logging out and back in, or taking the test more than once. No time limit for completing the test was set. Examinees’ answers were scored and analyzed using SPSS 28.

Results

The cut-off score of 8, calculated by using the cumulative binomial distribution method as proposed by Royal and Stockade (2017), establishes a threshold with a 95% confidence level, indicating that candidates scoring 8 or higher meet minimum

competency standards with strong statistical confidence. Nevertheless, this minimum mastery criterion level, corresponding to a 62% benchmark, falls below the 80% commonly set by educators as the minimum mastery level (Fuller & Fienup, 2018). While the statistically derived cut-off score provides a robust standard, the educational criterion of 80%, rooted in pedagogical principles and practical expectations, signifies a higher standard of mastery that educators believe examinees should attain to demonstrate acceptable proficiency in a subject matter. Together, these benchmarks ensure consistency and objectivity in determining minimum competency and enhance the reliability and validity of the assessment results. They serve as critical tools for evaluating student performance, guiding curriculum development, and making informed decisions about instructional strategies and resource allocation (Hambleton, 1978; Sax, 1997)

Global Cohort

The analysis of the test results for the overall cohort (N=660) reveals a mean score (*M*) of 6.15 with a standard deviation (*SD*) of 1.83, indicating a moderate level of variability in examinees' performance. The 25th percentile score is 5, the median is 6, and the 75th percentile score is 7, showing that most examinees scored between 5 and 7. Out of all the examinees, 152 (23%) achieved the statistically derived minimum mastery level, while a smaller subset of 22 (3.3%) reached the more rigorous educational mastery level. The overall performance of the cohort across all 5 tested domains is presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics by Domain for the Global Cohort

Domain	Maximum Score	M	% of the Max. Score	SD
CSL ₁	2	.69	34.5	.495
CSL ₂	2	1.42	71.0	.701
CSL ₃	2	.84	42.0	.681
CSL ₄	4	1.87	46.8	1.000
CSL ₅	3	1.33	44.3	.809

Based on the statistical data, teacher trainees demonstrate varying levels of competence across different domains of child-sensitive language. They exhibit the highest proficiency in non-judgmental language, with a *M*=1.42, representing 71% of the maximum possible score. However, the *SD*= 0.701 indicates considerable variability, suggesting that while some trainees perform well, others are less consistent. In contrast, the domain of empathetic language shows a *M*=0.69, or 34.5% of the maximum score, highlighting a significant challenge as most trainees perform below the midpoint. The *SD*=0.495 reflects moderate variability, indicating that while there is room for improvement, most trainees are performing at a similar level. The domain of non-threatening language has a *M*=0.84, which is 42% of the maximum score, with a moderate *SD*=0.681 showing performance differences among trainees similar to those in empathetic communication. The domain of appreciative language has a *M*=1.87. Nevertheless, this score is lower than the *M*=1.42 in non-judgmental language when

evaluated relative to the maximum possible scores (46.8%). This domain shows substantial variability, as indicated by a high $SD=1.000$, reflecting a wide range of competence levels among trainees. Lastly, in supportive, reassuring language, the $M=1.33$, or 44.3% of the maximum score, with an $SD=0.809$, showing less variability than in appreciative language but more than in empathetic, non-judgmental, and non-threatening language. Overall, while teacher trainees perform relatively better in non-judgmental language, performance across all domains is below the midpoint, indicating a non-mastery competence level in child-sensitive language.

Comparative Analysis of the German and Austrian Cohorts

The performance of the German cohort ($n = 435$) and the Austrian cohort ($n = 235$) on the test showed overall similarities, but also notable differences. The German cohort achieved $M = 6.18$, which is slightly higher than that of the overall cohort ($M = 6.15$) and that of the Austrian cohort ($M = 6.08$). The SD for the German cohort remained at 1.83, while the Austrian cohort had a very similar SD of 1.84, indicating consistent variability across groups.

The distribution of scores was identical across the German, Austrian, and overall cohorts, with the 25th percentile at 5, the median at 6, and the 75th percentile at 7. This uniformity suggests that score distributions are stable across national groups.

In terms of mastery levels, 23.7% ($n=103$) of German teacher trainees met the minimum threshold of 8 points, minimally exceeding the Austrian cohort's 20.9% ($n=49$) and the overall cohort's 23%. Similarly, 3.4% ($n=14$) of the German trainees reached the educational mastery level of 10 points, slightly higher than the 3% ($n=7$) observed in the Austrian cohort, and comparable to the 3.3% in the overall cohort. These findings suggest that German trainees performed marginally better in achieving higher mastery levels. When comparing the cohorts' performance in the individual domains - expressed as a percentage of the mean relative to the maximum possible scores - German trainees scored higher in non-judgmental (+6%), non-threatening (+4.3%), and appreciative communication (+2.2%), whereas Austrian trainees scored higher in empathetic (+3%) and supportive communication (+4.3%). The statistical data for both cohorts are presented in Table 4. While possible reasons for variability in individual performance are discussed in the limitations section, group-level influences such as cultural factors, variations in socialization into professional teaching roles, and differences in curricular emphases between Austrian and German teacher education programs may also contribute. Nonetheless, it is notable that neither cohort achieves the proficiency level expected of professionals for whom language is a fundamental tool of their trade.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics by Domain for the German and Austrian Cohorts

Domain	Maximum Score		M		% of the Max. Score		SD	
	DE	A	DE	A	DE	A	DE	A
CSL ₁	2	2	.67	.73	33.5	36.5	.500	.484
CSL ₂	2	2	1.46	1.34	73.0	67.0	.675	.745

CSL ₃	2	2	.87	.78	43.5	39.0	.689	.663
CSL ₄	4	4	1.90	1.81	47.5	45.3	1.005	.991
CSL ₅	3	3	1.28	1.41	42.7	47.0	.795	.831

Reliability

Using the same computation method as in the piloting phase of the instrument (Rotschild, 2024) the test exhibited a composite reliability coefficient ω of .77. This value of ω is above the comparable threshold of $\alpha = .70$ for good internal consistency (Kline, 2000). The relatively small decrease of .04 in the coefficient ω indicates that the test remains stable and reliable across different sample sizes. This suggests that the test maintains consistent performance and can be used with confidence in larger populations.

Discussion

The assessment of the teacher trainees’ child-sensitive communication competence reveals significant variability and notable gaps in their skills across different domains. The overall $M=6.15$, with $SD=1.83$, underscores the moderate level of performance among the 660 examinees. Although a quarter of the trainees (23%) met the minimum mastery level, only a small fraction (3.3%) achieved the educational mastery level, highlighting widespread deficiencies in their child-sensitive communication skills. The data indicate that trainees demonstrate a good command of non-judgmental language, marking it as a relative strength. In contrast, performance across all other dimensions of child-sensitive language falls below the midpoint of the possible scoring range. Empathetic language, in particular, emerges as a critical area for improvement. These findings suggest a pressing need for targeted interventions and training in these weaker domains, empowering prospective teachers in both countries to better navigate the challenges posed by today’s diverse student population (Da Silva Fernandes et al., 2021; Voss et al., 2011) characterized by very different entry characteristics, including special education needs (Al-Yagon et al., 2013; Lebeer et al., 2011) and an increasing prevalence of mental health disorders (Kieling et al., 2011; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2015). Positioned at the intersection of inclusive education and youth well-being, child-sensitive language supports multiple dimensions of the SDGs, particularly those related to quality education, mental health, and reduced inequalities - thereby contributing to long-term social sustainability. In addition to facilitate teachers’ agency, or their “capacity to make a difference” (Durrant & Holden, 2006), produce favorable academic outcomes (Kunter et al., 2013), and promote sustainability, child-sensitive communication competence could enhance teachers’ sense of “flow,” a concept described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as a state of professional satisfaction and personal growth, as they observe the positive effects of their interactions on students’ development and psychological well-being. As a result, teachers could experience heightened job satisfaction, increased teaching effectiveness, continuous professional growth, and improved psychological health (Olčar et al., 2019; Nwoko et al., 2023; Shim et al., 2021).

Limitations of the Study

While the findings of this study provide valuable insights, there are a few limitations to consider that may influence the interpretation of the results. One such limitation is the lack of information regarding participants' academic year, age, and prior communication training. Including details about the academic stage (e.g., first-year, second-year, or bachelor's level) could provide a deeper understanding of how communication skills develop at different points in teacher training. Additionally, participant age could offer insights into potential age-related variations in communication competence. The absence of prior communication training information also limits the ability to assess how previous experience or education in communication may have impacted the participants' performance. Future research could benefit from exploring these factors to gain a more nuanced understanding of the variables influencing child-sensitive communication skills and to inform more targeted training interventions. Despite these limitations, the findings remain relevant and meaningful for informing teacher education about the imperative to focus on developing child-sensitive language competence.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on designing appropriate training materials to enhance child-sensitive competence among teacher trainees. Additionally, evaluating in-service teachers' child-sensitive communication competence is crucial to compare the competence levels of the two cohorts. Such a comparison could shed light on the role of experience, if any, in the acquisition of competence in child-sensitive language. Furthermore, it could facilitate the development of targeted interventions that ensure all teachers, regardless of experience, possess the skills necessary to support students' cognitive, social, and emotional development effectively. Ultimately, this approach could enhance the overall quality of education and promote better educational outcomes for students.

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