

# Perceptions of Professional Competence in the Context of an Office-Based Workplace

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## Abstract

Social Sciences literature has produced various conceptualisations of professional competence, in addition to models and taxonomies for its perception, assessment and acquisition. The need remains for a holistic model that addresses the varied use of this term. My study contributes to the efforts to develop such a model by investigating how office professionals perceive and negotiate the meaning of competence in interaction.

Phase I combines thematic and interactional analyses of individual interview responses to visual stimuli from the sitcom *W1A*. Phase II combines thematic and interactional analyses of follow-up individual and group interviews with multimodal analysis of the visual stimuli.

Four conceptualisations were present in my sample. Three were context-independent: competence as a level of attainment; competence as a set of characteristics required for an individual to fulfil a role; and competence as a set of characteristics required to fulfil a role, subject to training. The other was a dual construction in which competence denotes a set of characteristics required to fulfil a role and, in respect to a given role, denotes any characteristic required for that role.

I suggest a multifaceted model that constructs professional competence as a level of attainment and defines context-dependent competencies required for 'competent' and 'expert' practitioners.

**Keywords:** Competence, context-dependent competencies, workplace interactions, *W1A*, interactional analysis.

## Introduction

Professional competence discourses proliferate in the modern workplace as well as in job adverts and role descriptions. Defining, developing and assessing competence has attracted significant interest in recent times across Social Sciences research. Scholars in anthropology, linguistics, psychology, sociology and business studies have offered models and taxonomies, which are employed within workplace learning initiatives and training and development programmes (Garavan and McGuire, 2001; Mulder, 2014). Areas to which less attention has been devoted include the micro-analysis of professionals' perceptions of what constitutes competence and how the meaning of this concept is negotiated in interaction. This article situates itself in these areas, examining a sample of office professionals who have held managerial responsibility over projects and human resources. My mixed-methods approach combines different datasets to investigate how professionals frame the concept of competence and how they perceive others in the context of general workplace interactions, rather than formal assessments.

## **Ethical considerations**

Threats to participant anonymity are controlled through the use of initials and the destruction of recordings of participants' interview responses subsequent to the completion of the project. Sensitive information such as names of individuals and organisations are omitted from the transcript.

## **Literature review**

There is an extensive body of literature concerning performance, perception and conception of competence. As professional competence is an abstract concept, its meaning is located within the research framework used, which derives from the various master narratives made available to the researcher through socialisation to the professional domain (Angouri, 2018: 69). The co-construction of the meaning of professional competence by researcher and participants will be discussed. In order to focus my study and situate my preconceived notions of competence, I explored competence training literature, particularly from the fields of education, linguistics and human resource management (HRM), to identify different conceptualisations of competence. Traditional viewpoints conceived of competence as consisting either of individual attributes or of tasks (Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75). Attempts to address this issue include the integrated conceptualisation outlined by Gonczi (1994), wherein

competence consists of behaviours associated with the completion of specific tasks and personal attributes (in Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 64). These traditional views are challenged by the 'holistic' views, which see competence as originating from workers' lived experiences and conceptions of their work (Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75). Holistic views include the interpretative view, wherein competence originates from experiences of work practices, and the interpretative-relational view, which focuses on workplace-situated experiences of work practices (Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75). As my study includes no observation of real-life workplace interactions and thus is relatively removed from the lived experience of the workplace, this article aligns predominantly with the interpretative view in its contribution to the continuing development of a more holistic conceptualisation of professional competence (Korthagen, 2004; Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75–76).

I reviewed frameworks for defining and assessing competence to obtain standards against which to compare my participants' perceptions. Drawing on Stoof *et al.*'s (2002) seminal boundary approach, authors such as Mulder (2014) and Tigelaar and Van der Vleuten (2014) define competence as consisting of a set of context- and purpose-dependent characteristics, or 'competencies'. These characteristics may be categorised under types of competence, such as intercultural or communicative competence (Bennett, 2015; Roberts and Campbell, 2006). Another template reverses the meanings of 'competence' and 'competency', using 'competence' to denote a specific skill and 'competency' to denote the broader concept of performance quality (in Soderquist *et al.*, 2010: 326, 335). This template is widely used in HRM literature, which is particularly relevant given the managerial profile of my sample.

Van Genderen's (2013) key aspects of competence in business are particularly salient to my focus on communication. The characteristics described can be depicted in, and judged from, video stimuli, making them a suitable focus for my project.

Given the widespread recognition of communicative competence as a vital requirement in the globalised business environment (Kane, 1993; Tuleja, 2005; Van Genderen, 2013), I chose to explore responses to situations where communicative competence is central to task fulfilment and successful performance in one's role.

Finally, I identified effective methodologies used to explore people's perceptions of competence. Gerber and Velde's (1997) clerical-administrative model successfully negotiated the high richness of responses inherent in a qualitative study of such an

abstract topic to produce an applicable model of competence. I therefore considered it a valuable source of methodological inspiration.

## Methodology

### Research design

I combined analysis of fictional depictions of office-based workplace interactions and interviews with professionals who have experience of office-based workplaces or similar in order to create a taxonomy of competence in an office-based workplace and explore how this taxonomy is negotiated in interaction. My research questions are as follows:

1. How do professionals perceive professional competence?
2. How do professionals negotiate the meaning of professional competence?

To investigate my first research question (RQ1), I used qualitative interviews and focus groups to explore participants' lived experiences and perspectives. To investigate my second research question (RQ2), I examined selected interview responses using interactional analysis. Finally, I conducted a multimodal analysis of fictional depictions of workplace interaction, drawing on relevant literature, to which I compared my participants' perceptions and interactionally situated constructions of competence in order to integrate my findings into a master narrative. I used a multiphase design in which my interpretation of the data collected in Phase I informed a number of methodological choices in Phase II. I here provide an explanation of the methodological choices and the processes of data collection and analysis within each phase.

### Phase I

#### Methodology.

To investigate RQ1, I examined participants' responses to video stimuli depicting fictional workplace interactions, an established method for investigating perceptions of competence (Kinnick and Parton, 2005). I sought to explore the real-life processes of judging the competence of others, but chose not to use real-life stimulus data owing to the practical difficulties of capturing the desired tasks and situations within

the relevant time constraints. Furthermore, I considered that participants would feel more comfortable about disclosing their opinions of fictional characters. I drew my stimuli, which depict office workplace interactions, from the comedy series *W1A*, which has not been analysed before in this research area (J. Angouri, personal communication, 30 October 2017). As *W1A* has received a number of awards (British Academy Film and Television Awards, 2016; 2017; Royal Television Society, 2016) and the relevant episodes attracted audiences of over 1.5m (Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, 2017), I considered it to provide an appropriate tool.

I conducted five individual interviews in which the participant was shown Stimulus A, 'Goodbye, BBC. Hello, BBC ME – W1A series 3 episode 1 – BBC Two', and asked questions to elicit their opinions on the competence of three characters, Ian, Anna and Siobhan. The process was repeated with Stimulus B, 'When the problem is you don't know what to do – W1A series 3 episode 2 – BBC Two', focusing on the same three characters and another, Lucy. To accommodate my exploratory aims, I allowed participants to discuss other characters and relevant personal experiences.

To identify my stimuli and focal characters, I examined role-specific competence models that relate to my participants' professional experiences (see Appendix 2). By identifying stimuli in which characters demonstrated or failed to demonstrate salient characteristics described in these models, I sought to maximise the relevance of the content to my participants' processes of judgement. In interpreting the models, I applied an integrated conceptualisation of competence, wherein competence is subject to performance and is constituted by a set of attributes, including knowledge, skills and attitudes guiding behaviour in context (Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75). I considered this conceptualisation appropriate for application across the styles used in the models.

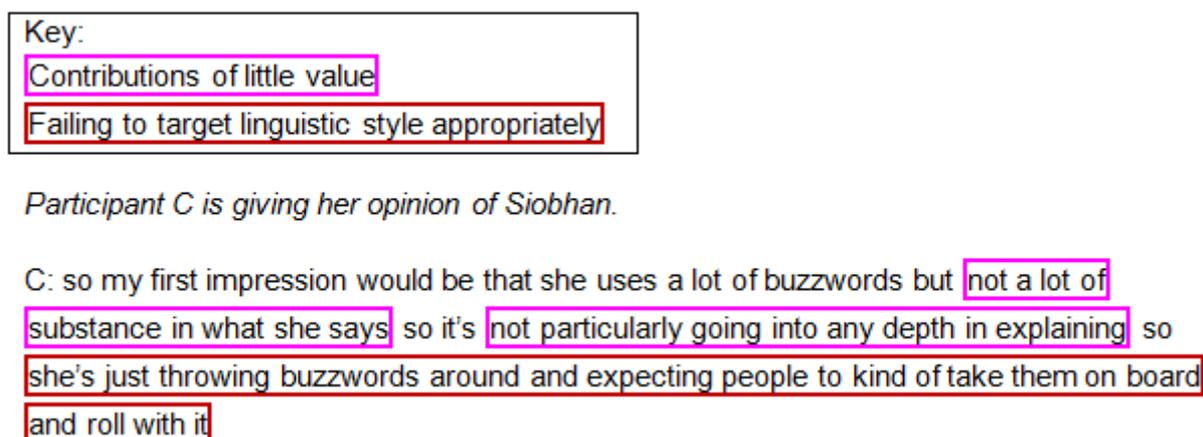
To address RQ2, I examined the negotiation of meaning of the term 'competence'. As an abstract concept, its meaning is located within the interactional event of the research interview and its broader interactional, social and historical context, including the research framework used within the project. This problematises the meaning of the term as it is used in the research questions. I address this issue in depth in the 'Results and discussion' section.

## Sampling

I had aimed to use purposive sampling by identifying potential participants from among my personal contacts who had worked in an office environment or similar, including occupying managerial roles for a minimum of six months. As it was outside the scope of this project to compare perceptions across different cultural backgrounds, I also required each participant to have occupied relevant roles in a British cultural environment for a minimum of one year. However, participant dropout resulted in my final sample being selected via convenience sampling. My final sample consisted of five male and four female participants distributed throughout the five age groups of a typical working life (see Appendix 2). Their diverse professional experiences include roles for which understanding self-presentation in workplace interactions is crucial, such as Participant G's background in corporate communications and Participants C, T and X's business training roles (see Appendix 2). Although generalisability was not a key aim, I used a diverse sample to allow different ideas to emerge and to examine convergence and divergence of views.

## Analysis

To address RQ1, I conducted a thematic analysis of all data that related to workplace behaviour in order to identify participants' ideas in respect of professional competence. Figure 1 shows an extract from this analysis showing coding for Participant C's ideas in respect of the performance of competence in a meeting-based interaction, unattributed to a specific role within the meeting.



**Figure 1:** Extract from coding for themes.

In my initial analysis, I drew on Saldaña's (2015: 199) coding-to-theory model of qualitative inquiry. Given the conflicting views present in the data, I decided to code each participant's data separately and create a set of emergent themes for each

participant. As this led to my extracting themes from very small datasets, I included in the process any ideas that seemed relevant to my research concerns, regardless of how frequently expressed or salient to the narrative they were within the participant's response. I categorised each set of themes to produce broader thematic categories, culminating in theoretical constructs, as shown in Figure 2.

X

- I. Characteristics of competence
  - Sales pitch
    - a. Confident presenter
    - b. Informative feedback
    - c. Having ideas
    - d. Open-minded
    - e. Not imposing on others
- II. Characteristics of incompetence
  - Leadership
    - f. Not making decisions quickly
    - g. Not communicating and enforcing decisions quickly
    - h. Refusal to consider others' viewpoints
    - i. Not forming opinions
    - j. Lack of ideas
    - k. Contributions of little value
    - l. Lack of comprehension
    - m. Quietness
    - n. Uninformative feedback

Figure 2: Categorisation of themes for Participant X.

From each participant's set of themes, I created a definition of competence, focusing on how professionals and managers should behave in a meeting-based situation (see Appendix 3). I drew this technique for presenting qualitative interview data from Gerber and Velde (1997: 470–71) and extended its application by using the definitions in my Phase II interviews.

## Phase II

### Methodology

To verify my Phase I thematic analysis, I conducted two individual follow-up interviews, in which I showed the participant the definition of competence that I had created for them and asked them whether it reflected their views. I also asked questions to explore or clarify elements of their Phase I responses.

To further address RQ2, I conducted two group interviews to examine how participants' constructions of competence negotiated with other participants differed from those negotiated with the researcher. I identified an unseen extract in which problem-solving was a goal unachieved by the characters, 'We haven't got a plan A – W1A: Episode 4 preview – BBC One'. I then conducted a group interview in which participants were given a problem-solving task drawn from the unseen stimulus and asked to collaborate to provide solutions and afterwards reflect on the collaborative process. Finally, they were shown the stimulus and asked to compare their own problem-solving processes with those employed by the characters, in order to encourage reflection on the characteristics required to undertake the situated process of problem-solving. I also asked questions to investigate their opinions with respect to specific language features in the stimulus that I had identified in my analysis as relevant to judgements outlined by the participants in Phase I.

In the second group interview, I utilised the definitions of competence shown in Appendix 3. Participants were asked to order the definitions according to the extent to which they agreed with them. We then discussed the meaning of the term 'competence' as a group.

### Sampling

I used convenience sampling for the individual interviews and purposive for the group ones. For the first group, I selected Participants N and X, as each of their written definitions referred to behaviours that the other did not mention. I was therefore interested to explore how they negotiated meanings with respect to these. For the second group, I selected Participant E, who had requested significant amendment of his definition in his follow-up interview, and Participant I, whose definition converged strongly with E's. The definitions used included their own, plus one which differed significantly from theirs, which I utilised to encourage discussion of different perceptions of competence.

### Analysis

As in Phase I, I conducted a thematic analysis on the interview responses to inform the amendment of each participant's written definition.

To explore RQ2, I conducted an interactional analysis on selected interview data to explore how participants and I negotiated the meaning of 'competence' and related terms. Within my interactional analysis, I conducted an informal comparison of participants' use of these terms when introduced by me and when introduced by the participant, which I will discuss below.

Finally, I sought to situate my findings within the relevant literature by comparing my participants' perceptions of competence, and the meanings which they ascribed to this term, with the definitions presented in the models. I therefore assessed the performance of the characters' competence through multimodal analysis of the stimuli, a technique established in works such as Mondada (2011), using the models as an analytical tool. I will discuss this analysis in the next section.

## **Results and discussion**

In my thematic analysis, I identified language features explicitly identified by the participants as contributing to the judgements they make about competence with respect to the stimuli and real-life experiences. I supplemented this with my multimodal analysis of the evidence from the stimuli that the participants identified as contributing to their judgements, an example of which is presented in Figure 3.

*Extract from Stimulus B. Lucy proposes a solution to a human resources issue. Lucy's actions in this extract are identified by a number of participants as evidence of her competence, whilst Anna's actions are identified by a number of participants as evidence of her incompetence and by one participant as demonstrating characteristics of both competence and incompetence.*

Lucy: I mean this probably wouldn't work

*Gaze downwards into neutral space*

*Shaking head*

Performance of modesty – appropriate for junior

Use of hedges and qualifiers – indirect style appropriate for junior

Anna: no

*Gaze at Lucy*

*Shaking head*

Lucy: *Gaze at Anna*

Direct, unmitigated rejection threatens Lucy's positive face. Its position before Lucy has voiced her idea strengthens the force of the FTA and indicates that Anna's justification for the rejection is based on extracommunicative knowledge, i.e. her existing knowledge of Lucy or ulterior motives.

**Figure 3:** Extract from multimodal analysis.

Figure 3 shows an extract from my interpretation of the language features that participants identified as contributing to their competence judgements and the surrounding audio-visual data.

The elements that attracted the most comment were language choices dubbed valueless or 'empty', as shown in Figure 4. These language choices attracted 17 references from eight participants. In addition, one participant mentioned the use of 'empty' language in her personal experiences. The framing of these references indicates that they were significant within the participants' judgement processes: for instance, many participants referred to empty language in response to highly general starter questions.

Key:	
Transcription:	
[data summary]	[...] irrelevant data omitted
Coding:	
Supportive	Language features
Contributions of little value	

*T is giving his opinion on Anna. Extract begins partway through T's conversational turn.*

T: she's not agreeing with whole concept exactly when somebody makes a point she says 'yes' or 'yes exactly'

R: do you think she's agreeing for the purpose of supporting her colleagues supporting the presenter

T: I dunno cos the language is supporting, but it's a bit empty [...] cos [Simon] says 'brilliant' you don't actually know that he thinks it's brilliant he's just saying it it's a mockery of management speak [...] when people give praise to thing or agree [...] but it's not really adding value

**Figure 4:** Extract demonstrating valuation of language features as 'empty'.

A number of factors can be identified from the framing of these references to 'empty' language to explain participants' evaluation that they signal incompetence. In a number of references, the participant in question indicates that they interpreted the language as signalling ignorance or lack of comprehension, as in Participant X's statement that 'my perception is that she has no idea what's going on and that's why she would have one word into every sentence like "yes no brilliant"'.

Another potential factor lies in the discursive performance of power. O'Barr and Atkins (1980) and subsequent authors characterise 'empty' adjectives as indicating powerlessness across a range of contexts (in Conley and O'Barr, 2005: 65; Wilson and Boxer, 2015: 4), which could contribute to the highlighting of 'empty' language across my diverse sample. This is supported by Participant C's evaluation that the characters using 'empty' statements of agreement are 'going with whatever the consultant is saying' because they 'are keen on pleasing her'.

A significant proportion of these characteristics relate to communication. This is consistent with the view of Van Genderen (2013) and others that appropriate communication is vital to constructing oneself as a competent professional.

Interestingly, the points of convergence are dominated by points concerning communication, while the points of divergence are largely related to other aspects of role fulfilment, implying that standards of communication may be less subjective than other standards of behaviour.

There is strong convergence between my participants' perceptions of competence and the characteristics detailed in the models of competence chosen for analysis, as shown in Figure 5. However, there is variation in how individuals conceptualise competence, with their ideas reflecting some of the many conceptualisations proposed in competence training literature.

To analyse conceptualisations that appear in my sample, it is important to recognise how they were negotiated by participants in interaction with the researcher. In each interview, I modified my communicative style as appropriate within the interaction, including adapting the level of specificity of each question. Where a participant responded fully to very general questions, such as 'what impression did you form of him?', I used the terms 'competence' and 'professional' less frequently than with participants who requested clarification in response to such questions; and with three of the participants, I used the terms only in response to the participant's use of them. Owing to this variation in my use of the terms, I investigated how I negotiated their meanings with the participants in order to explore the nuanced influence of potentially leading questions and the role of the researcher in the study of abstract concepts such as competence. For this purpose, I used interactional and thematic analysis, as shown in Figure 5.

Key:

Transcription:

[...] irrelevant data omitted

Coding:

Negotiation of meaning

Behaviour

Attitudes

Objectives

Products

R: what did you think of her competence

E: that means me trying to work out what I think her objectives were she probably did what she wanted to do but not what other people wanted her to do or maybe the other way around can you clarify what you're asking me to assess

R: were you a participant in that meeting would you be impressed by her would you

E: well she's [...] not taking it on board or addressing it she's just cutting him off

R: so because she's cutting off other people's feedback she's not being very good at that task

E: no she's not she's taking it into account she's not dealing with the question she's not dealing with the issues that people are throwing up so she's making a recommendation the recommendation has to work with the facts that are gonna be put forward it's a fairly simplistic argument her response to Ian 'it's over' but that's not backed up with evidence counter evidence is put in front of her but she's not explaining how that fits into her viewpoint it may fit into her viewpoint but she's not explaining how

Figure 5: Extract showing negotiation of meaning with Participant E.

In this extract the negotiation of the term 'competence' is externalised by the participant outlining the process of judgement in which he is about to engage and explicitly asking for clarification that his interpretation of the question coincides with the researcher's aims. Participant E postulates the achievement of objectives as an interpretation of the term, which he then subdivides into 'what she wanted to do' and 'what other people wanted her to do'. I clarify the question by asking E whether he would 'be impressed by her', prompting him to evaluate the impression that he would form of her as a real-life colleague. By not directly addressing his reference to

'objectives', I aimed to allow him to decide whether my construction of the term 'competence' confirmed or rejected his suggested conceptualisation; in other words, whether the extent to which she appeared to achieve her objectives would prompt him to form a positive or negative impression of her professional identity. He proceeded to give judgements on her and other characters' competence based on their behaviour, such as 'cutting him off'; approaches to the task, such as 'not taking it on board'; and personal attributes, such as 'closed-minded'. He linked these personal judgements to the task objectives, including some that benefited a specific character, such as the statement that, for Siobhan's recommendation to be accepted, it must 'work with the facts', and some that relate to the interests of the company, such as the statement that 'in that situation you want lots of people with contrasting views'.

I used various lexical forms of the terms 'professional' and 'competence' in some of my starter and exploratory questions (see Appendix 1). Since much of the interview consisted of eliciting responses about different characters in turn, this had the effect of constructing the concept of competence as equivalent to and comprising the concepts mentioned in other starter questions. For instance, I asked Participant I to judge how well the character of Anna was 'handling the situation', as shown in Figure 6. This construction of competence as performance in context draws on the integrated conceptualisation of competence as subject to performance (Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009: 75). This vocabulary choice reflects a starter question from earlier in the interview, in which I asked him to judge 'her competence her professionalism just the way she handled that situation', which constructs 'competence' and 'professionalism' as referring, at least to some extent, to how an individual responds to a situation.

Key:

Transcription:

[data summary]

Coding:

Negotiation of meaning

Behaviour

Attitudes

Objectives

Products

*R introduces Anna as a topic for discussion*

R: she was speaking she was giving some feedback what do you think of the way she was handling the situation

I: well again she did the same thing she's done previously she supported two different arguments within the same meeting initially she was not supportive of Lucy's proposal and ultimately threw her support behind it now there's nothing wrong with people changing their views within a meeting that's what the meeting is there to discuss to provide information for people but it's the way that she so quickly and easily does this it doesn't add any value to the meeting because there just doesn't seem to be any substance behind her views in the first instance and therefore there doesn't seem to be any substance behind her views subsequently when she changes them

*R asks whether his opinion of Ian has changed as a result of watching Stimulus B*

I: yes I felt that Ian didn't manage this meeting as well as he'd managed the previous meeting he's obviously got a challenge within these meetings from the characters that are in there [repetition of earlier points about Siobhan, blue-sky thinking, he didn't control her enough, she didn't control herself enough] so Ian's come across a less competent manager of meetings following this clip

**Figure 6:** Extract showing negotiation of meaning with Participant I.

My interactional analysis of how participants constructed the term 'competence' when they introduced it themselves compared to when it was introduced by the researcher indicates that participants' constructions accurately represent their views. For instance, Participant I stated that the character of Ian appeared to be a 'less competent manager of meetings following this clip' and justified his opinion by citing

aspects of Ian's behaviour relating to how well he 'managed this meeting', as shown in Figure 6. This use of 'competent' reflects my introduction of the term 'competence' to refer to how the character of Lucy 'handled that situation', to which Participant I responded by describing her as 'cautious' and 'understated' and citing aspects of her behaviour to justify his opinion, as with Ian.

Furthermore, I found that questions designed to elicit information on the topic, but using different language, including the use and non-use of the terms under study, produced responses containing the same details, namely comments on the characters' behaviour, language, goals and personal attributes. This indicates that, while personal judgements in respect of the characters may differ, understanding of the questions did not appear to, thus supporting the reliability of this method of data collection.

This tendency for participants to accept my use of these terms as coinciding with their own conceptualisation of each term's zone of meaning must be interpreted in light of the complex epistemic context of a research interview. Both researcher and participant have a right to possess and articulate information in the domain under study, as the researcher has studied it and the participant has experienced it. However, the presupposition is that each possesses different information. This may result in participants perceiving themselves as being of K- status, meaning that they are not highly knowledgeable within this epistemic domain, or domain of information (Heritage, 2012: 385). In consequence, they may adopt a K- stance and accept the researcher's construction of meaning despite it not fully converging with their own conceptualisation.

For participants whom I did not explicitly ask to define the terms, it is uncertain whether this occurred. However, my interactional analysis revealed significant use by participants N, S and X of epistemic markers that invoke a K- stance, such as 'I think' and 'my perception is', indicating that the possibility must be acknowledged.

For participants who adopted a K+ stance, claiming great knowledge of the domain, this possibility is not supported. The construction of this stance can be seen in the infrequent use of K- markers such as 'I think' and one participant's explanation that a hesitation of theirs, which might have been interpreted as indicating a lack of confidence, occurred because they could not think of the appropriate word. This supports the assumption for these participants that the absence of challenge indicates agreement.

However, my interactional and thematic analyses of the second group interview revealed a number of differences between certain participants' constructions of abstract terms and mine. The first difference appears once in my entire dataset, but concerns the key term 'professional'. In response to a question in which I constructed the noun 'professional' as denoting workplace identity, Participant N stated that 'she didn't seem all that professional'. This response substitutes the noun with the adjective, which she constructs as denoting a set of identity characteristics that are appropriate for this interaction. As no other participants challenged my construction of the noun 'professional', I disregarded this finding in interpreting their responses.

The second difference lies in the construction of competence in relation to context. Certain taxonomies use the term 'competence' to denote a context-independent concept (Eraut, 2003, in Le Deist and Winteron, 2005; Gilbert, 2007), using other terms such as 'competency' to denote role-specific characteristics (Mulder, 2014; Tigelaar and Van der Vleuten, 2014). This contrasts with the dual view that I used in my interviews, which constructs competence as encompassing context-independent and context-dependent concepts. Both views were present in my sample. To avoid confusion, I suggest using 'competence' to denote the context-independent concept and 'competency' for the context-dependent.

Another construction present in the sample uses 'competence' to denote a characteristic. This differs from Mulder's (2014) use of 'competency' in that the participant identifies 'competences' as the characteristics required to be able to fulfil a role, subject to training. A 'competent individual' is thus identified as a potential practitioner of a given role. This view is less widely discussed in competence training literature. However, it is similar to that used in competency-based training and assessment methods (Dubois, 1998), wherein 'competence' is positioned in contrast to 'performance' as an individual's potential to perform, rather than their actual performance.

Another view present in the sample constructs competence as a level on a context-independent scale of attainment, wherein it does not represent the highest level. This contradicts the use of 'competence' to denote the characteristics of an ideal employee, as in Dubois (1998), instead reflecting Mulder's (2014) development of the Dreyfus' (1986) five-stage model of professional development. There is divergence within the sample as to the position of this level with respect to learner development. One view is that it represents a level typically achieved through performing the role, as in the

Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications (in Biesta, 2017: 439). This model is highly relevant to the professional profiles of my sample (see Appendix 2). The other view is that competence must be achieved prior to assuming the role, which aligns with Mulder’s (2014) system.

To conclude, I identified four specific conceptualisations of competence in my sample. In three of the conceptualisations, competence is defined purely as an abstract concept, while in the other it is used as an abstract term to mean a set of characteristics required to carry out a role and as a context-specific term to refer to any characteristic required to carry out a specific role.

One of the abstract conceptualisations defines competence as a set of characteristics required to carry out a role, while another presents a different relationship between competence and current performance by defining it as a set of characteristics required to learn to carry out a role. Finally, the other conceptualisation defines it, not in terms of characteristics like the other three, but as a level of attainment required to carry out a role. These conceptualisations are shown in Figure 7.

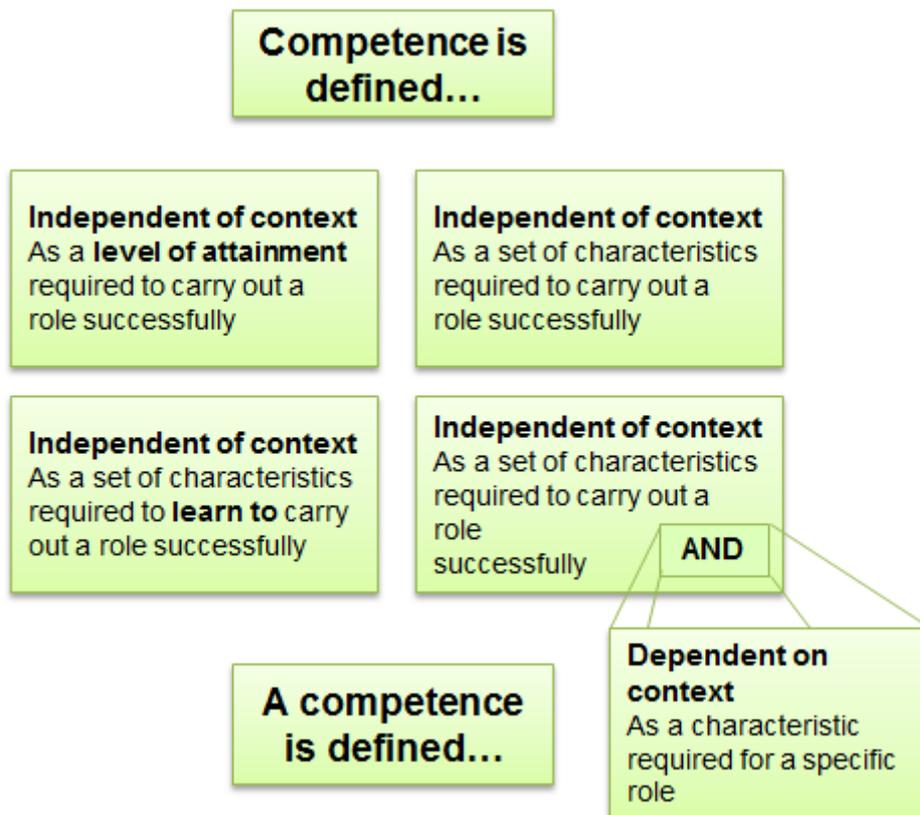


Figure 7: Constructions of competence present in sample.

These findings provide direction to support the development of role-specific models of competence by improving our understanding of the diversity of conceptualisations that have been generated through socialisation within the consciousness of professionals. I have synthesised my participants' conceptualisations to produce a multifaceted model that differentiates between the characteristics required to achieve 'competence' and 'expertise' levels of attainment, shown in Figure 8. This contributes to the heuristic of incorporating aspects of different conceptualisations within role-specific models in competence training literature.

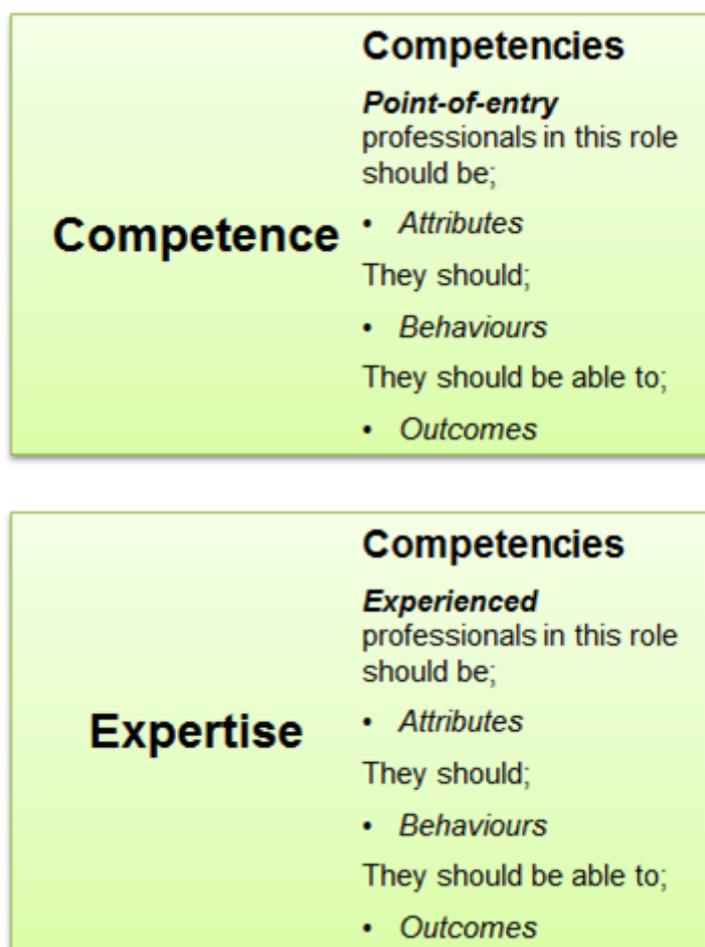


Figure 8: Multifaceted model template.

## Conclusions

This project contributes to ongoing efforts to develop a more holistic conceptualisation of competence and establish a more nuanced and multifaceted definition of this term (Mulder, 2014; Wai-Mui Yu and Velde, 2009). Members of my sample conceptualise professional competence as dual and context-independent and as a cluster of characteristics and a level of attainment. This supports a heuristic for

role-specific competence models to be developed to better reflect professionals' conceptions, grounded in their workplace experiences of how competence is performed. Different conceptualisations may be combined to create a multifaceted model, comprising the attainment levels 'competence' and 'expertise' and competency clusters for each level.

There is scope to develop this project through enlarging the sample in order to extend the thematic analysis and further investigate the negotiation of meaning in group interviews.

There is also scope for conducting a formal comparison of how participants negotiated key terms according to whether the terms were introduced by the researcher or the participant. The interactional analysis could also be extended by including non-vocal communication.

Finally, additional models could be included in the multimodal analysis. Owing to dropout, the professional profile of the final sample differed from that of the original.

It could be argued that the participants' awareness that they are discussing fiction could reduce the extent to which their judgement processes reflect those used in real life. However, as they drew extensively on characteristics that appear in competence models, I conclude that their judgement processes were sufficiently similar to real life to produce valuable findings.

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## Notes

[1] Helena Wall has graduated with a BA in Language, Culture and Communication from the University of Warwick and progressed straight to a PhD in Applied Linguistics at Warwick. Her doctoral research is to develop an oracy assessment for children aged 4-5 to be implemented in classroom settings.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of my project supervisor, Professor Jo Angouri of the University of Warwick, and of my parents. I would also like to thank my participants, without whom this project would not have been possible.

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Figure 6: Extract showing negotiation of meaning with Participant I.

Figure 7: Constructions of competence present in sample.

Figure 8: Multifaceted model template.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview questions

Prototypical interview questions demonstrating the use of the terms 'competence' and 'professional'.

Let's focus on Ian. He was the chairman. What did you think of his competence in that role?

Let's focus on Siobhan. She was the one presenting. What did you think of her competence in that role?

Let's focus on the character of \_. What impression did you form of him/her as a professional?

Prototypical interview questions demonstrating the use of language in place of the terms 'competence' and 'professional'.

Let's focus on the character of \_. What do you think of the way he/she was responding to the situation?

Let's focus on the character of \_\_. What do you think of the way he/she was behaving?

Prototypical interview questions demonstrating a focus on language used in the stimuli.

What did you think of the language he/she was using?

Could you give me an example of what's led you to that conclusion?

## Appendix 2: Participant profiles

Participant profiles showing demographic information and relevant professional experience.

<b>Initial</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Relevant professional experience</b>
C	F	German	26–35	Has occupied research and training roles in business
E	M	English	26–35	Has occupied analytical and managerial roles in the finance sector
F	F	English	56–65	Has occupied administrative roles in the pharmaceutical industry
I	M	English	56–65	Has occupied scientific research roles in agriculture and arboriculture and research, legal and managerial roles in the utility industry
G	M	English	36–45	Has occupied public relations roles
N	F	English	18–25	Has occupied events management roles

Initial	Sex	Nationality	Age group	Relevant professional experience
S	M	English	46–55	Has occupied legal and managerial roles in the utility industry
T	M	English	26–35	Has occupied teaching roles at a range of levels and research and training roles in business
X	F	Chinese	26–35	Has occupied administrative and assistive roles in television production, administrative roles at a university and research and training roles in business

### Appendix 3: Descriptions of ‘the competent individual’

Selected descriptions of ‘the competent individual’, created based on the total interview data for each participant to represent their views as to the characteristics of competence for given roles. Unless specified otherwise, these roles are those of the characters portrayed in the stimuli. The descriptions presented are the final versions of those utilised in their initial draft form as stimuli in the follow-up individual interviews and in the first group interview.

#### Participant E

A competent individual is one who fulfils the requirements of a role successfully, but not expertly. There are a number of guidelines that can be identified for achieving competence in a given role.

For instance, in a meeting-based scenario in the context of a financial strategy department, a competent individual is likely to be able to communicate effectively and build relationships with others. This involves identifying and accommodating to the communicative styles that their interlocutors expect them to use. There are four key styles that are relevant to this type of role; direct and commanding, indirect and collaborative, technical and person-oriented.

Communicative styles consist of elements such as how many qualifiers are used. Use of qualifiers is one technique for protecting the face of others. However, this concern must be balanced with the need for clarity and brevity and the risk of appearing weak or afraid of criticism.

One task for which a direct style is definitely appropriate is that of presenting a proposal. However, a competent presenter uses a more indirect style when responding to feedback on their proposal than when making the initial presentation. When responding to feedback, they should engage with queries and objections; for instance, by explaining how a proposal can be modified to accommodate an objection.

Finally, those in managerial roles should guide the actions of their team, including providing discussions and working jointly with each team member to ensure that they have the opportunity to contribute.

### Participant F

A competent individual is largely defined by how they contribute to a discussion. They readily express opinions and put forward ideas, particularly when giving a colleague feedback. However, they should also consider the viewpoints of others. Finally, they should not allow their emotions, such as feelings of rivalry or romantic attraction, to influence the interaction. In terms of personal qualities, a competent individual should be pragmatic.

Those holding leadership roles may choose to contribute little, instead allowing those junior to them to contribute ideas. Nevertheless, they must make and communicate decisions quickly to the team.

### Participant I

It is the responsibility of the manager to ensure that each team member contributes to achieving the objectives of the team project and assign to them tasks that suit their skills. These tasks may involve forming novel ideas, for which blue-sky thinking is more valuable than pragmatism, or solving practical issues, for which sensitivity to real-world concerns such as company values and interpersonal conflict is necessary.

When presenting an idea, a competent presenter clearly explains the idea using language targeted to the knowledge base of the audience. Technical language, if required, may be explained. If the idea is presented as part of a prepared proposal,

rather than in the context of a brainstorming session, the presenter must also collaborate with the audience to calculate how an idea may be implemented, although it is ultimately the responsibility of the manager to calculate whether to implement an idea, taking into consideration such factors as broader organisational initiatives, deployment of resources and costings.

Finally, a competent individual gives and receives feedback well. They neither support nor dismiss the contributions of others without due consideration of evidence or for the achievement of personal goals, such as the desire to assert dominance over a colleague, and they target their communicative style appropriately according to the role and hierarchical position of the interactants.

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