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Foreign language teacher preparation in Slovakia and Poland from skills to competences

ABSTRACT. The paper discusses the challenges of foreign language teacher preparation in Slovakia and Poland resulting from observed tendencies such as digitalisation, mobility and specialisation of disciplines. The background for these reflections on the state of teacher training education is the document *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – a Frame of Reference* (2004) and *DigComp 2.2 The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens* (2022), which point out the main fields essential for the development of high-quality foreign language teachers in terms of digital, life and entrepreneurial competences. The authors of the paper analyze example curricula at two universities, one in Poland (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) and one in Slovakia (Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra) to answer the following research questions: how will future foreign language teachers be supported in developing their competences at the tertiary level? How do the current foreign language teacher training curricula at universities in Slovakia and Poland incorporate the need for the development of new competences? The results of the analysis present the discrepancies at both universities in the way the recommendations concerning competence development are incorporated, however they also reveal the weaknesses and strengths of the existing solutions.

KEYWORDS: foreign language teacher training, skills, competences, Slovakia, Poland.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching foreign languages is a complex process that does not take place in isolation, but is part of the surrounding reality in which both teacher-instructor and learner-student are immersed and interact with. Any change in this setting has an influence not only on the efficiency but also on the quality of teaching. Dynamic changes require even more flexibility, creativity and readiness to adapt from teachers, something which is slowly becoming part of the teaching profession. Understanding the need for the best possible preparation of future teachers

for their profession in the field of foreign languages, the European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza & McEvoy 2004) was created, providing an overall structure of professional competences necessary for the pre-service and in-service preparation of future language teachers. The main objective of the study that was carried out by a team of language experts and supported by the European Commission was to answer the needs and produce a definitive draft of the European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference. The research team provided case studies in eleven European teacher education institutions with the aim of finding out how their teacher training programmes are formed, and then compared with the Profile. The document offers, in total, forty competences essential for professional language teacher development, grouped into four categories regarding their character and nature. The first is the structure of educational courses, dealing with the curriculum. The following category, knowledge and understanding, talks about the concepts “central to foreign language teaching” (Kelly et al. 2004: 4). The third category, strategies and skills, identifies the diversity of teaching and learning particular skills and strategies. The last category talks of values that should be encouraged and promoted through language teaching. The framework was the starting point for the development of the curricula in foreign language teacher training in many countries, including all those in Poland and Slovakia, whose current shape is described below.

2. THE SLOVAK PROFILE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER

Following the Velvet Revolution, the educational landscape in the Slovak Republic underwent substantial transformations aimed at instilling democratic and humanistic values. Notably, foreign language education was restructured in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the European Council. The primary objective was to equip graduates with the skills necessary for coexistence in a multicultural Europe, emphasising proficiency in a minimum of two foreign languages (Council of Europe 2007; Kováčiková 2021).

In Slovakia, aspiring foreign language educators are required to hold a master’s degree obtained from either a faculty of arts or education. The tradition of preparing language teachers prior to their entry into the profession has deep roots in faculties of education. This preparation places a strong emphasis on linguistic and methodological training, ensuring that teachers acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to excel in primary

and secondary school environments. The curriculum for this degree integrates theoretical knowledge with practical teaching experience. Upon completing their master's degree, individuals seeking to become foreign language teachers typically embark on a 2–3-year journey as novice teachers. During this period, they typically work under the guidance and supervision of experienced senior language teachers.

In 1989, the training of English teachers in Slovakia was limited to just two faculties, located in Bratislava and Prešov. However, with the turn of the century, the educational landscape witnessed a significant expansion. By then, a total of twelve faculties dedicated to English teacher training had been established (Gadušová & Hartánská 2002). The 1990s marked a pivotal period, during which the number of teacher training programmes in Slovakia experienced notable growth, adapting to evolving methodology requirements. It is worth noting that during this period, Slovakia faced a substantial shortfall in English teachers, with a demand for 3,000 instructors but with only around 2,000 available (Gill 1997). Following the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993, the approach to lifelong learning for teachers underwent significant changes. The concept, initially proposed in the 1990s, evolved into a more structured framework. Act No. 568/2009 on Lifelong Learning, which took effect on December 1, 2009 (Zákony pre ľudí, 2010), redefined lifelong learning with a focus on ongoing professional development. This encompassed both formal and informal avenues for growth. The formal aspect was assured through higher educational institutions or accredited educational establishments, leading to the issuance of diplomas or certificates, often achieved through attestation or “rigorosa” exams. Informal studies, on the other hand, involved various means of self-improvement, including teacher observations, practical training, participation in methodological seminars, and attendance at teacher conferences, all aimed at enhancing various facets of foreign language teaching. A survey conducted by the British Council of Slovakia in 2014 among English teachers (British Council, 2014) revealed a prevailing dissatisfaction with the conditions for teaching English in Slovakia. A significant 95% of respondents cited the absence of a structured system for additional in-service training, as well as a lack of opportunities for language immersion abroad, as major concerns. Furthermore, 93% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction at the absence of integrated teaching materials, which encompassed didactic and digital content to complement textbooks. It is important to note that these findings align with similar issues faced in several other European countries, highlighting the common need for qualified teachers, improved standards in teacher training, and increased availability of in-service courses (Enever 2011).

3. THE POLISH PROFILE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER

In Poland, similarly, the transformation in 1989 was a moment of significant changes in the field of education, beginning with the introduction of Western European languages from year VI, for 2 hours a week (Komorowska 2017: 68). Those changes were a sign of the increasing importance of foreign languages, which again caused preoccupations about the quality and preparation of foreign language teachers. In the 1990s, the education of language teachers was concentrated mainly in so-called foreign language colleges, where, apart from theoretical classes, future teachers received a very large dose of practical preparation for their future work in the form of work experience. Studies at these colleges lasted 3 years, after the end of this cycle, the young graduates could teach in primary schools. The years 2004–2005, after Poland's accession to the European Union, introduced numerous changes in the context of education, primarily by transferring education to universities and introducing a division into bachelor's and master's studies.

The qualifications for teaching foreign languages in public education in Poland were formulated in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 1 August 2017 defines the specific qualifications required for teachers, a person who seeks employment as a foreign language teacher needs to have completed¹

- 1) studies in a second-cycle or long-cycle master's degree in philology with a specialisation in a given foreign language, or in applied linguistics with a specialisation in a given foreign language, and teacher training,
- 2) studies in a country where the official language is not Polish, and has a teaching background, or;
- 3) second-cycle studies or a single master's degree, in any field (specialisation), and has
 - a) a certificate of proficiency or advanced standing in the relevant foreign language as referred to in the annex to the Regulation and teacher training, or
 - b) a certificate of passing the state examination in the relevant foreign language at level II referred to in the annex to the Regulation.
- 4) teacher training college of foreign languages specialising in a given foreign language.

After finishing the first cycle, graduates are allowed to teach in primary schools, whereas graduating from the second cycle allows them to teach foreign languages in all kinds of schools and institutions.

¹ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=105969.

In Poland, the path to becoming a fully independent foreign language teacher is relatively long (approximately 15 years) with two preparation periods of 3 years and 9 months, during which teachers are supposed not only to develop their teaching competences (hands on) in a real environment, but also to participate in methodological and pedagogical courses to enhance their knowledge about the latest teaching tools and methods. The motivation for extending the path to professional independence was care for the quality of education and changes in labour market needs. Briefly summarising the situation in Slovakia and Poland, the changes have gone in the direction from knowledge to the development of practical competences. In both cases, Poland and Slovakia university degrees provide the necessary background for future teachers, however thanks to internships and teaching practice in both countries, young graduates are already confronted with the potential challenges awaiting them in the school environment.

4. MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' COMPETENCES

The dynamically changing pace and standard of living strongly influence education. Not only technological advancement, but also internationalisation and demographic changes belong to the biggest challenges today's teacher is confronted with. A competence is more than just knowledge or skills. Referring to the definition of competence formulated by the OECD (2005), it points out that it is an "ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context." For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competence that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating (OECD 2005: 4). The statement by Andrzejewska (2008: 42) that teachers' competences are in a permanent state of development seems to be very true. Bearing that in mind, the training of a prospective teacher is nowadays a process requiring flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances. The table below depicts the current directions in socio-geo-political changes and their consequences for the development of foreign language teacher competences based on recent literature from the field (cf. Owens 2017; Selvi 2010; Sala, Punie, Garkov & Cabrera Giraldez 2020; Vuorikari 2022).

Table 1. Presentation of recent trends and their relationship to teacher competences

Trends	Teacher competences and reference to the latest research / documents	Description
Digitalisation	Digital competences (DigCompEdu) “digital competences educators need to foster efficient, inclusive and innovative teaching and learning strategies” (Vuorikari 2022: 16)	Ability to use new technologies in class, in lesson planning and assessment Familiarity with tools for online learning and teaching
Development of new teaching tools	Professional engagement / long-life learning competences – LifeComp (Sala et al. 2020)	Ability to search for sources of new knowledge and self-develop Observe changing trends in the surrounding reality Searching for networking and exchanging teaching ideas with peers and more experienced teachers Ability to critically self-assess
Diversification of learners / heterogeneity of aims, needs and backgrounds	Socio-cultural competences Pedagogical competences LifeComp (Sala et al. 2020)	Ability to recognise well and answer very diverse learner needs Ability to scaffold work Ability to motivate learners
Specialisation of disciplines	Field competencies Selvi (2010),	Ability and willingness to expand knowledge based on recent developments Familiarity with the results of recent research from the field
Globalisation – multilingualism, multiculturalism	Communication Competencies Selvi (2010), Council of Europe (2020), LifeComp (Sala et al. 2020)	Understanding the similarities and differences between languages, building references Cultural awareness of coexistence of different cultures
Constant development of new technological and social solutions	Transversal competences EntreComp (Sala et al. 2020)	Ability to search for new and creative teaching solutions Encouraging students to develop individual learning paths, tools Looking for bridges between teaching and real life situations
Networking / socialising through social media	Media / multimedia competence, Collaboration competence (DigCompEdu) LifeComp (Sala et al. 2020)	Ability to use social media for contacting and networking Incorporating the resources available on social media in the teaching process

Source: current study.

The above table shows the array of competences expected from the modern teacher, proving only the complexity and interdisciplinarity of the profession. Coping with new challenges requires new, extended skillsets that can ensure better understanding of learners and easier adjustment to the way they learn, so as to optimise the teaching process. However, it needs to be highlighted that the development of competences is a long process, for which the foundation is delivered during teacher training at university level. In the next part of the paper, the responsiveness of the curricula representing the teacher training programmes at universities in Slovakia and Poland will be analysed, to answer the following research questions:

- How are future foreign language teachers supported in developing their competences at the university level?
- How do current foreign language teacher training curricula at universities in Slovakia and Poland incorporate the need for the development of new competences?

5. METHODOLOGY

The data analysed in the empirical part of this paper has been extracted from the websites, the respective syllabuses for bachelor and master studies at the chosen universities – Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland and Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, which conduct foreign language teacher training courses as a part of modern language studies. The set of foreign language teacher training courses have been analysed and compared with the proposed set of competences in foreign language teacher education described in *DigComp 2.2 The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens – With new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes*. The intention of the analysis is to examine and evaluate the institutional plan for language teacher preparation in Slovakia and Poland. It will be interesting for researchers to see which courses incorporate the development of DigComp, LifeComp and EntreComp (Sala et al. 2020), and how the mentioned competences are trained. The analysis of the two curricula was made using the syllabuses for the Bachelor and Master degrees in English Teacher Training in Slovakia and Poland. The competences were identified in the topics that are covered in the courses offered by both educational institutions. Later on, the allocated hours for specific courses were counted and the results are shown in the tables below.

5.1. DigComp

DigComp are interdisciplinary competences which are taught in several courses, since the range of developed aspects is broad, including searching for information, using available educational materials such as Open Educational Resources (OER), sharing ready materials and connecting with teacher communities, as well as “using a computer and other electronic devices, handling the Internet as well as the use of various types of applications and software, and creating digital content”². The table below presents the courses and number of hours where elements of DigComp for future foreign language teachers are incorporated in Polish universities.

Table 2. Names of courses with incorporated elements of DigCom development

Name of the course / number of hours / cycle	Topics covered
Information technology/30/I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing ability to work with office software • Developing ability to present information • Developing ability to search for information
Research methodology in applied linguistics/30/I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting the methodological specifics of applied linguistics to an advanced degree • Describing methods, techniques and research tools in applied linguistics • Selecting methods and research tools and using them effectively during individual or team research work • Development of independent searching, analysing, evaluating, selecting and integrating written information using innovative and multimedia sources of information
Foreign language didactics 30/II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing teaching materials based on the latest technologies in line with the needs communicated by the learners • Assessing existing materials based on the utility principle, considering existing learners needs with regard to the latest subject literature
Language for specific purposes teaching training 30/II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using technologies to create networks between teachers communities • Preparing materials for LSP using new media • Use of AI for evaluating LSP learners work

Source: current study.

DigComp are present in the curricula for foreign language teacher training, their spectrum is rather broad, considering the interdisciplinary of its use. The

² https://depot.ceon.pl/bitstream/handle/123456789/9069/The_Framework_Catalogue_of_Digital_Compe.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

tables below present the number of hours in teacher training courses devoted to developing DigComp in Slovakia and Poland.

Table 3. The number of hours of courses supporting the development of DigComp at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland

Adam Mickiewicz University	Bachelor	Master
Number of hours of information technology	30	
Number of hours of Foreign language didactics	60	
Number of hours of media and multilingual communication		30

Source: current study.

Digital competences are trained in Poland within information technology, which is a general course dedicated to developing general fluency in the use of computer and information technology. Foreign language didactics is a course during which students are made familiar with the application of information technology in the teaching context. During master studies, students complete a course on media and multicultural communication where they are confronted with authentic examples of media application in strengthening of awareness of multicultural and multilingual communication. In Slovakia the direction of English language teacher training aims at development of linguistic skills and competences in Bachelor degree and methodological competences related to their practical application in English language teaching in Master degree. The courses on the bachelor degree cover Introduction to English language, Phonetics and phonology, Morphology, Lexicology, Development of Language skills (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing), Development of intercultural awareness and Introduction to history, culture and literature of English-speaking countries. Introduction to methodology, and classroom observations and assistant teaching practice is introduced already in the bachelor degree. The focus of teacher training in the master degree is placed on reflection on all the skills and competences gained in the bachelor degree, with the aim of using it in teaching practice. Therefore, the courses such as Teaching literature to very young and young learners, Teaching SEN learners, Bilingual education and CLIL, etc. are included. Since 2022, the new accreditation study plans have been followed, that reflect the necessary demands of the modern era and emerge from the modern teaching profession. Thus, ICT and modern technologies are involved a great deal in planning and carrying out the teaching process at the Faculty of Education. A big advantage is that all classrooms are equipped with all the necessary technology.

Table 4. Number of hours supporting development of DigComp at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra in Slovakia

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia	Bachelor	Master
Number of hours of information technology	78	52
Number of hours of foreign language didactics	39	206
Number of hours of media and multilingual communication	78	

Source: current study.

In the Bachelor degree of teacher training, three courses are offered in order to develop digital competences of future teachers, namely Information and communication technologies, ICT of modern teacher, Work with interactive instructional systems. Two courses cover media, such as Digital Games in Education, and Multimedia support in Education out of which pre-service teachers must select one. These courses are taught in Slovakian because they are compulsory for all teacher training programmes. In the rest, the language of instruction is English. On the Master's degree, the Web creation and Application of ICT courses offer 52 hours of instruction. Foreign language didactics is covered on the bachelor's degree, with 39 hours in Introduction to ELT methodology and VideoAnalysis in English language teaching. The increase in the number of hours to 206 on the Master's degree is due to 8 courses (2 hours/week).

5.2. LifeComp

LifeComp are undeniably those competences that are necessary for a foreign language teacher to understand and adjust to the dynamically changing needs of the learners and react flexibly to new, sometimes unexpected situations. Without doubt, the moment for developing LifeComp is at the start of one's independent professional life, however, the preparation for this takes place during teaching practice while studying. Teaching practice is an integral part of studies within the foreign language teaching specialisation. The purpose of teacher training is to combine theoretical knowledge with practice, and to familiarise the student with the requirements for teachers.

In Poland, the amount of teaching practice is standardised for each university. The practice is divided into two kinds³: **pedagogical practice** is to learn about the educational issues of elementary school children. As part of this module, students observe the work of a pedagogue or school psychologist

³ <https://ils.amu.edu.pl/dla-studenta/praktyki/praktyki-studia-i-stopnia>.

and **teaching practice** including lesson observations, preparation of lessons, preparation of lesson plans, preparation of teaching materials, discussion of topics with the teaching staff, preparation of documentation and other self-directed activities, discussion and evaluation of lessons conducted by the student-practitioner.

Table 5. The number of hours of courses supporting the development of LifeComp at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

Adam Mickiewicz University	Bachelor	Master
Number of hours of pedagogy practice	30	30
Number of hours of teaching practice	90	90

Source: current study.

Table 6. The number of hours of courses supporting the development of LifeComp at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra in Slovakia

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra	Bachelor	Master
Number of hours of pedagogy practice	80	40
Number of hours of teaching practice	20	120

Source: current study.

The Centre of Teaching Practice at the Faculty of Education in Nitra organises practice hours at elementary and secondary schools for all pre-service teachers at the whole university. During the bachelor's degree they undertake class observations and lesson analyses, and on the master's degree, the pre-service teachers gradually start real teaching under the supervision of a teacher. In 2021, the number of hours in practice of pre-service teachers was enriched with additional practice hours (assistance of one university student to one in-service teacher). The aim of this mode is to maximise the time university students spend in a real schooling environment, helping teachers to either prepare or conduct a class, or assisting during the teaching process.

5.3. EntreComp

EntreComp refers to the tasks connected with a teacher being a manager and organiser of student activities, as well as operating within the educational system. The development of competences in that field is realised at Adam Mickiewicz University in the courses on the legal aspects of the teaching profession and the practice of teaching in school.

Table 7. The number of hours of courses supporting the development of EntreComp at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

Adam Mickiewicz University	Bachelor	Master
Number of hours of legal aspects of the teaching profession	2	0
Laboratory of teaching in school	20	30

Source: current study.

Apart from the linguistic and methodological preparation for teaching English, some of the courses in pre-service preparation offer very specific insights into the teaching profession, in which teachers are seen as managers and organisers. The courses mentioned in the table require step-by-step development and modelling the projects that go beyond planning, realising and evaluating the teaching process. These courses lead the students through project management, the legal background and the requirements for the teaching profession in Slovakia.

Table 8. The number of hours of courses supporting the development of EntreComp at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra in Slovakia

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra	Bachelor	Master
Courses providing EntreComp	Development and Management of Projects	School Policy and School Management, Teacher Profession
Number of hours	26	26

Source: current study.

6. CONCLUSION

The role of a modern teacher is a universal one, transcending borders and cultures. It demands a high degree of adaptability to keep pace with the rapidly evolving trends in society, all while upholding the values of humanity and European democracy. Consequently, the most significant challenge in teacher preparation lies in aligning the teacher training curriculum with the ever-changing needs of society, equipping educators to meet the challenges of the future. This paper undertakes a comparative examination of two educational systems, Slovakia and Poland, which share historical similarities, such as a profound shift in ideology following the pivotal year of 1989, their subsequent accession to the European Union, and the implementation of multiple reforms in their respective schooling systems. Recent studies and research underscore the emergence of new para-

digms in education, encompassing digitalisation, the development of innovative teaching tools, the diversification of student demographics, the specialisation of academic disciplines, globalisation, with its inherent multilingualism and multiculturalism, the continuous advancement of technology, and the pervasive influence of networking and social media. Consequently, contemporary societies call for the cultivation of skills and competencies that mirror the dynamic demands of our ever-evolving world. The preparation of future educators must thus be closely intertwined with the content offered by universities, which should reflect these ongoing trends. An analysis of the teacher training curricula in Slovakia and Poland reveals that both educational institutions address the aforementioned requirements to a considerable extent. The findings demonstrate that all the topics associated with modern educational trends are integrated into the teacher training programmes of both countries. However, there may be variations in the number of instructional hours allocated to specific areas. Importantly, all the essential skills and competencies are developed, whether at the bachelor's or master's degree level. Consequently, it can be asserted that both programmes are in harmony with the contemporary trends in foreign language teacher preparation. One contributing factor to this alignment could be the accreditation process that both universities regularly undergo, ensuring that their programmes remain attuned to prevailing needs and social changes. It is noteworthy that the topics related to modern trends are discernible in the courses offered within foreign teacher training programmes. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations, primarily stemming from its qualitative analysis of course content and the assessment of outcomes post-course completion. This could potentially serve as a basis for further research in this area.

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Przygotowanie nauczycieli języków obcych na Słowacji i w Polsce od umiejętności do kompetencji

ABSTRAKT. W artykule omówiono wyzwania związane z przygotowaniem nauczycieli języków obcych na Słowacji i w Polsce wynikające z obserwowanych tendencji, takich jak cyfryzacja, mobilność i specjalizacja dyscyplin. Autorki artykułu analizują przykładowe programy nauczania na dwóch uniwersytetach, jednym w Polsce (Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu) i jednym na Słowacji (Uniwersytet Konstancyna Filozofa w Nitrze), aby odpowiedzieć na następujące pytania badawcze: w jaki sposób przyszli nauczyciele języków obcych będą wspierani w rozwijaniu swoich kompetencji na poziomie szkolnictwa wyższego? W jaki sposób obecne programy kształcenia nauczycieli języków obcych na uniwersytetach na Słowacji i w Polsce uwzględniają potrzebę rozwoju nowych kompetencji? Wyniki analizy przedstawiają rozbieżności na obu uniwersytetach w sposobie uwzględniania zaleceń dotyczących rozwoju kompetencji, ale także ujawniają słabe i mocne strony istniejących rozwiązań.

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