

# PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SLOVAK EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstrakt:** Vedecké skúmanie v oblasti učiteľovho presvedčenia datujeme už do polovice 70. rokov 20. storočia. Vyplýva z nich, že neexistujú jednotné výsledky, ktoré by potvrdzovali vplyv pregraduálnej prípravy na zmenu v presvedčení študentov učiteľstva jazykov o efektívnosti výučby jazyka, ktoré si budúci učitelia sformovali už pred vstupom do pregraduálnej prípravy. Považujeme za nevyhnutné prispieť výsledkami prieskumu, ktoré by obohatili vedecké zistenia v oblasti vplyvu pregraduálnej prípravy učiteľov jazykov na zmenu v ich presvedčení. Dotazník založený na 5-položkovej Likertovej škále s cieľom preskúmať rozdiely v presvedčení budúcich učiteľov v rámci rôznych ročníkov štúdia sme administrovali na vzorke 99 študentov učiteľstva angličtiny na Pedagogickej fakulte UK v Bratislave. Výsledky prieskumu ukazujú, že v presvedčení študentov učiteľstva jazykov o efektívnosti výučby angličtiny sú rozdiely. Konštatujeme, že na základe zistení by si mali pedagógovia v študijných programoch učiteľstva jazykov ako aj tvorcovia národnej politiky výučby jazykov uvedomovať dôležitosť rekonceptualizácie a modifikácií v študijných programoch učiteľstva jazykov.

**Kľúčové slová:** efektívnosť výučby angličtiny, študenti učiteľstva, dotazník, prieskum, presvedčenie učiteľa, študijný program učiteľstvo (anglického) jazyka

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**Abstract:** The study of teachers' beliefs is one of the challenges faced by many scholars since the mid-1970s. The research on pre-service language teachers' beliefs indicates there are no unifying research findings confirming the impact of language teacher education on the change in their pre-established beliefs concerning language teaching and learning. We consider essential to enrich the field of language teacher education with research findings reinforcing the importance of this phenomenon. The questionnaire based on the 5-item Likert type scale was administered to 99 pre-service teachers enrolled on English language teaching study programme provided by the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava aiming to examine differences among different years of pre-service teachers' study. The results of the survey show there are differences among different years of pre-service teachers' study programme. Based on the findings, teacher educators and policy makers should be aware of the importance of adopting new strategies for reconceptualising and modifying language teacher education programmes.

**Keywords:** effective English teacher; pre-service teachers; questionnaire; survey; teachers' beliefs; language teacher education programme

## INTRODUCTION

Based on the well-known work titled *Schoolteacher* (1975) by Dan Lortie, who claims that the beliefs of pre-service teachers and one's personal predispositions are not only relevant but, in fact, stand at the core of becoming a teacher, it is essential to emphasise that even though research on the beliefs of pre-service teachers has brought ambiguous, even unsettling findings, pre-service teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in their acquisition and interpretation of knowledge as well as subsequent professional behaviour, attitudes and classroom practice. A wonderful description of a prospective teacher's background is provided by Fleet (1979, 283) who wrote about visiting his brother's home and finding his 8-year-old niece playing "teacher", when he found "her in her room, surrounded by her dolls and poised by her very own blackboard, standing there with the chalk balanced perfectly in her fingers, and with the right tone of voice and facial expression, she was teaching, urging her doll students to pay close attention during this important lesson. She had "teacher" down pat." Regarding this illustrious scene, Pajares (1992, 322) points out that "little Miss Van Fleet was well into developing a set of beliefs and practices related to being a teacher. Whatever sort of person she might grow up to be, for at least the next 10 years she would hone those practices and strengthen her budding, if not already entrenched, beliefs."

## 1 ON THE NATURE OF (PRE-SERVICE) TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Teachers' beliefs represent a very broad research construct that has been conceptualised and operationalised in educational sciences since the mid-1970s (Abelson 1979; Ballesteros et al. 2020; Basturkmen 2012; Borg 2003, 2006a; Brown 2009; Calderhead 1996; Fang 1996; Maestre & Gindidis 2016; Nespor 1987; Otham 2018; Pajares 1992; Richardson 2003; Verloop et al. 2001; Zhen 2009 etc.) The study of teachers' beliefs is one of the challenges faced by many scholars because beliefs are not directly observable. It is possible to sit in a classroom where a researcher can observe a teacher's behaviour, s/he can see what the teacher does, s/he can describe that; but the researcher cannot look into teachers' minds and see what they believe. According to many authors (Florio-Ruane & Lensmire 1990; Nespor 1987; Wilson 1990 etc.), beliefs about teaching are well established (pre-established), although they are usually naive and simplified, by the time student teachers get to university or college. Teachers' beliefs are developed over the thousands of hours students have spent at school and they are brought into pre-service teacher education programmes. Lortie (1975) calls this phenomenon "*apprenticeship of observation*". Based on the term itself, we claim it is based on observing and evaluating professionals – teachers at schools. It includes ideas about what it takes to be an effective teacher; how students ought to behave; which procedures teachers take in order to do their jobs. However, these aspects of teaching cannot be fully understood and transferred unless we realise that students can see just visible signs of teachers' practices, not their inner world, their thoughts, views, their cognition. Regarding this, Lortie (1975) points out that students can see just the teacher frontstage, e.g. monitoring, correcting, and lecturing, they do not see, they cannot see the backstage behaviours, e.g. the teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events which are a crucial part of a teacher's job. Furthermore, Lortie (ibid.) adds most students who choose education as a career have had a positive identification with teaching, and this leads to continuity of conventional practice and reaffirmation, rather than challenge of the past. As aforementioned, pre-service teachers bring their pre-established beliefs into pre-service teacher education programmes. Therefore, researching pre-service teachers' beliefs is essential for subsequent critical examining complex issues included in policy making of teacher education programmes worldwide.

According to Kuhn and Weinstock (2002), individuals move through categories of personal epistemology from absolutist, through subjectivist to evaluativist. They claim that individuals holding absolutist personal

epistemologies view knowledge as concrete and unchanging. According to the developmental perspective, over time individuals may develop their beliefs to value personal opinions and view knowledge as tentative and personally constructed, in line with a subjectivist personal epistemology. Finally, individuals may align with an evaluativist personal epistemology, i.e. they may view knowledge as constructed and they evaluate information from a range of perspectives. Verloop et al. (2001, 446) claim: “in the mind of the teacher, components of knowledge, beliefs, conceptions, and intuitions are inextricably intertwined.” They also state that knowledge and beliefs are seen as inseparable, although beliefs are seen roughly as referring to personal values, attitudes, and ideologies, and knowledge to a teacher’s more factual propositions. We agree with Nespor (1987) who proposes that beliefs have stronger affective and evaluative components than knowledge; they are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organise and define tasks and problems and are stronger predictors of behaviour.

## 2 (PRE-SERVICE) TEACHERS’ BELIEFS – LITERATURE REVIEW

It is essential to notice that teachers’ beliefs exist as a system in which certain beliefs are core and others peripheral (Green 1971; Pajares 1992). **Core beliefs** are stable and exert a more powerful influence on behaviour than **peripheral beliefs**. Moreover, as it has been proved by several research studies (Borg 2003, 2006a; Pajares 1992; Phipps & Borg 2009), teachers’ core beliefs are the ones that are more stable and powerful in what teachers do. Borg (2006a) claims that teachers’ peripheral beliefs are, in contrast, less stable (might be changed and/or modified), perhaps issues that teachers are less committed to and which they might compromise on when tension arises between a peripheral belief and a core belief. It seems to be a matter of strength and it will vary enormously from individual to individual. In some cases the core beliefs may relate to educational issues more generally, whereas the beliefs teachers hold specifically about language learning may sometimes actually be peripheral. He also notes that there is little evidence from research in either general education or language education as to what constitutes a core belief. He also adds that the idea that teachers have a consistent set of beliefs, which regulate what they do in some consistent manner, is very simplistic.

Pajares (1992) offers a summary of all the fundamental assumptions conceptualising teachers’ educational beliefs. Based on his complex and deeply elaborated summary, for purpose of this scientific article we have selected the

basic characteristics as follows: all individuals develop a belief system that houses all the beliefs acquired; teachers' beliefs are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate, persevering even against contradictions caused by reason, time, schooling, or experience; beliefs are prioritized according to their connections or relationship to other beliefs or other cognitive and affective structures, the earlier a belief is incorporated into the belief structure, the more difficult it is to alter, newly acquired beliefs are most vulnerable to change; beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks and selecting the cognitive tools with which to interpret, plan, and make decisions regarding such tasks; hence, they play a critical role in defining behaviour and organizing knowledge and information; individuals' beliefs strongly affect their behaviour, beliefs about teaching are well established by the time a student teacher gets to college or university.

Regarding this, Florio-Ruane & Lensmire (1990) assert some beliefs are compatible with the educational hopes that teacher educators have for pre-service teachers, but some are not. Furthermore, Kagan (1992) claims trainees use methodological knowledge presented in teacher education to confirm their beliefs they established before entering the program. Therefore, these beliefs affect the amount of knowledge received during education and its interpretation. Likewise, Donaghue (2003) stresses the difficulty of assimilation of a string of activities for trainees unless they have the same beliefs with the trainer. She emphasises that it seems there is often a great difference in teacher development between input (from the trainer/expert), uptake (elements which participants find interesting and consider transferable to classrooms, i.e. which match their own theory), and output (what is actually implemented in the participants' classes).

Research has produced unsettling findings due to the fact that most pre-service teachers usually have an unrealistic optimism and a self-serving bias that account for their believing that the attributes most important for successful teaching are the ones they perceive as their own. They believe that problems faced by classroom teachers will not be faced by them, and the vast majority predicts they will be better teachers than their peers. Referring to many experts (Brookhart & Freeman 1992; Porter & Freeman 1986; Weinstein 1988, 1989; Wilson 1990 etc.), entering teacher candidates view teaching as a process of transmitting knowledge and dispensing information; they also emphasize and overvalue affective variables and undervalue cognitive/academic variables; some of their beliefs have been called insidious, even dysfunctional. Contrary to this, Walker et al. (2012), based on their longitudinal research, claim that final year pre-service teachers were no more likely than first year pre-service teachers to view the process of knowing as based on personal construction. This is of interest considering that there were clear shifts in their views about

the nature of knowledge (certainty and integration) and learning (learning might take time, characteristics of successful students include more than innate ability).

There are many research studies which produce contradictory findings concerning the change in pre-service teachers' pre-established beliefs. Some of the studies confirm that pre-service teachers' beliefs **can be developed and changed during education programmes** (Bramald, Hardman & Leat 1995; Cabaroglu & Roberts 2000; Debreli 2012; Dunkin 1995, 1996; Gürsoy 2013; Kavanoz et al. 2017; Nettle 1998; Parkinson & Maggioni 2017; Richards, Ho & Giblin 1996; Sheridan 2016; Walker et al. 2012; Yuan & Lee 2014 etc.); others claim that teacher education **programmes are not influential enough in modifying and changing pre-services teachers'** established beliefs (Almarza 1996; Ballesteros et al. 2020; Borg, M. 2005; Capan 2014; Kagan 1992; Kunt & Özdemir 2010; Mattheoudakis 2007; Peacock 2001).

Regarding the issue of language teacher education programmes in Slovakia, Šipošová (2019) points out it seems reasonable to suggest that pre-service teachers' beliefs are prone to change, in particular, when the pre-service teachers are shown that there is a discrepancy between their pre-established beliefs, knowledge they learn during language teacher education (i. e. the theory they study within lectures and seminars), what they would ideally like to do in their imaginative classrooms, and what they actually do during the short-term teaching practicum or, later, in the course of their classroom practice. In a similar vein, Hlava (2017) observes that in terms of pre-service teachers' beliefs the dynamicity starts to shape only after subjects' conscious awareness of and confrontation with the phenomenon. Although pre-service teachers are introduced to the complexity of linguistic structures and reductions (e.g., Lančarič and Bojo 2020), complexity of British and American literature courses as well as area studies, they lack the reflection concerning methodology of teaching the English language means and skills in our educational context. Therefore, they should be trained to recognise how their beliefs and contextual factors influence their instructional practices. By providing pre-service teachers with opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, e.g. through developing reflective thinking (e.g. answering reflective journals, etc.) during pre-service education, we can enhance their professional development aiming at the benefits of their language learners. Hankerová (2018) also suggests that teaching practicum is an inevitable part of teacher education allowing students to analyse the teaching process and thus recognise the particular methods and techniques used for teaching English.

### 3 RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING – LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a bulk of research studies aimed at exploring the characteristics as well as **beliefs about the effective language (English, in particular) teaching and learning** (Altan 2006, 2012; Baytur & Razi 2015; Borg 2006b; Brown 2009; Diab 2009; Demiröz & Yeşilyurt 2015; Gao & Liu 2013; Ghasemi & Hashemi 2011; Gürsoy 2013; Kissau, Algozzine & Yon 2012; Kourieos & Evripidou 2013; Malikow 2006; Mutlu & Özkan 2017; Thompson 2008 etc.). Thompson (2008) states that effective teachers do have a combination of strong teaching skills and positive personality traits. The findings suggest that pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge and personality traits greatly account for the effectiveness in language teaching. Furthermore, in a number of studies greater importance is placed upon the teacher's personal attributes, such as teacher's help, authority and tolerance as compared to pedagogical knowledge and subject-matter knowledge (Mutlu & Özkan 2017). Generally, the research findings have shown that perceptions of effectiveness are influenced by personal experiences and preference, cultural, social, institutional as well as economic factors. According to Brown (2009, 54), the teachers' beliefs concerning effective L2 teaching "approached the ideal of the communicative classroom, where students communicate about meaningful topics, complete real-world tasks, use computer-based technology, engage with the language outside of class, gain exposure to the culture in class, and work in groups or pairs." Likewise, Kissau, Algozzine & Yon (2012) state that the results of their study suggest uniformity in beliefs across L2 teachers. They believe in the importance of exposing students to the L2 and the L2 culture; the need to use a variety of different teaching strategies and to address diverse student needs and interests in the L2 classroom. They also agreed on the importance of not emphasising grammatical accuracy and error correction at the expense of communicative competence as well as reducing anxiety in the classroom.

Gürsoy's study (2013) aimed at investigating pre-service teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching as well as identifying any change during the course of education revealed that the majority of responses reflected a traditional way of language teaching, in particular, influenced by their own experiences as learners. Although senior trainees (4<sup>th</sup> graders) changed most of their beliefs as a result of their education, in statements related to the teaching of grammar, first and fourth grade trainees showed similarities. The majority of freshmen and seniors believed that the grammar rule should be practiced via (worksheet) exercises in order to learn it, indicating that they were considering

worksheets as essential when compared to the use of games, activities, role-plays etc. to improve grammar. First year trainees also stated that the teacher should explain the grammar rules definitely and clearly, and write the formula of a grammar rule. Results of the empirical research by Hlava (2015) seem to corroborate Gürsoy's findings, since, on average, teachers spend up to 67 % of time on explaining grammar and grammar related activities. Related to the learning of vocabulary both groups agreed that learning new words with relevant pictures and objects is a good way. Freshmen showed tendency towards vocabulary lists with their Turkish translations, and the need to find the meanings of words from a dictionary while reading. Both groups rejected the translation of a text for comprehension and were in favour of pre-reading activities, the use of reading strategies, and authentic texts. Interestingly, when developing the writing skill first years believed writing should consist of at least a paragraph and they have to think in Turkish before they write something in English. Fourth graders, on the other hand, disagreed with all of these beliefs. Both first and fourth graders considered it important to gain a native-like pronunciation as part of the development of the speaking skill, but only first graders believed that reading dialogues out loud can be considered as a speaking activity. Finally, for the development of the listening skill both groups agreed that knowing just vocabulary and/or grammar is not enough.

Altan's survey (2012) in the group of 217 pre-service EFL teachers also enriched the field of pre-service education with significant findings. The author utilised BALLI (Beliefs about language learning inventory) questionnaire (Horwitz 1987) focused on four different aspects of English teaching and learning, i.e. foreign language aptitude; difficulty of language learning; the nature of language learning; and learning and communicating strategies. Unsurprisingly, 88% of the respondents in his study either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that "It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language", consistent with the common wisdom that children are better language learners than adults. 76% of the participants indicated that some people are born with a special ability to learn a foreign language, and 59% either strongly agreed or agreed that they have this special ability. In addition, 74% either strongly agreed or agreed that everyone can learn to speak a foreign language. Furthermore, 79% agreed that it is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. Regarding the length of time it would take to learn a foreign it was very positive to find out that 67% of the pre-service teachers believed that one can learn a language within five years, which proves that these student teachers do not hold unrealistic views about the time required to learn a foreign language. A great majority of respondents (92%) agreed with the statement that "it is best to learn English in an English-speaking country" since there is

a greater exposure to the foreign language, its culture and its people. Taking into consideration language learning and practice, 89% agreed that it is “important to repeat and practise a lot“. Interestingly, 89% endorsed the importance of oral practice, and 71% of the participants believed that “it is OK to guess if you don’t know a word in English.” Therefore, it was proved that strategic and meaningful guessing the meaning of new words without over reliance on dictionaries is a useful and effective skill. Moreover, more than half of the respondents (59%) believed that learning new words is the most important part of language learning, and only 26% of respondents agreed that the most important part of learning a foreign language was learning grammar (42% disagreed). In addition, 83% of respondents disagreed with the notion that one should not say anything in English until one can say it grammatically correctly; and 40% believed that if their mistakes were not corrected immediately, they might become fossilised. However, 70% of respondents believed that it is important to speak English with excellent pronunciation rather than grammatical accuracy. According to the author of the survey, these findings suggest that the participants view it more important to speak with excellent pronunciation rather than with grammatical correctness, although the new developments in English language pedagogy have seen a shift from a focus on excellent pronunciation to internationally accepted pronunciation with communicative competence. Therefore, such an emphasis on pronunciation may obviously be detrimental. These findings indicate that the surveyed pre-service teachers seem to hold unrealistic beliefs regarding accuracy and error correction, which, if not challenged, may interfere with their teacher training and negatively affect the teaching and learning process in these future teachers’ language classes.

#### **4 A STUDY**

As aforementioned, the research on pre-service language teachers’ beliefs indicates there are no clear-cut and unifying research findings confirming the impact of language teacher education on teacher trainees who prepare for their prospective profession. Therefore we consider it essential to enrich the field of language teacher education with research findings reinforcing the importance of understanding pre-service teachers’ backgrounds, namely their thoughts and views on the effective language teaching and learning being hold by pre-service teachers at different stages of their teacher education. By deep understanding of a pre-service teacher’s background we can adopt new strategies for reconceptualising and/ or modifying language teacher education programmes. For this aim we established two basic research questions.

## Research Questions

1. *What are Slovak pre-service teachers' beliefs about the effective English language teaching and learning?*
2. *What are significant differences in Slovak pre-service teachers' beliefs within particular grades of English language teacher education programmes?*

### 4.1 Participants and data collection

Based on the questionnaire elaborated by Kissau, S., Algozzine, B., & Yon, M. (2012), we modified the instrument to align it with the purpose of the current research study, thus specifying the statements using the effective “English“ teacher. The changes that we also made concerned the identification of a study programme by indicating particular years (i.e. 1st, 2nd or 3rd year bachelors; 1st or 2nd year masters).

The questionnaire, based on the 5-item Likert type scale (1=Strongly Disagree/SD, 2=Disagree/D, 3=Neutral/N, 4=Agree/A, 5=Strongly Agree/SA), was focused on particular statements/questions concerning the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. The questionnaire subscales were thematically divided into 5 sections (A – E): section *A – Language and Culture* (Q1 – Q9), section *B – Teaching Strategies* (Q10 – Q17), section *C – Individual Differences* (Q18 – Q22), section *D – Assessment and Grammar* (Q 23 – Q29), and section *E – Second Language Theory* (Q30 – Q45).

We administered the questionnaire to Slovak pre-service teachers at the beginning of the winter term 2020/2021 during ELT methodology seminars (September 2020). The rationale behind administering the questionnaire personally was to obtain prompt feedback from all the participants of the seminars. The survey sample consists of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors (20 students), 2<sup>nd</sup> year bachelors (23 students), 3<sup>rd</sup> year bachelors (19 students), 1<sup>st</sup> year masters (28 students) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters (9 students), i.e. 62 bachelors and 37 masters. Altogether, 99 pre-service teachers enrolled on English language teaching study programs provided by Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Slovakia.

Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) was used in order to answer both research questions. The participants were asked to state their perceptions, from “strongly disagree (SD)” to “strongly agree (SA)” with what “the effective English language teacher” does/does not do in his/her class.

## 4.2 Results

The first subscale (**Section A**) in the questionnaire concerned *Language and Culture*. The participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about the behaviours that contribute to the effective English language teaching regarding Language and Culture. This subscale contained nine questions (Q1 – Q9). All pre-service teachers in the study answered Q1 – Q4 expressing their perceptions from not sure (3=NS) up to strongly agree (5=SA) scales, avoiding strong disagreement (1=SD) and disagreement scales (2=D). **Q1, Q2** and **Q6** were perceived as the ones with the highest % of (5=SA) strong agreement by 88.9% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters. The highest % of neutral (3=N) beliefs was expressed by 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors in **Q4** and **Q9**. Contrary, the highest % of (2=D) disagreement (11.1%) was expressed by 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters in **Q8**.

**Table 1** Language and Culture questionnaire statements

	<b>Section A (Language and Culture) Statement:</b> The effective English teacher ...
Q1	is involved in and enthusiastic about the target language (TL) and the target language (TL) culture.
Q2	has good oral and written skills in the target language.
Q3	teaches familiar expressions (e.g., It's raining cats and dogs.) to help learners communicate successfully in the TL.
Q4	often uses authentic materials (e.g., maps, pictures, clothing, food) to teach about the TL and culture.
Q5	provides opportunities for students to use the TL in and outside of school.
Q6	uses the TL as the main language of communication in the classroom.
Q7	encourages foreign language learners to speak in the TL from the first day of instruction.
Q8	gives examples of cultural differences between the student's first language and the TL.
Q9	selects materials that present viewpoints that are unique to the foreign language and its culture (e.g., a text shows how people greet each other differently in the target culture).

The second subscale (**Section B**) in the questionnaire was aimed at examining *Teaching strategies*. The participants were asked to indicate their perceptions about the appropriacy of methodology involving variety of teaching strategies implemented in the EFL classroom. This subscale contained eight questions (Q10 – Q17). All pre-service teachers in the study answered using the whole spectrum of the 5-item Likert type scale. The highest % of (4=A) agreement was identified by 77.8 % of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters in **Q16**. In addition, **Q13** and **Q17** were perceived as the ones with the highest % of (5=SA) strong agreement by 44.4% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters. The highest % of (3=N) neutral beliefs was expressed by 45% of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors in **Q14**. Contrary, the highest % of (2=D) disagreement was expressed by 35% of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors in **Q13**.

**Table 2 Teaching Strategies questionnaire statements**

	<b>Section B (Teaching Strategies)</b>	<b>Statement:</b> The effective English teacher ...
Q10	uses small groups so that more students are actively involved.	
Q11	gives learners a time limit to complete small group activities.	
Q12	gives learners tasks to complete (e.g., labelling a picture, filling in blanks) while reading or listening in the TL.	
Q13	provides opportunities for students to learn more about other subjects (e.g., math, science, social studies) in the TL classroom.	
Q14	has students take part in role-plays from the beginning of TL instruction.	
Q15	asks students to find out unknown information from a classmate or another source.	
Q16	has students act out commands or do other physical activities to practice listening comprehension in the TL.	
Q17	uses computers (e.g., computer-based exercises, e-mail, Internet resources).	

The third subscale (**Section C**) in the questionnaire concerned *Individual differences*. The participants were asked to indicate their views on learners' individual differences which should be taken into consideration in the EFL classroom. This subscale contained five questions (Q18 – Q22). **Q21** and **Q22** were viewed as the ones with the highest % of (5=SA) strong agreement by 88.9% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters. Contrary, **Q20** was viewed as the one with the highest % of (2=D) disagreement by 11.1% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters. The same question (**Q20**) was viewed as (3=N) neutral by 25% of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors.

**Table 3 Individual Differences questionnaire statements**

	<b>Section C (Individual Differences) Statement:</b> The effective FL teacher ...
Q18	plans activities to meet the ends of FL students with a variety of interests.
Q19	plans different teaching strategies and activities depending on the learners' age.
Q20	encourages students to explain why they are learning the TL and how they learn best.
Q21	teaches FL students to use various strategies to improve their vocabulary learning (e.g., creating a mental picture of the word, memory aids).
Q22	teaches FL students to use various learning strategies (e.g., self-evaluation, repetition, draw a picture).

The fourth subscale (**Section D**) in the questionnaire focused on *Assessment and Grammar*. The participants were asked to indicate their beliefs about behaviours and activities of the effective English language teacher regarding assessment and grammar areas in the field of ELT. This subscale contained seven questions (Q23 – Q29). All pre-service teachers in the study answered using the whole spectrum of the 5-item Likert type scale. **Q23** was perceived as the one with the highest % of (4=A) agreement by 68.4% of 3<sup>rd</sup> year bachelors. In addition, (4=A) agreement perception was also identified by 67.9 % of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters in **Q29**. The highest % of (3=N) neutral beliefs was expressed by 60% of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors in **Q25**. Contrary, the highest % of (1=SD) strong disagreement was expressed by 55.6% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters in **Q26**. Likewise, 53.6% of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters view **Q26** expressing their (2=D) disagreement.

**Table 4 Assessment and Grammar questionnaire statements**

	<b>Section D (Assessment and Grammar) Statement:</b> The effective English teacher ...
Q23	understands the basics of linguistic analysis (phonology, syntax) as they apply to the TL.
Q24	uses activities and assignments that draw learners' attention to grammatical points.
Q25	bases at least part of students' grades on completion of homework.
Q26	grades written assignments mainly on the amount of errors in grammar.

Q27	grades spoken language mainly on the amount of errors in grammar.
Q28	bases at least some part of students' grades on how well and how often they speak in the TL.
Q29	Teachers should rephrase learners' errors rather than focusing on the mistake.

The fifth subscale (**Section E**) in the questionnaire explored pre-service teachers' beliefs about *Second Language Theory*. This subscale contained sixteen questions (Q30 – Q45). All pre-service teachers in the study answered using the whole spectrum of the 5-item Likert type scale. **Q32** was perceived as the ones with the highest % of (4=A) agreement by 78.6% of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters. In addition, 67.9% of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters also expressed (4=A) agreement with **Q31**. The highest % of agreement (4=agreement), 65.2%, was expressed in **Q30** in both groups of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year bachelors. Paradoxically, **Q31** was marked as the one with the highest % of (3=N) neutral beliefs by 55% of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors. Contrary, the highest % of (2=D) disagreement was expressed by 75% of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters as well as 66.7% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters in **Q44**.

**Table 5 Second Language Theory questionnaire statements**

	<b>Section E (Second Language Theory)</b>
Q30	Foreign language learners should speak with native speakers of the TL as often as possible.
Q31	An understanding of theories of second language acquisition helps foreign language teachers teach better.
Q32	Foreign language learners do not always learn grammatical points by means of formal instruction.
Q33	Using small group activities helps make students less nervous in the classroom.
Q34	Activities that focus on the exchange of meaningful information between two speakers are more important than activities that focus on the use of grammar.
Q35	The more intelligent a person is, the more likely he or she is to learn the TL well.
Q36	Foreign language teachers must correct most students' errors.
Q37	Having students work in small groups is likely to result in them learning errors in the TL from each other.

Q38	It is not good to have beginning foreign language learners speak too much with native speakers because native speakers usually do all of the talking.
Q39	Foreign language learners can learn to use a foreign language well simply by exposing them to it (e.g., reading in or listening to the language).
Q40	Exposing learners to written and spoken language that is a little bit above their current level of understanding is necessary for TL learning.
Q41	Making students speak quickly in the TL improves TL use.
Q42	Adults learn a foreign language in a way similar to the way they learned their first language.
Q43	Teaching about the TL culture is not as important as teaching grammar and vocabulary.
Q44	Native or near-native language skills of the teacher are more important than his or her teaching skills.
Q45	Learners must understand every word of a spoken message to understand what is being said in the TL.

### 4.3 Discussion

The results of this study indicate the common belief of the surveyed pre-service teachers in the importance of the English language usage in the language classroom. Taking a closer look at different years of the 5-year-long language teacher study programme, it was proved that the highest percentage of strong agreement and agreement was expressed by masters who had passed majority of the obligatory ELT Methodology Courses. Based on their beliefs we can summarize the attributes of the effective English language teacher as follows:

***The effective English language teacher:***

- √ *is involved in and enthusiastic about the target language (TL) and the target language (TL) culture;*
- √ *has good oral and written skills in the target language;*
- √ *uses the TL as the main language of communication in the classroom;*
- √ *has students act out commands or do other physical activities to practice listening comprehension in the TL;*
- √ *uses computers (e.g., computer-based exercises, e-mail, Internet resources);*
- √ *teaches FL students to use various strategies to improve their vocabulary learning (e.g., creating a mental picture of the word, memory aids);*

- √ *teaches FL students to use various learning strategies (e.g., self-evaluation, repetition, draw a picture);*
- √ *understands the basics of linguistic analysis (phonology, syntax) as they apply to the TL;*
- √ *rephrases learners' errors rather than focusing on the mistake;*
- √ *believes his/her language learners should speak with native speakers of the TL as often as possible;*
- √ *believes that an understanding of theories of second language acquisition helps foreign language teachers teach better;*
- √ *believes that foreign language learners do not always learn grammatical points by means of formal instruction.*

Contrary, the highest percentage of neutral statements was expressed by 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors. This finding may be naturally explained by the fact that these student teachers are just at the beginning of their study, and they lack the knowledge of ELT Methodology. Therefore, they expressed absolute uncertainty in statements concerning the usage of authentic materials (e.g., maps, pictures, clothing, food) to teach about the TL and culture; selecting materials that present viewpoints that are unique to the foreign language and its culture (e.g., a text shows how people greet each other differently in the target culture); having learners take part in role-plays from the beginning of TL instruction; encouraging learners to explain why they are learning the TL and how they learn best. Furthermore, they are not sure whether and how students' grades depend on the completion of homework. Since they have not taken any Methodology courses yet, they do not know anything about the importance of understanding theories of second language acquisition that constitute one of the crucial parts of the language teacher education programme in which student teachers learn about the theories which help foreign language teachers understand the fundamental processes and teach effectively.

Paradoxically, in terms of Q13 (*The effective teacher provides opportunities for students to learn more about other subjects (e.g., math, science, social studies)*), there were identified the main differences between 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors, who expressed disagreement and 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters, who expressed strong agreement). At this point we have to take into consideration the implementation of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) aspects in language lessons. By teaching CLIL lessons, we are giving students the tools to grow, acquire and activate cross-disciplinary skills by using a language different from their own. CLIL encourages learners to think critically, utilise their collaboration skills. Students in CLIL lessons need to pay attention, observe and learn the language by learning about other subjects in that language since

the CLIL curriculum balances bilingual education and language learning. Repeated exposure and stimulation helps students to assimilate the language while learning particular content (e.g., history, chemistry, biology, geography, math, physics, etc.) that will greatly expand their horizons and promote natural curiosity. Therefore, we again assume that the lack of knowledge of CLIL Methodology in the group of 1<sup>st</sup> year bachelors lead to their rejection of including aspects of other subjects than English in the language classroom.

As for the highest percentage of masters' disagreement that was identified in Q26 (*The effective teacher grades written assignments mainly on the amount of errors in grammar*), it suggests that although grammatical accuracy is considered important in the process of writing and language learners need to master the knowledge on how to transfer concepts of English grammar into their writing compositions, teachers' focus put on grading the amount of errors in grammar is not conducive to learners' progress. This finding can be supported by Singh et al. (2017) who claim that learners who understand grammatical concepts are at an advantage. Likewise, Gustilo & Magno (2015) emphasise that L2 learners' writing performance is directly dependent on their linguistic knowledge, hence urging teachers to put primary focus on this knowledge. In addition, Phuket & Othman (2015) stress that the errors made by the learners can inform teachers of their language learning progress. However, identification of language errors will be inadequate if no treatment is provided to support students' writing performance.

Finally, the highest % of disagreement was expressed by 75% of 1<sup>st</sup> year masters as well as 66.7% of 2<sup>nd</sup> year masters in Q44 (*Native or near-native language skills of the teacher are more important than his or her teaching skills*). Obviously, this finding is in line with other research findings. The results of Brosh (1996) proved that mainly language teachers' command of the target language; their abilities to organise, explain and clarify and their abilities to arouse and sustain interest and motivation have been associated with the effective characteristics of language teachers. Likewise, Chen & Lin (2009) emphasise that being enthusiastic in teaching, friendly, open-minded, respecting students and caring about students are the most important characteristics of effective English teachers. In addition, teachers' personality and teacher student relationship are very important characteristics of an effective language teacher. Recently, Çakmak & Gündüz (2018) proved that the effective teacher is the one who is objective, competent and consistent. The identification of effective teacher in their study rated "being objective" as the most important item among 55 items in the questionnaire thus putting a high level importance on teachers' competence and teaching skills. The student teachers in their study also perceived the ability to motivate learners as the

most important characteristics of an effective teacher as it was suggested by Zamani & Ahangari (2016).

#### **4.4 Limitations of the Study**

Before drawing conclusions, there are a number of limitations since the study was purely based on a questionnaire which was administered to pre-service teachers just at one Faculty of Education and their willingness to respond to survey items. Therefore, the number of respondents was rather small, making it difficult to generalise the findings of this study to the entire population of student teachers in Slovakia. However, despite limitations regarding the small-scale of this study, it may be seen as a starting point for educational researchers who are interested in making comparisons among diversity that exists within groups of student teachers enrolled on pre-service language education programmes in Slovakia. The findings of the study also demonstrate the need for more research related to this issue. By adding a qualitative component to the strictly quantitative measures used in the present study, we can enrich the descriptive data by complex personal interpretations of research subjects. Further research by means of qualitative research methods involving narration, in-depth interview, unstructured observation processed in the form of either Grounded Theory Paradigm models, concept maps, metaphors etc. would be essential in order to gather qualitative data which may reveal specific aspects of pre-service teachers' beliefs about language teaching and learning. Moreover, longitudinal studies may bring about complex research data which will continuously enrich the issue of pre-service teachers' beliefs.

### **5 CONCLUSION**

We realise that university programmes provide pre-service teachers with a theoretical background and a little teaching practice in the form of short-term obligatory teaching practicum they have to take part in. It is crucial to emphasise that theory is dynamic and developing in the light of student teacher' knowledge and experience. Nevertheless, more effort should be made to design language teacher education programmes in accordance with the recent theoretical progress and development in English as a foreign language teaching and learning, particularly in accordance with new research findings in neurosciences, psycholinguistics etc. Therefore, we propose that apart from linguistic and literature courses, language teacher training programs should

focus both on pre-service teachers' inner world, their cognition and ELT methodology.

Having explored pre-service teacher' beliefs about the effective English teaching and learning, we can summarise it as follows: EFL teacher should possess a wide range of qualities which will be classified as subject-matter knowledge including good command of English language, personal traits and instructional skills. As stated by Brown (2009), good personal traits and instructional skills are equally important as they play a major role in the effectiveness of learning. We agree with Alzobiani (2020) who provides a review of research on teachers' effectiveness. Thus, highlighting personal traits such as patience, friendliness, enthusiasm, interest in their career, interest in their students, sense of humour, confidence, cooperation, motivation, caring, flexibility, and understanding. Furthermore, effective teachers' instructional skills are not just a series of techniques that teachers need to be familiarized with and then use automatically in class. As Liakopoulou (2011) states, they are a set of skills that teachers need to acquire in order to save time and energy, and achieve better outcomes. Jasman (2003) claims that effective teachers should possess skills such as applying various teaching methods, presenting information clearly, using a variety of teaching aids, promoting students' interest, providing constructive feedback, recognizing students' individual differences, and building their teaching based on their needs. Stronge (2004) highlights that instructional skills can be classified as: classroom supervision and organization, arranging for instruction, executing instruction and observing students' progress and potential.

As aforementioned, teachers' beliefs prove to be the most valuable psychological construct in the field of (language) teacher education. Pre-service language teachers should be trained to recognise how their beliefs and pre-established philosophies may influence their prospective classroom practices. Regarding this, Ballesteros et al. (2020) claim that teacher educators need to make their students' conceptual systems be more explicit and enhance their reflection on the implications these concepts have for their actions as teachers. There is a common agreement that reflection in and on practice needs to be enhanced but it also needs to be equally understood by teacher educators and pre-service teachers, and it has to be made more tangible and less vague for all. The challenge of a change in pre-service teachers' pre-established beliefs can bring about new directions in language teacher education programmes so that the programmes enhance teachers' professional development aiming at the benefits of their language learners.

Regarding the prospective change (modification) of pre-service teachers' beliefs about the effective language teaching and learning, teacher education

programmes should, firstly, encourage student teachers to explore their beliefs, pay attention to any unrealistic beliefs or misconceptions they may hold, and challenge such beliefs with new information, knowledge as well as research findings based on data taken from classrooms. Secondly, student teachers should be given more time and space testing and verifying their beliefs in the form of micro teaching and teaching practicum they regularly take part in. The results of this study have implications and applications for policy makers and school authorities designing language teacher education programmes in which specialised courses should be offered in order to allow student teachers learn more than the subject matter (i.e. linguistics, literature, language skills, ELT methodology etc.) in order to be ready for meeting their prospective learners' needs.

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