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Teacher Competences for Teaching English as a Foreign Language in the First Educational Cycle of Primary Education

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Abstract: Foreign language teaching in the Slovenian educational context begins in the first grade (age 6). Many studies report a lack of qualified teachers at this stage of learning around the world and numerous authors emphasise the misconception that basic linguistic and didactic knowledge of teachers is sufficient for teaching children. All three Slovenian public universities are aware of this problem and offer pre-service and in-service programmes for (student) teachers who want to specialise in teaching English to young learners. In the present article, we focus on the subject-specific teacher competences for teaching English in the first three years of primary education; namely, linguistic, subject didactic and intercultural competences. We explore teachers' self-assessment of these competences and their perception of certain elements pertaining to them. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What subject-specific competences do teachers consider essential for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education? (2) To what extent do teachers believe they have developed certain subject-specific competences? (3) What are teachers' attitudes toward certain subject-specific competences that the teacher needs for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education? The results of the quantitative survey, in which 100 teachers participated, show that teachers perceive their subject didactic competence to be the most developed and their intercultural competence to be the least developed. Moreover, they consider that a basic level of English is not sufficient for teaching English in the first grades.

Keywords: *Early language learning, foreign language, primary school teacher, teaching competences.*

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Introduction

Teacher competences in teaching a foreign language at an early stage are extremely important, because in the first years of primary education students are in a sensitive stage when they either embrace the foreign language or get the feeling that they are unsuccessful in learning it. This feeling is difficult to alter, and it can unfortunately prevail throughout their whole lives. Extensive research by Garton et al. (2011) showed that teachers want to develop their foreign language teaching skills at an early stage and many of them feel that they are not sufficiently qualified for this task. Other studies confirm that there is a gap between the actual and the desired number of qualified foreign language teachers due to the ever-increasing early foreign language learning internationally (e.g., Emery, 2012; Enever, 2011; Enever & Lindgren, 2016; Murphy, 2014; Zein & Garton, 2019). Hanušová and Najvar (2006), as well as Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2011), even argue that the younger the student is, the more important it is for the teacher to be well trained in teaching a foreign language. A competent teacher must have a good knowledge of the child's cognitive and psychological development and learning approach, the curriculum and the didactics of early language teaching, as well as a high level of knowledge of the foreign language being taught.

Competences of Foreign Language Teachers

Competence is the ability to successfully cope with demands in a given context using knowledge (cognitive, metacognitive, socio-emotional and practical), skills, attitudes and values (OECD, 2016). Richards (2010) believes that foreign language teachers must possess six key competences: they must have a knowledge of teaching theories, be skilled in teaching and communication, be able to reason with (common) sense, be able to make decisions, know the profession, and have social, cultural and professional knowledge. Foreign language teaching involves not only knowledge of didactic

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methods and curricula, but also the teacher's knowledge and understanding of teaching, as well as the beliefs held by the teacher that influence his or her teaching practice (Basturkmen, 2012; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Piasta et al., 2009). Research has shown that teacher knowledge is also related to student academic achievement (Carlisle et al., 2009; McCutchen et al., 2009; Piasta et al., 2009; Shulman, 1986). Yafu (2011, as cited in Yang, 2020) lists language competence, fluency, teaching methods, learning process, learner, curriculum, teaching process, evaluation, assessment, social culture and mentality (e.g., teaching elements such as process, course, activity, technique, environment and thinking) among the key competences of foreign language teachers.

Although, according to Borg and Edmett (2018), it is almost impossible to make a list of competences needed by foreign language teachers, competences in foreign language teaching are usually divided into three main areas: linguistic, intercultural and subject didactic.

Linguistic Competence

According to Chomsky (1965), linguistic competence is the linguistic ability to understand and produce sentences and to select the most grammatically correct sentences from those mastered. Chomsky's conception of linguistic competence was later extended by Hymes (1972) to include a more realistic conception of competence, that is, communicative competence. According to Hymes, communicative competence is the general skill of individuals to communicate in accordance with changing situational and normative conditions of a psychological, social and linguistic nature (Hymes, 1972). In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (European Commission, 2001), linguistic competence is a part of communicative competence along with sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. A language user's linguistic competence is activated by performing various linguistic activities that involve receiving, producing, interacting or communicating. Each of these types of activities is possible with texts in both spoken and written form.

Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is a combination of the attitudes, knowledge, understanding and action-oriented skills of an individual or group to understand, respect and respond appropriately to people from a different cultural background (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). It is important to establish a positive and constructive attitude and understanding of cultural differences in any interaction (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). Huber (2012) identifies intercultural competence as a "key component of education", particularly everyday practice, within which the necessary behaviours, skills and knowledge we need to understand one another are developed. Byram (1997) developed a model of intercultural communication competence with five categories to be covered in the foreign language classroom: knowledge of cultural content, development of a positive attitude toward otherness, ability to interpret and identify with other cultures, ability to interact in other cultures, and critical thinking and awareness of one's own culture. Most primary education curricula encompass the development of intercultural competence; for example, one of the three main goals of language learning in Slovenian foreign language curricula in the 1st, 2nd and the 3rd grades is to learn about cultural diversity and contacts between cultures (Pevcec Semec et al., 2013a, 2013b).

Subject Didactic Competence

Subject didactic competence includes knowledge in the field of developmental and educational psychology, pedagogy and the special didactics of teaching and learning a foreign language. In addition to knowledge of the developmental characteristics of students and knowledge of a foreign language, teachers must also have a good knowledge of the nature of learning and methods of teaching the language.

Borg (2009) listed the following key factors of good pedagogical practice at this level, based on the results of a study that investigated the profile of the English as a foreign language teacher in primary school: action-oriented teaching; varied use of teaching aids and resources; class routine, real-time checking of understanding of didactic instructions; thorough lesson planning; adaptation of activities according to students' response; and self-reflection. Moreover, he confirmed that the development of subject didactic competence is also strongly influenced by the teacher's cognition, i.e., his or her thinking and beliefs (Borg, 2009).

Foreign Language Teacher Education in the First Educational Cycle of Primary Education

The pivotal document *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications* (European Commission, 2010) stresses that teacher education must be of a high standard and that quality training must be supported by the institutions in which teachers are employed or are to be employed, in accordance with national or regional policies for which adequate resources are provided. These policies must relate both to the initial training of teachers as well as to their continuing professional development.

Teacher education is struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of the trend toward earlier and earlier foreign language instruction. In 2004, due to overwhelming educational needs, the European framework of reference for language teacher education was designed (Kelly et al., 2004). Three years later, Newby et al. (2007) created the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages, which provides an overview of the competences needed by foreign language teachers

and is a self-assessment tool for (future) teachers. It entails foreign language lesson planning, teaching, assessment, didactics and use of resources in the classroom.

On a global scale, there is a shortage of qualified teachers for early foreign language teaching, which countries are addressing with retraining and new training programmes. A study involving 2,500 teachers from 89 countries indicated that there is a global shortage of English teachers with adequate training in early English language teaching (Emery, 2012). The author added that in certain countries, the government provided only basic teacher training with no specific qualifications for all teachers, regardless of which subject they would be teaching or how old their students were (Emery, 2012). Another study, which included 4,696 responses from teachers in 140 countries, emphasised the need to improve teacher education programmes for early childhood foreign language teaching (Garton et al., 2011). Cameron (2003) succinctly pointed out a widespread misconception about early childhood English language teaching; namely, that the teacher need only possess basic linguistic and didactic knowledge. Cameron (2003) emphasised the fact that early foreign language teaching requires specific and high-quality training.

In Slovenia, English can be taught in the first cycle of primary education (the first three years, ages 6–8) by generalist teachers who have completed a bachelor or master's degree in primary education and a pre-service or in-service programme for early English language teaching, and by subject teachers who have completed a bachelor or master's degree in English and an in-service programme for early English language teaching (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2015). All three public universities in Slovenia (University of Ljubljana, University of Maribor and University of Primorska) are aware that in order to successfully teach a foreign language at an early level, it is necessary to train a sufficient number of teachers and to offer full-time training programmes and study programmes to improve teacher education in the field of early foreign language teaching.

Methodology

Research Design and Objectives

Since there is no in-depth research in the field of competences of teachers teaching English in the first years of primary education in Slovenia, and due to the fact that foreign language learning from the first grade onwards was only introduced in 2016, we wanted to investigate whether teachers felt sufficiently competent to teach English in the first educational cycle of primary school and to determine the extent to which they believed they had developed key subject-specific competences, i.e., linguistic, intercultural and subject didactic. We also examined the relationship between prior education and teachers' attitudes towards the development of subject-specific competences. Based on the research problem, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: What subject-specific competences do teachers consider essential for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education?

RQ2: To what extent do teachers feel that they have developed certain subject-specific competences?

RQ3: What are teachers' attitudes towards certain subject-specific competences that the teacher needs for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education?

Sample

The research involved 100 teachers from different regions of Slovenia who taught English in the first cycle of primary education in 2018. The sample consists of 76 generalist teachers who have completed a primary education programme and 24 subject teachers who have completed an English language programme. In 2018, most of the surveyed teachers taught English in multiple grade levels in the first cycle of primary education (83%), followed by those who taught English in the first grade of primary school (8%), in the third grade of primary school (6%), and only in the second grade of primary school (3%). The majority of the teachers surveyed (63%) had taught English in the first three years of primary school for less than five years, which is understandable given that English as a school subject has only been present in the first cycle of primary education in Slovenia since 2016.

Instrument

An anonymous questionnaire was created for the needs of the study, containing open, closed and combined questions, questions with ranked answers, and questions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree). The questions were divided into sections related to the areas of linguistic, intercultural and subject didactic competence. Of 100 teachers involved in the study, 33 completed both "test and retest". Correlation coefficients (Spearman's r_s , and/or Cohen's kappa, where applicable) were high for all categories of question, with a mean value of 0.795 for Spearman's r_s , and a mean value of 0.768 for Cohen's kappa, showing high test-retest reliability of questionnaire. We have asked 5 experts to rate each of the items from the questionnaire. The mean of Lawshe's content validity ratios (content validity index) was 0.847, showing very high content validity of questionnaire.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was undertaken through an online questionnaire targeting teachers who taught English in the first cycle of primary education in 2018. In Slovenia, primary education lasts nine years and is divided into three educational cycles. The first cycle represents the first three grades of primary education, where children are aged 6–8/9. A total of 100 fully completed questionnaires were used for our study. The processing and interpretation of the questionnaire were carried out at the level of descriptive statistics of quantitative analysis. For the purpose of statistical data processing, we used the program IBM SPSS Statistics 22. In presenting the data, we used absolute (f) and percentage frequencies (f %). The χ^2 test and /or likelihood ratio test were used to determine statistically significant differences, and the correlation between variables was checked by calculating the correlation ratio (η).

Results

The following table shows how the interviewed teachers rated the importance of the individual subject-specific competences they need for teaching English in the first educational cycle of primary school. The results show that the surveyed teachers attach the greatest importance to the selection and use of didactic methods (63%), followed by highly developed language skills (26%), and finally intercultural competence (11%).

Table 1. Teachers' Opinions on the Importance of Subject-Specific Competences

The importance of subject-specific competences for foreign language teaching in the first cycle of primary education				Total
	Linguistic competence	Inclusion of cultural content	Use of didactic methods and approaches	
N	26	11	63	100
N %	26.00%	11.00%	63.00%	100.00%

We also asked the teachers how they perceived the development of their own subject-specific competences. The results show that the teachers rated the development of their own intercultural competence the worst. Of the teachers surveyed, 64% believe that they have some deficits in this area, and 19% believe that they have many deficits in this area, while they rate their language competence and subject didactic competence similarly.

Table 2. Assessment of the Deficits of Own Subject-Specific Competences

Development of subject-specific competences (deficits)	Total				
	Many	Some	Very few	None	
Linguistic competence	2%	55%	34%	9%	100%
Intercultural competence	19%	64%	14%	3%	100%
Subject didactic competence	2%	44%	36%	18%	100%

The results (percentage frequencies) showed that the teachers surveyed considered their own subject didactic competence to be the most developed, followed by language competence. They perceived the most deficits related to the development of their intercultural competence. There were statistically significant differences in the teachers' assessment of the development of their own language competence between different types of teacher education ($\chi^2 = 10.438$; $g = 3$; $p = 0.015$). The surveyed subject teachers generally assess the development of their own language competence better than the surveyed generalist teachers. The opposite statistically significant differences were shown in the self-assessment of subject didactic competence ($\chi^2 = 15.798$; $g = 3$; $p = 0.001$). The surveyed generalists evaluate the development of their own subject didactic competence better than the surveyed subject teachers. The results also show that there are no statistically significant differences between the two different types of teacher education in the assessment of the development of their own intercultural competence ($\chi^2 = 2.765$; $g = 3$; $p = 0.429$). Most of the surveyed generalist teachers and subject teachers believe that they have developed their intercultural competence with some deficits (64%).

In order to shed further light on the researched topic, we will present the attitudes of the teachers towards certain subject-specific competences. Table 3 below shows the teachers' attitudes towards given statements related to the importance of language competence.

Table 3. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Statements Related to Linguistic Competence

Statements	Degree of agreement										Total	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		f	f%
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%		
I had positive experiences with learning English during my teacher education.	3	3.0	7	7.0	21	21.0	41	41.0	28	28.0	100	100.0
I improved my linguistic competence in English the most during my teacher education studies.	5	5.0	26	26.0	22	22.0	28	28.0	19	19.0	100	100.0
I have no problems communicating in English.	1	1.0	5	5.0	2	2.0	50	50.0	42	42.0	100	100.0
Only a basic knowledge of English is sufficient for teaching English in the first educational cycle of primary school.	35	35.0	46	46.0	7	7.0	9	9.0	3	3.0	100	100.0
A well-developed competence in the first language is a prerequisite for developing linguistic competence in English.	3	3.0	13	13.0	25	25.0	40	40.0	19	19.0	100	100.0
I use English frequently in my daily life.	3	3.0	12	12.0	19	19.0	47	47.0	19	19.0	100	100.0
I have no problem giving instructions in English in class.	0	0.0	10	10.0	10	10.0	46	46.0	34	34.0	100	100.0

Of the teachers surveyed, 69% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they had a positive experience of learning English during their university education, while only 47% believe that they strengthened their competence in English the most during their university education. As many as 92% of the teachers surveyed agree or strongly agree with the statement that they have no problem communicating in English, while 80% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they have no problem giving instructions in English in the classroom, and only 12% agree or strongly agree with the statement that only a basic knowledge of English is sufficient for teaching English in the first educational cycle. We also investigated whether there is a relationship between the teachers' prior education and their assessment of their own language competence development. We found that there is a negligible positive correlation ($\eta = 0.011$; $p = 0.914$) between the generalists' prior education and the development of their own language competence, with the value of the correlation being between 0 and 0.2, while there is a weak positive correlation ($\eta = 0.253$; $p = 0.011$) between the subject teachers' prior education and the development of their own language competence, with a value between 0.2 and 0.4. From the data obtained, we conclude that there is a statistically significant relationship between the prior education of the teachers surveyed and the development of their own language competence. This relationship is stronger for the subject teachers surveyed than for the generalist teachers.

We were also interested in the teachers' attitudes towards intercultural competence.

Table 4. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Statements Related to Intercultural Competence

Statements	Degree of agreement										Total	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		f	f%
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%		
My intercultural awareness is well developed.	0	0.0	0	0.0	23	23.0	59	59.0	18	18.0	100	100.0
I improved my intercultural competence the most during my teacher education studies.	4	4.0	33	33.0	39	39.0	18	18.0	6	6.0	100	100.0
I incorporate cultural content in my teaching from grade 1 onward.	1	1.0	11	11.0	28	28.0	42	42.0	18	18.0	100	100.0
I support multilingualism and plurilingualism.	0	0.0	0	0.0	13	13.0	58	58.0	29	29.0	100	100.0
In addition to English, I speak at least one other foreign language.	5	5.0	32	32.0	7	7.0	29	29.0	27	27.0	100	100.0
I have a positive and constructive attitude towards understanding cultural differences.	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	8.0	48	48.0	44	44.0	100	100.0
I know my students' socio-cultural backgrounds.	0	0.0	2	2.0	19	19.0	54	54.0	25	25.0	100	100.0
I often choose topics related to learning about other cultures in my teaching.	1	1.0	7	7.0	33	33.0	50	50.0	9	9.0	100	100.0
I take into account my students' initiatives on intercultural learning.	0	0.0	6	6.0	15	15.0	59	59.0	20	20.0	100	100.0

Of the teachers surveyed, 87% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they advocate multilingualism and plurilingualism, 79% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they have a knowledge of their students' sociocultural backgrounds, and only 24% agree or strongly agree with the statement that intercultural competence in English was most strengthened during their teacher education process.

The results also showed that there is a weak positive correlation between the generalists' prior education and the development of their own intercultural competence ($\eta = 0.236$; $p = 0.018$), with a value between 0 and 0.2, and between the subject teachers' prior education and the development of their own intercultural competence ($\eta = 0.318$; $p = 0.001$), with a value between 0.2 and 0.4. From the data obtained, we conclude that a statistically significant relationship exists between the respondents' prior education and the development of their own intercultural competence, and that it is weaker among the surveyed generalists than the surveyed subject teachers.

We will also present the results related to the third key language teacher competence, i.e., the teachers' attitudes towards subject didactic competence.

Table 5. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Statements Related to Subject Didactic Competence

Statements	Degree of agreement										Total	
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		f	f%
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%		
During my teacher education, I acquired sufficient knowledge in the didactics of teaching English to young learners.	3	3.0	12	12.0	24	24.0	43	43.0	18	18.0	100	100.0
I improved my subject didactic competence in English the most during my teacher education studies.	3	3.0	20	20.0	14	14.0	37	37.0	26	26.0	100	100.0
I am familiar with various approaches to teaching English to young learners.	1	1.0	3	3.0	19	19.0	53	53.0	24	24.0	100	100.0
Inappropriate approaches to teaching English to young learners have a negative impact on children's achievement in learning English.	0	0.0	1	1.0	10	10.0	27	27.0	62	62.0	100	100.0
In the classroom, I often vary the didactic approaches to teaching.	0	0.0	3	3.0	13	13.0	53	53.0	31	31.0	100	100.0
I attach great importance to motivational activities in teaching young learners.	0	0.0	1	1.0	6	6.0	40	40.0	53	53.0	100	100.0
I adjust learning objectives and content according to students' cognitive development.	0	0.0	1	1.0	5	5.0	56	56.0	38	38.0	100	100.0
Based on students' abilities, I differentiate English lessons in the stages of planning, implementation, assessment and evaluation.	1	1.0	3	3.0	16	16.0	52	52.0	18	28.0	100	100.0

Of the teachers surveyed, 94% agree or strongly agree with the statement that their learning objectives and content are adapted to students' cognitive development, while 93% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they give priority to motivational activities in early learning, and 61% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they acquired sufficient knowledge in the didactics of early learning during their studies in teacher education.

The results also showed that there is a weak positive correlation ($\eta = 0.255$; $p = 0.010$) between the previous education of the generalist teachers surveyed and the assessment of the development of their own subject didactic competence, with a value between 0.2 and 0.4. On the other hand, the assessment of the development of the teachers' own subject didactic competence has a negligible positive correlation ($\eta = 0.046$; $p = 0.650$), with a value between 0.2 and 0.4. From the data obtained, it can be concluded that a statistically significant relationship exists between the prior education of the teachers surveyed and the assessment of the development of their own subject didactic competence. This relationship is stronger among the generalists than among the subject teachers surveyed. The more the interviewed teachers strengthened their subject didactic competence in English during their teacher training at the university level, the better they assess the development of their own subject didactic competence at the time of employment.

Discussion

In this paper, we investigated teachers' attitudes towards subject-specific competences and their self-assessment of competences for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education. In the first research question, we determined which subject-specific competences teachers believed were essential for teaching English in the first cycle of primary education. The results showed that the teachers surveyed attached the greatest importance to the selection and use of didactic methods (63%), followed by highly developed language skills (26%) and intercultural competences (11%). Similar results emerged from the second research question, where we asked teachers about the extent to which they believe they have developed certain subject-specific competences. The results show that the teachers surveyed were least likely to highly rate the development of their own intercultural competence. Of the teachers surveyed, 64% believe

they have some deficits in this area, while 19% believe they have many deficits. The level of development of the teachers' language competences and subject didactic competences is assessed similarly, although, as expected, there are smaller differences between the previous education of the surveyed teachers, as the surveyed generalist teachers assess their subject didactic competences better and the surveyed subject teachers assess their language competences better. Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2011) emphasise that both competences are important for early language teaching. The prevailing view in the past that basic language skills are sufficient to teach younger students has been proven incorrect (Butler, 2004), and many studies, including ELLIE (Early Language Learning in Europe), have shown that early-stage teachers need to have a high level of language proficiency, i.e., level C1 or C2 (Enever, 2011). In addition, many studies emphasise the importance of subject didactic competence at this stage, as teaching approaches differ from teaching older learners (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; Zein & Garton, 2019).

Within the third research question, we investigated teachers' attitudes towards individual subject-specific competences. With regard to language competence, we observed that the teachers largely believe that basic language skills are not sufficient to teach English in the first cycle of primary education (81%) and that they feel competent to use English as a foreign language both in everyday communication (92%) and when giving instructions in class (80%). Cameron (2001) points out that one of the core competences of a teacher is to teach in English. Most of the teachers surveyed had positive experiences learning English during their teacher education studies, but a significant percentage (53%) disagree with or cannot decide about the statement that linguistic competence was strengthened the most during their teacher education. These data are somewhat surprising, as great importance is given to the development of linguistic competence during teacher education. It would, however, be necessary to investigate the exposure to and development of language skills outside the school context, as studies abroad demonstrate the important role of informal language learning (Enever, 2011). The attitudes towards linguistic competence also revealed that the teachers interviewed had ambivalent attitudes towards the notion that well-developed linguistic competence in the first language (L1) was a prerequisite for developing linguistic competence in English. According to research, learning a new language has a beneficial impact on L1 development, metacognition and learning strategies being among the most explicit benefits (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). Furthermore, learning another language while your L1 is still being developed, will result in a native-like accent of the language one is learning (Cameron, 2003). The results of the present survey show that teachers might not be aware of the complementary role of learning two or more languages in childhood.

In terms of teachers' attitudes towards the importance of intercultural competence, we found that the majority of the teachers surveyed (87%) were in favour of multilingualism and plurilingualism, and just over half of the teachers surveyed (56%) spoke at least one foreign language in addition to English. Teachers should, of course, be careful not to see an additional foreign language as separate from the first language or English, but to develop a language repertoire in which all languages intertwine and complement each other (Grosman, 2010). Based on the results obtained, we also note that just over half of the teachers surveyed (59%) often choose topics related to learning about other cultures, and that they take into account students' initiatives on interculturality. However, this percentage is still not enough. Referring to contemporary research, Čok (2005) believes that language and culture are inseparable, and that language is a medium for rapprochement and building relationships between different cultures. Vižintin (2017) and Šečerov (2010) emphasise the essential role of teachers in the development of students' intercultural skills, which should begin in English classes at the lowest grades. Based on the data obtained in the research, teachers also face some difficulties in integrating cultural content. They typically run out of time to deal with cultural content, but they occasionally also have difficulties finding appropriate teaching materials or think that they simply lack experience and knowledge on how to incorporate cultural content in the classroom. The lack of inclusion of cultural issues in the classroom and the problems teachers have with including such issues are related to the teachers' opinion that teacher education institutions do not put enough emphasis on the development of students' intercultural competence: only 24% of the teachers surveyed agree or strongly agree that their intercultural competence improved the most during their teacher education. The fact that teacher education is not always competency-based is also pointed out in global research (Emery, 2012; Garton et al., 2011), where the desire for additional teacher training is highlighted by teachers, as they believe they have not acquired enough knowledge on how to develop certain subject-specific competences for teaching a foreign language to young learners.

In the context of teachers' attitudes toward subject didactic competence, we found that the majority of the teachers surveyed agreed with the statement that they improved their subject didactic competence (63%) and acquired knowledge about didactics of teaching English to young learners (61%) during their teacher education. The surveyed teachers also mostly agree that they are familiar with the approaches of teaching young learners (77%) and that they frequently change didactic approaches in the classroom (84%). Even more of the respondents believe that using inappropriate didactic approaches in the classroom has a negative impact on the child's performance in learning English (89%). Most of the teachers interviewed (93%) believe that they attach great importance to motivational activities in the classroom, and that they adapt teaching according to the cognitive development of their students (94%). Based on the data obtained, we can conclude that teacher education institutions emphasise the importance of developing the subject didactic competence of future teachers and present them with a wide range of approaches, methods, elements and activities that can be used in their future profession.

Conclusion

The research shows that the surveyed teachers of English in the first cycle of primary school in Slovenia feel qualified didactically and linguistically for teaching at this stage, but that they assess the development of their intercultural competence as inadequate. Their perceptions of the importance of subject-specific competences for teaching young learners mostly coincide with experts' views on language acquisition. Teachers believe that a highly developed subject didactic competence is most important for teaching young learners, and many authors (e.g., Cameron, 2001; Enever, 2011; Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2017) confirm that choosing appropriate teaching approaches at this level is crucial.

Recommendations

Considering that the teachers surveyed on average rate the development of their own intercultural competence significantly lower than the development of their own linguistic and subject didactic competence, and that only a very small percentage of the teachers believe that intercultural competence is strengthened most during teacher education, it would make sense for teachers to place more emphasis on interculturality and the development of intercultural awareness during their studies. If students or teachers had enough knowledge about how to include intercultural content in foreign language teaching, the percentage of teachers who include cultural content in English classes from the beginning and often choose topics related to learning about other cultures would be much higher. Similarly, possessing a high level of intercultural competence and being able to educate children to respect and cherish different cultures is essential in today's world, where cultures merge and blend with each other. Considering that the inclusion of cultural content is not emphasised enough in foreign language curricula, we believe that updates of foreign language curricula are necessary, especially now that learning foreign languages across Europe starts at a very young and delicate age. Of course, teachers do not have to limit themselves to the curriculum: they can implement the inclusion of cultural content in the classroom through various projects, especially at the international level. Since we find a negligible correlation between pre-service education and the development of language competence among generalist teachers and a weak one in English, we would suggest that primary teacher education programmes place a greater emphasis on the development of linguistic competence, especially speaking, which many authors consider an essential foreign language skill in the lower grades. The institutions in which teachers are employed should also support teachers in their personal and professional development, which they can do through additional professional development seminars, international mobility opportunities, and the management of various projects, especially at the international level. This would enable teachers to gain knowledge about how to develop their own subject-specific competences, which is the first step towards their students being able to develop them as well.

Limitations

Despite the significant findings, the study has several limitations. In future studies, we suggest adding other research methods, e.g., longitudinal classroom observation, which would provide a deeper insight into teaching practice and, consequently, into competences that need to be more stressed in teacher education. Similarly, interviews with teachers would enable a more thorough overview of teachers' needs and competences. We also believe that a portfolio is an underused tool in teacher education. Using a self-reflection tool with which teachers could assess and reflect upon their competences (Cf. Borg & Edmett, 2018) would present a clearer understanding of the issues that need to be addressed in teacher education.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Fojkar: Conceptualisation, design, data analysis and interpretation, writing. Grahut: Data acquisition and data analysis. Skubic: Data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of manuscript, final approval.

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