



Way Ahead – New Teaching Skills for a New Generation of Learners

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Abstract

Today's world, which is rapidly changing, has a significant impact on young people in terms of how they live, think, make choices, and learn, as well as how they prefer to learn. This creates a strong imperative for teacher education and the preparation of new teachers. It is essential to ensure that future teachers are equipped to respond effectively to the evolving demands of both education systems and society as a whole. Core subject knowledge alone is no longer sufficient, as future teachers will be working with learners who are growing up differently from most teachers currently in service. This study investigates how new teachers-to-be feel prepared for the expectations of their future clients (students). It examines their flexibility in applying approaches that differ from those they experienced as students. The aim was to identify key challenges future teachers foresee in their career as well as their willingness to incorporate transversal skills in their teaching. Findings from semi-structured interviews suggest that teacher trainees generally feel confident in basic classroom management; however, they are less confident in their ability to motivate the younger generation to learn. The greatest uncertainty concerned how to manage students' learning processes in the context of AI integration. This area represents one of the most rapidly evolving developments and requires careful consideration and critical thinking to be used effectively in education. Transversal skills seem to future teachers as a natural supplement, although not easy to implement.

Keywords: AI; motivation; self-efficacy; transversal skills; teacher training

1 Introduction

Initial teacher education is increasingly expected to prepare graduates for educational environments characterised by technological innovation, curriculum reform, demographic change, and growing uncertainty regarding future labour-market demands (OECD, 2019; Biesta, 2022). These developments are reshaping not only what students learn at school and how they learn, but also why learning matters and which competencies will be essential for their future lives. Schools face the reality that they need to prepare young people for an uncertain future in which resilience, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and digital

competence are regarded as equally important as disciplinary knowledge (Griffin et al., 2012). In this situation, educational institutions worldwide start to reconsider both the purposes of schooling and the competencies teachers need to support learners in these rapidly changing contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In Slovakia, these skills have already been included in the new curriculum, which will come into effect from September 2026.

The current generation of school learners differs substantially from previous generations. Generation Z, generally defined as individuals born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s, has grown up alongside widespread internet access and rapidly evolving mobile technologies (McCrindle & Fell, 2020). This generation has frequently been described as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) because of their apparent confidence in using digital technologies, in contrast to many of their teachers. Nevertheless, subsequent research has challenged the assumption that all young people naturally possess advanced digital competencies simply because they have grown up with technology (Bennett et al., 2008). Their successors, Generation Alpha, born approximately from 2010 onwards, have experienced an even greater degree of digital immersion through smartphones, artificial intelligence, streaming platforms, and personalised digital ecosystems from early childhood. Researchers describe Generation Alpha as the first generation expecting immediate access to information, interactive learning environments, multimodal resources, and personalised educational experiences. Whereas Generation Z often perceived digital technologies as valuable educational tools, Generation Alpha increasingly regards smart technologies as an inseparable component of everyday life (McCrindle & Fell, 2020).

More recently, the rapid development of generative artificial intelligence has accelerated these transformations. AI-powered tools capable of producing text, images, programming code, and personalised feedback are beginning to influence virtually every aspect of educational practice (Miao & Holmes, 2023). As a result, established approaches to teaching and learning are being reconsidered, and pedagogical practices that have remained relatively stable for decades are increasingly being questioned. Although artificial intelligence offers significant opportunities to enhance learning, personalise instruction, and improve educational efficiency, it also raises important pedagogical, ethical, and professional concerns regarding academic integrity, data privacy, algorithmic bias, critical evaluation of AI-generated information, and the evolving role of teachers (Kasneci et al., 2023), particularly within English language education.

These developments have fundamentally reshaped expectations of the teaching profession. Recent literature characterises language teachers not only as instructors of linguistic knowledge, but they are also expected to facilitate learner autonomy, reflective practices, design authentic learning experiences, as well as develop transversal competencies such as effective communication and collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, emotional self-regulation, intercultural awareness and citizenship (Richards, 2017; Mercer et al., 2020). In an era characterised by fast-changing modes of communication and information exchange, these competencies have become central to effective language teaching. Teachers also play a key role in developing learners' digital literacy, information literacy, and ethical awareness regarding the responsible use of emerging technologies (Farrell, 2019). Furthermore, growing classroom diversity requires teachers to personalise instruction, respond to learners' individual needs, and design flexible learning environments that support different interests, abilities, and cultural backgrounds (Tomlinson, 2014).

Growing concerns about declining learner engagement, increasing mental health challenges, and the influence of digital media on attention and learning behaviours have further highlighted the importance of supportive teacher–student relationships and psychologically

safe learning environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Researchers and policymakers continue to question whether teachers are adequately prepared to respond to these expanding professional expectations (Caena, 2014). Consequently, the readiness of future teachers has become an important area of investigation. Evaluating the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education is essential to determine whether future language teachers are sufficiently prepared to meet the challenges of contemporary classrooms, where relying solely on personal experiences as former learners is no longer adequate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

1.1 Challenges for Language Teacher Education

Traditional models of foreign language teacher preparation have primarily focused on developing subject knowledge, language proficiency, teaching methodology, and classroom management. While these components remain fundamental, contemporary research suggests that they are no longer sufficient to prepare future teachers for the increasingly complex realities of language education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Nunan, 2020). English language teachers are now expected to demonstrate not only pedagogical expertise but also adaptability, collaboration, reflective thinking, digital literacy, cross-curricular connections, and the ability to respond to rapidly changing educational contexts (Richards, 2022).

The movement away from an exclusive emphasis on content knowledge towards the development of broader competencies has been evident in education for several decades (Nunan, 2020). In foreign language teaching, this shift began with the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching, which redefined language learning as the development of communicative competence rather than the memorisation of grammatical knowledge. Later on, it was the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, where other educational areas were taught via a foreign language. More recently, language education has continued to evolve towards approaches that emphasise meaningful communication, authentic language use, and the development of transferable competencies. Viewing educational outcomes through the lens of competence rather than knowledge, therefore, creates favourable conditions for integrating transversal naturally into language teaching.

Teacher education programmes preparing future English language teachers in Slovakia continue to devote substantial attention to linguistics, literature, and language pedagogy. This structure reflects a long-standing tradition in which disciplinary expertise has been regarded as the primary qualification for entering the teaching profession. However, the most visible curricular innovation has occurred within English language methodology courses, which have gradually expanded beyond traditional concerns such as teaching methods, classroom management, language skills, subskills, and assessment. Contemporary methodology courses increasingly address learner-centred teaching, differentiated instruction, reflective practice, inclusive education, the use of educational technologies, intercultural competence, and the development of transversal skills that enable teachers to respond effectively to changing educational and societal needs.

Recent research in language teacher education emphasises that teacher competence is not a fixed body of knowledge acquired during university studies but a dynamic construct that develops continuously throughout a teacher's professional career. Borg (2015) argues that teachers' professional knowledge is shaped by an ongoing interaction between prior experiences, teacher education, classroom practice, and contextual factors. Similarly, Farrell (2019) demonstrates that systematic reflective practice enables teachers to adapt their instruction to new pedagogical challenges and changing learner needs. These perspectives suggest that initial teacher education should not merely transmit established teaching methods but should cultivate reflective practitioners capable of continuous professional learning.

One of the greatest challenges currently facing teacher education is preparing future teachers for uncertainty. The unprecedented development of artificial intelligence, digital technologies, and changing labour market demands makes it increasingly difficult to predict which competencies learners will require in the future (Miao & Holmes, 2023). This is the reason why teacher education programmes need to focus on developing transferable competencies—including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, resilience, ethical judgement, and lifelong learning—rather than preparing teachers solely for existing classroom practices (2019). Research consistently indicates that these competencies are best fostered through authentic learning experiences, collaborative inquiry, reflective dialogue, and opportunities to solve complex educational problems rather than through transmission-oriented instruction (Bedir, 2019).

Within English language teacher education research, similar conclusions have emerged. Bedir (ibid.) found that pre-service English teachers considered transversal skills as essential professional competencies but reported limited opportunities to develop these skills systematically during their university studies. Similarly, Lu and Xie (2025) demonstrated that critical thinking developed primarily during teaching practice through collaborative lesson planning, classroom experience, and reflective discussion rather than through theoretical coursework alone. Their findings suggest that transversal skills become meaningful only when future teachers experience them as part of authentic teaching practice.

Reflective practice has also been identified as one of the principal mechanisms through which future language teachers develop professional competence (Borg, 2015). Mann and Walsh (2017) argue that structured reflection enables novice teachers to connect theoretical knowledge with classroom realities, critically evaluate their instructional decisions, and develop professional autonomy. Similarly, Richards (2017) emphasises that effective English language teachers require considerably more than linguistic competence or methodological knowledge. They need the capacity to make informed pedagogical decisions, respond flexibly to learners' needs, collaborate with colleagues, and continue learning throughout their professional careers.

Against this background, understanding how pre-service English language teachers evaluate their own readiness for the profession has become increasingly important. While previous research has documented the expanding expectations placed on language teachers, considerably less attention has been paid to how future teachers themselves perceive these expectations and their preparedness to meet them, particularly in Central and Eastern European contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study explores the perceptions of Slovak pre-service EFL teachers at the end of their initial teacher education programme, focusing on the professional challenges they anticipate, their confidence in addressing them, and their perceived readiness to integrate transversal skills into their future teaching.

2 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore pre-service English language teachers' perceived readiness for the teaching profession upon completing their initial teacher education programme at a Slovak university. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate for this research since it allows an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding their future professional practice. Group interviews provided the flexibility to explore themes which were prepared by the participants as well as those which emerged from the discussion. Thus, it was possible to map the complexity of participants' views on teacher preparedness, anticipated professional challenges, and the role of transversal skills in English language teaching.

The study addressed the following research questions:

- 1. What challenges do future English language teachers anticipate as manageable, and which do they perceive as problematic in their future profession?*
- 2. To what extent do they feel their pre-service teacher education has equipped them to address these challenges?*
- 3. How do participants perceive the role of transversal skills in English language teaching, including their importance, feasibility of implementation, and anticipated influence on instructional practice?*

The research sample consisted of 25 pre-service English language teachers who had just completed their teacher education programme at the University of Presov, Slovakia. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they represented the final cohort of student teachers who had completed all components of the programme, including their teaching practice. In qualitative research, the aim is to achieve depth of understanding rather than statistical representativeness. The sample size was considered adequate to provide rich descriptions of participants' perceptions. Participation in the study was voluntary; participants provided informed consent and were assured that their responses, as well as their identities, would remain confidential and anonymous.

Throughout their pre-service preparation, participants had completed methodology courses that explicitly addressed issues such as differentiated instruction, the pedagogical use of educational technologies, or the integration of transversal skills into English language teaching. Consequently, all participants had comparable educational experiences relevant to the study's focus.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. They were organised as focus groups, each consisting of five respondents, a moderator and an assistant. The interviews lasted 55 to 75 minutes and were conducted face-to-face in Slovak. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The assistant was taking notes on non-verbal cues, which were later connected to the transcript.

Prior to the interviews, participants completed a preparatory task in which they identified the ten greatest challenges they expected to encounter during their future teaching careers. They were also asked to indicate the extent to which they believed they would be able to manage each challenge effectively. The preparatory task encouraged participants to reflect on their future professional roles before the interview. It enabled discussion to be grounded in issues identified by the participants themselves rather than solely by the researchers. The identified challenges formed the basis of the subsequent interviews. Participants were invited to elaborate on their responses, explain the reasons underlying their perceptions, and reflect on how well their university preparation had equipped them to cope with these anticipated professional demands. Participants were provided with opportunities to clarify their responses during the interviews, and they were encouraged to discuss and comment on challenges identified by their peers, allowing for a richer exploration of shared and contrasting perspectives.

Interview questions also explored participants' views on the role of transversal skills, such as critical and creative thinking, collaboration, emotional self-regulation, intercultural awareness and citizenship, and digital competencies in English language teaching, their confidence in integrating these competencies into classroom practice, and the potential impact of such integration on their professional identity and instructional approaches.

Data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Meaningful units of text related to perceived professional challenges, preparedness for teaching, confidence in implementing transversal skills, and anticipated changes in teaching practice were then coded. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which overarching themes were developed. Throughout the analysis, particular attention was paid to both recurring patterns and the participants' individual experiences and concerns. The varied viewpoints of individual participants were discussed to identify relevant arguments supporting the participants' perceptions.

The coding procedure began with an initial review of the transcripts; preliminary codes were developed from recurring concepts and patterns identified in the data and linked to the study aims and research questions. These codes were organised into a codebook containing code names, definitions specifying the data and guidance on their application. The codebook was repeatedly refined throughout the analysis as new concepts emerged and overlapping codes were clarified or consolidated. For example, statements describing the lack of attention during the lesson were initially coded as "ATTENTION PROBLEMS" and subsequently contributed to the broader theme "MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS." As the analysis progressed, data from subsequent interviews were compared with the emerging codes and themes. Saturation was considered reached when subsequent interviews predominantly reinforced previously identified patterns and no substantially new themes relevant to the research questions emerged, or when a new theme appeared relevant to only one participant.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, two researchers were involved in the coding and interpretation of the data. Coding decisions and emerging themes were compared and discussed between the researchers. The researchers used their long-term experience in the field to interpret the data during the coding procedure. If any differences in interpretation were encountered, these were resolved through discussion and consensus. Formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated, as the emphasis was placed on collaborative interpretation and consensus rather than quantifying agreement.

3 Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed that participants generally perceived themselves as well prepared to enter the teaching profession; however, their confidence varied considerably depending on the nature of the anticipated challenges. While they expressed relatively high levels of confidence regarding instructional aspects of teaching, including lesson planning, teaching language skills, and the use of teaching materials, they felt considerably less prepared for challenges associated with the immersion of AI into education, diversity and special education needs of the learners, assessment for learning, as well as social and emotional aspects of the profession.

3.1 Perceived Professional Challenges

The preparatory task, in which participants identified the ten greatest challenges they expected to encounter in their future careers, provided an overview of the issues they considered most significant. Although individual responses differed, several recurring themes emerged across the interviews. The most frequently mentioned challenges included the role of AI and technology in education (mentioned by all participants), maintaining learner motivation, classroom management (especially time management), inclusive teaching and responding to learner diversity, communication with parents, and designing tasks to develop critical thinking and writing. In the discussion, participants clarified that writing is especially worrisome for them in connection with writing tasks carried out at home, which was a very

common way of using writing in the past. It is no longer possible since students would likely use AI to complete the tasks.

Interestingly, participants also expressed personal challenges, such as their ability to communicate in English or their ability to use their voice as a tool of classroom management. As one participant explained:

"I simply cannot tell whether I am audible enough. I am so worried that I will shout, since I have always hated teachers who shouted in our lessons. And then I realise that some students might not hear me because they are not paying attention. I simply cannot find the right level."

Participants have included possible challenges within both student and teacher communities and expressed worries about how they might handle conflicts with students or other colleagues. These findings support previous research suggesting that initial teacher education prepares future teachers reasonably well for planned instructional activities but less effectively for the dynamic interpersonal aspects of teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Caena, 2014). Rather than perceiving themselves as insufficiently prepared, participants appeared aware that successful teaching increasingly depends on their ability to respond flexibly to situations that cannot be anticipated during university preparation.

The results from the pre-interview task indicated that some areas showed higher levels of uncertainty among participants. At the same time, there were also areas where individual issues came to light. Below is the summary of sample challenges presented by the participants:

Table 1: Identified challenges in the pre-interview task

challenge	participants	avg. level (1 least worrying – 10 most worrying)
artificial intelligence/technology	25	8
motivation of students	20	6
time management	18	7
different needs of students (SEN)	16	8
parents' communication	14	7
relationship with other teachers	13	5
assessment for learning	11	8
well-being of students (mental health)	10	6
tasks for critical thinking	9	5
tasks for writing development	8	5
maintaining the attention of students	5	6
conflict management (especially at the secondary level)	4	7
paperwork (administration)	4	4
active learning tasks	4	5
my English level	1	7
my voice	1	6

limited free time	1	4
		Source: author

3.2 Implementation of AI and Technology

Artificial intelligence emerged as one of the most frequently discussed themes, as all participants addressed it as a potential challenge in the pre-interview task. Participants generally perceived AI as both an opportunity and a challenge. From their own experience, they acknowledged its potential to support lesson planning, generate teaching materials, personalise learning activities, and provide immediate feedback. At the same time, they expressed concerns regarding plagiarism, students' overreliance on AI-generated texts, declining critical thinking, and the increasing difficulty of assessing authentic student work. This dual perspective corresponds with earlier discussions of AI in foreign language education, which highlighted both its potential to enhance language teaching and the need to prepare teachers to use AI-powered technologies effectively and critically (Pokrivčáková, 2019).

Most participants admitted that, despite increasing emphasis on the need for young people to learn to use AI responsibly in educational settings, they felt uncertain about how to facilitate such use as teachers. They attributed this uncertainty partly to the novelty and rapid development of generative AI and the consequent lack of established practices on which they could draw. Several argued that teachers should become guides who help learners critically evaluate AI-generated information rather than attempting to prohibit its use altogether. Their concerns should also be understood in the context of recent Slovak regulation of mobile phones and similar personal electronic communication devices in primary schools (Zákon č. 245/2008 Z. z., § 151a). Since January 2025, their use has been prohibited for pupils in grades 1–3, while from grade 4 onwards their educational use is permitted under specified conditions, including when authorised by a teacher. Although this regulation does not prohibit AI itself, participants perceived restrictions on pupils' access to personal digital devices as an additional challenge to integrating AI meaningfully into classroom practice.

“There is no way to stop them from using it once they are at home. So I will have to reconsider what assignments I give them, especially for homework.”

“I just remember how we used AI during these last semesters (laughter), and my students will do the same.”

“The only thing that I am worried about is that I noticed we use AI basically for everything, even when we do not need to. If I want my students to keep, e.g., a portfolio with summaries of what they read or listened to, well, it could all be just summaries from AI. How will I find out?”

These perceptions reinforce earlier calls for foreign language teacher education to prepare teachers for the pedagogically appropriate use of AI-powered technologies (Pokrivčáková, 2019), while also reflecting more recent international discussions concerning the ethical and educational implications of generative AI (Miao & Holmes, 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher education programmes should increasingly address not only the technical use of AI tools but also their critical, ethical, and pedagogically meaningful integration into language education.

3.3 Motivation for Learning

Motivating learners emerged as the second most frequently discussed challenge anticipated by the participants. While participants generally expressed confidence in their ability to prepare lessons and teach language content, they were considerably less certain about their capacity to maintain students' interest and willingness to engage in learning. Participants drew on examples from both their own experiences as learners and their teaching practice. Some expressed frustration with students' unwillingness to participate in learning tasks:

"I really planned that activity well, and I expected students would be motivated, especially because they would do something different from filling in the exercise. And they started ignoring me from the very beginning because I told them the task would not be graded. Towards the end, I felt I had to force them, and I just wanted to disappear."

Motivation was viewed as a complex phenomenon influenced by technological, social, emotional, and individual factors that extend beyond the teacher's direct control. One of the strongest concerns was related to learners' decreasing attention spans. Participants repeatedly associated this issue with the increasing presence of smartphones and digital media in students' everyday lives. They believed that learners had become accustomed to immediate stimulation, making it more difficult to sustain attention during classroom activities.

One participant commented:

"Students are used to getting everything immediately. If an activity does not catch their attention in the first minute, they switch off mentally. I realised it especially when the students were asked to read a longer text from the textbook."

Another participant reflected on the challenge posed by differences in students' abilities and interests and the difficulties she encountered when attempting to keep all learners motivated:

"I was teaching at a vocational school where students were not that interested in the Maturita exam, so I could not motivate them using it as a threat. And I realised I had no other tools on my mind. I completely failed there. Later, I thought of including their hobbies, but if you think about what they usually do after school, it is scrolling through their phones. That would not help."

Participants acknowledged the role of external incentives, which they had observed during their teaching practice. However, they expressed greater concern about how to foster and maintain more autonomous and enduring forms of motivation. This distinction can be understood through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which differentiates between forms of motivation according to the degree to which behaviour is autonomous or externally controlled and identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs supporting high-quality motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Participants' emphasis on curiosity, learner autonomy, personal achievement, and meaningful engagement therefore closely corresponds with these principles. Although they believed that learners should be encouraged to develop these forms of motivation rather than rely primarily on grades or other external incentives, participants expressed limited confidence in their ability to translate these principles into classroom practice.

As one participant stated:

"I do not want students to learn English just because there will be a test. I would like them to enjoy using the language and realise that it can open many opportunities for them. But during the teaching practice that was not possible."

Another participant reflected:

“The biggest challenge will be helping students want to learn instead of forcing them to learn.”

Participants recognised that fostering autonomous motivation requires considerable pedagogical expertise. Several expressed uncertainty about how to encourage genuine interest among learners who initially demonstrated little willingness to participate or who perceived English as irrelevant to their future lives. Their accounts suggest that they understood motivation not merely as a classroom management issue but as a central educational objective closely connected with learner autonomy, perceptions of competence, meaningful learning, and positive teacher–student relationships. These concerns are consistent with SDT, according to which learning environments that support students’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness are more conducive to autonomous motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

3.4 Readiness for Professional Practice

When discussing their university preparation, participants generally evaluated the teacher education programme positively. They reported feeling confident about lesson planning, learning about appropriate teaching activities, organising communicative tasks, and using a variety of teaching materials. Many participants specifically referred to their teaching practice and methodology courses as valuable experiences that helped bridge theoretical knowledge and classroom practice.

Nevertheless, they also recognised limitations of pre-service preparation. Several participants argued that certain aspects of teaching could only be learned through experience.

“I was very uncertain how to grade my students during my teaching practice. We never practised that in the seminars because we could not give each other authentic assessment even while doing microteaching. I just had to rely on my intuition and experience, and sometimes my mentor helped me. I like the idea about criteria in assessment, but they did not really use it at my school. Yet, I want to try it when I become a teacher. It makes sense to me.”

Managing difficult classroom situations, communicating with parents, responding to learners’ emotional needs, and making rapid pedagogical decisions were frequently described as competencies that develop only after entering the profession.

One participant summarised this perception by stating:

“The university prepared us well; I appreciate that the syllabus included a lot of new information from neuroscience. We have learnt a lot about new curricular transformation, so I really had the feeling we are learning new methodology. But there is a lot we need to learn in real situations, especially a lot of what happens around teaching, I mean interactions, relationships and such stuff. You cannot really learn this in a seminar.”

This observation reflects a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Participants did not expect teacher education to prepare them for every possible situation but believed it should provide stronger opportunities to develop professional judgement, confidence, and adaptability.

These findings are consistent with Borg’s (2015) view that teacher expertise develops through the interaction between formal preparation, classroom experience, and reflection. Similarly, Farrell (2019) argues that professional competence cannot be reduced to methodological

knowledge but develops continuously through reflective practice and engagement with authentic classroom contexts.

3.5 Perceptions of Transversal Skills

Since the main focus of the study was oriented towards the transversal skills the questions in the interview addressed this issue directly because the participants in their pre-interview task mentioned only critical thinking and wellbeing. When asked overtly, the participants expressed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards transversal skills. They viewed them as essential competencies for learners, especially in the area of foreign language learning. Most participants expressed that even during their teaching practice, they realised how easily they included these skills in the lessons. They argued that English language teaching naturally provides opportunities for developing many of these competencies through communicative activities, collaborative learning, project work, problem-solving tasks, and classroom discussions.

However, in the discussion, they admitted that they often took the development of these skills for granted and did not realise that even communication needs to be developed step by step. One participant shared her experience from teaching a speaking lesson:

"I put my students in groups and asked them to discuss some topics. I was surprised how they stumbled in communication and did not know how to proceed in the task. Often they lost interest and started talking about other stuff. Then, in another lesson, I did a similar task, but I allocated the roles to individual students, gave a list of criteria they needed to meet and appointed a team leader who was responsible for meeting them. I remember we did that in one Methodology course seminar. And that was a whole different story. I did not realise before they just would not talk if not being prompted."

However, they in general agreed that transversal skills match language lessons well. One participant added: *"Students cannot really communicate in English without also learning how to cooperate, express opinions, solve problems, and think critically."*

These perceptions correspond with what Mercer et al. (2020) state as a key reason behind bringing transversal skills to the attention of language teachers. This finding distinguishes language education from many other school subjects. Rather than viewing transversal skills as an additional curricular requirement, participants considered them an inherent component of communicative language teaching.

3.6 Challenges in Implementing Transversal Skills

Although participants recognised the educational value of transversal skills, they expressed considerably lower confidence regarding their implementation in classroom practice. Several factors contributed to this uncertainty.

First, participants questioned how transversal skills should be assessed within existing educational systems. This concern reflects a broader challenge associated with translating transversal competences into observable and assessable learning outcomes. The European LifeComp framework conceptualises personal, social, and learning-to-learn competences as interconnected and applicable across different educational and life contexts, while emphasising their developmental nature (Sala et al., 2020). Similarly, Mercer et al. (2020) propose an assessment framework that makes the progressive development of such skills visible to learners by providing clear learning goals and enabling them to recognise different levels of achievement, including performance that extends beyond expected outcomes.

Participants, however, perceived a tension between the importance attributed to such competences and their limited visibility within conventional assessment practices. As one participant expressed it clearly:

“If it is not assessed, it is not taken seriously by students or their parents. And then it does not matter for them.”

They also expressed concerns regarding limited instructional time and the pressure to fulfil curriculum requirements. Some mentioned they discussed the issue with their mentors: *“She (the mentor) said she simply does not have time for including it in her year plan since it is so full anyway; she can hardly ever manage it in time.”* This, however, indicated that teachers still view transversal skills as an addition to their curriculum, and trainees did not dispute that.

Further on, some participants worried that less proficient language learners might struggle with cognitively demanding activities requiring critical thinking or collaborative problem-solving in English. They themselves expressed uncertainty about how to design an appropriate task. If such tasks are not included in a textbook, the participants stated they will probably not include them.

“I had some tasks in the textbooks where I used just a quick modification, as we learned it in the seminars. I just added a few questions to help my students think critically. However, I am not sure if I really can design a task where I would include all students. Some might find it really difficult.”

Consequently, participants viewed implementation not as a question of willingness but of pedagogical competence. They repeatedly emphasised the need for practical examples, authentic teaching materials, and opportunities to observe experienced teachers integrating transversal skills into everyday instruction. This supports Lu and Xie's (2024) conclusion that confidence in fostering critical thinking develops primarily through teaching practice, mentoring, and structured reflection rather than through theoretical coursework alone.

4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. The qualitative research design was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of pre-service teacher trainees' perceptions and anticipated professional challenges. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to the broader population of future English language teachers. The study involved a relatively small sample drawn from a single teacher education programme at one Slovak university. Although the participants shared comparable educational experiences, their perceptions may not reflect those of pre-service teachers enrolled in other institutions or educational contexts.

A further limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported perceptions. Participants reflected on their anticipated readiness for the teaching profession rather than their actual classroom performance. Personal beliefs, confidence levels, or recent experiences during teaching practice may have therefore influenced their responses. The study did not include classroom observations or other forms of data triangulation that could have provided additional insight into the relationship between participants' perceived preparedness and their teaching practices. Since this study is a part of a larger project, these findings are considered partial outcomes which will contribute to a bigger research project.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to collect data from pre-service teacher trainees in order to determine how they feel ready for their future profession, which challenges they perceive, and how they feel prepared by their university teaching programme for the implementation of transversal skills, which will soon become a compulsory part of a new elementary school curriculum in Slovakia.

The findings indicate that participants perceived their general readiness and university preparation on a high level. They appreciated that the teacher training programme was up-to-date, closely linked to new achievements in the sciences (pedagogical, psychological or neuroscience) as well as to the reality of teaching in the country.

However, the participants identified possible challenges and clearly reasoned why these areas create for them feelings of uncertainty. Rather than expressing concerns about teaching language itself, they anticipated difficulties in maintaining learners' attention, responding to diverse motivational needs, and creating learning environments that encourage sustained engagement and intrinsic interest. Areas such as the use of artificial intelligence in the classroom or outside it, motivation of Generation Alpha learners, and an inclusive approach to all learners have thus emerged as clear future focuses and imperatives for innovation in university methodology courses.

Participants did not attribute declining motivation solely to Generation Alpha learners or to digital technologies. Instead, they recognised motivation as a shared responsibility requiring teachers to design meaningful learning experiences, adapt instruction to diverse learners, and establish supportive classroom relationships. Their reflections demonstrate an awareness that the role of the contemporary language teacher extends beyond transmitting linguistic knowledge to facilitating learning, supporting learner autonomy, and responding flexibly to rapidly changing educational contexts.

These findings reinforce previous research highlighting learner engagement as one of the principal challenges facing beginning teachers. They also suggest that initial teacher education programmes should devote greater attention to motivational theories, learner psychology, differentiated instruction, and practical strategies for sustaining engagement in increasingly digital and diverse classrooms. Developing these competencies during pre-service preparation may strengthen beginning teachers' confidence in addressing one of the most complex aspects of contemporary language teaching.

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