Researching The Beliefs and Developing Cognitions of Pre-Service English Teachers Regarding the Teaching of English Grammar in Slovakia

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Abstract

Research on the beliefs and cognitions of pre-service language teachers regarding the teaching of English grammar has brought a substantial number of findings. This research study presents the results of qualitative research (Focus Group, Open Coding and Constant Comparative Method) involving a sample of 35 undergraduate students (aged 21–22) enrolled in an English language teaching study programme provided by the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. The aim of the study was to enrich the empirical evidence in the field of teacher education programmes by exploring the beliefs and developing cognitions of Slovak pre-service English teachers regarding the teaching of grammar. In an emerging theory based on the qualitative methodology of research, a clear declaration and subjective interpretation of the issue of English grammar teaching in Slovakia has been identified. The research subjects experienced and recognized their former grammar education reflectively and critically as extremely traditional (i.e. knowledge transmission; upfront teaching, decontextualized tasks; form-focused), impersonal and insufficiently motivating. Therefore, the phenomenon underlying their developing cognition highlights the need for a comprehensive change in the teaching of English grammar, including the awareness and implementation of substantial aspects that are/will be part of this change.

Keywords: beliefs; English grammar teaching; language teacher cognition; qualitative methodology; pre-service teacher
1. Introduction

The complex issue of teacher cognition, including teachers’ beliefs, has been elaborated since the 1990s (Borg, 2003, 2006; Fang, 1996; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Richardson, 1996 etc.). Although the study of teacher cognition is generally characterised by a multiplicity of labels, among which we can find such concepts and notions as teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, pedagogical theories, attitudes, assumptions, conceptions, principles, thinking, decision-making, it is obvious that identical terms have been defined in different ways and different terms have been used to describe similar concepts. Teacher cognition, having been researched in various subjects such as the sciences as well as languages, has been acknowledged as playing a crucial role in teachers’ lives due to the fact that it influences their subsequent behaviour, decisions and classroom practices. The generally accepted relationship between teacher cognition and its impact on classroom practice has been summarized as follows: teachers’ cognitions are highly influenced by their own experience as learners (thus they can be deep-rooted and highly resistant to change); these cognitions have an impact on the mental processing and acceptance of what and how teachers learn during their pre-service education, acting as a filter through which pre-service teachers interpret new information and experience; they may suppress the impact of pre-service education in influencing what teachers do in classrooms; they exert a strong impact on teachers’ instructional practices in classrooms; they are not always congruent with the practices teachers implement in classrooms (i.e. in some cases they are completely divergent); and they interact bi-directionally with teachers’ experience (i.e. teachers’ cognitions influence classroom practices, and practices can also lead to changes in cognition, particularly with regard to context).
1.1 Pre-service teachers’ beliefs

The study of teachers’ beliefs is one of the challenges faced by many scholars because beliefs are not directly observable; the researcher cannot look into teachers’ minds and identify their beliefs. It is also essential to note 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 proved by several studies (Borg, 2003, 2006; Pajares, 1992; Phipps & Borg, 2009), teachers’ core beliefs are more stable and powerful regarding what teachers do. Borg (2006) claims that teachers’ peripheral beliefs are, in contrast, less stable and might be changed and/or modified when a peripheral belief is confronted with a core belief. This seems to be a matter of strength and 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 be peripheral.

The beliefs of pre-service teachers represent crucial aspects of inner worlds that impact their classroom practices demonstrated during microteaching at the university level and/or during the short-term teaching practicum they are obliged to undergo during their studies. It is essential to emphasise that although research on pre-service teachers’ beliefs has brought rather ambiguous, even unsettling findings, they play a pivotal role in their knowledge acquisition as well as subsequent professional behaviour, attitudes and classroom practices.
As Borg (2003) claims “there is ample evidence that teachers’ experiences as learners can inform cognitions about teaching and learning which continue to exert an influence on teachers throughout their career; there is also evidence to suggest that although professional preparation does shape trainees’ cognitions, programmes which ignore trainee teachers’ prior beliefs may be less effective at influencing them” (p. 81).

1.2 English grammar teaching

What is grammar? As reviewed by Byram & Hu (2013), “there has been considerable discussion about the differences between pedagogical and linguistic grammar, variously termed theoretical or scientific” (p. 524). Similarly, Katz & Blyth (2009) distinguish between academic grammar and pedagogical grammar. In their view, linguists have their own academic grammars which tend to be technical in their discussions of particular aspects of the language (i.e. syntax or phonology), while grammar books written for students are called pedagogical grammars. “The ultimate goal of a pedagogical grammar is not so much to help students to understand the grammar point, but rather to encourage them to practice using a given structure, to develop a feel for it, and to use it when communicating” (p. 4). The authors also point out that modern textbooks select and sequence grammar points according to predetermined pedagogical agendums, the so-called grammatical syllabus, and they contain grammatical explanations of some sort as well as activities to practise the target grammar point. Furthermore, both new and experienced instructors often struggle with the dilemma of whether and how to explain grammatical rules to their students.

Undoubtedly, no other language issue has so preoccupied language-teaching scholars, educators, educational researchers, linguists as well as language teachers as the role, importance of and approaches to grammar teaching and learning in the English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) classrooms. Teaching grammar always escalates worries and uncertainty in English language teachers from the curricular, didactic and linguistic points of view.

The Pendulum Metaphor (applied to the history of language teaching) can also be applied to grammar teaching. We have seen a pendulum swing in grammar teaching from a structural view of language (e.g. the Grammar-Translation Method as well as Audio-lingual Method) through the functional view of language to an interactional view of language where language is considered a communicative tool to maintain social relations (particularly the Deep-end Approach to Communicative language teaching). When focusing on grammar teaching, persistent dichotomies arise, in particular, form vs. function, form vs. meaning, accuracy vs. fluency, form-based instruction vs. meaning-based instruction, intensive vs. extensive grammar instruction or a zero grammar approach. According to Newby (2003), the dichotomies have been resolved by three general approaches: traditional grammar teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT) and post-communicative teaching. Many experts in the field claim that the time of packaged solutions of methods for language teaching is over. Ellis (2006) does not believe in just one preferred approach to teaching grammar, since the acquisition of the grammatical system of a second language is a complex process and almost certainly can be assisted by a variety of approaches. Hence, this can be summarized as the starting point for developing a teacher’s personal theory of grammar teaching (we consider this personal theory as teacher cognition, which includes teachers’ beliefs) which encourages language teachers to experiment in their classrooms taking into consideration the linguistic
and psychological aspects of ELT, learners’ variables as well as the socio-cultural and educational conditions influencing language learning.

1.3 Pre-service teachers’ beliefs about English grammar teaching – literature overview

The beliefs of teachers and pre-service teachers regarding English grammar teaching can be considered a more detailed part of their beliefs about English language teaching in general. According to Richards et al. (2002), the most commonly reported core beliefs about grammar are centered on the role of grammar in language teaching and the related issue of how grammar should be taught, highlighting the importance of grammar for communication, comprehension and clear expression. According to Toprak (2019) previous research on language teachers’ beliefs about grammar instruction has demonstrated that teachers’ practices were practical and experiential rather than based on second language acquisition theories; psychological, contextual and experiential factors may impact teachers’ theories in grammar teaching; and teachers favour formal instruction of grammar which fosters the presentation and practice of grammar. Moreover, he points out that research on language teachers’ beliefs about grammar instruction has been carried out mainly in contexts such as the USA, the UK, Singapore and Malta, where English is the official language. Thus, more research efforts may prove useful in EFL contexts where English is learnt as a foreign language and mostly treated as a school subject; opportunities for using English for authentic purposes are relatively scarce; and attaining proficiency in English may serve gate-keeping purposes. In such contexts, grammar instruction may constitute a fundamental component of language teaching practices.

Undoubtedly, teaching grammar may be a real challenge for pre-service English language teachers for various reasons. Based on the bulk of relevant literature reviewed (Borg, 2003; Eisenstein-Ebsworth & Schweers, 1997; Farrell, 1999; Hankerová, 2018, 2017; Javorčiková and Zelenková, 2019; Nishimuro & Borg, 2013; Numrich, 1996; Richards et al., 2002; Šipošová, 2018 etc.) pre-service teachers’ beliefs about grammar teaching relate to their own experience with grammar as learners. Therefore, their expectations and prospective real classroom instructions may differ due to their age, experience, linguistic ability, professional and personal interests (e.g., more focus on cultural studies, more focus on fluency when developing speaking, avoidance of error correction, etc.), learning style (e.g. an analytical or global learner), pre-service teaching locations, students’ needs, etc. When teaching English grammar, pre-service teachers should determine the points of grammar they believe are most important, the length of time they should allocate for grammar teaching, the approach to arranging grammar lessons, and the types of activities they should select based on their suitability and applicability in particular language classrooms.

Many educational researchers (Ballesteros et al., 2020; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Cumming, 1989; Debrelí, 2012; Peacock, 2001) confirm that students entering teacher training programmes may have an inappropriate and inadequate, unrealistic or even naive understanding of teaching and learning. For instance, Borg (2003, citing Brown & McGannon) claims that students in the initial stages of their programme believed that languages were learned mainly by imitation and that errors were mainly due to L1 interference. Debrelí (2012) reported that pre-service teachers at the beginning of the education programme declared grammar was the least important skill in a foreign language classroom and explicit error correction should be abandoned. They advocated utilizing implicit correction, as it encourages students to look for and discover their mistakes/errors by
themselves. The author added that after a student teacher’s first lesson (during his internship in a public school) he commented on an incident when he needed to correct a student explicitly. Thus, he admitted that explicit correction can sometimes prove to be useful. In Peacock’s longitudinal study (2001), the author concludes that over their three years of study of TESL methodology far too many third-year trainees believed that learning a second language means learning many grammar rules. In their qualitative study involving 42 pre-service teachers in an undergraduate program in a Northern Mexican public university, Ballesteros et al. (2020) found that in spite of exposure to current theories on language teaching and learning and practicum courses, the pre-service teachers tended to hold on to outdated theories which they expressed in metaphors; in particular, they expressed one of the most traditional views on education – the teacher as the owner and dispenser of knowledge.

2. Methodology

The presented research study is focused on unpacking the beliefs of Slovak pre-service English language teachers in order to make them aware of the implications of their teaching practice. It also aims at enriching the empirical evidence in the field of a foreign language pre-service teachers’ reflection and developing cognition by investigating and interpreting their beliefs and pre-established cognition in English grammar teaching in the Slovak system of language education. Since the intention of our research was to understand how the subjects of research understand the (examined) social situation and the reasons that lead them to a certain reasoning and/or belief (Švaříček, Šeďová et al. 2014), the principles of qualitative methodology were applied. Qualitative research is participatory, practical, inductive research, which means that the activities are carried out systematically, in detail and intensively in cooperation between the researcher and research subject(s). As Kostrub (2016) claims, “Qualitative research means a consistent, complete approach to subjective and intersubjective realities as legitimate objects of scientific knowledge” (p. 11).

2.1 Research strategies/techniques and tools applied to data acquisition and analysis

- **A focus group** was used to collect data on the acquisition of opinions, beliefs, explanations of knowledge of the research subjects (Severini and Kostrub, 2018; McNamara, 2006; Plchotová, 2002).
- **Open coding** as a method of initial analysis and text opening (a transcript of research subjects’ statements) were used, followed by the creation of codes and categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1999; Gavora, 2008).
- **The Constant Comparative Method (CCM)** was applied in terms of the systematization of research data, categories and the monitoring of the saturation of categories in order to generate a theory of the studied phenomena (Kolb, 2012; Creswell, 1998; Kostrub, 2016).
- **The contrasting research** data was applied in the analysis of information samples (Patton, 2002).
2.2 Participants – research subjects

Pre-service English language teaching at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia is a five-year study programme divided into two levels (a 3-year bachelor’s programme and a 2-year master’s programme). Our research sample consists of 35 third-year students (aged 21-22). Since the research sought to understand (so called mutual understanding) the meanings that were attributed to phenomena by participating subjects, a view from the perspective of the research subjects was applied (Kostrub, 2016; Flick, 2009; Gavora, 2008). The research subjects were deliberately selected and represented a sample of homogeneous cases in which their general experience with the thematic core of the subject of research was examined and interpreted. They were appropriate research subjects because they had a certain level of knowledge and experience with English language teaching/learning at primary and/or secondary schools, which they relied on to comment on the issue (in focus groups).

2.3 Research questions and data collection

By conducting qualitative research we aimed at identifying how the initial beliefs and pre-established cognition of pre-service English language teachers in Slovakia (research subjects) were formed, i.e. based on their statements we sought to identify the phenomena, factors and acquired prior experience of the students at the time of their own foreign language education at primary / secondary schools that formed their initial beliefs and thus understand the causes and sources of their origin. By examining the research subjects’ initial beliefs and pre-established cognition about English grammar, we also aimed to identify and characterize the current model of their teacher cognition. As a result, the following research questions were used.

RQ No. 1 What (lived experience, factors, phenomena) related to prior English grammar teaching/learning in primary and / or secondary schools forms the initial pre-established beliefs and cognition of pre-service English language teachers in Slovakia?

RQ No. 2 What pre-established beliefs and cognition about grammar teaching/learning can be identified in the views of pre-service English language teachers in Slovakia?

In the first phase (October – December 2020), we established focus groups attended by a total of 35 participants. The focus groups met four times and in separate groups (lasting more than 7 hours in total) in order to optimize the number of participants within one group and to make proper use of the thematic and research potential (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Due to COVID restrictions, data collection was carried out during MS Teams video calls, which were recorded with the consent of all participants. At least 3 facilitators (one moderator, facilitator and technical administrator) were present on each call to ensure the fluidity and use of the research and thematic potential of each research subject. Prior to the implementation of the focus groups, all of the participants were acquainted with the subject, goal and scenario in person and in writing. The ethical and research principles of qualitative research were observed throughout the sessions.
2.4 Data analysis

In the second phase (January – March 2021), the data obtained from audio-visual recordings were transcribed and the individual protocols were repeatedly analysed and revised by at least two researchers (focus group facilitators). In the first stage of analysis, the method of open coding was applied, followed by the application of CCM and the contrasting of research data. In the third phase (March – June 2021), the principles of high mental abstraction and techniques were applied in the analysis and interpretation of the data according to Quintana (2006 in Kostrub, 2016):

- Techniques of generating significance (elaboration of a concept, idea, image, which enables the emergence of an interpretable phenomenon or an understandable phenomenon) by integrating various parts of the investigated phenomenon.
- Techniques of generating significance by differentiating parts of data.
  - Realization of contrasting and comparison.
  - Breakdown of variables.
- Techniques of generating significance by discovering more abstract constructs and their mutual relations.

Table 1: Overview of saturation of categories and subcategories related to research question No. 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and subcategories related to research question no. 1</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category saturation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predominant upfront teaching: transmission of grammatical structures and their meanings</td>
<td>Experienced methods and organizational forms of teaching (EMFT)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drill of isolated grammatical structures and their meanings</td>
<td>Drill of isolated grammatical structures and meanings, (DIGS)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant assessment of declarative knowledge (knowledge of isolated grammatical structures and their meanings)</td>
<td>Assessment (A)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of procedural grammatical knowledge (in context)</td>
<td>Assessment (A)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The phenomenon of the English language teacher</td>
<td>Reflection on the teacher (ROT)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The phenomenon of the English language teaching/learning process</td>
<td>Reflection on the experienced prior teaching/learning process (ROTL)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied learning strategies</td>
<td>Student applied learning strategies (SALS)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Authors: Siposova – Ostradicky, 2021)

Explanations to Table 1:
Saturation of the main categories: $\geq 19, \leq 35$.
Saturation of the subcategories: $\geq 12, \leq 14$.

Table 2: Overview of saturation of categories and concepts related to research question No. 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories related to research question no. 2</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Category saturation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of English language grammar teaching/learning</td>
<td>Teacher-learner relationship; teacher self-reflection; motivation; activating methods and organizational forms of teaching; contextual and personalized learning; practical use of grammatical knowledge</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk of failure of English language grammar teaching/learning</td>
<td>The current system of education; demotivation of subjects; unsystematic learning; emphasis on theory; “grammarization” of language; missing context and communicative tasks; teacher; traditional way of teaching</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations of pre-service teachers for English language teaching/learning</td>
<td>English lesson as a safe place to make mistakes; emphasis on teachers' professional and thorough knowledge of English grammar; emphasis on functional use of language; maintaining motivation of subjects; use of activating methods; emphasis on teacher self-reflection; practical training; intensive use of communicative tasks in undergraduate study programmes</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Authors: Siposova – Ostradicky, 2021)
During the contrasting of research data and CCM application, the polar types of cases of information samples were analysed; they proceeded in a line from both extreme poles towards the centre. Importantly, the principles of occurrence, repeatability and contextuality of phenomena in the research material were noted, i.e. the data were subjected to the process of searching for the phenomenon/phenomena, their occurrence, representation, repeatability and the context in which they occur.

Table 3: Identified concepts of polar-type interpretation categories for research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE PHENOMENON OF A &quot;SLOVAK&quot; APPROACH TO TEACHING/LEARNING ENGLISH GRAMMAR</th>
<th>THE PHENOMENON OF A &quot;LIVING&quot; PERSONALIZED AND CONTEXTUALLY ANCHORED APPROACH TO TEACHING/LEARNING ENGLISH GRAMMAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• teaching/learning isolated grammatical structures and their meanings;</td>
<td>• teaching/learning grammatical structures and their meanings in context;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• deterministic algorithmic teaching/learning and assessment of declarative knowledge of English grammar;</td>
<td>• non-deterministic algorithmic teaching/learning and assessment of procedural knowledge;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• prevailing non-personalized teaching/learning of English grammar;</td>
<td>• more personalized teaching/learning of English grammar;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• activities with controlled and mostly controlled output; decontextualized tasks focused on form;</td>
<td>• teaching/learning grammatical structures applicable in practice and real-life tasks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teacher seeking confidence in academic/linguistic and pedagogical grammar – in the grammatical syllabus of textbooks; grammatical structures presented upfront;</td>
<td>• teacher creating conditions for the development of a learner’s ability to utilize declarative knowledge and communicate fluently (also grammatically correct) within cultural and discursive practices;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• learners seeking understanding, meaning and motivation within their own learning strategies;</td>
<td>• learners as constructors of their own / socially constructed knowledge;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teacher and learner insufficiently motivated in the Slovak education system;</td>
<td>• teacher and learner internally motivated by the systematic support of stakeholders;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• systemic prevalence of the emphasis on declarative knowledge</td>
<td>• teacher as the primary initiator, facilitator, mediator and guarantor of systemic changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Authors: Siposova – Ostradicky, 2021)
2.5 Interpretation of research findings

The research subjects unanimously cited the need for partial as well as system-wide changes in teaching/learning English grammar. They formulated their beliefs on the basis of their own experience as primary/secondary school students. They interpreted this experience as an educational reality and a space in which, in the role of learners, they encountered a significantly predominant transmissive conception of teaching which they labelled as “ordinary, traditional, boring, typically Slovak”. They noted the emphasis on drill, memorizing rules and theories and assessing declarative knowledge. They consider upfront English grammar teaching (transmission of knowledge, decontextualized structures, form-focused instruction, non-personalized tasks used) to be de-motivating, difficult and problematic, resulting in a minimal application of activating teaching methods which, from the point of view of the subjects, stems from a “system-wide setting within the Slovak system of education”. They also identified the risks of teaching/learning English grammar when they interpreted experience with a gradually increasing phenomenon within their own educational trajectory by naming it “performance school”. In other words, while at primary school they also experienced the opposite pole of traditional teaching (at least in one of its phases), at secondary school they only encountered something similar in English conversation classes as preparation for the oral part the school leaving exam.

In the forming of a belief (cognition) this can / should be done differently and in their own search for an understanding of English grammar (and/or sources of motivation), the research subjects applied their own learning strategies which were characterized by contextuality, authenticity, dynamism and practicality. Specifically, it involved additional study in evening language courses, private tutoring, reading books, watching movies and series, listening to music and reading lyrics, travelling and personal encounters (conversation and written correspondence) with native speakers.

The research subjects also cited the insufficient knowledge of academic and pedagogical grammar and language skills of their former English teachers and frequent teacher turnover as problematic and troublesome (in some cases they had a new English teacher every second year). Regarding the insufficient knowledge of pedagogical grammar of teachers, they noted the deterministic algorithmic structuring of a lesson, a teacher’s uncreative and inflexible use of teaching methods, approaches, organizational forms of teaching/learning and teaching aids, form-focused instruction, and decontextualized and non-personalized tasks. They indicated their understanding of a certain connection between academic and pedagogical grammar and teachers’ competence when they expressed the belief that only a teacher with thorough mastery of content knowledge (academic grammar knowledge) and didactic knowledge (pedagogical grammar knowledge) can dismiss schematic teaching by not proceeding exclusively according to the textbook content (grammatical syllabus of textbooks, in particular), but based on the CLT principles (e.g. authenticity, situational principle, different kinds of discourse, real-life etc.), thus, creating conditions of teaching/learning that will enable the social construction of knowledge. In other words, the teacher needs to be prepared for unforeseen situations and circumstances. Naturalness was understood as a key factor in English grammar teaching/learning by the research subjects. The research subjects expressed the conviction that the teacher should be the main source of systematic change in English grammar teaching/learning by being an initiator, facilitator, mediator and guarantor of specific changes resulting from experience in his/her own teaching.
This can be ensured by:

- the teacher’s self-reflection;
- examples of good practice promoted by teachers (i.e. demonstrations of one’s own innovative teaching) at school(s) didactic professional seminars, webinars, workshops, etc.;
- inviting (more experienced) colleagues to evaluate, recommend and collaborate in teaching design;
- initiating mutual collective support of stakeholders (starting with school principals).

2.6 Discussion

Based on the presented key research findings (the conviction that the teacher should be the main source of systematic change in English grammar teaching/learning), further implications could be taken into account:

From the point of view of a full-fledged graduate English teacher, English language teaching departments should allocate part of undergraduate training to the area of pedagogical grammar, with a closer focus on:

- frequency, formal complexity, communication importance of relevant grammar structures;
- compilation and form of the grammatical minimum;
- the description and interpretation of the non-parallel grammatical categories and phenomena (i.e. not existing in L1), attitude to error correction;
- English grammar teaching utilizing activating and innovative teaching methods;
- curriculum practice, selection, order and continuity of grammar structures and phenomena, the question of grammar testing and assessment, etc.

3. Conclusion

The issue of language teacher beliefs and cognition has attracted abundant attention since the last decades of the 20th century. Many research studies have relied on questionnaires, semi-structured interviews as well as observations accompanied by video-recording and subsequent stimulated recall or delayed interviews. Less attention has been given to qualitative research utilizing in-depth interviews, focus groups and the constant comparative method (CCM). Therefore, the aim of the presented research study was to enrich the empirical evidence by investigating and interpreting pre-service English teachers’ pre-established beliefs and developing cognitions in English grammar teaching in Slovakia by utilizing focus groups and CCM qualitative research tools.

We believe it is essential for pre-service teachers to be provided not only with comprehensive knowledge of academic grammar, but also pedagogical knowledge of English grammar. Thus, part of the undergraduate study programme should focus on pedagogical grammar that should be practical in order to provide rules of thumb that seem to work well.

It is important to realize that teachers of English grammar who are not confident in the choice and arrangement of teaching various grammatical structures and phenomena often present grammatical phenomena in a traditional and transmissive way (i.e. drill, memorizing rules and theories, decontextualized structures, form-focused instruction, non-personalized tasks, testing
and assessing declarative knowledge; upfront teaching). These teachers slavishly rely to textbooks in their classrooms, avoiding the use of supplementary authentic materials and personalized and creative tasks that focus on the practical use of grammar in meaningful communication and context. Based on the research findings we believe that the teacher ought to be the main source of systematic change in English grammar teaching/learning by being an initiator, facilitator, mediator and guarantor of specific changes resulting from experience in his/her own teaching.

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