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## Training Pre-School and Early School Pedagogy Students to Teach English: A Study on Belief Modification

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### Abstract

In the academic year 2020-2021, pre-school and early-school pedagogy M.A. students entered a three-semester course of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) which was incorporated for the first time into a regular ministerial programme in the Pedagogy Department in Legnica, Poland. Similarly, pre-school and early-school pedagogy students in Kraków took courses on teaching English to children as part of their study programme. These experiences offered an opportunity for the trainers to design specialised courses, implement them, and conduct research on the impact they had on the beliefs of M.A. students in relation to language learning and teaching. Additionally, the beliefs of pre-service teacher trainees were revealed on the education of young learners and the extent to which the course meets the challenges faced by the Pedagogy students in teaching a foreign language. The study exploited Lightbown and Spada's framework (2011), verbal reports, and anecdotal records, which provided insight into the process of educating M.A. students of Pedagogy in teaching a foreign language to children aged 3-10 and informed the trainers on what the needs of this group of teacher trainees were in developing their teaching skills not only in foreign language instruction. The initial findings from the research indicate the significance of modifying the beliefs of M.A. students in the realm of language education and revisiting their preconceptions of a pre-primary and lower-primary teacher.

**Keywords:** teacher beliefs and perceptions, verbal reports, anecdotal records, reflection, mindsets



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*"I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged,  
not simply in the training of individuals,  
but in the formation of the proper social life."  
(Dewey, 1897, p. 80)*

## 1 Introduction

John Dewey (1897) - in the seminar work "My Pedagogic Creed" - expressed his beliefs about what education should be like. The creed remains profoundly relevant to the contemporary approaches of preparing pre-primary and lower primary teacher-to-be-students to teach English. Dewey's principles allow educators to go beyond the traditional teaching methods and to facilitate interaction between the teacher and learners that will stimulate their curiosity and interests. It may be assumed that those teachers who align with Dewey's creed, will be able to reshape their educational beliefs and have an impact on education today. His vision shall inspire educators to create environments in which English language learners and future teachers will actively participate in the educational process. Implementing the so-called "education for life" in EFL (Gębal, Kiński, Mercer, Nowak & Szulc-Kurpaska, 2022) shall be based on authentic and meaningful hands-on experiences, holistic development of learners and real-life problem-solving learning. This in turn shall foster their belief modification and enhance educational impact through such educational programmes.

## 2 Theoretical and pedagogical context

The problem regarding how languages are learned refers to a complex phenomenon similar to identity, motivation, personality, intelligence, aptitude, individual differences or learner characteristics. In this study, we aim to investigate how teachers' beliefs, understood as their perceptions of reality and the way how language shall not only be learned but also taught - may bring new insights into the way their future career will be shaped. By highlighting the answers provided by the participants to Lightbown and Spada's framework (2011), we will see what they think about language education at the pre-primary and lower primary level. Our aim is to investigate how participant's beliefs may influence their teaching practice in the future.

### 2.1 Beliefs about learning and teaching

A popular definition of a belief states that "it represents an acceptance or conviction that something is true" (Williams et al. 2015, p. 63). According to Rokeach (1971), a belief refers to "any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase 'I believe that'" (p. 61). Gabillon (2012) claims that teacher beliefs about teaching derive from their life experiences in the society, prior schooling, as well as professional education and teaching experience (p. 3). Teachers are under the influence of their own beliefs which are also related to their values, understood as the views about the world and the perception of the context in which they live and work (Williams & Burden, 1997). It is also claimed that human beliefs very often lack consistency, and an individual can believe in contrasting convictions.

Beliefs can be divided into three groups (Williams et al. 2015, p. 68): *epistemological beliefs*, *mindsets* and *attributions*. *Epistemological beliefs* concern understanding the nature of knowledge and what is meant by the process of learning. Beliefs may be conscious and unconscious. Those conscious ones are also called *explicit*, and they may be verbalised by an individual. Unconscious beliefs, the ones a person may not be aware of, are called *implicit* beliefs or *mindsets*. Those hidden beliefs may, however, change and this is what teachers and teacher trainers can base their instruction on. *Mindsets* may be *fixed* and not

likely to change or they may be subjected to modifications, and this is when they are labelled as *growth mindsets*. These mindsets are more prone to enhance the learning process as they encourage people to try discovering new knowledge or skills (Dweck, 2016). *Attributions*, according to Oxford Learner's Dictionary (18 July 2024), refer to the act of saying or believing that something is the result of a particular circumstance. *Attribution theory*, therefore, attempts to answer the question what a person attributes a success or failure to.

Foreign language teacher beliefs, as identified by Werbińska (2006, 2011), entail the beliefs about the language, the teaching programme, learning, teaching and the profession itself. As Savić and Prošić-Santovac (2023) note, teachers' beliefs are generally found to affect their pedagogical practices and to play a significant role in teaching decisions. They also underline that in order to deepen our understanding of how teachers' beliefs about children's language learning are shaped, it is also crucial to take the country and teaching contexts into account. Weiner (1986) identified four factors which may influence an individual in justifying their actions: ability, effort, task difficulty and luck. Most motivating are beliefs which attribute success to effort and least favourable for investment is the conviction that ability and luck decide about achievement. Pajares (1992) claims that teacher beliefs are more influential on teaching practices executed by instructors in the classroom than their knowledge about teaching.

Teacher beliefs can be divided into (1) beliefs about learners, (2) beliefs about learning, (3) beliefs about teachers and (4) beliefs about teaching. Beliefs about learners, as suggested by Meighan and Meighan (1990), are being realised in the following categories: resisters, receptacles, raw material, clients, partners, individual explorers, or democratic explorers. The idea of resisters implies that learners are not willing to learn and are forced to do so by teachers. In the category of learners as *receptacles* they are treated as empty vessels to be filled up with knowledge. Learners as *raw material* are to be shaped by teachers in the way they think is best for them. The fourth belief about learners introduces the focus on learner needs rather than the teacher importance in the process of teaching. In this belief the learner is *a client* who may have a say in what they want to learn. Learner as *partner*, the fifth belief about the learner, involves the teacher and the learners in the process of learning, with the teacher being also a learner negotiating the learning process with the students. To facilitate the learning process of a learner as *an individual explorer*, the teacher enhances the process of discovery which the learners are engaged in. *Democratic exploration* expands the idea of learner autonomy to the group which decides about what and how they want to learn.

As far as the beliefs about learning are concerned, they influence very significantly the way teachers teach, often in the same or similar way they were taught in their education (Lortie, 1975). One of the approaches as to what learning may mean was provided by Gow and Kember (1993). For the researchers learning may imply progressive accumulation of knowledge, learning by heart, the absorption of facts and procedures for further use, the realisation of meaning, interpretation of the reality and change of a person. Williams and Burden (1997, pp. 61-62) express the beliefs about learning that it is a complex process. It causes personal change, it includes new understandings, it may be realised in different ways, it is influenced by the environment, and it is derived from interaction. This process requires mediation, it varies among individuals, it involves emotions and cognition, it implies self-image of a person, and it is a continuous process. For these reasons, it might be difficult to change teachers' beliefs (Richardson, 1996). However, effective teacher training programmes are needed to affect beliefs of teacher trainees (Guyton, 2000), especially because it is they who will further influence children's attitudes towards language learning, develop their motivation and encourage participation in classroom activities (Król-Gierat & Savić, 2023). Beliefs are thought to have two functions in learning to teach. The first relates to the constructivist theories of learning that suggest that students bring beliefs to a teacher education programme that strongly influence what and how they learn. The second function relates to beliefs as the focus of change in the process of education (Richardson, 1996, p. 105).

As regards beliefs about the teacher and teaching, Williams and Burden (1997, pp. 62-63) stress the importance of developing self-esteem by the teachers in themselves because only in this way can they also enhance self confidence in their learners. Other qualities which should also be cherished in the relations between the teacher and the pupils are dignity and respect. Yet, another feature which teachers should stimulate is permissiveness, which is understood as acceptance of people in their search for their own individuality, expression of opinions and values in life, and, consequently, approval of the learners in their pursuit for identity. Teaching in this approach is interpreted as conveying values and attitudes rather than only transmitting knowledge.

Ainscough (1997) states that teacher beliefs can be understood as teachers' personal theories, and they "are subject to an ongoing reappraisal of the teaching context in which they are engaged" (p. 574). This dynamic view of professional growth may be modified through interactions with learners, teaching materials, teaching process, or school context. In this way teachers adjust their beliefs and their personal theories about teaching to professional conduct. The main sources of personal theories are: (1) own experience as a learner, (2) personality of the teacher, (3) principles based on research, (4) principles based on teaching methods, (5) accepted practice, and (6) teaching practice. According to Werbińska (2016), these personal theories constitute teacher identity which involves three constructs: *affiliation*, *attachment* and *autonomy* (p. 137). *Affiliation* may be represented by answering the question: *Who am I as a language teacher?*, attachment corresponds to the enquiry: *How do I teach?* And *autonomy* may be challenged by responding to the interrogative form: *What am I allowed to do?* These aspects of teacher identity may be expressed linguistically, or they may remain nonverbal. This is when they are difficult to uncover even for the teachers themselves. However, Borg (2003) found out that if language teachers' beliefs are not examined, they may influence their learning, professional training, and their future careers.

Many researchers assert that it is important to understand the context in which beliefs arise. Bandura (1997) claims that individuals construct their beliefs primarily through the integration of information from four key sources: (1) *mastery experiences*, which refer to instances where individuals successfully perform tasks. They serve as a powerful foundation for belief formation reinforcing the idea that they can achieve similar success in the future. (2) *Vicarious experiences* which allow people to learn by observing others and witnessing the successes of role models who can enhance one's confidence in their own abilities. (3) *Social persuasion*, such as encouragement and positive feedback from peers and mentors, which plays a crucial role in shaping self-efficacy beliefs by affirming individuals' perceptions of their capabilities. (4) *Psychological and emotional states*, including feelings of anxiety or excitement, which significantly influence how individuals interpret their experiences and ultimately affect their belief system.

In literature on beliefs, several conceptual frameworks have emerged that highlight different ways in which beliefs are understood, particularly in the context of language learning and teaching. Barcelos (2003) stresses the normative approach, in which beliefs are perceived as stable, pre-conceived notions rooted in cognition. These beliefs are thought to be relatively fixed and shape the way individuals understand their experiences. Contrasting this view, Wenden (1998) advocates for the *metacognitive approach*, which views beliefs as a type of metacognitive knowledge. In other words, beliefs are seen as subjective, fallible and relatively stable, but not entirely rigid, allowing for change over time based on personal reflection and experience. In the *contextual approach*, Gabryś-Barker (2012) or Kalaya (2016) emphasise the significance of learners' beliefs about language learning and teachers' beliefs about teaching. These beliefs are viewed as contextually situated and dynamically shaped by the experiences of school practice.

Szyska (2023) suggests that beliefs are dynamically related to experiences, particularly those of schooling, and are reflected in the actions individuals take. Beliefs are also socially constructed, i.e., they are shaped through interaction with others and the social contexts in which learning occurs. They are contextually situated, emphasising that beliefs cannot be understood in isolation but must be considered within the specific environments and circumstances in which they are formed. Lastly, Szyska (2023) highlights that beliefs are often operationalised as a form of value-related reflection, indicating that they

are often tied to personal values and serve as a foundation for future actions and decisions in the classroom. This perception shows that beliefs are complex and fluid. The evolving nature of beliefs displays their multifaceted construct which is grounded in personal and social experiences.

The aim of the study by Szulc-Kurpaska (2021) was to reveal the experience of running qualification courses and post-graduate studies in Poland with particular focus on how teacher training of pre-school teachers may influence their perceptions of themselves as teachers and how they can reflect on their role in educating children in light of what they have learned from English language teaching methodology. These personal theories were explored among the participants on the basis of a questionnaire administered at the end of their training. They informed future courses and studies as far as the content of such training is concerned, so that not only are kindergarten teachers learning how to teach English to pre-schoolers but also broaden and refresh their teaching skills in general as well as learn to reflect on their teaching experience.

## 3 Research

### 3.1 Participants

The participants in this study are  $n=195$  teacher-to-be students of pre-primary and lower primary education who additionally participated in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) courses in two Polish universities (see Table 1). The process of educating master's students in Pedagogy to teach foreign languages to children aged 3 to 10 involves a comprehensive curriculum designed to address both theoretical and practical aspects of language acquisition.

Students from the Witelon State University of Applied Sciences, Legnica, specialising in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), enrolled in the Ministerial programme within the Pedagogy Department. These students ( $n=57$ ) have completed four semesters of English as a foreign language course, in total 120 hours, and have also undertaken a three-semester course that focused on TEYL. The study includes three cohorts of master's students:

1. 2021-2022 and 2022-2023  $n=16$  M.A. students
1. 2022-2023 and 2023-2024  $n=17$  M.A. students
2. 2023-2024 and 2024-2025  $n=24$  M.A. students

In addition to their core courses, the students were engaged in the following:

- **Semester 6:** *Psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language to children* – 30 hours of lecture and 30 hours of workshop
- **Semester 7:** *Teaching English to pre-primary children* - 30 hours of workshop
- **Semester 8:** *Teaching in English to lower primary children* - 30 hours of workshop

Students from the University of the National Education Commission, Kraków, were fifth-year pre-school and early childhood pedagogy students ( $n=138$ ), all female, of whom  $n=81$  enrolled in daytime and  $n=57$  in extramural long-cycle Master studies. They undertook their studies in 2019/2020 and graduated in 2023/2024 academic year. They have completed three semesters (2, 3, 4) of General English (GE) course, in total 110 hours, ending with an exam on B2+ level according to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They have also attended English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course lasting 15 hours in semester 4. What is more, as part of their regular pedagogically oriented study programme, these students were engaged in the following TEYL courses:

- **Semester 7:** *Psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language to children* - 30 hours of e-learning (daytime cycle), 15 hours of e-learning (extramural cycle)
- **Semester 8:** *Methodology of foreign language teaching* - 20 hours of lecture & 15 hours of workshop (daytime cycle), 10 hours of lecture & 10 hours of workshop (extramural cycle)
- **Semester 9:** *Children's literature in foreign language teaching* - 20 hours of workshop (daytime cycle), 10 hours of workshop (extramural cycle) and *Games and plays in foreign language teaching* - 35 hours of workshop (daytime cycle), 20 hours of workshop (extramural cycle)

Table 1: Research participants

	The Witelon State University of Applied Sciences, Legnica	University of the National Education Commission, Kraków	
No. of participants	57 (daytime M.A. cycle)	138, of whom: 81 (daytime M.A. cycle) 57 (extramural M.A. cycle)	
Academic year	2021/2022-2024/2025	2022/23-2023/24	
EFL course	GE: 4 semesters (120 hours)	GE: 3 semesters (110 hours) + EAP (15 hours)	
TEYL preparation	3 semesters (120 hours)	3 semesters (120 hours – daytime 65 hours – extramural)	
Language of instruction	Polish (predominant)/English	Polish/English	
Course content	<p>Semester 6: <i>Psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language to children</i> (30 hours of lecture &amp; 30 hours of workshop)</p> <p>Semester 7: <i>Teaching English to pre-primary children</i> (30 hours of workshop)</p> <p>Semester 8: <i>Teaching English to lower-primary children</i> (30 hours of workshop)</p>	<p>Daytime</p> <p>Semester 7: <i>Psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language to children</i> (30 hours of e-learning)</p> <p>Semester 8: <i>Methodology of foreign language teaching</i> (20 hours of lecture &amp; 15 hours of workshop)</p> <p>Semester 9: <i>Children's literature in foreign language teaching</i> (20 hours of workshop) <i>Games and plays in foreign language teaching</i> (35 hours of workshop)</p>	<p>Extramural</p> <p>Semester 7: <i>Psychological and pedagogical foundations of teaching a foreign language to children</i> (15 hours of e-learning)</p> <p>Semester 8: <i>Methodology of foreign language teaching</i> (10 hours of lecture &amp; 10 hours of workshop)</p> <p>Semester 9: <i>Children's literature in foreign language teaching</i> (10 hours of workshop) <i>Games and plays in foreign language teaching</i> (20 hours of workshop)</p>

## 3.2 Procedure and research questions

Even though there are many instruments that can measure Language Learner Beliefs (LLB) (e.g., the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) by Horwitz, 1988; The BeTeBaS instrument (BEginning TEachers BAsic Skills) by Elke, Adriaensesns, & Meynen, 2011, the Epistemological Belief Questionnaire by Mori, 1999; How I Think I Learn Best by Wenden, 1991) or Teacher Beliefs (TB) (e.g., Teacher Belief Scale by Horwitz, 1985; BAK: beliefs, assumptions, knowledge by Woods, 1996), we decided to use Lightbown and Spada's framework (1999). Several studies (Kakhramonov, 2020; Doughty & Mackey, 2021; Almashy, 2018; Qiao, 2024) have applied the theories and empirical findings developed by Lightbown and Spada (2011); therefore, the decision was made to apply it in the exploratory research.

In this study, we utilised *Lightbown and Spada's framework* (2011) to investigate the beliefs and pre-conceptions regarding language learning and teaching of master's students in Pedagogy (RQ1). Pre-conception, as defined by Oxford Learner's Dictionary (18 July 2024), refers to an idea or opinion that is formed before you have enough information or experience. To explore the impact of these beliefs and preconceptions of what English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction should look like, we relied on *verbal reports* that provide insights into their experiences and reflections on teaching English to children (RQ2). Additionally, based on *anecdotal records*, we identified the main challenges these teacher trainees experienced, through an analysis of their lesson plans and tasks observations of microteaching as well as examination of the constraints they encounter (RQ3). This systematic approach aimed to deepen our understanding of how their educational experiences shaped their teaching practices and ultimately enhance our comprehension of their beliefs about what teaching foreign languages to young learners should look like.

- **RQ1:** What are the beliefs and preconceptions of the pre-primary and lower primary teacher trainees?
- **RQ2:** What is the impact of the beliefs on their perceptions of what EFL is to be like?
- **RQ3:** What are the common challenges faced by teacher trainees as evidenced by their lesson planning and microteaching observations?

## 4 Results

To answer the first research question (RQ1), we used Lightbown and Spada's framework (2011). The data were analysed using NVivo14 software, which is often used in qualitative studies. Figure 1 presents the most frequently used words written by the participants in the responses provided to the framework.

Figure 1: Word cloud visualizing word frequency of the data using NVivo14



We applied Mayring's Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2000) to analyze the data coming from the participants' responses. In the QCA, we focused on both *deductive* (theory driven) and *inductive* (data-driven) reasoning. Deductive reasoning entailed assigning categories in order to confirm theories about teachers' beliefs, whereas inductive categories required re-reading of participants' answers to gain a deeper understanding of the data. As there were no significant differences between the two groups of teachers-to-be students, both datasets are presented together (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Coding agenda of deductive and inductive categories (based on Mayring, 2000)

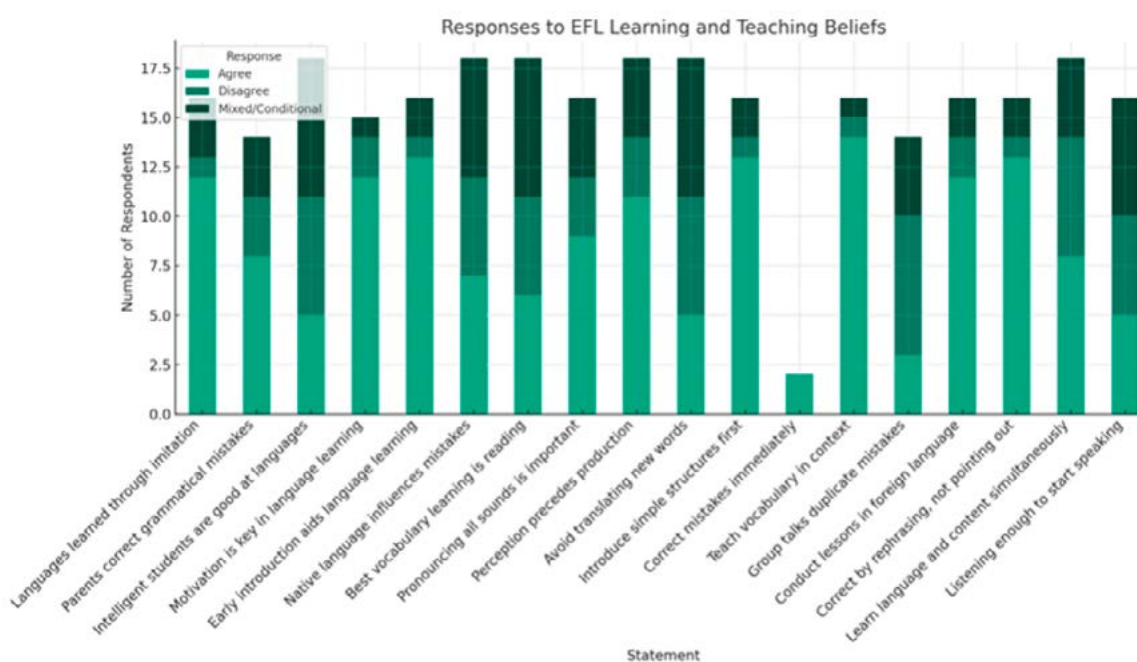
DEDUCTIVE CATEGORIES	
Category	Examples
Imitation as a key aspect in language learning	<p>"Languages are learned mainly through imitation" (PNS_34)</p> <p>"Children learn a language primarily by listening to adult speech and imitating sounds words and sentences. This process begins at birth infants listen to the language used by their parents and caregivers, and then try to imitate it" (PNS_44)</p> <p>"Children imitate behaviours and language from their immediate environment" (F_4)</p> <p>"Imitation can facilitate the memorization of new vocabulary and grammatical structures" (PNS_11)</p> <p>"Students imitate the way of speaking intonation and expressions used by native speakers which accelerates the process" (PNS_10)</p>
Role of parental correction in language development	<p>"Not all parents correct the grammatical mistakes that their children make. I believe that every parent should correct their child if they say something incorrectly or improperly if a child learns to speak incorrectly it will be difficult for them to speak correctly as they grow older" (PNS_23)</p> <p>"Not all parents have sufficient knowledge of a foreign language to correctly correct their children's mistakes, so they may avoid doing so to prevent misleading them" (PNS_25)</p>
Intelligence and language	<p>"Intelligence can be an asset in learning foreign languages but it doesn't guarantee success. Effective language learning requires a balanced approach that includes both cognitive abilities and practical application of the language in various situations. It is important for students to have access to appropriate resources, support, and learning strategies that suit their individual needs and learning styles" (PNS_2)</p> <p>"I agree with the thesis that highly intelligent students are good at learning languages. High intelligence is often associated with better analytical skills, memory, and the ability to quickly absorb new information, which makes language learning easier" (PNS_19)</p>
INDUCTIVE CATEGORIES	
Category	Examples
Motivation is a key to successful language learning	<p>"Motivation drives engagement and persistence in language learning far beyond intelligence or natural ability" (PNS_3)</p> <p>"Motivation is a key factor in learning a foreign language; it determines whether students will want to learn or not" (F_5)</p> <p>"Motivated students make faster progress as they regularly practice and overcome challenges" (PNS_14)</p> <p>"Motivation is a key factor that can significantly influence the effectiveness of our own language learning. However, to achieve success, motivation should be supported by other elements, such as regular practice, effective teaching methods, a suitable environment, social support, and individual student characteristics. The interaction all these factors create optimal conditions for language learning" (PNS_2)</p>
The importance of practical application and environmental exposure	<p>"Learning through exposure to native speakers using media like music and podcasts accelerates language acquisition" (PNS_22)</p> <p>"Regular interaction in the language helps reinforce what students learn in the classroom" (PNS_36)</p> <p>"The earlier foreign language is introduced, the greater likelihood of success in learning" (F_25)</p> <p>"I only partially agree. Although intelligence can help with analysing and understanding grammatical rule, other factors such as motivation environment and engagement are equally important in language learning" (PNS_55)</p>



Balanced approach: combining formal and informal education	<p><i>"Imitation is important in language learning but other methods such as learning grammar and conscious practise also play a significant role"</i> (PNS_16)</p> <p><i>"Vocabulary should be taught in the context in which it will be used in natural use"</i> (F_13)</p> <p><i>"Parents correct grammatical errors especially in native language learning but the correction should be balanced with encouragement"</i> (PNS_7)</p> <p><i>"For older learners, practice with formal methods and consistent effort is essential to complement imitation"</i> (PNS_50)</p>
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The teacher-to-be students mentioned the importance of early language education, exhibiting various beliefs about EFL. Most participants agreed that imitation plays a significant role, especially in the early stages of language learning. They perceived it as an effective way for children to acquire pronunciation, intonation and vocabulary. Another recurring theme was that imitation alone is insufficient, and it needs to be supported by more formal methods, especially in more advanced stages of learning. Some students even though acknowledging its importance, noted it is just one aspect of learning as there is a variety of learning strategies and teaching methods. There were also some voices which recognised imitation to be more effective when it is accompanied by visual aids, yet, they did not acknowledge the creative aspect of language development which was advocated in the theoretical part of the course. The respondents see the role of parental correction as a way of reinforcing proper language use and its development. However, a few respondents raised concerns that overcorrection could discourage language learners especially if the feedback is too critical. This belief is similar to the affective filter by Krashen (1982) who argues that excessive correction can increase anxiety and lower learner motivation, leading to poor language acquisition outcomes. While some students believe that highly intelligent individuals are naturally better at learning languages, others were more cautious in attributing language success solely to intelligence. This belief may be referred to multiple intelligences' theory by Gardner (1983) which is a popular approach to this construct, although not the one accepted by psychologists. The beliefs of the students align with the established theories; however, they also emphasise practical, motivational and experiential aspects of learning. This belief also indicates an understanding of a scaffolded learning where imitation serves as a base that evolves into more complex language learning strategies.

**Figure 2:** The distribution of M.A. students' responses to various students' statements about the EFL learning and teaching beliefs



One of the themes that emerged inductively from the data was the central role of motivation in language learning success. Students tended to emphasise that motivation is the most important factor driving persistence, engagement, grit and achievement in language learning. This may reflect their understanding of self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (1985). The importance of hands-on experiences and environmental exposure was another emergent theme. Respondents frequently stressed the value of real-world language use and interaction with native speakers or media as essential for acquiring a language. This belief aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles by Richards and Rogers (2021). Participants also understand the impact of experiential learning, claiming that acquiring language is more effective through practical engagement and contextualised use rather than formal instruction. Lastly, the beliefs show a balanced approach, as several students suggested that while imitation and practical use are essential, the effective use of teaching resources and application of contemporary teaching methods must be complemented in formal instruction.

Figure 2 presents an overview of statements used by the M.A. students. The bar graph shows the numerous responses divided into three categories, namely participants who (1) agreed, (2) disagreed or (3) had mixed opinions about the questions from Lightbown and Spada's framework (2011). Most students agreed with the majority of the statements. For instance, the beliefs that learning through exposure and when motivated, brings the best results in language learning. There were also some statements where different opinions or disagreements were outlined regarding the use of L1 or vocabulary teaching. The balance of responses indicates that there were still areas to be discovered or debated among the teacher trainees.

Even though both datasets show similar beliefs expressed by the students coming from two Polish universities (as displayed in Table 2), the Witelon students focused more on early language introduction and teaching vocabulary in context, whereas the UKEN students on environmental exposure and balanced approach to language learning. It may be indicated that the latter group of respondents exhibited a slightly higher teacher cognition level. These findings show that both groups share common beliefs rooted in established theories (*deductive reasoning*) but they also exhibit unique insights that emerge from their own experiences as learners (*inductive reasoning*).

In response to the second research question (RQ2), we applied verbal reports, which „consist of first-hand verbalizations of thoughts, beliefs, and explanations related to teachers' beliefs, and may include structured and unstructured interviews" (Schraw & Olafson, 2015, p. 26). Through these self-reports, the participants expressed their beliefs about what EFL teaching should be like. The statements reveal that the participants were deeply influenced by their previous experiences as learners and by the constraints they faced during their own language education. For the majority of participants, the experiences were largely negative. One of the respondents described her EFL lessons as "boring", while others characterised the process as a "time consuming" and "difficult journey". These negative experiences seemed to affect their beliefs about teaching methodologies as the participants were often resistant to apply active learning strategies, such as pair or group work. One participant stated that "[p]air work and group work cannot be introduced in the age group we teach". Additionally, the participants expressed doubts about modern pedagogical approaches, such as children's ability to self-assess. The remark that "Children are not able to self-assess their work" testifies of the participant's lack of confidence in fostering independent learning among young learners. Moreover, the teacher-to-be students strongly believed in traditional and test-oriented learning education. One student stated, "You should give us the questions before the test because this is what all other teachers do", while another added "You can't give us so many questions for the test because we won't be able to learn them by heart". These examples not only reflect an overreliance on memorization techniques over deeper learning approaches but also indicate a lack of well-developed study skills. For instance, one student admitted, "We are not used to writing lesson plans in the table-like format".

Low academic performance and a sense of frustration with the demands of the teacher preparation training were also observed, particularly when it comes to reflection. Some students admitted that "Reflection is the most difficult task". Furthermore, the participants reported feeling restricted by external factors, such as not being allowed to teach English ("We don't want to teach English and we are not allowed to") or observe English

lessons (“*Teachers do not allow us to observe English lessons at schools and kindergartens*”). According to Polish ministerial directives and the new educational standards introduced in 2023 (Ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science, 2023), a person qualified to teach a foreign language in kindergartens and grades I-III of primary schools must meet specific criteria. These include holding a full master’s degree in pre-school and early childhood pedagogy, as well as possessing a certificate of proficiency in the relevant foreign language at a minimum of intermediate level, as specified in the annex to the legal regulations (e.g., FCE – First Certificate in English). Additionally, the individual must have completed qualifying studies or courses in the methodology of teaching the given foreign language, such as postgraduate studies in early childhood education with a focus on the respective language. Nonetheless, the main educational pathway leading to a qualification to teach English as a foreign language in all types of schools is a master’s degree in English Studies with a teaching specialisation. These restrictions not only reinforced a narrow perception of EFL teaching but may have influenced students’ self-confidence or diminished their enthusiasm for teaching practice. On the other hand, many students viewed contemporary teaching resources provided by the educators as unexpectedly valuable. Statement like “*We didn’t know that there are such nice books for teaching English*” were often repeated.

All in all, the above-mentioned *discursive explanations*, as Kalaya (2016) clarifies, are what “learners provided for their success or failure” (p. 99) of learning and teaching experiences. They show that the self-reports revealed a complex relationship between these prior experiences, prevailing challenges and their current beliefs about EFL teaching. Even though the beliefs were often shaped by negative experiences and reliance on traditional methods, the participants tended to be open for change and progress. The results indicate that there is a need for teacher education programmes to address these preconceptions in order to actively engage students in critical reappraisal of their beliefs and reflective approach to their teaching practice.

The third research question (RQ3) explored the common challenges faced by the participants in teaching English to pre-primary and lower primary learners. The analysis was based on anecdotal records coming from two sources of data, namely lesson planning and observations of microteaching sessions. The main rationale for using anecdotal records in the third research questions (RQ3) was that according to Whitehead (2020) they “provide a longitudinal qualitative picture of the behavio[u]ral changes in the life of each student and this systematic recording is carried out overtime (...). These notes are used to record objective and subjective information as well as affective information, such as levels of engagement, curiosity, and motivational factors” (p. 99). Initially, the anecdotal records collected in the study included factual descriptions without interpretation or analysis at the time of recording. With time, they were reinforced by reflective approach and troubleshooting actions.

Participants demonstrated several common problems when asked to create lesson plans for young learners. One of the most prevailing difficulties was formulating language objectives. The majority of participants found it difficult to specify measurable and achievable goals for their lessons and align these aims with the needs of learners. This often resulted in overly ambitious execution of the lesson which prevented the natural flow of the lessons to be conducted. As Szulc-Kurpaska (2019) concludes on the basis of her previous research on the role of teacher language in a young learner classroom, “teacher trainees should be encouraged to be more adventurous (...) so that there is more space for the learners to be spontaneous with language use. Also, while planning lessons and the course, more attention should be paid to varied practice activities and not only to the presentation of the new material” (p.124). Another noteworthy obstacle was caused by improper identification of lesson stages. Even though participants were familiar with basic lesson structures, they frequently omitted the warm-up or disorganised the PPP (practice, presentation and production). In terms of content, participants struggled to limit the number of vocabulary items introduced and reviewed during a single lesson. They often overestimated the students’ abilities to acquire new and unknown language which led to cognitive overload on the part of learners. Similarly, participants encountered problems in specifying grammatical structures for revision or presentation of new material which led to confusion about which aspects of language should be the focus of particular parts of the lesson. What is more, the students faced problems with planning their own teacher language use in English as they did not anticipate the importance of preparing

classroom language. This resulted in a lack of clarity when providing the learners with adequate instruction or when presenting or practising new vocabulary as well as the excessive use of the Polish language for instructions. Participants also exhibited a tendency to introduce written forms of language too early in the YL classroom. Introducing written language prematurely may be too challenging for pre-primary learners whose literacy skills are still developing. It is also recommended to practice oral skills at this stage. Some participants struggled with designing effective pre-listening and pre-reading tasks, even though they were informed that they are crucial for facilitating comprehension of the receptive skills. There was noticeable resistance to the use of contextual guessing strategies. Participants preferred explicit explanation and direct translation into L1 rather than attempting to encourage learners to infer meaning from context.

During microteaching sessions, several challenges were observed that resulted from inaccurate lesson planning. The most consistent issue was to translate vocabulary directly from English into Polish. Even though the students wanted to ensure the comprehension of the lesson by young learners, they limited the opportunities to engage with English fully. Secondly, there was an excessive amount of “teacher talk” in Polish. Participants frequently used Polish for instructions or explanations and by doing that, they significantly reduced the amount of English input. Another significant challenge was observed in the lack of confidence in delivering instructions in English. Many students hesitated when attempted to clarify instructions, were not able to guide learners during the lesson stages and were unsure about how to effectively use classroom management strategies. The students’ lack of confidence was also visible in their minimal use of body language and gesture to support meaning as well as their reluctance to sing songs in class. Students also have problems with teaching resources as they often were unable to organise the materials used, such as flashcards or props. Finally, the students exhibited pronunciation difficulties with the language forms they were introducing. Inaccurate pronunciation not only affected their credibility as language teachers but also misled learners who rely heavily on teacher’s pronunciation.

## 5 Discussion

We agree with Muñoz and Ramirez (2015) that the participants’/teachers’ motivation depended on **relatedness**, which is understood as the ability to recognise potential benefits of using English in their future career.

Our studies revealed that such educational programmes should be made **relevant** to career aspirations of future teachers. This is in line with Albrecht and Karabenick’s (2018) study in which connections need to be made to “*focal issues*—that is topics of concern or interest to an individual that frame his/her beliefs about relevance” (p. 4). In the context of the course, however, the goals of the participants cannot be realised as finding employment and attaining job security after graduating is impossible due to ministerial decisions/requirements.

Contrary to other studies (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Reynolds, Shieh & Ha, 2022), in which teachers’ beliefs were reflected in their teaching practice, the majority of the current study participants did not “practice what they preach” in the Lightbown and Spada’s framework (2011). This may be explained by the fact that even though they may have adequate knowledge, still they are not ready yet to perform and more training is needed. Some of the problems pre-primary and lower primary teacher trainees face result from their inadequate foreign language competence. Szulc-Kurpaska (2021) also studied beliefs and competences of early and pre-school teachers at the post-graduate level, who expressed concerns about the high level of English examination. Another factor may be derived from their general training courses as they are used to talking too much in Polish while microteaching instead of demonstrating. They are also not experienced in reflecting on their own teaching as well as in giving feedback to their colleagues. As suggested by Szulc-Kurpaska (2019), one of the solutions could be to provide student teachers with more opportunities to view fragments of lessons in teacher training programmes in order to present to them examples of good practice and help them become aware of possible drawbacks in foreign language instruction. What is more, getting teacher trainees to record themselves during microteaching and then analyse their own performance would enable them to “reflect on the most valuable practices and to work on improving those that are less effective.” (p. 125).

We agree with Kennedy and Heineke (2014) that there is the need to redesign the role of universities in training early childhood teacher education. The role entails preparing “skilled, resilient professionals who have already proven their ability to positively influence children, families, and communities” (p. 23). With this idea in mind, the courses should be more open to the constructivist approach to educating children enhancing their autonomy and creativity in order to better prepare them for the challenges of the world they will live in.

Based on literature review, Savić (2018) concludes that the implementation of microteaching as a teacher education technique has a great potential in EFL teaching methodology courses for enhancing preservice teachers’ didactic skills and FL proficiency. Pedagogy students should also be provided with the opportunities of teaching practice under supervision of English language teachers to gain first-hand experience in delivering foreign language instruction to young learners.

## 6 Implications

As far as implications are concerned, certain changes need to be introduced in Teacher Training and Development (TT&D) and curriculum development. First of all, it is crucial to implement Differentiated Instruction, which is defined by Maruf (2023) as “a teaching approach that involves adapting instruction to meet the diverse needs of individual students in classroom” (p. 358).

We agree with Gruba, Moffat, Søndergaard and Zobel (2004) that there are certain factors that influence curriculum change in higher education. Among others, the increasing demand for graduates, who are equipped with various competences, including knowledge and skills of ICT, are the priority. Another factor refers to student expectations that are connected with providing more engaging, practical and outcome-oriented learning experiences which urge academic institutions to reevaluate traditional approaches to education and training of teachers. Finally, new teaching techniques and learning strategies need to be introduced in order to effectively train the teacher trainees in improving their own learning processes and enhancing language development in children. The aspects such as exposure to the target language, interaction and exploiting the strategy of guessing from context are to be assimilated by prospective teachers of English to pre-primary and lower primary students as strategies specific for foreign language instruction.

The complexity of beliefs outlined in the study highlights areas where **mindset-focused interventions** could be beneficial for future language teachers as research suggests that such interventions may reshape teachers’ and learners’ attitudes about their abilities and can foster growth-oriented beliefs. These interventions could include activities focused on challenging fixed-mindset beliefs, mainly by encouraging teachers to reframe their misperceptions and by applying reflection in their teaching practice. For instance, Yeager and Dweck (2012) claim that interventions will build – or at least – affect resilience of the students. They suggest a formula for successful implementation of such interventions which is based on “*Effort + Strategies + Help From Others*” (p. 311). Dweck (2006) emphasises that those teachers who develop growth mindset of the students tend to foster more supportive and innovative learning environments. For future teachers, who often hold deeply rooted perceptions about their skills or limitations, those targeted interventions can be particularly beneficial.

Relevance, which refers to “direct attempts by teachers to help students to experience the learning process as relevant to and supportive of their self-determined interests, goals and values” (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002, p. 264), shall be given the priority in teacher education. Fostering relevance to autonomy-supportive actions shall „include behaviours such as providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, minimising the use of controls, and acknowledging the other’s perspective and feelings” (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002).

### 6.1 Limitations

Taking into account the exploratory nature of our study, we acknowledge certain limitations that must be considered. First of all, there were two different universities, study programmes and teacher trainers. Secondly,

the number of students participating in the courses was uneven. Last but not least, a more in-depth analysis of the data collected by introducing reflection to the teacher trainees in planning lessons, while executing them and after conducting classes would provide an insight into the modification of beliefs of Pedagogy teacher trainees in the process of becoming teachers of a foreign language. Moreover, a more comprehensive analysis of the differences between students from Legnica and Kraków could reflect variations in their perspectives, educational context or the teacher preparation programmes between the two groups.

## 7 Conclusions

As observed by Savić & Prošić-Santovac (2020), “an EFL teacher who possesses appropriate pedagogical knowledge and skills, as well as attitudes and beliefs that favour this age group and promote children’s foreign language proficiency and overall development, can have a lasting positive impact on children’s motivation for FLL and their FL development” (pp. 42-43). Therefore, as advocated by Sarkar et al. (2024), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) - understood as an amalgam of teachers’ subject matter expertise and their practical approach to “why and how” to teach specific content - should be highly valued and promoted.

We agree with Radwan (2019) who claims that “individual teachers bring to teaching very different beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching” (p. 39). If the experiences teacher trainees have in their own foreign language education are unfavourable, effort has to be invested in promoting altering their mindsets to what is considered to be effective foreign language instruction. Another effect of introducing the component of foreign language teacher training of Pedagogy students is that their general course may be informed about the potential benefits of having another approach to teaching young learners which should but enrich the way they are educated.

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