

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS: UKRAINIAN PERSPECTIVE

Challenges encountered by foreign language teachers remain an understudied issue in the context of Ukraine, awaiting a more systematic empirical response. The given paper aimed to probe for the challenges of Ukrainian language teachers and consider their possible causes. To this end, an exploratory study was carried out with the participation of 44 foreign language teachers. The qualitative data collected through an open interview were subjected to content analysis. A range of potentially challenging aspects of language teaching and their causes were derived from the data analyzed.

The findings indicated that the respondents were inclined to identify the challenges of language teaching with the aspects inherent to the profession. In other words, they commonly referred to difficulties deriving from the characteristics of their competence and the nature of their professional activity. The interviewees repeatedly referred to the challenges of personalizing instruction, its planning and management, establishing rapport with learners, attending to discipline issues, motivating learners, and teaching mixed-ability classes. The teachers also reflected on the challenges of developing various language competencies, like explaining grammar in clear terms and teaching speaking. Meanwhile, the respondents rarely mentioned causes of difficulties external to them, for instance, language policy. However, they frequently commented on the problems caused by the lack of resources, in particular, indispensable in distance learning. Thus, the teachers' overriding concern stemmed from having to deal with learners, which outweighed the significance of developing their language skills.

Overall, the qualitative snapshots of the foreign language teaching challenges help discern areas deserving more specific attention in teacher education. One of the study's implications is the need to embrace the views of practitioners in organizing effective teacher education. Otherwise, risks are high of furnishing them with preparation experiences divorced from their actual needs.

Keywords: challenges; foreign language; teacher; teacher education; Ukraine.

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ВИВЧЕННЯ ТРУДНОЩІВ УЧИТЕЛІВ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ В УКРАЇНІ

Зважаючи на присутню роль педагогів в умовах освітніх реформ та Євроінтеграційних інтенцій України, постала об'єктивна необхідність дослідження труднощів, пов'язаних із викладанням іноземних мов. Метою статті є вивчення кола викликів або труднощів, з якими стикаються вчителі іноземних мов у професійній діяльності. Відповідно до визна-

ченої мети в статті представлено результати якісного дослідження, проведеного із застосуванням методу інтерв'ю за участю 44 учителів іноземних мов. Одержані в ході інтерв'ю дані було опрацьовано за допомогою контент-аналізу, що уможливило виділення низки потенційно проблематичних аспектів викладання іноземних мов та їхніх причин.

З'ясовано, що респонденти схильні ототожнювати проблеми викладання іноземних мов із внутрішньозумовленими чинниками, асоціюючи їх із характером професійної діяльності й власної фахової компетентності. Згідно з одержаними даними, вчителі позиціюють серед найскладніших такі завдання, як: індивідуалізація і диференціація в навчальному процесі, його планування та організація, налагодження взаємодії з учнями, дотримання дисципліни учнями, формування навчальної мотивації та ін. Респонденти досить активно обговорювали труднощі формування іншомовних мовленнєвих компетентностей, як-от: пояснення граматичного матеріалу та навчання усного мовлення. Водночас вони рідко аналізували зовнішньозумовлені проблеми викладання іноземних мов, крім обмеженої ресурсної бази, необхідної для забезпечення дистанційного навчання. Доведено, що серед пріоритетів учителів іноземних мов чітко простежується спрямованість на особистість учня та закономірно об'єктивовані цим труднощі.

Ключові слова: труднощі, іноземна мова, учитель, іншомовна педагогічна освіта, Україна.

Introduction. Since the proclamation of its sovereignty in 1991, Ukraine has committed itself to the inculcation of core democratic values and exemplar world practices in its education system. In response to these obligations, several governmental initiatives were issued, including "Conceptual principles of state policy on the English language development in the sphere of higher education. Project of the Ministry of Education and Science" (МОН України, 2019). As stipulated by the document, education is recognized as a stimulus of societal transformation, and knowledge of English as a foreign language as a key competence, instrument of intercultural communication, and a precondition of its integration with world education.

Spurred by the like initiatives, foreign language (FL) teachers have assumed a central role in the communicative competence development of their students, which has increased demands on the quality of their work and, consequently, on the quality of language teacher education and development. However, ensuring

high-quality standards cannot be limited to one-way, imposed from the above initiatives. The implementation of educational reforms hinges to a greater extent on the teachers themselves, hence the importance of paying heed to the language teachers' voices.

Literature review. The analysis of academic literature on FL teaching in Ukraine has revealed a group of difficulties plaguing FL teaching and, in particular, language teachers. One of their pertinent causes is the country's language and education policies. Although the Ukrainian educational system is committed to reforms, many of the entrenched from the Soviet period stereotypes hinder the renewal of its FL teaching practices. As Professor Vyshnevskiy (2016) pointed out, some decades before the Soviet language policy stipulated that all children learn FLs, eventually without acquiring them as a means of communication. Its implicit goal was to prevent society from coming in contact with the capitalist world, in this way avoiding its "corruptive" influence. The language teaching objectives, approaches, and methods were selected accordingly. Under the circumstances, communicative competence development was considered an unrealistic and implausible goal. Partly, it was also due to the lack of resources. Throughout the country, learners were taught not the language per se but about the language. The procedures prevailing in the classrooms included reading complicated texts and explicit learning of grammar and vocabulary. As the outcome of such courses, students could not communicate in the target language and quickly forgot it. As the corollary, FL teachers were not expected to attain a high level of language competence. All this was reflected in the teacher preparation system, leading to drops in the quality standards and preparation of second-rate language specialists.

Even though the Ukrainian education system is currently undertaking serious attempts at its reform, the influence of the former language education policy is hard to overcome. The language teaching methods focusing more on form than meaning persist. The academic year 2018–2019 saw the introduction of the "New Ukrainian School" reform necessitating the reappraisal of the objectives, traditional approaches in FL education. In particular, learners are now expected to acquire skills enabling their active participation in the contemporary multinational and multicultural society, thus foregrounding the significance of intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the Ukrainian FL teachers are confronted with the challenges requiring both shifts in their cognitions and the need for adequate preparation to meet such expectations. The situation is further aggravated by the widespread tendency of teachers to teach the way they were taught, and not the way they were told to teach (Oleson & Hora, 2014).

Another source of challenges related to the previous policy issue stems from the lack of the standard of FL teacher preparation in Ukraine and, ensuing from it, multiple sore points in the formal teacher education. Although the project of the standard was developed in 2016, it has not been approved or implemented yet. Universities are left to their own devices, for the better or worse, for providing quality language teacher preparation. Standards of FL teacher professional development are also yet to be developed. Although the Ukrainian academia unanimously recognizes the significance of teacher induction, little is done in the way of guidance and support to novice teachers. Thus, according to the "Conception of development of pedagogical education", there is a need for implementing teacher internship for newly qualified pedagogues to counteract high rates of teacher attrition in the country (МОН України, 2018). The problem of teacher attrition in Ukraine stands acute, as supported by the findings of Shchudlo et al. (2018). As shown in their study, the bulk of Ukrainian teachers is in their thirties, while the percentage of novices constitutes a mere 6% of the total population of graduates. It is all the more surprising, given the fact that around sixty higher-education institutions prepare FL teachers in this country.

Detailed analysis of the curricula of FL teacher education programs in Ukraine revealed that they accentuate the development of professional competencies and, especially, practical skills relevant for effective language teaching. However, the number of credits allotted to the discipline "Methods of FL teaching" (a classical curriculum component in Ukraine) varies significantly. It ranges from as few credits as 3 (e.g., Uzhgorod National University) to as many as 22 (e.g., Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk national pedagogical university) at the undergraduate level. School practicum also varies from 4,5 to 16 credits in the universities (Лєврінци, 2020). Given such variability, many university programs lag behind the quality standards in furnishing their graduates with the necessary practical skills of organizing effective instruction. By way of example, the Ukrainian EFL teachers deplored the overly theoretical slant of their university programs and insufficient opportunities to engage in the practical application of the curriculum content. Another critical issue transpiring from this research was the subsidiary role of language teaching methodology and the prevalence of linguistics courses in the universities. The participating teachers expressed a wish to learn the language teaching methodology, pedagogy and psychology in more detail and less so the disciplines covering knowledge about language (e.g., history of English, general linguistics, theoretical grammar) (Levrints, 2022).

Another source of difficulties nagging Ukrainian language teachers is presumably the level of FL

proficiency on the analogy with their colleagues from other countries. The previous research has borne out that language teachers' perceptions of their linguistic competence cause fear and anxiety, affecting their motivation, instructional preferences, and the choice of classroom techniques and procedures (Faez & Karas, 2019; Farrell & Richards, 2007). Language teachers experienced pressure imposed by curricula demands (Valizadeh, 2021), which may be incongruent with the local realities of education, for instance, differences between rural and urban areas, where the level of learner motivation and parental expectations can stand in stark contrast. Potential sources of challenges, identified in the study of Trynus (2017), were the low socio-economic status of teachers and lack of resources. Novice teachers also experienced difficulties caused by the insufficient level of professional competence, among which were maintaining rapport with learners, making language mistakes, keeping discipline, planning and managing instruction, failure to provide a clear explanation of the new material, excessive paperwork, and others (Komar et al., 2021). However, research focusing on the challenges experienced by Ukrainian FL teachers irrespective of their teaching experience could not be located in the academic literature.

Purpose. The paper aims to disclose the challenges encountered by language teachers in Ukraine and consider their possible causes.

Accordingly, the following research question needs to be addressed:

What are the perceived challenges faced by the Ukrainian FL teachers?

Next, the discussion proceeds with the description of the methodology and results of this study.

Materials and methods. *Participants.* Altogether forty-four FL teachers expressed their voluntary consent to participate in the study. They currently occupy positions in Ukrainian educational establishments. The study's sample was recruited using a convenience sampling technique (Griffie, 2012). The teaching experience of the participants varied between 2 and 41 years. The sample was represented by 11 primary school teachers, 24 secondary school teachers, and 9 university lecturers with BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees. The teachers were free to quit the study at any moment.

Data collection and analysis. In order to explore the challenging areas in FL teaching in Ukraine, an open interview was selected as an appropriate format for generating qualitative data. Although interviewing does not allow for the breadth of the study, it is particularly effective when the problem requires an in-depth analysis. The interviewees were requested to answer an open-ended question, "Which areas of FL teaching do you find challenging?" In addition, follow-up questions served to ensure the clarity and the necessary level of

detail of responses. The respondents were also asked to indicate their age, education, position, length of teaching experience, and the educational level of their students. The interviews were conducted either in person or online via software applications in 2021.

The data were transcribed and analyzed with the help of a content analysis method. First, the themes repeatedly mentioned by the teachers were singled out. Next, they were assigned codes and worked through quantitatively (the number of references made by the respondents) and qualitatively (the reasons and explanations suggested by the respondents). Finally, two teachers were re-interviewed so as to ensure the credibility of the study. They had to read the summary of their interview prepared by the author of this study and decide whether the interpretation of their responses was valid (Griffie, 2012).

Research results and discussion. The results of content analysis, based on which a group of themes and their numeric characteristics were extracted, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

FL teachers' challenges

№	Themes	Frequencies	Percentage
1	Differentiation and individualization of instruction	28	64
2	Lack of teaching resources	21	48
3	Planning for instruction	20	45,5
4	Rapport with learners and maintaining discipline	17	39
5	Mixed ability learners	16	36
6	Motivating learners	13	29,5
7	Meeting curriculum requirements	8	18
8	Explaining grammar	8	18
9	Stress and anxiety	7	16
10	Teaching speaking	5	11
11	Teaching writing	5	11

As evidenced by the data set in Table 1, the interviewees grappled with the need to attend to students' individual differences (64%) in that most of them commented on the issues of providing

personalized instruction tailored to students' needs and teaching classes with mixed ability learners (36%). Many experienced teachers reported struggling with a lack of teaching resources (48%), including listening materials, up-to-date course books, and other financial concerns. Establishing workable relationships and rapport with learners, disciplining them (39%) was problematic as well. The participants treated these two challenges as a single interdependent issue. The teachers also stated that learner motivation (29,5%) persisted as one of the most challenging tasks. Several respondents commented on curriculum requirements (18%) which were believed inadequate. The following comments illustrate the participants' standpoint:

When I started working, I wanted to teach everything according to the curriculum and the book. I imagined ideal classes and ideal circumstances. Later I realized that I need to take into account my learners' needs, interests, abilities because all classes and all learners are different. I needed to learn to be flexible in preparing my lesson plans (T3).

Other interviewees reported having to combat stress and anxiety (16%), especially in the early years of teaching. The teachers felt challenged and stressed by questions from learners, translation of vocabulary items, committing errors, disruptive student behavior, and overwork caused by lack of experience in planning for instruction. The excerpts given below exemplify teachers' views:

Several years before, I often felt unpleasant tension before lessons. I tried to rehearse what I had to explain to learners before classes (T11).

The main problem I experienced was student discipline. I had no previous experience of teaching. Dealing with learners was hard, especially with adolescents. I felt students were testing me and my limits. I had trouble establishing my authority in the classroom. I often cried after lessons at the beginning. I was seriously considering quitting teaching. It took very long to learn how to establish relationships with learners (T17).

Students provoked me, organized power tests, and examined my knowledge of English. It was very stressful (T38).

A distinct group of factors causing difficulties, as reflected by the participants' responses, concerned different aspects of EFL teaching, such as providing clear explanation and practice of grammatical structures (18%), developing oral communicative competence (11%), and teaching writing (11%). Other domains of EFL teaching like vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and reading were alluded to by less than 10% of respondents. The quotations given below exemplify teachers' beliefs:

I wish I could explain grammar in simple terms to different learners and make it less frightening to my students (T41).

Other challenges identified by the teachers were lack of professional guidance at the induction phase, organizing distance learning, teaching culturally diverse learners, insufficient knowledge of FLT methods.

In reflecting on the challenges they face in language teaching, the interviewees mentioned a plethora of blocks related primarily to their professional competence and, in particular, to general pedagogical knowledge and skills. However, the teachers were less inclined or eschewed talking about challenges related to their language proficiency or pedagogical content knowledge. Thus, most problems stemmed from pedagogical and learner knowledge areas, including personalized instruction, lesson planning, learner rapport, discipline, etc. The participants in this study made more frequent reference to areas inherent to the language teaching, like different aspects of managing the instructional process or developing language skills, for the most part, similar to their colleagues from other countries. The interviewees infrequently commented on the areas external to their immediate professional obligations and pinpointed rather forcefully only one such theme, i.e., lack of resources. Parallels can be drawn with an extensive study of Copland et al. (2014), whose respondents were also challenged by discipline problems, classroom management, motivation, differentiation. The only substantial difference between the findings of this and the above-mentioned study was in the rate of challenges caused by teaching speaking, which was the most challenging aspect in the previous research. The participants of this investigation were also pressurized by the curriculum requirements and lack of facilities, as in the study of Valizadeh (2021) conducted in the context of Turkey. Some analogies can also be found between the results of this and the study of novice FL teachers conducted by a group of Ukrainian researchers, which suggested that they experienced difficulties with the management of the instructional process, lesson planning, communication with learners, student behavior, and others (Komar et al., 2021).

An issue voiced by the respondents concerned anxiety associated with teaching, resonating with the study of Harmsen et al. (2018), whereby stress was shown to positively correlate with teacher attrition. These problems were perceived by the participants as more urgent than immediate aspects of language teaching. At the same time, teachers shied away from mentioning the challenges associated with their language proficiency, although the "native-speakerism" bias (Houghton et al., 2018), viewing non-native language teachers as deficient users of the target language, is also making its demands on the FL teachers in this country.

Conclusions. Challenges faced by Ukrainian FL teachers persist as an under-researched area, providing

limited empirical insight for teacher education and development. To expose the difficulties of Ukrainian language teachers, an exploratory study utilizing an open interview was carried out. Next, the generated data were submitted to a content analysis method. When asked about the challenging aspects of language teaching, the participants identified a number of potential sources.

The most striking finding to emerge from this study was teachers' identifying problems mostly internal to their professional obligations, i.e. stemming from the features of their professional competence, as well as learners. They were less inclined to search for sources of problems among the external factors. The interviewees frequently referred to the challenges of personalizing instruction, planning, and management of instruction, establishing rapport with learners, attending to discipline issues, motivating learners, and teaching mixed-ability classes. The teachers also reflected on the challenges of developing various language competencies, like explaining grammar in clear terms, teaching speaking, etc. However, they were less frequent than the problems concerning general pedagogic knowledge. A serious issue to transpire from the study was the level of stress and anxiety experienced by language teachers, especially at the outset of their careers. Finally, the participants frequently commented on the problems caused by the lack of resources, especially due to the need for implementing distance learning.

The limitations of the given study derive from the caveats of a qualitative research paradigm in general. Since we deal with an in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases, it requires a precaution in drawing generalizations to larger populations. Nevertheless, qualitative research is particularly suitable when exploration of as complex an issue as challenges experienced by FL teachers is desired.

Overall, an exploration of challenges encountered by EFL teachers can potentially illuminate the areas of professional knowledge requiring additional attention in teacher education. Anchored in the EFL teachers' perceptions, the implications of this study refer to the need for enhanced preparation in the areas of pedagogical and learner knowledge, stress resilience, and specific aspects of language competencies development. A further strand this research could take is a quantitative follow-up probing of the themes emerging from this exploratory study. It would assist in the triangulation of the obtained data.

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