

## **Cognitive Competences of English Language Teachers and Their Impact on Use of Teaching Methods with Learners at Lower Secondary School**

*Jana Hart'anská – Zuzana Muchálová\**

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### **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** The paper discusses the term cognitive competence of foreign language teachers and focuses on their application in practice. It also deals with possible impact of cognitive competences on choice of teaching methods. The paper identifies a list of the cognitive competences which are both expected and needed when conducting English lessons.

**Methods:** For the purposes of the survey, the qualitative method of direct observation was chosen. To maximise valid information about the taught lesson, identical observation and self-evaluation sheets had to be designed first. The findings are analysed, compared, and conclusions drawn for school practice.

**Results:** The survey data show which cognitive competences the teachers of English language use the most and the least when the teaching of pre-intermediate learners from two grades was observed at lower secondary school. The main findings also highlight the necessity of using a wider variety of more up-to date teaching methods and approaches suitable for both target grades of learners, in contrast to still prevailing traditional ones.

**Discussion:** It needs to be admitted that the authors of this paper are not aware of works which deal with similar research of cognitive competences. Though many authors write about social, key and teaching competences in general, cognitive competences are still a kind of Pandora's box. It is recommended both that deeper research be undertaken in this field and that teachers pay more attention not only to relevant theoretical knowledge within, for example, courses of continual professional development, but also to the impact on their learners' performance of the cognitive competences being used.

**Limitations:** The authors are aware of the limited number of observed lessons due to objective reasons such as the reluctance of some teachers to participate in the survey. The survey sample of four observed lessons is too small to enable definitive, generalisable statements to be made about the use of cognitive competences and the appropriateness of teaching methods. Additional, observed lessons would yield more valuable and valid results.

**Conclusion:** The survey proves that cognitive competences are a necessary part of teachers' personalities and abilities and their usage can depend on the proficiency level of learners of English language. The authors assert that the topic of cognitive competences and their impact in foreign language teaching has still not been

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\* Jana Hart'anská, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, Nitra, Slovakia; jhartanska@ukf.sk  
Zuzana Muchálová, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts, Nitra, Slovakia; zmuchalova@gmail.com

explored in detail. It is an interesting area involving active metacognitive and cognitive functions influenced by many factors which tend to change according to the teacher's historical context. This idiographic survey for the purposes of a graduation thesis carried out in a small town school can be regarded as a modest contribution to the topic.

**Key words:** competence, cognition, metacognition, method, teaching process.

## **Introduction**

The level of learners' knowledge depends on the teacher's abilities and pedagogic mastery (Petlák, 2000; Kouteková, 2015). This is what must be considered when talking about teaching process. Nowadays, a good teacher is expected to be a highly educated, knowledgeable, responsible, creative and skillful professional who bears responsibility for the quality of learners' education. Especially in the last decades, necessary specific requirements regarding these teacher's professional abilities and skills - so called competences - have changed, and their number has increased. Teaching is not about passing on knowledge anymore; it includes improvement of thinking, creativity, communication skills, working on relationships, building self-confidence, reliability and responsibility, dealing with problems, preparation for one's professional future, and so forth. (Magová et al., 2016) Moreover, nowadays, assessment of teachers' competences is considered to be an integral part of the internal quality assurance system of each educational institution (Hašková & Lukáčová, 2017) and carrying out this assessment is one of the head of school's responsibilities (Hašková, Bánesz, & Magová, 2016).

Walker (1992) defines a competence from a general point of view "as the attribute which enables an individual or group to perform a set of tasks to an appropriate level and thus makes the individual or group competent in that role." Various authors differ slightly in terms of their definitions. Kosíková (2011) claims a competence is not only the absorption of knowledge and skills but also the creation of abilities necessary for life or profession. It is a bounded structure of skills, wisdom, abilities, leading, organizing, advisory, and social attitudes, opinions which are necessary for a learner. Gadušová et al. (2014) see a competence in a similar way as a complex of skills and abilities and further define them as specific requirements such as psycho-educational, communicative, leadership, organizing, and advisory. Krásna and Verbovanec (2014) consider competences as a behaviour which leads a person to gain a high achievement. Many scholars deal with teachers' competences. For example, Petlák (2000) highlights the importance of the role of teacher. According to him "the success of a teaching process is not accidental, but it depends on a teacher and his/her approach to work and learners." Teacher's competences can be classified into at least three broad categories. To the first area belong competences aimed at teacher's professionalism, professional development and managerial abilities in the educational process. The second category is represented by competences which focus on factors of teaching with an impact on a learner's individuality and development. The third one is represented by competences with a focus on subject content and didactic-methodological areas of the educational process (Lomnický et al., 2017).

One of the most important competences of a teacher is the ability to update own ways of teaching and to adapt teaching methods to the new expectations and requirements of a modern knowledge-based society. It means not only having a responsible attitude to the educational process and an ability to self-reflect to improve its effectiveness, but also

reacting appropriately to learner's ability to integrate the acquired knowledge into other relevant theoretical or practical activities. There is also an emphasis on the importance of managing various situations as well as the teacher's flexibility in reacting to specific individual needs of each learner. Teachers are not only expected to know competences theoretically, and therefore to be aware of the abilities and skills necessary for teaching professionally, but must also demonstrate a certain ability, gift, predisposition or mastery in applying and using them appropriately in everyday school practice too. Also, the question of how to motivate teachers to improve their competences is highly important. The tools for improving, upgrading and developing teachers' skills should be relevant, and appropriate education and training of teachers is necessary. According to Belz and Siegrist (2001) one of the most effective ways of improving teachers' professional competences is group work involving fellow professionals. Groups allow teachers to meet others within the same field of study and with similar needs as well. Hašková et al. (2010) hold the view using electronic educational and teaching materials is not helpful only in teaching and learning process, but is of great help for teachers' self-education too.

Before teachers work with learners in the class, and before choosing the way of teaching, be it method or technique, it is necessary for them to be aware of the psychological and psycho-didactic processes present in the human body. Both emotions and cognitive processes, including thinking, acquisition of knowledge, and perception are important aspects in any teaching process. Cognitive process includes perception, imagination, thinking, memory and attention. The first three abilities create cognitive pictures straight away, while memory and attention do not create these pictures, but are a necessary component of the other processes. Emotions influence thinking and vice versa, and intellectual thinking can calm some emotions in a stormy situation.

In teaching languages all psychological, or to be more specific, all cognitive processes must be necessarily present. The "realization of our own cognitive processes" (Kosíková, 2011, p. 40) is called metacognition. It can also be understood as a "complex of cognitive abilities, personal characteristics and themes". Besides thinking, a learner uses their own metacognitive strategies, logical thinking, solution of problems at higher level as well. It can be said that children's competences to learn and solve problems are influenced and improved by metacognition. Furthermore, creativity and solving problems are key aspects for cognitive competences nowadays, as Krykorková (2004) adds. Cognitive competences are crucial for interaction of the learner with new study material. The process is not only about strategies, but also involves coding and decoding information: organization of the study process is important, too.

Metacognition is essential in learning. Not only is it important in facilitating the absorption of new information and, in general, in the learning of healthy children, but it is also very helpful for learners with learning disabilities. It helps the creation of a good plan or structure for learning information. Moreover, it is proved that if "learners were given a list of strategies that they could apply at their discretion, comprehension was greatly improved". (Pressley et al., 1998, p. 159) Metacognitive strategies include cognitive manners, and as Hnilica (1992) states, learning process is also affected by personal features.

Now, several metacognitive strategies will be presented below which can be used in English lessons at different proficiency levels. These are:

- a) PQRST method = is very useful when working with literary texts. The main point of this method is that it helps learners to keep information in long-term memory. The name of it is derived from initial letters: Preview, Question, Read, Self-recitation, Test. The first and the last steps usually deal with the chapter itself and three middle steps are assigned to every part within the chapter. Some authors use “summarize” or “state” instead of self-recitation. This method is one of the most effective and complex methods used in reading comprehension (Veselský, 2004).
- b) MURDER strategy = this acronym stands for Mood, Understand, Recall, Digest, Expand/Elaborate, Review. It represents a study technique which can be used in every study field and school subject. MURDER leads to better performance and, moreover, we can use it for improving not only reading and writing skills, but also listening and speaking (Helus & Pavelková, 1992).
- c) THINK-ALONG strategy = was in 1983 suggested by Beth Davey, but under the term think-aloud. “During the think-along process, the teacher reads a story aloud to students, who follow along in their copies. As the teacher reads, she thinks-aloud so the students can think-along with her” (Farr, 1989, p. 94).
- d) SQ4R strategy = is appropriate for teaching at any proficiency level. This successful and effective strategy has been used since the 60’s as a great help for learners in getting useful information from textbooks. The acronym SQ4R represents the following verbs: Survey, Question, Read, Reflect, Recite, Review. Some teachers use different variations of this strategy like SQ3R, SRR, PQ4R which contain some modifications (Duchovičová & Škoda, 2013).
- e) COGNITIVE ACTIVITY PATTERN method = teacher uses it when explaining steps of some process. But what is considered as important is that the teacher speaks aloud, so, the learners can hear and see his/her inner thinking process expressed verbally. Things which usually act as indiscernible, cognitive, logical processes are now clearly shown and unmasked (Walberg et al., 2005).

These are not the only strategies in the metacognitive field. Many other variations are used nowadays and not only by teachers, but also by other competent professionals in a range of specialized courses. Nevertheless, the ones stated above can be widely used, they are applicable in English language instruction, and, finally, learners are able to use them independently after some practice.

To understand the term cognitive competence, it is important to know the difference between cognitive and learning styles. Cognitive style is derived from cognition which means from thinking, knowing. Cognitive style is sometimes understood as something like an initial, primary name for learning styles. According to the Educational Dictionary (Průcha, Walterová, & Mareš, 2001), a cognitive style is described as an individual way of receiving and processing information, also as a complex of intellectual, cognitive, and perceptual abilities. Moreover, these authors add that it is also possible to diagnose it. Allport (1937), the first author to start using this term, sees cognitive style as a tool for categorizing personal and intellectual styles. It can also be understood as a way of organizing and controlling cognitive processes (Gardner, 1993). It is important to consider that cognitive style is ascribed to each learner from birth, this implies that it is not possible to change, modify, or influence it. On the other hand, cognitive style is not only the deepest layer of a learning style (Švec, 2002), but it also refers to the way a person processes information internally in a way that is unique to that individual. Not

only for teaching English language, but also for other school subjects and learning courses it is necessary for teachers to be able to recognize the cognitive and learning styles of their learners. Using appropriate methods, motivation, and aids is dependent on a style type.

Receiving and processing information during English lessons depends not only on a learner's learning style, cognitive functions, or teacher's competences, but also on a learner's level of intelligence. Ruisel (2004) claims that there is an important connection between intelligence and how learners visualize their mental objects, pictures or processes. In the past, intelligence was understood only as a result of thinking processes (of cognition). However, it involves an ability to use all the brain's capacities effectively, too. Intelligence has been explored by many authors, inter alia Vygotsky (1978), Herrnstein and Murray (1994), Jensen and Miele (2002), or Gardner (1993).

According to the cognitive features mentioned above, the following cognitive competences were identified for the purpose of the idiographic qualitative survey for the needs of a graduation thesis (Muchálová, 2018): competence to coordinate, competence to explain, competence of keeping attention and interest, competence to work in different ways at the same time, competence to accept other opinions with a view to improving one's own abilities and skills, competence to organize the lesson in terms of time management, competence to put cognition, emotions, and intelligence together and competence to use various methods. The identified cognitive competences were intended to function as a brief review or summary of just a few crucial competences with the focus on the ones which are the most important and the most often applied in foreign language lessons - in our case in English classes. Thus, these cognitive competences of a foreign language teacher are a basis for the empirical survey.

## **1 Methodology**

The study analyses the data yielded by the idiographic survey which was part of a graduation thesis focused on teacher's cognitive competences. The aim was to find out what cognitive competence addressed teachers of English language use or apply in the observed lessons and what possible impact the competences employed have on the choice of teaching methods and techniques in the educational process. Moreover, the influence of learners' proficiency level when applying competences must be considered as well. For the purposes of the qualitative research, direct observation as a method was chosen. Four classes of learners at lower secondary school were intentionally chosen from a small town in the Liptov Region (central Slovakia). The table below shows how the observed classes were divided according to their learners' proficiency level:

Table 1

*Division of classes for observation*

<i>Pre-intermediate level</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Number of learners</i>	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Time</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> group (PIL1)	8 A	8	teacher A	9.45-10.30
2 <sup>nd</sup> group (PIL1)	8 B	6	teacher B	11.30-12.15
1 <sup>st</sup> group (PIL2)	9 A	15	teacher A	7.50-8.35
2 <sup>nd</sup> group (PIL2)	9 B	11	teacher B	10.40-11.25

The first pre-intermediate group of eight-graders are labelled as PIL1. The second group of learners of the ninth grade are labelled as PIL2. As shown in the table above, teachers are also marked either with the letter A or B. The learners in grades 9 A and 9 B are more experienced and slightly more advanced. There was a different teacher of English language for each grade, meaning that four teachers were involved in the research in total.

When observing the lessons in grades 8 A and 8 B, both teachers taught the same subject matter. The teachers in the higher classes worked in the same way. The teacher in class 9 A taught the same topic as the teacher in class 9 B. Even though there is only one school year difference between these two grades, the English teachers claimed that abilities of the learners from grades 8 B and 8 A were much lower than those of the older learners' in grades 9 A and 9 B. Thus, we considered these four classes as appropriate survey samples of learners for observational purposes.

All the observed teachers were females. The average length of their teaching experience was 20 and half years. The youngest teacher has been teaching for 14 years, another one for 17 years, the third teacher for 22 years, and the eldest teacher has been teaching for 29 years. We consider this data as an important fact because it can also have a significant influence on the choice of teaching methods, techniques, and the organization of the lesson in general. The impact of a teacher's teaching experience and experience with the methods used will also be commented upon.

Before the observations, all four teachers were informed about the survey intentions and were requested to teach the way they usually do. Keeping the organization of the lesson as natural as possible was crucial for the reliability of the survey, too. After teaching the lesson, the teachers themselves assured the observer that the educational process had been as usual, in their opinion, which means that the learners behaved naturally, as if nobody had been sitting there and observing them. So, it is reasonable to state that the lessons were not influenced unduly by the research. These observations were done in March 2018 with the permission of the head teacher of the school. Two English lessons taught in eight grades were observed on 8th March and two lessons of the ninth-graders were observed one week later, on 16th March.

Before the observation itself, the researcher was challenged to work out an observation sheet for the observer and a self-evaluation sheet for teachers teaching the observed lessons. The observation sheet was partially inspired by and designed according to evaluation sheets which were, at the time of working on the thesis, in the process of being created as a part of a university APVV-14-0446 project called Evaluation of Teacher's Competences. Also, the sheets were supposed to be designed according to the findings being sought. The observation sheet consists of five pages. At the top of the first page, there is a chart for basic information (name of school, date, number of learners, etc.) Then, the sheet is divided into two parts called – "The organization part of the lesson" (consisting of seven questions) and "The lesson from methodological point of view" (including ten questions). The observation sheet and the self-evaluation sheet are nearly identical.

The aim of the sheets was to maximize the level of reliable information about the presented lesson. That is also why it was decided to use two main types of questions. These are: Closed questions (these offer several possibilities and observer and teachers are supposed to choose an appropriate answer) and Semi-open questions (these include

options necessary to choose from, but also space for personal responses or some explanation). This type of question is the one used most frequently.

Both observation and self-evaluation sheets offer various ways of answering. The objective was not to see them as statistical facts only. It was important to get more than just one-word answers. Almost every question gives an opportunity to explain the response given or to write the reason why the teacher thinks so. Moreover, some questions required more space and options for more complex answers, thus making them clearer and more understandable. Charts were designed and applied in the sheets too. To elicit appropriate and usable answers, scales were also designed. Mostly the interval scale type was used with 5 choices. These were: Not at all, Rarely, Sometimes, Most of the time, and All the time. In one question, ordinal scale was designed with points from 1 to 5. These numbers represent the level of agreement, where 1 is “strongly agree” and 5 is “strongly disagree”. The last type of question measures the order of importance. A list of 10 cognitive competences, derived from a detailed and thorough theoretical study, was given there, and the teacher’s task was to mark them with a number in decreasing order of importance, where 1 is the most applied and 10 the least applied item.

To sum up, this survey is perceived as an idiographic survey conducted at a small town school with a small number of teachers serving as a basis for qualitative analyses. Even though only four lessons were observed, belief is strong that the analyzed data from the lessons provided good material to work with and reflected a real situation in one of the “marginal” schools in our country. On the other hand, concurrently we are aware that the results of the survey could differ if 10 or more classes taught by another age group of teachers from various regions were to be observed.

## **2 Results**

Even though only four lessons were observed, it can be confidently affirmed that reliable results were gained from such a small-scale survey. Two lessons were focused on eight-grader learners and two on nine-grade learners of pre-intermediate level in the lower secondary school. It would be not possible to come to any conclusion without observation and the evaluation sheets that had been designed and prepared in advance. As stated earlier, one of the aims of the survey was to find out whether teachers apply their cognitive competences at all during lessons. Based on the observations, all four teachers applied their cognitive competences in a different way. Some teachers used competence to organize or explain more than others, while some considered competence to use various methods and aids less important than the other teachers. But all four teachers used several cognitive competences during the lesson. Clearly, it is not possible to teach learners and lead a lesson without using cognitive competences. After all, teachers already start using cognitive competences before the lesson. An ability to plan and prepare requires a teacher to think carefully about their learners and their abilities, relationships in the class, topics they have already dealt with before or those they will learn later. Moreover, creativity, intelligence, and emotion are needed when planning the lesson.

Ultimately, the analyzed data show that the most commonly applied cognitive competence was competence to organize mainly due to the fact each lesson was structured well, including time management and disciplinary factors, and the stages were smoothly and logically interconnected. This competence was carried out appropriately in all grades. Next in importance was the competence to explain. It was present in all four

lessons in which new subject matter, i.e. Gradation of Adjectives (grades 8 A, 8 B and the Present Perfect Tense (grades 9 A, 9 B g) were introduced. The teachers applied other competences too, for instance, competence to use various aids. Out of two observed pairs of teachers, there always was one teacher from each pair who used more aids than the other. It is important to highlight the different teachers' use of the interactive white board. On one hand, not all teachers, mostly those who belong to an older generation, choose to work with this up-to date technical aid and are still afraid of using it in education. On the other hand, it is true that not every class in every school has this interactive device. Luckily, the chance arose for observation of a lesson that was very motivating and interesting when using it during nearly the whole time; furthermore, learners truly enjoyed it. Explanation of a new topic is no longer about writing notes, concepts, on the blackboard, but still a lot of teachers keep using this traditional approach.

The other important aim of our local survey was to observe the use of various methods and techniques applied according to teacher's competences. The observation proved that cognitive competences of teachers have an impact on the use of teaching methods. The higher creativity and depth of professional knowledge, the more numerous and varied the methods used in teaching. If a teacher is bored and without enthusiasm, then, in general, fewer methods are employed. The observed teachers used from three to four different methods on average. They usually were using brainstorming or discussion as motivational methods. Then, revision as a method and question-answer were applied. The teachers in the eighth grades used more methods than the teachers in the ninth grades. It can be said they need to apply their competences more and be more flexible and creative than probably teachers teaching learners in higher grades.

Due to the small scale of the qualitative survey, there was no need to state hypotheses. We stated just the survey questions and gathered insights into each of these, in pursuit of the survey aims, as follows:

- *What cognitive competences does a teacher need to have when teaching eighth-graders at pre-intermediate level and ninth-graders at the same level?*

The list of competences designed in the theoretical part of the graduation thesis and stated in Introduction were found to be very useful. All the competences written there are considered important. It is difficult to say which of them are the most crucial ones, but it is also one of the teacher's abilities to manage their competences simultaneously. The most important competences which teachers teaching both grades need to apply are those involving explanation, the of use various methods and aids, competence to coordinate, and competence to arouse learners' interest. As the results show, our sample of teachers is advised to improve their thinking, perception or acceptance of others' opinions constantly.

- *What differences in cognitive competences can be performed when two different teachers teach the same topic at the same grade level?*

We were given a chance to observe lessons of four teachers only. But there were obvious differences in their way of teaching. For instance, two teachers teaching the same topic in the grades at the same level had in common a problem with the competence of choosing appropriate methods. The teachers had difficulties naming the methods, moreover, they used only the more traditional ones. The other difference was seen in the competence to use effective aids. One teacher used the blackboard only, while the other one used an interactive white board, online programme or a song. The competence to



accept others' opinion was examined. Almost all four teachers were afraid of asking their learners for any feedback, or they simply did not want to. It seems reasonable to suggest that this competence needs improvement. Other competences were applied in approximately equal measure.

- *How can the designed observation sheet help the observer to evaluate the results of the research?*

The aim of the thesis was also to design the observation and self-evaluation protocols. From these, we found out what competences the teachers had problems with, for example, competence seek feedback or competence to choose appropriate aids and methods. The protocols also reflected the teachers' approach to teaching methods as such. Thanks to these instruments, we found out that the observed teachers had quite noticeable problems, firstly, with naming methods, and secondly, with using them. Being physically present at the observed lessons was very useful for the observer, moreover, the teachers' opinions written in the self-evaluation sheets completed the realistic view at the level of cognitive competences.

It can be said that answers were found to all three stated survey questions and our survey can be regarded as useful and meaningful. Observing only four lessons inevitably brings limitations. It means that the results garnered may differ from results had the observed lessons been more numerous. The findings lead us to conclude that the topic of cognitive competences has not yet been fully researched and discussed. Together with other competences of a foreign language teacher, they are a necessary part of their professional education. Owing to the on-going APVV project and the efforts of other researchers and professionals in the field, fresh possibilities to conduct more observations in the future with more valid results, seem to be both appropriate and realistic.

Below, the concrete results of just two questions from the self-evaluation sheets have been chosen for presentation in this paper. They reflect and identify teachers' problems with teaching methods. First, the results from the self-evaluation sheets filled in by the teachers of eight-grade learners will be shown and commented upon (Tables 2 and 3). It should be noted that Teachers A and B were teaching the same topic- Gradation of Adjectives. Both teachers had the same teaching conditions including the same teaching aids. Despite this fact, the lessons were different. It needs to be said that the teachers in both grades were using both languages during the lesson - Slovak and English, because the pre-intermediate learners simply required it.

#### QUESTION:

Fill in the table below with the help of the following questions:

- What teaching methods did you use?
- In what phase of the lesson did you apply each method?
- What was the main point of the method?
- What was the learners' attitude towards it?
- What learners' cognitive competences were improved?
- Which cognitive competences did you use/apply?

Table 2

*Methods used by Teacher A*

<u>Name of the method</u>	<u>Phase of the lesson</u>	<u>Main aim</u>	<u>Learners' attitude</u>	<u>Improved learners' cognitive competences</u>	<u>Used/Applied teacher's cognitive competences</u>
brainstorming	motivation	to practise new adjectives	children liked it	fast thinking	ability to support learners and accept ideas
description as a method	controlled practice	practising grading adjectives	funny activity for children	creativity	ability to support and help Ls
discussion	controlled practice	practising new vocabulary	children enjoyed the activity	ability to compare	ability to explain
repetition	conclusion	revision of new vocabulary	interesting, they enjoyed it	thinking, understanding	ability to choose appropriate sentences, words

The observers' comments: Each part of the lesson included some method. As mentioned above, teacher A always starts the lesson with revision of tenses. At this stage in the lesson, she chose brainstorming. The learners revised tenses and applied fast thinking. Also, the teacher had to react fast and either accept or not accept learners' ideas. Description as a method was also used. It was a good idea to practise adjectives to achieve the objectives. The learners had a chance to practise gradation on real objects. Next method was discussion. The learners were comparing fashion in the past and nowadays. This method also helped the achievement of aims. At the end of the lesson, the teacher used repetition as a method. The learners repeated the structures used for grading adjectives, in more examples. It can be said that via these methods she achieved objectives in an interesting, amusing way.

Table 3

*Methods used by Teacher B*

<u>Name of the method</u>	<u>Phase of the lesson</u>	<u>Main aim</u>	<u>Learners' attitude</u>	<u>Improved learners' cognitive competences</u>	<u>Used/Applied teacher's cognitive competences</u>
discussion	motivation part	getting learners' attention	they enjoyed the discussion	presenting own ideas and opinions	ability to lead the discussion
game	1 <sup>st</sup> half of the lesson	practising adjectives	it was interesting for Ls	thinking	ability to coordinate and correct
description of a picture	2 <sup>nd</sup> part of the lesson	practising adjectives	it was a good way of repetition	creativity thinking	ability to accept other opinions
revision as a method	the end of the lesson	revision of comparative and superlative	Ls like it, because they understood it	quick thinking	ability to achieve the objectives

The observer's comments: The second teacher also used several methods to achieve objectives. As said before, teacher B used an interactive board at the very beginning of the lesson. It was a good idea and a way of arousing learners' attention. Then she used it also for a game consisting of matching adjectives and making pairs with nouns. In the second part of the lesson, the teacher improved reading comprehension. However, she was still practising adjectives with her learners. It means that she did two things at the same time, but the learners' progress in both areas was demonstrated. At the end of the lesson, she applied learners' cognitive competence to think fast. Learners were asked to create negatives or questions from the sentences they have already written on the board. In our opinion, all the teaching objectives were reached.

Now, the results of the same question will be shown which were filled in by the teachers teaching ninth-graders learners (Tables 4 and 5). Teachers A and B were teaching the same topic of the Present Perfect Tense. Many learners regard it as very difficult. Both teachers compared this tense with the past simple tense during the observed lessons. The groups of learners are considered good and bright. That is why they did not use their mother tongue during the lesson at all (in both grades). The observer was curious about what up-to-date methods would be used during the lessons. Neither teacher's A nor teacher B's lessons included any more up-to date communication methods (e.g. Phillips 66, Carousel, DIE, Snowball, Mind map, Creative drama, Experiential teaching etc.).

Table 4

*Methods used by Teacher A*

<u>Name of the method</u>	<u>Phase of the lesson</u>	<u>Main aim</u>	<u>Learners' attitude</u>	<u>Improved learners' cognitive competences</u>	<u>Used/Applied teacher's cognitive competences</u>
motivational dialogue (Where did you go for holiday?)	motivation part	-to get Ls' attention -to connect it with past simple	learners were interested in	fast reacting	ability to get Ls' attention
repetition	introduction controlled activity conclusion	-to revise past simple -to get to use new tense -to make Ls understand	-learners were answering the questions -they felt they understand it	understanding thinking perception	ability to revise new tense via different ways
praise as a method	controlled activity	to make learners feel they can do it	learners liked when T told them "very good"	accepting others opinion	-ability to raise the interest in learning -ability to find sth. to praise for

The observer's comments: Teacher's motivational method at the beginning of the lesson was very good. It aroused learners' interest. During the whole lesson she was using repetition as a method. It was necessary and logical because of introducing the new language structure. It helped the learners to remember it better. This was demonstrated at the end of the lesson when the learners successfully created sentences in present perfect

tense and not just in manipulative exercises. Also, they were able to use the structure in freer production when talking about themselves. Teacher A also praised learners a lot which helped them to think they can learn this problematic tense more easily. Teacher A had problems recollecting the names of the teaching methods used. Nevertheless, the observer cannot say that the teacher was not able to apply her competence to use an appropriate method. To become familiar with more up-to-date methods and introduce them in lessons is recommended.

Table 5

*Methods used by Teacher B*

<u>Name of the method</u>	<u>Phase of the lesson</u>	<u>Main aim</u>	<u>Learners' attitude</u>	<u>Improved learners' cognitive competences</u>	<u>Used/Applied teacher's cognitive competences</u>
brainstorming	motivation part	getting learners' attention	they enjoyed it, because they had a chance to tell their idea	-imagination -presenting ideas	ability to accept learners' ideas/opinions
motivational dialogue	motivation part	to make learners be interested in	it was interesting for Ls	thinking imagination	ability to keep learners' attention
song as a motivation	conclusion	to revise learnt knowledge	learners were happy about the song	ability to work in different ways at the same time	ability to coordinate and to know when and how to correct

The observer's comments: Methods used by Teacher B were in accordance with her cognitive competences. She was improving several learners' competences like thinking or ability to work in different ways at the same time and her own competences such as ability to keep learners' attention or ability to coordinate and to know when and how to correct. At the beginning of the lesson she used brainstorming to elicit learners' ideas and opinions. Then she smoothly moved through a motivating dialogue to explanation of the new tense. The song at the end of the lesson was a very good choice. She was able to apply her competence to coordinate all the activities well. However, she did not apply any of the more up-to-date methods, except brainstorming. Interestingly, even though she did not use them, she was able to keep her lesson interesting. But in the observer's opinion, it would be beneficial to use a more interactive and inductive approach in her lessons.

The fact the teachers had problems to name the used methods is regarded as rather unsatisfactory; moreover, they applied only brainstorming as a more up-to-date method. As mentioned in the Introduction, a list of cognitive competences of a teacher was designed. This list was included in the self-evaluation sheet too. It is interesting to note the competence teachers thought they had applied the most. First, the answers of the teachers of eighth-grade learners are presented.

QUESTION:

Which competence (marked in the tables as “c”) did you apply at the lesson the most? If any from the list, put sign X. Then mark them with a number in decreasing order of importance (1 = the most applied, 10 = the highest number – the least applied).

Table 6

*Teacher A's applied competences*

---

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | c. to explain   |
| 2 | c. to coordinate  |
| 3 | c. of keeping attention and interest                                    |
| 4 | c. to organize the lesson in terms of time                              |
| 5 | c. to use various methods   |
| 6 | c. to put cognition, emotions, and intelligence together                |
| 7 | c. to work in different ways at the same time                           |
| 8 | c. to use various aids  |
| 9 | c. to know when and how to correct                                      |
| X | c. to accept other opinions so that to improve own abilities and skills |
- 

Table 7

*Teacher B's applied competences*

---

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | c. to coordinate  |
| 2  | c. to explain   |
| 3  | c. to organize the lesson in terms of time                              |
| 4  | c. to use various methods   |
| 5  | c. to know when and how to correct                                      |
| 6  | c. of keeping attention and interest                                    |
| 7  | c. to put cognition, emotions, and intelligence together                |
| 8  | c. to accept other opinions so that to improve own abilities and skills |
| 9  | c. to use various aids  |
| 10 | c. to work in different ways at the same time                           |
- 

The observer's comments: As can be seen in Table 6 above, teacher A did not apply only one competence from the list. She did not use the competence to accept another opinion because she did not ask for feedback as mentioned before. If we have a look at the results put in the table, we can see that teacher A perceives the competences in an absolutely different way than teacher B. There is no same answer. First two competences were put almost at the same level. Teacher A thinks the most applied competence was competence to coordinate. Teacher B, as can be seen in Table 8, put this competence at the second place while the competence to explain is at the first place. And here their opinions differentiate. Teacher A fills in the first five positions with the competence of keeping attention, competence to organize the lesson in terms of time, and competence to use various methods. The third place in teacher B's table is competence to organize the lesson in terms of time, fourth is using various methods, and the fifth is correcting errors and mistakes. This competence was at the last place on teacher A's list of the most

applied competences. According to teacher B the least applied competence is competence to work in different ways at the same time. After teaching the lessons and filling the self-evaluation sheets, both teachers told us it had not been that easy to choose appropriate number of order here because sometimes they would put more competences at the same level.

Below, the answers of teachers teaching ninth-graders are shown.

Table 8

*Teacher A's applied competences*

---

- 1 c. to explain
  - 2 c. to organize the lesson in terms of time
  - 3 c. of keeping attention and interest
  - 4 c. to put cognition, emotions, and intelligence together
  - 5 c. to work in different ways at the same time
  - 6 c. to coordinate
  - 7 c. to know when and how to correct
  - 8 c. to use various methods
  - 9 c. to accept other opinions so that to improve own abilities and skills
  - 10 c. to use various aids
- 

Table 9

*Teacher B's applied competences*

---

- 1 c. to coordinate
  - 2 c. to organize the lesson in terms of time
  - 3 c. to use various aids
  - 4 c. to explain
  - 5 c. to know when and how to correct
  - 6 c. of keeping attention and interest
  - 7 c. to use various methods
  - X c. to work in different ways at the same time
  - X c. to accept other opinions so that to improve own abilities and skills
  - X c. to put cognition, emotions, and intelligence together
- 

The observer's comments: As seen in the tables above, teachers A and B have different opinions about the importance of applied competences within the lesson. Moreover, teacher B marked three competences with the sign X, which means she does not consider them as important as other competences. Teacher A thinks the competence to explain was the one applied most during the lesson, followed by the competence to organize the lesson in terms of time. Then keeping attention and the mixture of cognition, emotions and intelligence occupy the next most prominent positions. Using various aids, accepting other opinions and using various methods are assigned to the last places. And this truly corresponds to reality. All three of these competences were applied with least frequency during the lesson. Teacher B thinks coordination and organization are the most important competences within the lesson. Moreover, using various aids is also crucial. Then

correcting errors, keeping the attention and using various methods are next in order of ranking. As the lessons were different, Tables 8 and 9 also highlight the differences between the two teachers and their ways of applying competences. Competence to ask for a feedback is truly in the last positions and it needs to be given higher value and attention. Also, competence to use various methods was considered less important which mirrors its position in the table of methods in the question before. Teachers do not know the methods, they cannot up-to-date ones and thus they cannot apply them in lessons.

### **3 Discussion**

Many theoreticians view the study of teachers' key competences as important for successful teaching practice. Also, social competences are very often at the core of research. On the other hand, the topic of cognitive competences seems to have fallen out of favour among researchers, so it is difficult to find current research dealing with cognitive competences applied mainly in English language instruction. There is no similar research in Slovakia either. Scholars Rachel and Eadaoin (2012) studied cognitive competences, but from a perspective that differs from the focus of our research. Only critical and creative thinking as basic cognitive competences were described by them as their work was based on Piaget's theory of cognition. Furthermore, they also wrote about metacognition and cognitive style. But after a short general introduction to the topic of cognitive competence their attention moves to the area of thinking in general and then to critical and creative thinking and the relationship between them. The authors were inspired by research carried out by Zhang with Chinese University students and research findings gained by Dewey and Bento. But Rachel and Eadaoin did not conduct their own research at primary or secondary schools and did not design their own self-evaluation sheets either. It may be concluded from this that even though these authors were in part dealing with the same topic as ourselves - cognitive competence - our respective work cannot easily be compared because the survey aims, approaches, methods and fields) are different. It is evident that this area of research calls for greater attention, through a larger range of investigation, and more thorough and complex research carried out in different types of school.

### **Conclusion**

The survey has proved that cognitive competences are a necessary part of teachers' personalities and abilities. All the teachers applied them during their lessons, the differences being in the way they did so. The teachers teaching the eighth-graders applied competences according to the learners' language abilities. Sometimes, they had to switch the two languages during the lesson because the learners did not understand them well. The teachers who taught in the ninth grades had an advantage because their learners were speaking English mostly, but on the other hand, they had to prepare more challenging, varied activities than the teachers in the lower grades. Logically, several competences were applied in the lesson in relation to the lesson phase and activity. The competences used most frequently by teachers were the competence to explain, the competence to organize and coordinate, and the competence to use various aids and methods during the lesson.

We also wanted to find out how much the cognitive competences influence the teacher's choice of method. The table showing methods used and techniques designed at the bottom of the sheets helped to identify clearly all the methods used. This means that the

observer and teachers had a chance to write down the method being used, the phase of the lesson and the reason for using it. It was also considered important to know the learners' emotions, feelings or attitude to the method being used. It needs to be mentioned that not only teachers, but also learners were applying cognitive competences too. That is why the last two columns of Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 are focused on identifying those cognitive competences which improve both learner and teacher. Most often for the learners, it was perception, or the ability to share ideas and opinions, and creativity that were the most improved cognitive competences.

The area of cognitive competences has still not been explored in sufficient depth in our view. It is an interesting area of active metacognitive and cognitive functions influenced by many factors which tend to change according to the era a teacher works and lives in, the quality of education and professional training and personal interest and motivation in further professional development. Further research could herald deeper insight into the problematics of cognitive competences and point to other possibilities for further research as well.

The profession of teacher is becoming less interesting and more challenging nowadays. Teachers are no longer seen as educators who pass their knowledge on to others and help them understand many things and concepts. Unfortunately, for decades they have not been all that much respected and valued by our society. It is our contention that the position of teacher deserves more attention. Practice sometimes shows that the skills and abilities they demonstrate in lessons are more than heroic. Competences which every teacher needs to have, or should have, are necessary for each lesson. The aim of the paper was to inform the reader about cognitive competences of foreign language teachers. The factors presented which influence the application of cognitive competences are considered important. They do not only relate to the preparation of materials for the class. Teachers apply several other competences while planning their lessons, and before and during the teaching process too. Via the survey it has been revealed that teachers use competences to explain, coordinate and to use, in the main, several traditional methods. Some of the observed teachers prepared a more interesting lesson and it was obvious they applied more competences in the process of doing so. Competence to receive other opinions or feedback was the least used, which is quite striking, and it probably reflects teachers' fear of hearing possibly negative comments (as experienced during the observations). It is a pity that there are still teachers who prefer traditional ways of teaching to more up-to-date methods and approaches (e.g. writing on the board for almost the entire lesson is still frequent). Resulting from the findings, there was noticed certain difference between applying competences in the eighth grades and ninth grades of lower secondary school. It can be stated the proficiency level of the learners with a year-of-instruction-difference between the grades may influence the different competences used by teachers, and their choice of methods. Teacher teaching at a lower level must be more creative, teachers' reactions must be faster, and they also need to know how to keep their learners' attention and interest fully. Of the communicative more up-to date methods appropriate for improving cognitive skills, only brainstorming was applied during motivation phase of the observed lessons.

This survey could, in our view, act to stimulate further possible research into the application of cognitive competences in foreign language education. It is impossible for teachers to teach without using their own cognitive competences. So, it is proposed that urgent attention should be devoted to them in the coming years. Extending the depth and



scope of research is highly recommended. More observations at various schools would be beneficial if the time management of future researcher permits. Multiple observations of the same teacher teaching a variety of lessons would demonstrate whether their way of teaching accurately reflects the very first observed lesson. Another possible source of improvement is to pay attention to lesson planning too. The researcher would find out how much effort and how many cognitive competences a teacher needs to apply before teaching. In this case the research could be divided into two parts: cognitive competences applied while preparing for the lesson and cognitive competences applied during the teaching itself. Finally, a summary of the methods influenced by teacher's cognitive competences would be defined.

The results of our survey may also serve as recommendations for future teachers. They should, firstly, realize the importance of knowing a range of teaching methods and techniques. When a teacher recognizes and applies, for instance, four methods only, and uses them again and again, it suggests a lack of interest in improving their knowledge in the field. A good teacher should be able to name various methods and apply them in teaching practice regularly. It is difficult to achieve objectives without knowing how best to do so. Secondly, future teachers should be encouraged not to be afraid of asking their learners for feedback, either after activities or at the end of the lesson. The role of the feedback is not to make teachers depressed, but to allow learners' opinions to help teachers to improve their own competences. And finally, teachers should emulate those mentioned in the quote by an American journalist, Dan Rather: "The dream begins, most of the time, with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you on to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called truth."

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