

## The role of teachers' language proficiency in teaching English in the Transcarpathian Hungarian schools in Ukraine

**Abstract.** The article examines the relationship between teachers' English language proficiency and their ability to teach English in the Transcarpathian Hungarian context. The results suggest that the higher the language proficiency level of the teacher, the more successful they can be in the teaching process. Further investigations are needed to identify the teachers' real level of English language proficiency. *Key words:* teachers' language proficiency, teaching English, native and non-native English speaking teachers, Transcarpathian Hungarian educational institutions

**Резюме.** У статті розглядається взаємозв'язок між рівнем володіння англійською мовою вчителями та їх вмінням викладати англійську мову в школах з угорською мовою навчання на Закарпатті. Отримані результати свідчать про таке: чим вищий у вчителя рівень володіння мовою, тим успішнішим є навчання англійської мови в ході навчального процесу. Необхідні подальші дослідження з метою визначення фактичного рівня володіння вчителями англійською мовою.

**Rezümé.** A cikk megvizsgálja a tanárok angolnyelv-tudása és angol tanítási képességük közötti különbséget a kárpátaljai magyar kontextusban. Az eredmények azt sugallják, hogy minél magasabb a tanár nyelvtudásának szintje, annál sikeresebb lehet a tanítási folyamatban. További felmérésekre van szükség a tanárok valódi angolnyelv-tudásszintjének megismeréséhez. *Kulcsszavak:* tanárok nyelvtudása, angolnyelv-tanítás, anyanyelvi és nem angol anyanyelvű tanárok, kárpátaljai magyar oktatási intézmények

### 1. Introduction

It is needless to emphasize the importance of knowing a foreign language nowadays because there is hardly any person who would not agree with the statement that knowing one's first language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural Europe is in no way sufficient. Meeting the demand of the market and following the trends, more and more language schools are started and language courses launched where those willing to learn a foreign language can select from a wide range of languages the one that corresponds to their needs and interests most. In accordance with this world-wide tendency, it can also be observed how in our closer context (Transcarpathia) new language centres are opened for learners intending to learn a foreign language. Candidates can take internationally accredited language exams (e.g. Pearson's PTE, ECL, or Cambridge FCE) in Transcarpathia, all those who need to prove the level of their proficiency in a certain language with an official language examination certificate.

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All the above possibilities are related to learners' language proficiency. The international academic literature on language pedagogy provides a significant number of research articles dealing with the language learners' language proficiency (cf. Çetinavci and Yavuz, 2010). However, there are few studies available dealing with the language proficiency of English teachers (cf. Richards et al., 2013; Valmori, 2014). In Transcarpathia, this issue has not been investigated before; therefore, one of the main motivating reasons to carry out research in the area in question was to fill the gap with a survey on the English language teachers' language proficiency. The research questions included ones on the relationship between the teachers' English language proficiency and their ability to teach English as a foreign language, as well as the role of the teachers' language proficiency in the teaching process. The initial hypothesis was that the research respondents found relationships between language proficiency and the ability to teach English.

## **2. Background**

Ukraine is a former Soviet republic that became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Now it is a sovereign non-EU state in Eastern Europe with a population of 46000000 people. The country consists of 24 administrative regions (or oblasts) and the westernmost of these is Transcarpathia where the research detailed in this article was conducted. It is a multinational, multicultural and multilingual territory inhabited by 1200000 people, among whom there is a Hungarian minority with about 150000 people (Molnár and Molnár D., 2005). Most members of the Hungarian minority live along the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. This minority has its system of primary, secondary and tertiary education with 104 Hungarian schools and a higher educational establishment which form an integral part of the country's educational system. All of these schools teach at least three languages: Hungarian as the learners' mother tongue or first language (L1), Ukrainian as the official language of the country (L2 for the learners), and a foreign language (FL) (Huszti, 2009). This FL in most schools is English.

In Ukraine (Transcarpathia included), it is possible to teach a foreign language in secondary education with college or university qualifications. A person obtaining a humanities degree in English from a college should have a command of English at the B2+ level according to the system of levels defined in the Common European Framework (2001), while a person with a Master of Arts degree from a university should have English language proficiency at the C1 level. Currently, the teachers' foreign language proficiency is 'only proven' officially by their college or university degrees. However, very soon it can be expected that foreign language teachers working in primary and secondary education will have to take a language examination and a specialist examination as well to prove their language proficiency and professional knowledge. Moreover, recognizing the demand of teachers towards such courses, methodology training courses are offered

in Lviv (Lviv Region, Ukraine) for secondary school teachers that prepare them for the successful passing of the mentioned examinations (Maletych<sup>1</sup>, 2016, personal communication).

The construct of language proficiency for the present research has been defined as the knowledge the English language teacher has about English and what he or she is able to do with the language. It is often measured on proficiency scales, e.g. on the scale of the Common European Framework (2001) from level A1 to level C2. It is the level of competence at which an individual is able to use the language for both basic communicative tasks and academic purposes (Husztí, 2014:65). Bachmann also defined the construct as 'knowledge competence or ability in the use of a language' (1990:16).

A study was conducted in Spain in 2003 with Catalan teachers of English (Llurda and Huguet, 2003). The results showed that there was a relationship between the non-native English speaking teachers' English language proficiency and their self-esteem, i.e. these teachers were less confident in teaching the English language when having problems because of their lower level of language proficiency.

Today the teachers working in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools are non-native English speaking teachers (their native language is either Hungarian, or Ukrainian, or Russian). The international academic literature calls these teachers non-native English speaking teachers or non-NESTs (*cf.* Medgyes, 1994; Illés and Csizér, 2015). For more than twenty years, it has been debated in professional circles whether native English speaking teachers (NESTs) or non-NESTs teach English better in a non-mother-tongue context. One of the most outstanding experts of this issue is professor Péter Medgyes, who, while acknowledging the credits and advantages of NESTs, he insists that non-NESTs can be more successful in teaching English than their native English speaking peers.

One of the biggest advantages of NESTs is evidently their language proficiency level, because it is almost impossible to achieve native competence for non-NESTs however much they want it. Nevertheless, to assist it, Medgyes (2014:183) proposes an action plan of twelve points, in the ninth point of which he defines his proposal as follows: 'Since language competence is a key requirement for effective teaching, language improvement courses should constitute a fundamental component of the training curricula for non-NESTs'.

### **3. The research**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The research instrument (a questionnaire) was sent out to 55 English teachers working in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools. The return rate was 85%, so 47 filled in questionnaires provided data for the analysis. Table 1 summarizes the teachers' personal data (gender and age).

<sup>1</sup> Svitlana Maletych, regional director of Pearson Ukraine in Lviv Region

**Table 1. Gender and age of the research participants**

Age	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	Total
Gender							
Male			1	1			2
Female	3	15	16	7	2	2	45
Total	3	15	17	8	2	2	47

All the teachers had a college or a university degree with English language teacher qualifications. One of them even did a PhD doctoral course in language pedagogy and is currently working on her dissertation.

The teachers provided self-perceived data on their own language proficiency level according to the categorization of the Common European Framework of Reference (2001), so nine teachers have Level B2 English knowledge, 31 teachers have Level C1, and five teachers claimed to have Level C2. In two cases the data were missing.

Table 2 shows the types of the establishments where the teacher participants were working at the time of the survey. Thus, most teachers worked in secondary schools (20 – 42.55%) and primary schools (18 – 38.29%), four teachers were working in grammar schools (4 – 8.51%), three teachers in lyceums (3 – 6.38%), while an elementary school teacher (1 – 2.12%) and a kindergarten teacher (1 – 2.12%) also participated in the research.

**Table 2. Type of educational establishments where the participants were working**

Type of establishment	Number of teachers
Kindergarten	1
Elementary school	1
Primary school	18
Secondary school	20
Lyceum	3
Grammar school	4
Total	47

The language teaching experience of the participants ranged between 1-5 years to 26-30 years. The data obtained from the teachers are given in Table 3.

**Table 3. Division of teachers according to the length of their language teaching experience (in years)**

1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	Total
17	10	15	2	2	1	47

### **3.2 Research instrument**

A questionnaire was designed to collect data from the research participants on the question in focus of the present investigation. It consisted of two parts: the first contained questions asking for the participants' personal data (age and

gender, length of teaching experience, type of school they worked at, and their perceived English language proficiency level. The second part contained four open-ended questions, one question asking for indicating the opinion on a Likert-type scale, and a closed-ended question. In this part of the questionnaire the participants were expected to share their views on such issues as the correlation between the teacher's English language proficiency and their ability to teach English; the importance for a language teacher to be fluent in English and have a high level of language proficiency in order to be effective in language teaching; the needed language proficiency level for teachers in various educational establishments from elementary to tertiary education; the question causing an eternal dilemma: whether native English speaking teachers (NESTs) or non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) are more effective in various educational contexts.

The questionnaire data were analysed qualitatively.

#### **4. Findings and their interpretation**

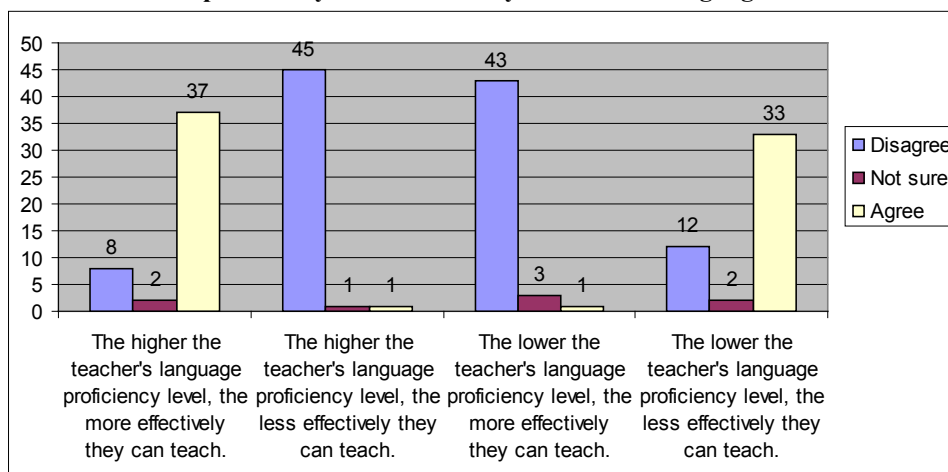
##### **4.1 Connection between the English teachers' language proficiency and their ability to teach the language**

Most of the research participants expressed their firm beliefs that there is a link between the teacher's language proficiency and their ability to teach that foreign language. 17 (36%) participants considered it the luckiest situation when a high level of language proficiency is combined with an excellent knowledge of English teaching methodology. This way the teacher can achieve real success in their job. 13 (28%) participants thought that having a high level of language proficiency is in vain if it is not paired with excellent methodological knowledge. On the contrary, 8 (17%) teachers assumed that the good language teaching ability is useless without proper knowledge of the language. 7 (15%) respondents felt there was a direct relationship between language proficiency and teaching ability, stating that the better the teachers' command of the language, the more effectively they are able to teach it.

Two (4%) teachers summarised the essence of the opinions in relation to the above question, claiming that the teacher can be successful in the English teaching process only in case they have the proper level of language proficiency.

The respondents were expected to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements concerning the connection between the teachers' English language proficiency and their teaching ability. Diagram 1 shows the results.

**Diagram 1** Respondents' views on the relationship between the teachers' language proficiency and their ability to teach the language



It is immediately clear from the diagram that the number of hesitant teachers was insignificant; they either agreed or disagreed with the statements. These results support the findings obtained from the open-ended questions, namely that the higher the teacher's language proficiency level, the more effectively they can teach, and vice versa, the lower this level, the less effective this process is. However, it must also be noted that the ratios are surprising as only 79% of the participants agreed with the statement in the first case, and even less, only 70% of the respondents agreed with it in the second case.

#### ***4.2 The importance of fluent language knowledge for effective and successful language teaching***

Most teachers (18 – 38%) had the view that without fluent language knowledge the teacher cannot teach effectively.

1) In my opinion, it is daring to stand in front of today's youth to teach them English without appropriate knowledge. There are a lot of children who acquire English through hard work from various sources (e.g. films, music, etc.). If the teacher is linguistically unprepared for such situations, they will have to face serious problems.<sup>2\*</sup>

Twelve (26%) participants claimed that teacher's fluent language knowledge and high level of language proficiency could serve as a motivating drive to encourage pupils to learn English more diligently. Five (11%) teachers presumed fluent language knowledge is essential for the teacher to be able to communicate with the pupils at an adequate level.

<sup>2</sup> Here and hence, the quotations from the questionnaires are presented in the author's translations.

2) It is important that the teacher be able to communicate at an appropriate level in the given language in order to show their self-confidence and competence to the pupils. In addition, if the teacher's language proficiency is appropriate, they can easily call the pupils' attention to themselves and can involve them in the learning process more effectively.

Two teachers (4%) believed that language teachers needed fluent knowledge of the target language they were teaching not only for the purpose of teaching as the educational process does not come to an end with giving lessons.

3) The teacher's work is not over after she finishes her lessons. She has to participate in various methodological forums, discussions, and professional meetings. It would be more than strange if the English teacher could not contribute in such situations because of poor command of the target language.

One respondent (2%) clearly stated that it is not fluent, but accurate target language knowledge what foreign language teachers need.

Nine respondents (19%) do not consider the teachers' fluency in English the most important indicator of effectiveness. They believe that it depends much on the teachers' teaching methods and techniques.

4) Of course it is not a 'problem' if the teacher is fluent at English, but I find it more important that the teacher is appropriately prepared for their lessons.

Unfortunately, no concretely requirement set by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine towards the language proficiency of English teachers exists at present. Therefore, the participants of the research described in this paper were asked about their views concerning the English teachers' language proficiency working in various types of educational establishments. They were requested to indicate their answers according to the scale of levels depicted in the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference, 2001). The results are summed up in Table 4.

**Table 4. The necessary language proficiency level of English teachers as seen by the research respondents**

	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
Kindergarten	13	15	16	3	
Primary education		11	19	16	1
Secondary education			15	27	5
Tertiary education (English philology)				5	42
Tertiary education (non-English training)		1	8	28	10

Table 4 shows that the respondents' opinions vary in regard of the kindergarten teacher's necessary level of English proficiency. However, they are almost equally distributed: 13 (28%) teachers think level A2 is enough, 15 (32%) and 16 (34%) teachers, respectively, believe that levels B1 and B2 are necessary.

Only three participants (6%) are of the view that the kindergarten teacher should have a C1 level command of the English level.

The situation is different what concerns primary education. The majority of the respondents (19 – 40%) believed that the teachers should have at least level B2 proficiency. Concerning secondary educations, the respondents' views mostly coincided as 27 (57%) participants claimed that teachers should know the language at level C1.

A great majority of the research respondents (42 – 89%) agreed that the English teachers involved in English teacher training in tertiary education should have the highest level of English language proficiency, i.e. C2. The participants' opinions were not so unanimous when asked about the necessary proficiency level of teachers working in tertiary education and teaching at non-English training course. Mostly, level C1 was mentioned (28 – 60%). In addition, level C2 was indicated (10 – 21%). However, there were eight respondents (17%) who believed level B2 was enough for such teachers. Moreover, one respondent (2%) indicated level B1.

#### ***4.3 The role of the English teacher's language proficiency in the teaching process***

The research data prove that all the participants believed the English teacher's language proficiency played a significant role in the teaching process, though five respondents (11%) did not provide detailed explanations.

Eleven (23%) respondents agreed that the better the teacher knows the target language, the more knowledge they are able to mediate to their students and of a higher standard their job will be. Another view can be connected here, namely that language proficiency plays a crucial role because if the teacher makes mistakes when speaking the target language, then they can't teach the language accurately without errors (eight respondents – 17%), or the inadequate language knowledge reduces the effectiveness of the teacher's work (4 – 9%).

In addition, eight participants (17%) added that the teachers' English language proficiency level is also essential because they are always an example, a kind of motivation for the learners.

5) Of course, the English teacher's language proficiency has an important role because they serve as a model for the learners. If the children see how enthusiastic the teacher is for English and of what high levels their knowledge is, the learners will consider English even more important and will learn it with more enthusiasm.

Table 5 provides further ideas about the English teacher's language proficiency. It also shows what percentage of teachers is of a certain view.

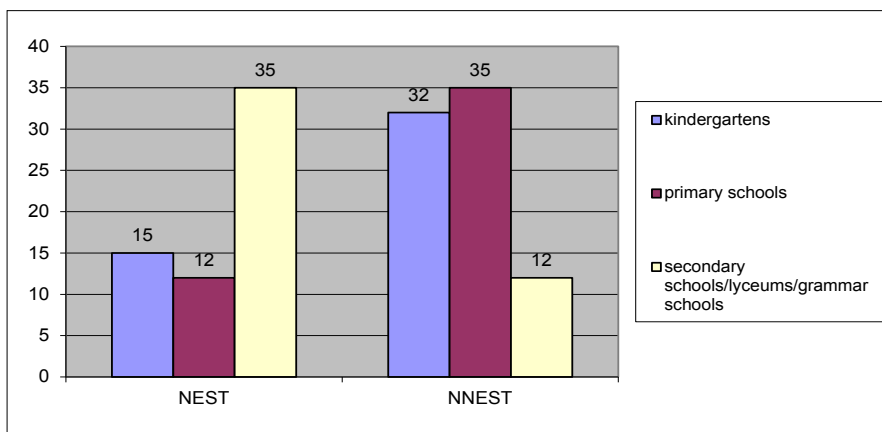
**Table 5. Further opinions on the English teacher's language proficiency**

Opinion	Participants (%)
The teacher's language proficiency is important, as well as their suitability for the teaching profession and their methodological knowledge.	11
It is important that the teachers have a language proficiency level that is appropriate for the learners.	4
It is important because everybody expects the teacher to have perfect language knowledge.	2
The teacher's language knowledge is important but the learner's willingness and diligence is even more crucial.	2
It is important, so that the teachers were able to use foreign extra teaching materials as well.	2
The language proficiency is important but it is not all as much can be achieved with appropriate diligence and motivation.	2

#### **4.4 The eternal dilemma: native speaker (NEST) or non-native speaker (NNEST) teachers**

The participants were requested to express their views on whether native-speaking or non-native speaking teachers should work in various educational establishments. Diagram 2 shows the results. The most frequent opinion was that children in the kindergartens and primary schools need the use of the mother tongue, therefore it is better if NNESTs teach in these establishments, while learners in secondary schools, lyceums and grammar schools have a certain language proficiency level with the help of which they can easily understand NESTs.

**Diagram 2. Teachers in various educational establishments as viewed by the research respondents**



There were two participants (4%) who defined the essential solution of the dilemma saying that it does not matter what the teacher's mother tongue is, the most crucial issue is that they be professionally well prepared and have thorough knowledge.

In my opinion, the first language of the teacher has absolutely no significance. If his knowledge and expertise is adequate, he can be efficient with every age group.

### ***5 Conclusions and pedagogical implications***

1) The English teacher's level of language knowledge plays an important role in the teaching process.

2) There is a relationship between the language proficiency of the English teacher and their ability to teach the target language. The better the teacher knows the English language, the more effectively they can teach it to their students and the more successful their job is. Consequently, if the teacher does not have a good command of English, they cannot achieve success in teaching.

3) The most successful is the teacher who has a high level of language proficiency paired with excellent methodological training.

4) The teacher's fluent language knowledge might be a good example for the pupils; it can be a motivating drive for them to study more diligently in order to achieve the set objectives. Therefore, the teacher has to do everything possible to show a good model for the pupils by constantly improving their language knowledge.

5) Based on the opinions of the research participants, NNESTs in the kindergarten should know English at Levels B1 or B2, in the primary school it should be Levels B2 or C1, while in the secondary school this should be Level C1, in English teacher training in tertiary education – Level C2, and finally the teacher working in tertiary education with non-English major students should know the target language at Level C1.

6) NNESTs might be successful in the kindergarten and the primary school, while NESTs could achieve more success in secondary education.

7) In the present study, the participant teachers' English language proficiency level was presented based on their self-perception. Further research is needed (e.g. in the form of a standardized proficiency test) to identify the teachers' real language proficiency in English.

8) Following Medgyes' (2014) proposal, it is advisable and worthwhile to include language development courses for teachers in their INSET courses besides professional training to further improve their language proficiency.

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