# Examining grammatical knowledge of English language student teachers

**Abstract:**

It is widely believed that the content knowledge, or scholarship in content disciplines, plays the central role in the knowledge base of teaching (Shulman, "Those Who Understand" 6). However, investigations of its acquisition remain rare not only in the context of the Czech Republic, but worldwide (Píšová and Brebera 75). The paper focuses on exploring what role the pre-service education plays in the development of (subject matter) content knowledge of English for Education students, i.e. whether and how the (subject matter) content knowledge of the bachelor programme students of English for Education, namely their grammatical knowledge in English, is developed and internalized in formal education. Based on the analysis of tests and examination scores of English for Education students, the study hypothesizes that there is correlation between the selected aspects of communicative competence in the course of the studies, i.e. there is a (positive) change. However, drawing on correlations of exam scores in students' grammatical knowledge, namely results of morphology exam assessments and a grammatical part of the language exam, it does not seem that by addressing the processes of grammar learning and acquisition in the formal instruction, student teachers improve their conscious use of grammar.

## Introduction

*Those who can, do. Those who understand, teach.*
Shulman, "Those Who Understand" 14


The teacher's role in content acquisition of the learner may be considered as special because it is the teacher, who intermediates the first contact with the knowledge of the particular subject for the learner. The teacher must not only understand concepts and principles of their discipline, doubt them and link with new understanding, they also have to define what is essential and what not in their disciplines and they communicate that knowledge, their attitudes and values to it to the learners with respect to their individualities.

As many authors claim (König et al. "The Role of Opportunities", König et al. "Teachers' Professional Knowledge", Troyan et al., Kissau and Algozzine, Cogill, Janík), the contemporary construct of teacher professional knowledge is significantly influenced by Shulman's concept of knowledge base for teaching ("Those Who Understand" and "Knowledge and Teaching"). He describes that concept as "a codified or codifiable aggregation of knowledge, skill, understanding, and technology, of ethics and disposition, of collective responsibility – as well as a means for representing and communicating it" ("Knowledge and Teaching" 4). In his framework, a category of content is "a central feature of the knowledge base of teaching" ("Knowledge and Teaching" 9) because knowing what and understanding why is a prerequisite for the development of teachers' professional knowledge.

In terms of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), it is the language what plays a significant and distinct role in the instruction, as it represents not only the aim and content of the subject, but language is also a means of their attaining (Hendrich 81-82). Such a unity of content and medium makes TEFL distinct from teaching other subjects (König et al. "Teachers' Professional Knowledge" 3, Píšová et al., *Učitel expert* 31) and operationalising EFL teacher's content knowledge may then represent quite an uneasy task (Shariatifar et al. 500, Brown and Lee 545-547, Freeman et al. 129-139). However, to be able to provide EFL student teachers optimal learning opportunities which help them cope with the challenges of quality instruction (Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2020 25), it is essential to define the

content of TEFL and identify thinking and learning processes involved in student teachers' professional knowledge development (Worden 106).

Nevertheless, "the absence of focus on subject matter" is considered to be the " 'missing paradigm' problem" (Shulman, "Those Who Understand" 6) not only in the context of the Czech Republic but also abroad (Píšová and Brebera 75). Since there is a gap in researching the development of domain-specific content knowledge of EFL student teachers (Svatoš 788, König "Teachers' Professional Knowledge" 4, 7-8, Worden 106) the aim of this article is to explore what role the pre-service education might play in the development of domain-specific (subject matter) content knowledge of EFL student teachers, namely their knowledge of English language grammar. In the first part, the article outlines EFL student teachers' content knowledge in terms of English grammar and processes of its acquisition and organization. In the second part, the opportunities to learn in the pre-service teacher programme are explored through the content analysis of the syllabi and students' EFL grammatical content knowledge development is measured with comparing their exam scores.

**EFL student teachers' grammatical content knowledge**

The general categories of knowledge can be applied to professional development of all teachers. In TEFL, a formal and practical (Fenstermacher 1994 in Janík 23) language related knowledge is analysed, evaluated and discussed also in linguistics, a domain specific scholar discipline (Ries 23-34), namely in terms of communicative competence encompassing "both knowledge and ability for language use" (Hymes 1972, in Richards and Rodgers 159).

Communicative (language) competence, ability or, as Bachman and Palmer (63) put it, language knowledge is a complex and complicated linguistic construct, which many scholars try to depict with the help of models (see for example Horváthová 79-80, Duff 18-22), inevitably simplifying the structural complexity of the construct in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the concept. One of the models depicting the ability to communicate in a foreign language is presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF), which "guides language teaching policies, planning, and assessment in countries in the European Union" (Duff 21, Delalande 177). As this is the model which is referred to in the curricular documents of the Czech Republic, hence determining aims and content of English language instruction at all levels of the Czech national school system, the language knowledge of English for Education students' is analysed from the perspective of the CEF model of communicative language competences.

According to CEF (9), communicative language competences (*sic*) "are those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means" and includes three main components: linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge, skills, and know-how. Sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences cover sociocultural conditions of language use and the functional use of linguistic resources and provide participants of communication with abilities necessary for realizing communication appropriately in the given context (CEF 13).

To produce accurate and meaningful communication, an individual should also know and be able to use the formal resources of language described in CEF under linguistic competences. CEF suggests the following areas of the language system organizational knowledge (108-118): lexical (vocabulary), grammatical, semantic (meaning; lexical, grammatical, pragmatic semantics), phonological (sounds), orthographic and orthoepic (coding and decoding a written system of language; writing and reading) competences. The grammatical accuracy, or knowledge of morphology and syntax, is traditionally perceived to be fundamental in terms of producing and recognizing accurately formed utterances or sentences in accordance with the

set of principles of their assembling (CEF 112-113, Shulman "Knowledge and Teaching" 9). The qualities of that knowledge are related not only 'to the range and quality of knowledge' of an 'individual's communicative language competence' but also to how that knowledge is cognitively organized, stored and accessed (CEF 13).

**Acquisition and organization of grammatical content knowledge**

Because the article focuses on the specific group of EFL students – student teachers of EFL - who have experienced instructed EFL learning of a different quality for a substantial amount of their lives (English lessons are suggested to be offered as compulsory from the 3rd grade of the primary school, RVP ZV 143), the study is grounded in two models of second language acquisition: Lantolf's computational model of SLA and Vygotskian sociocultural theory, especially concept development, applying complementary not contradictory perspective in the article.

The computational model of SLA "views acquisition as taking place in the mind of learners as a result of attending to and processing the input that they are exposed to" (R. Ellis 33). Acquisition may be described with the help of Vygotsky's definition of concept development as the dynamic knowledge of spontaneous and scientific concepts, the former believed to "develop through own reflections on everyday experience" (Kozulin xxxi), implicitly from usage (N.C. Ellis, "At the interface" 306), being tacit, "unconscious" (Hulstijn 131), the latter typically learned in formal instructional contexts (Kozulin xxxi), being "systematic, hierarchical, and logical" (Worden 107), processing the input intentionally and consciously (Hulstijn 131). N.C. Ellis adds that "implicit and explicit knowledge are dissociable but cooperative" (305) because all cognitive tasks "language being no exception" include conscious and unconscious processes (Gass and Selinker 247). Therefore, "the ultimate goal of concept development then is for spontaneous and scientific concepts to become united into true concepts" (Worden 107).

So, EFL student teachers' grammatical content knowledge is for the purposes of the article defined as the amalgam of spontaneous and scientific concepts of English language morphosyntax, i.e. learners' implicit knowledge or ability to use morpohosyntax correctly in the discourse and verbalized explicit (or metalinguistic) knowledge (Bialystok 3) about morpohosyntax.

To provide conditions for grammatical content knowledge learning and development of EFL teachers in pre-service teaching programme, scholars agree it is inevitable to create appropriate learning opportunities (Crandall and Miller 632). The concept of learning opportunities describes and analyses learning and development in educational contexts, "is central for investigating the impact of teacher preparation on teacher learning" (König et al. "The Role of Opportunities 111), and linking opportunities to learn "to learning outcomes such as test scores of teacher knowledge supports the validity of interpreting relevant findings" (Floden, 2002; Messick, 1994 in König et al. "The Role of Opportunities 111).

**The study: Examining grammatical knowledge of English language student teachers related to opportunities to learn**

*Context of study*

In the University of Pardubice, the TEFL education is realized in the structured form of academic education, i.e. divided in the bachelor (English for Education) and follow-up master (English Language Teacher Education) degrees, in the Department of English and American

Studies (DEAS). The typical length of the bachelor's study programme is 3 years and some of the students then continue in the master study programme for two more years.

The general goal of the English for education bachelor study programme is to acquire fundamental domain-specific knowledge base for teaching, namely content knowledge in linguistically and literary-culturally oriented disciplines integrated with pedagogical content knowledge in educational sciences, psychology, pedagogy, and English language teaching methodology. The fundamental knowledge might be then defined as understanding and applying professional conceptual and metalinguistic (or metacognitive) knowledge in both Czech and English languages.

The uniqueness of performing teacher education under one department really enables to apply the model of integrative pre-service teacher education (Hanušová 11, 2005), where all the educators involved in professional disciplines offered in the department equally participate and are responsible for the pre-service teacher education. Because on September 1, 2016 the amendment of the act No. 111/1989 of universities, determining new ways of the study programmes system and accreditation processes, came into force, it was necessary for the DEAS educators to evaluate the quality of the existing programmes sufficiently soon enough to analyse the results and take necessary precautions to meet the newly arising requirements and standards imposed on pre-service teacher education. The article presents the results of the study, which was initially used for the evaluative purposes of the bachelor study programme in the accreditation process, and as the process ended successfully, it might be beneficial for the research community to obtain the insight of the study too.

*Research questions*

To examine whether pre-service English for Education study programme provides opportunities to learn and to develop students' EFL grammatical content knowledge, the article focuses on four research questions:

1. What components of communicative language competences (according to CEF) are addressed in the intended curriculum of the linguistic and communicative modules?

2. What aspects of linguistic competences are covered in the intended curriculum of the linguistic and communicative modules?

3. Are the addressed aspects of linguistic competences developed during the study, i.e. is there a positive relation between student teachers' grammatical knowledge at the beginning (the entrance exam scores) and at the end (final language proficiency exam scores) of their bachelor studies?

4. Does formal explicit instruction have any impact on the practical (implicit) use of English, i.e. is there a correlation in the morphology exam results (MFA2) and the (final) English language proficiency exam scores?

**Method**

Data were collected in 2014 for the departmental evaluative purposes in order to investigate EFL student teachers' opportunities to learn in the English for Education study programme in relation to their grammatical content knowledge. To get a deep insight in the quality of the study programme and its potential in providing opportunities to learn grammatical knowledge, the data were collected and analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

*Syllabi content analysis*

For the purposes of the study, only the syllabi of linguistic and communicative modules were analysed in detail as it was assumed that the linguistic module is likely to cover explicit instruction of scientific grammatical concepts more deeply while in the communicative module a spontaneous and implicit grammatical knowledge might be addressed more frequently. Concerning the content of the linguistic disciplines in the pre-service bachelor degree teacher education, it is primarily designed on the basis of the structuralistic perspective with sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences explicitly being focused on in the linguistic module in the follow-up master studies. The implicit development of sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge in the other modules, namely literature and culture modules, was intentionally excluded from the study. Furthermore, all the compulsory courses of the linguistic and communicative modules are taught in English, hence increasing the amount of learning opportunities with the extensive receptive input.

So, the sample of the syllabi intended for further detailed content analysis was made from the following compulsory courses (versions of the academic years 2012/13 and 2013/14):

a) linguistic module: Introduction to language studies (STJA), Phonetics and phonology (FONA), Morphology 1 (MFA1), Morphology 2 (MFA2), and Syntax 1 (SYN1);

b) communicative module: Language in use 1-4 (JAC1-4), Speaking skills 1, Presentation skills for teachers, and Writing skills 1-2.

Totally, five compulsory syllabi of the subjects in the linguistic and eight in the communicative modules were analysed. In the syllabi, the sections of aims, content and outcomes were surveyed to identify how and what components of communicative language competences are addressed in the intended curriculum of the selected courses (from the perspective of the rationale described in the article). The relevant lexical items (mainly adjectives, verbs and nouns) explicitly denoting categories of communicative language competences were categorised accordingly under the principles of open coding. If a lexical item denoting the category occurred in any of the syllabi parts, it was assumed that the whole course aims at the development of the identified concept.

Example of open coding (extract from JCA1, aim section, version 2013/14):

> *The aim of this course is the development of students' English language communicative competence in all its aspects - linguistic, pragmatic and strategic. Students will improve their skills to use English language effectively in its spoken and written form appropriately in the social context. The content covers the development of productive and receptive skills on the basis of the relevant subskills acquisition.* (Vzdělávací cíle oboru)

From the perspective of communicative language competences, the aims of the course are distinct, explicit metalanguage is used to identify the general aim of the course (*communicative competence* representing the holistic concept of language ability), partial aims (*linguistic, pragmatic and strategic aspects* explicitly cover individual competences)*,* ability to use language (*skills to use…effectively …in the spoken and written form... appropriately in the social context* target also at the pragmatic competence as well as *productive and receptive skills*)*,* and they focus explicitly on the linguistic competence (*the relevant subskills acquisition*).

However, in terms of knowledge acquisition or cognitive processes of learning there seem to be no explicit lexical clues which would identify those processes or describe opportunities in which they are likely to happen. It might be only tentatively induced from the statement that they happen in interaction (*use* of the language*)*, but how, still remains unclear. As the study

searched for the empirical evidence explicitly expressed in the curriculum, the category of knowledge types was therefore excluded from the syllabi analysis.

*Exam scores*

The connection between opportunities to learn and students' grammatical knowledge is examined as an outcome measure (see also König et al. "The Role of Opportunities" 113, 2017). Hence, the scores of the (final) English language proficiency exam (JAC4), typically done in the second year of the bachelor study (compulsory communicative module courses are taught in the first two years of the bachelor degree study) are compared with:

a) the initial proficiency tests (entrance exams) to explore if there is a positive relation between the initial and 'final' student teachers' grammatical knowledge, and

b) the linguistic knowledge (MFA2 exam done at the end of second year) to explore the impact of explicit morphosyntactical instruction on the student teachers' implicit grammatical knowledge.

The entrance and (final) English language proficiency tests are quasi standardized. The entrance test is done in the written form only and measures the initial acquired level of proficiency in English. The test includes listening and reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and cultural-literal sections. The (final) English language proficiency exam tests both spoken and written skills of learners, i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing, and selected lexical-grammatical subskills. MFA2 exam diagnoses and evaluates student teachers' morphosyntactical metalanguage knowledge, both in the spoken form. For the purposes of correlation, only the corresponding parts of the tests were compared, i.e. only those parts were language knowledge is tested either implicitly or explicitly and reflected in the written reactions of the student teachers (reading, listening and grammar) to reduce the risk of bias.

*Sample*

To compare the initial and final outcomes in terms of English proficiency and the impact of explicit instruction on the outcomes of learning, it was necessary to find a group of students who did their (final) English language proficiency exam in the same year in which they did their MFA2 exam to limit other intervening variables. Based on these criteria, only 19 students of English for Education bachelor study programme, who started their studies in the academic year of 2012/13, were considered relevant for the analysis.

**Findings and discussion**

**RQ1**

The results of the analysis of the lexical items used in the syllabi are summarized in Table 1 below.

| Language competence | Communicative module courses | | Linguistic module courses | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 12/13 | 13/14 | 12/13 | 13/14 |
| linguistic | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| sociolinguistic | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| pragmatic | 4 | 4 | 1 | 1 |

*Table 1: Syllabi analysis of the selected module courses*

All eight subjects of the communicative module include explicit metalanguage describing linguistic and pragmatic competences, almost the same holds true for sociolinguistic competences, which are not explicitly mentioned only in two courses out of eight. Therefore, the content analysis of the communicative module syllabi is likely to show that the planned intention of the educators is to cover all the aspects of communicative language competences in the instruction and that it is planned to facilitate the overall language knowledge development. Moreover, this happens in such courses where student teachers' are required to use the language in production.

The explicit metalanguage used in the selected linguistic module syllabi, which are oriented in their nature more morphosyntactically and scientifically (in the rationale of concept development), proved that in all five linguistic module subjects the emphasis is laid on such components of the communicative language competence that cover mainly morphological and syntactical, i.e. linguistic-receptive, aspects of the language knowledge.

**RQ2**

In the second analysis the communicative and linguistic module syllabi were surveyed to identify what categories of the linguistic competences (lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic) are intended to be developed in the bachelor teacher education programme. Graph 1 shows that there is only one aspect of the linguistic competences which is equally mentioned in both the communicative (two subjects) and linguistic (two subjects) modules – phonological competence. The second is grammatical knowledge, which is the most frequently mentioned competence in both modules (four communicative subjects and three linguistic subjects). The lowest occurrence and the biggest difference in terms of frequency is in the lexical competence, which is not addressed by the linguistic courses of the first two years of the bachelor study at all, but referred to in six communicative subjects. Semantic competence is believed to be developed in one communicative subject and three linguistic subjects. The last category of orthographic and orthoepic competence is planned to be focused on in four communicative and one linguistic subjects.
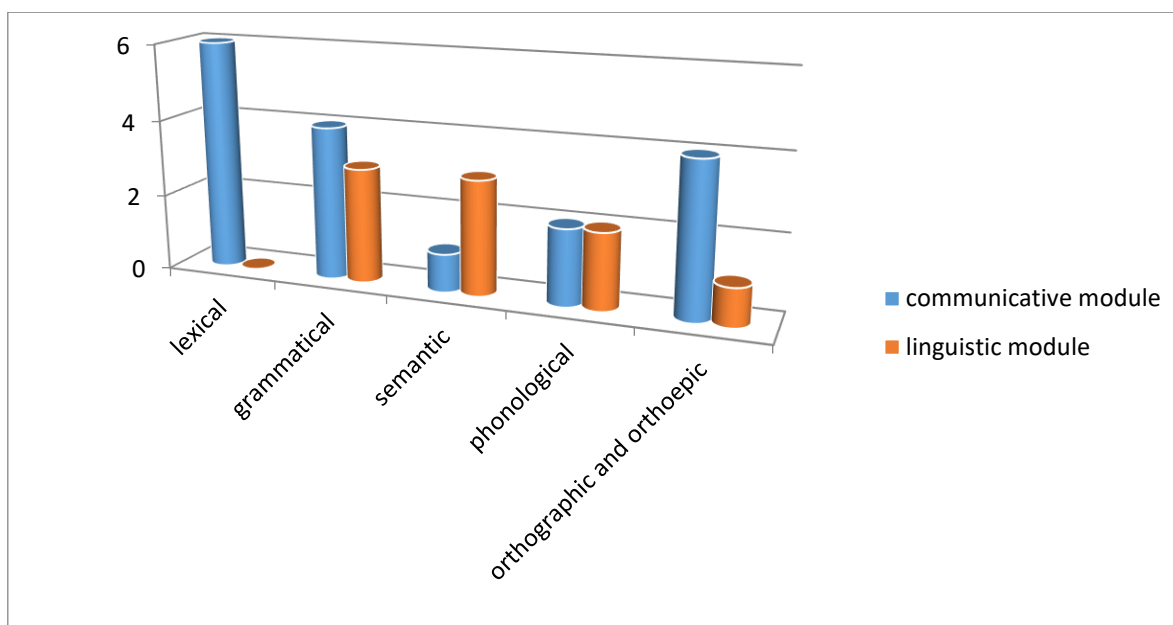
*Graph 1: Syllabi analysis of the courses in the selected modules from the perspective of linguistic competences (based on the frequency of metalanguage terms used in individual subjects)*

Therefore, it implies not only that the grammatical knowledge is almost equally represented in the explicit (formal) instruction but also that students have enough opportunities to use that knowledge in the language production, which stimulates their implicit learning.

If equal attention in the formal and practical disciplines of the discussed study programme is devoted to grammatical competences in the intended syllabi, it can be assumed that the interface of knowledge in that specific aspect of communicative language competences would be the strong one. Based on the findings of the syllabi analysis, the next phase of the study concentrated on measuring the impact of explicit instruction on the grammatical knowledge of students.

## RQ3

As it was assumed the student teachers would have better results in all aspects of communicative competence in the (final) English language proficiency exam than the results they had when entering the studies, it was necessary to identify if there is any correlation and if any, whether it represents statistically significant relation. Based on this assumption, a null and alternative hypotheses are formed:

$H_0$ = Students' scores in all the selected aspects of communicative language competence in the (final) English language proficiency exam (2014) in English are the same as their scores in the entrance exam (2012).

$H_A$ = Students' scores in the (final) English language proficiency exam (2014) are better in all the selected aspects of communicative language competence than their scores in the entrance exam (2012).

| | | Entrance exam | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Exam in English language proficiency* | | *Listening* | *Reading* | *Grammar* |
| | *Listening* | ***0,002309*** | *0,344418* | *0,282084* |
| | *Reading* | *0,128167* | *0,116641* | *0,480652* |
| | *Grammar* | *0,08409* | *0,201532* | *0,476631* |

*Table 2: Correlation of the selected aspects of communicative language competences: p-value (1% significance level)*

The results in Table 2 show that the only statistically significant correlation is identified in listening (p-value = 0,002309), where p-value is smaller than α therefore a null hypothesis (no difference in results) must be rejected for this skill and the alternative claiming that there is a difference between the initial level and the final of proficiency in English is accepted.

One of the possible explanations of these findings is that due to the character of the study programme, conducted primarily in English, listening as a receptive skill is present in almost all subjects, no matter what module is concerned and thus its development might be enhanced the most. The results are also partially in alignment with de Jong's research (in Gass and Selinker 248), who found out that practising aural comprehension might promote greater speed in comprehension.

However, the other correlations in the language knowledge (positive) progress, including grammatical knowledge, are statistically insignificant and thus the null hypothesis cannot be rejected for them. Accepting or rejecting the above mentioned hypotheses concerns only the existence of relation between the entrance exam and the (final) English language proficiency exam but it does not express the quality of that relation.

## RQ4

It was also supposed in the study that the student teachers' scientific grammatical knowledge enhanced by explicit instruction might influence their implicit use of grammar. To explore that phenomenon, the linguistic module MFA2 assessments and the use of language scores in the (final) English language proficiency exam were correlated. The hypotheses were set up as follows:

$H_0$= Students' metalanguage knowledge (MFA2 exam results, 2014), is not reflected in their use of language in the grammatical part of English language proficiency exam (2014).

$H_A$= Students' metalanguage knowledge (MFA2 exam results, 2014), is reflected in their use of language in the grammatical part of English language proficiency exam (2014).

To identify whether there is any impact of the explicit metalanguage instruction on the ability of the student teachers' to use grammar correctly, the MFA2 oral assessment of 19 students expressed in marks was statistically correlated with students' scores in the grammatical part of the JAC4 (final) proficiency exam. Again, the result of that correlation is not statistically significant (p-value on 1% significance level is 0.800214, i.e. p-value is larger) and therefore the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Based on the findings it might be assumed that in the context of formal education of the particular study programme the explicit form-focused instruction in the morphology courses is not implicitly reflected in learners' ability to use their grammatical knowledge in language production. This may be, of course, affected by many other variables, e.g. different format of testing, instruction provided, selected aspects of communicative competences, etc.

So, the findings are likely to signify the controversy in the results obtained from the content analysis and from the correlation of exam scores. The intended curriculum of the selected subjects might suggest student teachers are provided enough opportunities to learn and acquire both the scientific and spontaneous language concepts, however, the results of the attained curriculum may indicate there is no impact of the explicit instruction, at least in the category of grammatical knowledge. Some of the researches are also rather sceptical about the impact of teacher education (Freeman, 222 and R. Ellis 22). Freeman suggests (222) a shift in research is necessary and he suggests to start examining learners' perceptions on actions rather than those actions.

**Conclusion**

Some of the findings of the study may be perceived as contradictory in terms of language concept acquisition from the diachronic and synchronic views, on the other hand those discrepancies may be seen as challenging not only for future research, but also for teacher educators. In order to obtain plausible findings and deeper understanding of explicit scientific and implicit spontaneous grammatical, or language, knowledge, it is suggested to explore the topic with the use of more research methods and techniques of data collection to identify learning/teaching processes in terms of the interface of knowledge types and variables influencing the interface of language knowledge types in the context of formal education, to describe their relations, explore causalities, patterns and dependencies.

Despite the limitations of the study (sample size, measuring knowledge as an outcome product, not taking into consideration the realized curriculum, etc.), there are some reasons for which it can be valued. One of the assets of the study is for those who teach and plan the relevant study programme courses since the syllabi analysis of the subjects revealed that almost in all the communicative module subjects the overall development of communicative competence is strongly supported. On the other hand, amendments of content facilitating opportunities to learn and acquire are necessary to be done in the individual subjects and disciplines to make them more compatible and interactive to cause changes in student teachers' knowledge.

The aim of the study was to explore the role and importance of pre-service teacher education and its impact on the student teachers' knowledge. Even though there does not exist agreement between authors in terms how to approach different types of knowledge in instruction, not to speak about student teacher education, if the article claims teachers should understand the content they teach and if content knowledge could be seen as a dynamic concept which can be

facilitated in teacher education programmes, the topic needs to be discussed and conceptualized to provide student teachers real opportunities to learn even at the beginning of their professional path. The results of the study may then serve as a starting point in the evaluative processes of pre-service teacher education.

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