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## Developing didactic competencies among English language primary school teachers in Poland: Insights from experienced educators

### Summary

This article examines the development of didactic competencies among English language teachers in Poland, particularly those working with young learners through CLIL, EMI, and immersion methods. The main aim of this study was to identify and explore how experienced teachers perceive the key elements that support professional development of novice teachers, and what kind of support could be provided for them. Using a quantitative approach, the study surveyed experienced teachers (n=149) across all Polish voivodeships. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, combining both closed- and open-ended questions. Gathered answers were analyzed using frequency and thematic analysis to identify recurring trends. Findings reveal persistent gaps in initial teacher support, especially in mentoring and methodological preparation. Participation in professional development courses, collaboration with experienced colleagues, and classroom observation were cited as crucial for building competencies. Conversely, challenges included a lack of effective mentorship, limited access to quality materials, and insufficient practical training during university studies. The study highlights the need for structured mentoring programs and targeted professional development opportunities, such as workshops, webinars, and international exchanges, to better support novice English teachers.

**Keywords:** didactic competencies, professional development, English language teachers, teacher education in Poland, mentoring, CLIL

### Introduction

Teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should consistently acquire new knowledge and skills. Research about teachers' professional development (PD) has led to several

projects that have modified the way *how* and *what* we think about it (Yuan & Lo, 2023). Effective PD programs are essential to foster teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes. Evolving models of teacher development also underline the importance of language teachers, whose PD is linked to the broader educational and societal concepts.

Communication in multiple languages is a basic competence, and English has become a new *lingua franca*. Second language acquisition goes parallel to obtaining language skills in the mother tongue. Schools continue to adapt to new global realities and technological advancements; the role of a teacher becomes increasingly complex. English teachers – especially those working within diverse models such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), and immersion – face challenges that demand not only linguistic, but subject competence. In everyday understanding, both internationally and in Poland, the above-mentioned terms are often used interchangeably or mistakenly treated as synonyms. It is therefore important to briefly clarify the distinction. In the literature, CLIL is defined as a dual focus of teaching subject content and a non-native language, while content-based instruction (CBI) focuses on content-driven instruction with English as a vehicle; immersion, in turn, involves teaching almost exclusively through a second language (Coyle et al., 2010; Szpotowicz & Szulc-Kurpaska, 2009). Currently, English teachers are expected not only to deliver language but also content knowledge, develop students' critical thinking, creativity, and social-emotional skills in response to the dynamic needs of contemporary society (Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021).

Teachers all over the world are faced with unique challenges and expectations that shape their didactic competencies. Gordon (1991) highlights factors that influence effective teaching, the most important being addressing students' individual needs, abilities, and problems, communicating with coworkers (including administrators and supervisors), and communicating with parents. Smoleń & Borkowska (2024) point out challenges for English teachers in Poland, which are divided into three categories: 1) students' difficulties, 2) teachers' difficulties, and 3) others. The problems concerning the teachers are related to their lack of teaching experience, insufficient pedagogical training, low English comprehension, and lack of administrative support. Still, some challenges are universal for both novice and veteran teachers as they adapt to continuous changes, student diversity, and technology development (Swallow & Olofson, 2017).

This article primarily focuses on the professional development (PD) of English elementary school teachers in Poland, particularly those engaged in CLIL, EMI, and immersion approaches, to provide insights for support systems for novice teachers from the perspective of experienced teachers' professional growth.

### Theoretical framework and rationale for this study

The concept of development encompasses a complex and often ambiguous process that provides for economic, social, political, technological, and cultural dimensions (Sumner & Tribe, 2008; Trempala, 2020). One common perspective frames development as a long-term structural transformation of society, focusing on historical processes and deep shifts in socio-economic structures. In contrast, another approach defines development in terms of short- to medium-term goals, such as poverty reduction. Lifespan developmental psychology conceptualizes human development as a dynamic and continuous process, emphasizing qualitative transformations shaped by individual life events, social roles, and context (Trempała, 2020). Adult development is marked by autonomy and responsibility, independence, and a high degree of responsibility, as well as emotional maturity (Newman et al., 2024; Trempała, 2020).

Lifelong learning and PD have been the subject of extensive research, with numerous studies examining various aspects of this expansive field. According to the Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications (European Commission, 2005), teachers' education and teachers' PD are viewed as a lifelong process (Cropley & Knapper, 2021; Lo, 2020; McDougald, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. This includes the initial teacher training, ongoing professional learning, and continuous career progression. Reviewing the research on teachers' PD, one might encounter a wide variety of models, including Guskey's model (Guskey, 2002, 2003), which highlights the importance of measuring PD outcomes across multiple levels, from teacher satisfaction to student achievement. These models provide a comprehensive view of PD as a process that is not only about acquiring new knowledge but also about fostering collaborative learning and reflective practices. The concept of cognitive apprenticeship (CAS), outlined by Dennen and Burner (2008), serves as a valuable framework in mentoring relationships for novice teachers. That framework refers to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky (1978).

Additionally, the theory formulated by Labouvie-Vief (2015) about adult cognitive development introduces the concept of postformal thoughts. According to that theory, development is a lifelong process, and the overarching goal is to achieve autonomy and self-realization, which might be important for teachers to promote effective education (e.g., Bergh, 2015). PD programs are crucial for novice teachers

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<sup>1</sup> The report from the Institut Jacques Delors: <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/towards-and-individual-right-to-adult-learning-for-all-europeans-2/> access: 25.10.2025. Additionally, in this place, it is worth mentioning other publications like The Faure report from 1972 and The Delors Report from 1989.

to bridge the gaps between what they have learnt and what is required in their institutions.

### **Teachers' professional development – Ideas, problems, needs, and strategies**

Teachers' PD has become a central topic in educational research, emphasizing continuous growth and lifelong learning (Equals Framework for Language Teacher Training and Development Online, 2020 – The Teacher as Professional). Avalos (2011) defines PD as “teachers learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students' growth” (p. 10). Many studies have explored the concept of teacher development and “change” (Avalos, 2011; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Korthagen, 2004; Snow-Gerono, 2008; Vermunt & Endedijk, 2011), focusing on how teachers evolve through training, adapting to new conditions, and engaging in continuous growth. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) describe six perspectives on teacher change, emphasizing the processes of training, reform initiation, systemic changes, and ongoing professional development. Research cited by Avalos (2011) further explores the personal processes involved in teaching and the different formats for PD, such as workshops and models of teacher learning.

The need to bridge gaps in pre-service English teacher training is widely acknowledged by several researchers (Lorenzo et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2015; Pérez Cañado, 2018; Zein, 2016), particularly in the context of CLIL and bilingual teaching. Lo (2020) highlights that a variety of PD programs can influence teachers' beliefs and practices. Additionally, frameworks such as the SIOP model, Cammarata's framework, or Lyster's CAPA are recommended for CLIL teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills.

However, some studies pointed out the limitations of certain PD programs (Guskey, 1986; Yuan & Lo, 2023). Failures often stem from an overreliance on the deficit model approach (Guskey, 1986), one-time workshops (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991), and the lack of teacher agency and contextual learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Many PD programs are criticized for being outdated, passive, or one-size-fits-all, which diminishes their effectiveness (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). As Zein (2016) notes, rural teachers, in particular, often lack access to rigorous PD programs, a gap that exacerbates disparities in teacher development. The lack of personalization in PD programs further limits their impact (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Eksi & Aydın, 2013). Addressing these challenges requires PD programs that are tailored to the unique contexts and needs of teachers. PD should be more accessible, particularly for teachers in rural areas or schools with limited resources (Kopeć, 2013; Zein, 2016). Furthermore, training in new technologies is

crucial for English Language Teaching (ELT) (Cinganotto, 2017; Eksi & Aydın, 2013), like the eTwinning program, which facilitates cross-border collaboration (Yuan & Lo, 2023). The digital competencies of teachers are a growing focus within the research on teacher development (Maziarz, 2020).

Collaborative PD is another crucial theme in the literature. Researchers like Avalos (2011) and Diaz-Maggioli (2003) advocate for collaborative approaches to PD, where teachers refine their practices through ongoing dialogue and shared learning. While workshops and seminars remain common for CLIL teachers, Eksi and Capa Aydın (2013) suggest these should focus more on practical applications rather than theoretical content. Mentoring is another critical element of PD, particularly for novice teachers (Avalos, 2011; Diaz-Maggioli, 2003), though Brzosko-Barratt's (2023) study shows it is less popular among English teachers in Poland. Despite this, mentoring remains essential, especially for new teachers seeking more personalized support. Research on long-term training programs, like those examined by Cammarata and Haley (2018) in Canada, suggests that mentoring can be highly effective, particularly in areas such as co-planning, reflection, and feedback. Collaborative practices such as teacher co-learning, peer coaching, and study groups have also been identified as important for fostering professional growth (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003; Thorn et al., 2007).

Additionally, teacher portfolios provide a comprehensive means for teachers to document their practices, offering opportunities for self-reflection and feedback (Edgerton et al., 1991; Seldin, 1993). Action research and teacher-researcher partnerships are also recognized as effective strategies for PD, encouraging teachers to reflect on and improve their practice. According to several researchers (Day, 2002; McArdle & Coutts, 2010), PD within the lifelong learning paradigm should promote shared sense-making and collaborative reflection. Teachers engaged in continuous PD are encouraged to adopt models that foster joint action for change, which can significantly impact their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (McDougald, 2023).

Yuan and Lo (2023) listed 12 PD programs for CLIL teachers globally. In addition to that list, other full-time master's programs focusing on Teaching English to Young Learners are also available internationally. It was designed to prepare educators for teaching English to children in preschool and early primary school settings (grades 1–3). The curriculum integrates theoretical knowledge with practical experience, emphasizing CLIL methodologies. In Poland, PD for in-service English teachers, including those in CLIL programs, is a critical aspect of career advancement, as it not only supports teachers' linguistic and methodological growth, but also fosters collaboration and professional networking.

Mentoring has gained attention as a strategy for teacher development, particularly for pre-service teachers (Rzońca & Madalińska-Michalak, 2024). However,

despite the availability of various PD models, there is limited research on how these apply specifically to English teachers at the elementary level in Poland. McDougald (2023) advocates for PD programs not only for CLIL educators but for all teachers, encouraging the inclusion of 21st-century skills and competencies. Collaborative partnerships between in-service teachers and researchers are seen as essential for fostering meaningful, practice-oriented PD. In response to this, my doctoral project aims to establish a mentoring group for early-stage CLIL teachers, providing a collaborative space to support the development of didactic competencies.

### Competence – definitions

Looking at the etymology of the word *competence*, in the Latin language *compētō*, it means *to be able to do* (Kumaniecki, 1983, p. 102). However, Filipowicz (2024) gives examples of *competentia* and *competere* and refers to the explanation of *responsibility*, *compatibility*, and *readiness to do something*. The roots of competence theory can be traced to management theories by McClelland and Boyatzis, who emphasized behaviors over traditional IQ metrics (Boyatzis, 2008; Day, 2002; Filipowicz, 2024). Boyatzis expands the concept of competence into three levels: personality traits, modifiable levels of adopted social roles, and ease of development of a set of skills. The term *competence* implies possessing the necessary skills and knowledge and being adequately equipped to perform tasks within a particular domain. Polish researchers define *competence* as a multifaceted concept with various interpretations in pedagogical literature. It is understood as the ability for personal self-realization as a result of the learning process, the ability to do something, the ability to demonstrate behavior, awareness of its consequences, and responsibility for actions (Dylak, 1995; Kopaliński, 2007; Okoń, 1987). Dylak (1995) distinguishes three categories of teachers' professional competence: basic, related to effective communication and social functioning; essential, which enable the fulfillment of educational tasks; and desirable, which extend a teacher's professional profile. On the other hand, Kopaliński (2007) defines competence in normative and functional terms, highlighting qualifications and the capacity to act. In contrast, Okoń (1987) claims that competence is the ability for personal fulfilment and is regarded as a result of learning. Despite these different perspectives, provided definitions are the basis for contemporary attempts to define competence holistically.

Competence is thus defined holistically as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. define competence holistically as knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. There is a growing interest in providing the most appropriate definition of the term competence; however, there is still a lack of a precise definition. Looking at the definitions formulated inter alia by Chisholm (2005), UNESCO (2016), CDC

(2016) and Witkowski (in CEO, 2022), a certain pattern of what competence is begins to emerge. Competence can be understood as the ability and readiness to apply skills and knowledge in different contexts. The commonly known acronym KSA of competence encompasses knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Badea et al., 2015); however, the Council of Europe (2016) and later the OECD (2019) in the Learning Compass 2030 define competence as KSAV: knowledge and critical understanding, skills, attitudes, and values – this definition is broadly used in the European Union environment, and it serves as a foundation for formulating the concept of what competencies are. The European Training Strategy (ETS) competence model defines competencies as attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

The two frameworks, the competence model for youth workers and the EU's eight key competences for lifelong learning, have overlapping goals but differ in their scope and focus. Both frameworks share a strong emphasis on PD, intercultural sensitivity, communication, and civic engagement. The EU framework caters to a broader audience, emphasizing STEM, digital skills, and entrepreneurship, whereas the youth worker model is more specialized, focusing on practical skills for facilitating and managing youth programs.

### **English teacher competencies**

The topic of teacher competencies is an important subject addressed by many researchers. According to Gu (1986, cited in Cheng et al., 2024, p. 8), there is no standardized definition of teacher competencies. Competence can be defined in psychological, pedagogical, or sociological terms. Teachers with knowledge of psychological assumptions can prepare effective and adequate teaching aims and objectives (Cheng et al., 2024). Shulman (1986) highlights the multidimensionality of a teacher between content, pedagogical content, and general pedagogical knowledge. In his other work (Shulman, 1987), he pointed out seven areas of teachers' knowledge, including: (1) pedagogical knowledge, (2) knowledge of learners, (3) educational context, (4) educational philosophy, (5) curriculum knowledge, (6) content knowledge, and (7) pedagogical content knowledge. Moreover, pedagogical competencies are about passing knowledge of taught content and the ability to use effective teaching methods, support and motivate students, respond to their needs, and create a safe learning environment (Berliner & Calfee, 2013). Owing to the distinctive nature of the profession, teachers' competencies are aligned with the teacher's role in the classroom environments when monitoring students' knowledge, conducting evaluations, and assessing learning outcomes (Jentsch & König, 2022). Johnston and Goettsch (2000) outlined content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of learners.

Goodnough and Hung (2009) elicit other necessary skills such as knowledge of classroom management, human development, and curricular goals. Of the aforementioned competencies, didactic competencies in language education are pivotal in fostering student engagement and effective learning. For English language teachers, it is essential to add additional competencies: a strong understanding of language acquisition theories (e.g., theory by Chomsky) (Bokus, 2007) and a methodology for teaching English (Szpotowicz & Szulc-Kurpaska, 2009), as these are crucial for effective teaching of language-specific skills and supporting diverse language learning needs.

Additionally, English language teachers should be proficient in various teaching methodologies such as CBI, CLIL, immersion, Total Physical Response (TPR), or EMI. These approaches might be essential for addressing the diverse needs of learners, enhancing their language skills, or integrating content knowledge. According to Brzosko-Barratt (2023), bilingual teachers may face challenges in developing both content and language skills. Several studies (Lorenzo et al., 2010; Pérez Cañado, 2018; Pladevall-Ballester, 2015) have shown that insufficient language competence affects the way bilingual education is delivered. Teacher educational institutions often fail to address the integration of content and language adequately, as they do not include dual-focused learning in their curricula.

The Common European Principles for Teachers' Competences and Qualifications provide guidelines on how to modify educational programs. The document enumerates common principles: (1) a well-qualified profession, (2) a profession placed within the context of lifelong learning, (3) a mobile profession, and (4) a profession based on partnerships. Furthermore, key competencies are mentioned for the teachers' profession: teachers should be able to cooperate and work with others, work with knowledge, technology, and information, and work with and in a society (European Commission, 2010, pp. 3–4). For a better understanding of didactic competencies of English teachers, it is worthwhile referring to the Equals Training & Development (TD) framework (Equals, 2024) (but there are many more frameworks to refer to, such as EPOSTL, European Profile for Language Teacher Education, The European Profile Grid, Cambridge English Teacher Framework, and Common Framework – Teaching Competences). This framework is a guideline for English language teachers, with a description of developmental phases and recommended knowledge and skills. Equals TD Framework encompasses five main competencies: planning, teaching and learning; teaching and supporting learning; assessment of learning; language, communication, and culture; and teacher as a professional. Other frameworks emphasize collaboration, promoting social justice, and promoting health and well-being.

There are several frameworks which represent core competences for CLIL teachers, such as *CLIL Teacher's Competence Grid* (Bertaux, Coonan, Frigols-Martín & Mehisto, 2010) and *European Framework for CLIL Teacher Education* (Marsh, Mehisto, Wolff, & Frigols-Martín, 2010). Some aspects of those frameworks highlight the importance of understanding key elements of CLIL, knowledge of teaching and integrating content and language, didactic skills (like planning lessons), and promoting intercultural mindedness.

Taking into account the perspectives discussed above, I conceptualize in-service English teachers' didactic competencies as a set of professional skills and knowledge of planning, delivering, and assessing content and language. These competencies involve the ability to integrate language and content learning, apply pedagogical strategies aligned with learners' needs and contexts, foster student engagement, and reflect critically on their practice to promote continuous professional growth.

To conclude, effective professional development for English teachers must be responsive to the diverse needs, contexts, and evolving roles of educators. Research consistently highlights that successful PD programs are those tailored to teachers' specific circumstances – integrating personalized learning, collaborative practices, and opportunities for ongoing reflection. Highly developed didactic competencies might influence learners and their learning. For English teachers to develop strong didactic competencies, the PD programs need access to flexible, context-sensitive training that evolves alongside the shifting demands of the educational landscape. Grounding professional development in the principles of lifelong learning allows teachers to continually expand and refine their knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (OECD, 2019). In a time of rapid educational change, such an approach is not just beneficial but necessary for ensuring that teachers remain adaptive and effective. Moreover, fostering a culture of collaboration and sustained professional engagement empowers educators to continuously improve their practice and better meet the diverse needs of their students.

### Methodology

This study forms part of a doctoral research project on developing didactic competencies among early childhood English language teachers in Poland, including those using CLIL. It focuses on veteran teachers to identify factors influencing their professional growth. The Polish context is particularly relevant due to recent reforms, rising demand for early English instruction, and the growing role of integrated language approaches like CLIL. Despite these advancements, systemic issues

persist – such as limited support for novice teachers, inconsistent mentoring, and gaps in pedagogical preparation. Exploring veteran teachers' experiences offers valuable insights into how didactic competencies evolve within Polish schools, informing more effective support systems for novice educators in similar multilingual and post-transition contexts.

### *Research approach and objectives*

This study employs a quantitative research design to collect structured data from experienced English language teachers in Poland, aiming to explore their perspectives on effective developmental practices and professional resources. The main objective is to provide insights that can inform support systems for novice teachers by identifying which forms of professional development were most beneficial and preferred by experienced teachers at the beginning of their careers. Informed by the theoretical model of teacher change (e.g. Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Vermunt & Endedijk, 2011) and supported by empirical insights (Dobkowska et al., 2024; Lo, 2020; Rzońca & Madalińska-Michalak, 2024; Yuan & Lo, 2023). The quantitative approach was chosen to capture the breadth and diversity of teachers' perspectives across Poland and to identify generalizable patterns in their professional experiences. Specifically, the study investigates the interrelations between external professional stimuli and personal reflection in shaping teachers' didactic competencies, drawing on their reported experiences and perceptions. Such a design allows for systematic comparison between subgroups of teachers (e.g., CLIL, CBI, immersion), which would not be possible in a small-scale qualitative study.

This study focuses on the experiences and reflections of experienced teachers to better understand how various forms of professional support may contribute to the early stages of English teachers' professional growth. Accordingly, the research addressed the following main research question: What factors influence the development of didactic competencies among English language teachers in Poland? More specifically, the study examined: (1) what forms of professional support are most commonly utilized by English teachers at the beginning of their careers; (2) what factors teachers with varying levels of experience identify as having the greatest impact on the development of their didactic competencies; (3) what barriers English teachers encounter in developing their didactic competencies during their initial years of teaching; and (4) what forms of support experienced English teachers recommend for novice teachers to enhance the effective development of their didactic competencies.

### *Study participants*

The sample consisted of 149 experienced English language primary school teachers in Poland, all of whom had a minimum of six years of professional experience. This threshold was established based on research indicating that the first five years of teaching are typically the most challenging and associated with the highest attrition rates among novice teachers. According to Dobkowska et al. (2024), many Polish teachers leave the profession within this early career stage, whereas those who remain beyond it tend to have developed stable professional identities and teaching practices.

The invitation to participate in the study was distributed directly to school principals, who were asked to forward it only to teachers meeting the inclusion criterion of at least six years of professional experience in elementary education. The participants self-reported their years of experience, which were verified through their professional qualifications (e.g., appointed teacher – *nauczyciel mianowany* or chartered teacher – *nauczyciel dyplomowany*), ensuring that all respondents possessed sufficient experience to reflect meaningfully on the long-term development of their didactic competencies. The participants' qualifications were consistent with national standards and ministerial requirements for teaching positions in primary education. The majority of participants identified as women (90.9%), with a smaller proportion identifying as men (9.1%). The respondents, focusing on early childhood and primary education (grades 1–3), offered a comprehensive view of English language teaching contexts across all Polish voivodeships.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Data were collected using a Google Forms online questionnaire, administered in October and November 2024. Before distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed for content validity by a PhD holder in social sciences (specializing in economics) with expertise in market research. The expert provided feedback on the clarity, structure, and relevance of the items. The tool was then pilot-tested with four experienced teachers to assess its comprehensibility and usability. Minor modifications were made in response to this feedback.

The survey was designed to gather both demographic and professional information. The first section included four questions on the development of didactic competencies (two multiple-choice and two open-ended), followed by four questions regarding participants' professional background and development experiences. For multiple-choice participants were asked to choose up to three options per question (from fourteen given options), and the online form was programmed to restrict

additional selections beyond this limit. In addition, an open “other” category was provided, allowing participants to mention additional forms of PD.

Additional demographic data – such as gender, education level, school type, and voivodeship – were also collected.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2021, which enabled frequency analysis for the closed-ended questions, reported in percentages (%). For the qualitative component, thematic analysis of the open-ended responses was conducted using Atlas.ti software, which facilitated the identification of key themes and insights relevant to the study’s research questions.

### *Ethical aspects of the study*

The study was conducted in compliance with GDPR guidelines. All collected data was securely stored and used solely for research purposes, with strict adherence to ethical standards. For research purposes, I obtained permission from the Ethical Commission with the number 2024/4.

## **Findings**

### *Participants*

In the online survey, 61% of responders were English language teachers, 25% were CLIL teachers, 10% CBI teachers, and 4% were immersion teachers. This distinction was made to capture potential differences in the didactic approaches and PD experiences or needs of teachers working within these varied instructional contexts. It shows that in Poland, the traditional method of teaching English (Komorowska, 2013) to young learners is still the most popular, which refers to a language-focused approach in which English is taught as a separate school subject, with an emphasis on vocabulary, grammar, and the four language skills rather than on integrating content from other disciplines. Out of all participants, 83.2% work as English teachers at public schools, 10.1% work as English teachers in private schools, 4.9% run their own language school, 1.8% have quit the profession, and their answers were excluded from the data analysis. Most of the teachers had graduated from the Institute of English Studies (51%), University College of English Language Teacher Education (22%), Faculty of Education (21%), and Applied Linguistics (2%). Those faculties provide high language preparation, but only at the Faculty of Education, pre-service teachers are offered the cross-curriculum program for teaching additional language and content for elementary education. The rest of the participants graduated from content studies (mostly STEM education), and they possess an English certificate.

### *Factors supporting the development of didactic competencies*

In the next step of the analysis, I examined the responses related to the factors that supported the development of didactic competencies among experienced English language teachers. The analysis of open-ended responses revealed several recurring themes. Teachers most frequently cited participation in professional development courses or workshops (67 responses), cooperation with a mentor (39 responses), support from more experienced colleagues (15 responses), and the opportunity to observe other teachers' classes (17 responses). Several teachers reported that taking part in a teacher exchange, job-shadowing, or Erasmus+ project was vulnerable for their development (T13; T44; T52; T87; T123), e.g., "*observation of another teacher's lesson international internships/job shadowing/observation of teachers in Scandinavian countries, the UK, and the USA*". For other teachers, work and practice were most effective in developing didactic competences (T16; T23; T48; T102; T137). Finally, teachers also noted that their professional development was closely tied to their initial teaching experiences, personal beliefs about education, and professional attitudes. This aligns with (McDougald, 2023) observation regarding the role of internal factors in shaping how CLIL educators engage in the classroom, highlighting that teachers' beliefs significantly influence the implementation of the CLIL approach. Moreover, these findings can also be understood within the broader competence framework, which was introduced above (Eaquals, 2024; Filipowicz, 2024; OECD, 2019). Didactic competences as a multidimensional concept link knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, and can be developed through diverse forms of professional engagement.

### *Perceived gaps in early career support*

Next, I analyzed the responses related to the perceived gaps and challenges that English teachers encountered at the beginning of their professional journey. In contrast to the previous question, there are significant discrepancies in the responses. Even though some teachers answered that cooperation with a mentor or a more experienced teacher was crucial, the majority of the veteran English teachers highlighted a lack of professional support. A recurring theme among the respondents was the lack of adequate mentorship during the initial stages of their teaching careers. T22 reported, *there was a lack of mentor support. I was thrown into the deep end*. Similarly, T38 emphasized the absence of guidance, stating that *there was no help from experienced teachers, no ideas from them, no support of any kind – I was thrown into the deep end and left to fend for myself. I managed to cope, but I know many young teachers who couldn't*. This sentiment was echoed by T65, who highlighted the limited opportunities for practical observation:

*The opportunity to observe a mentor teacher working with a group of children. I gained a lot of theoretical knowledge, but I lacked the opportunity to 'see' this knowledge in practice. Beginning teachers often don't have enough chances to observe another teacher or mentor in action, to see how certain methods, techniques, and tools are used.*

Furthermore, T123 pointed to the need for *an appropriate mentor who had the time, resources, and willingness*. Following the category of didactic resources and its subcategories emerged from the survey: lack of teaching materials (books, course books, teacher's guidelines) and digital tools with multimedia access. The same issue was noticed, e.g., by Ball (2018), and due to the diversity of the CLIL approach, it is almost impossible to apply one universal teaching materials. The veteran teachers enumerated a lack of pedagogical preparation for working in the profession, specifically, a lack of practical knowledge about the realities of the Polish public school system gained during their studies. They pointed to the absence of methodology and didactics grounded in the Polish educational context. As T72 noted, *the didactics taught at university are suitable for language schools, but not for public schools, as they fail to equip graduates with essential skills in classroom management or student guidance*. Additionally, veteran teachers highlighted the lack of methodological support for lesson planning, stating that creating such materials independently is time-consuming, especially at the beginning of one's teaching career. They also pointed to a lack of experience in working with students with diverse educational needs and to a limited understanding of English language teaching methodology. Many felt overwhelmed by bureaucratic demands early in their careers, as well as by the necessity of producing their teaching materials. Teachers also identified several barriers to professional growth. Without institutional support, these demands often led to significant financial burdens, covered primarily by their resources.

#### ***Support that would have been beneficial at the beginning of a teaching career***

Reflecting on their early years in the profession, many teachers noted specific types of support that would have been beneficial at the beginning. The term early years of teaching refers to the initial five years of professional experience. The results showed that mentor support (105 responses) was by far the most commonly declared aspect contributing to the development of didactic competencies at the start of the respondents' careers. Other frequently mentioned aspects included access to better materials and teaching resources (60 responses), participation in courses (57 responses), individual work with a methodologist (55 responses), participation in thematic webinars (53 responses), better multimedia equipment (48 responses), and participation in international conferences (45 responses). With noticeably lower frequency, respondents indicated coach support (31 responses)

and participation in national conferences (24 responses). The least frequently mentioned aspects were postgraduate subject studies (16 responses), language courses (15 responses), and postgraduate internships (12 responses).

Detailed distributions of responses are illustrated in Figure 1.

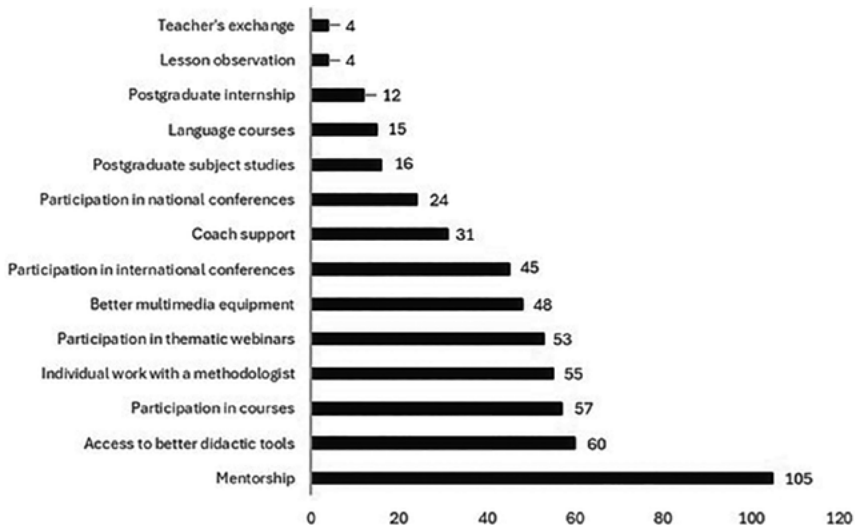


Figure 1. Number of responses indicating types of support that would have been beneficial at the beginning of a teaching career (multiple responses allowed).

### *Recommended forms of support for novice teachers*

In the final step of the analysis, I examined the forms of support that English teachers recommend for young teachers to facilitate more effective development of didactic competencies. To this end, a frequency analysis was conducted on responses to the question of what types of support, from the respondents' perspective, they would recommend to young teachers to better develop their didactic competencies. Respondents were allowed to pick more than three answers. The results indicated that mentor support (69.8%) was by far the most frequently recommended form of support for young teachers to develop competencies more effectively. While Brzosko-Barratt's (2023) study indicated that only 10% of CLIL teachers preferred mentoring for professional development, the current findings emphasize its crucial role. Mentoring was the most frequently recommended and sought-after form of PD. Participants reported that having experienced mentors significantly improved their didactic skills, confirming the value of personalized guidance and constructive feedback in enhancing teaching competence (Clutterbuck, 2014; Lo, 2020; Yuan & Lo, 2023). While mentoring is mandatory for novice

teachers in their first year, a more intentional and thoughtful process of selecting mentors is needed, rather than leaving it to chance.

Other frequently mentioned aspects included participation in thematic webinars (62.4%), courses (51.7%), access to better materials and teaching resources (47.0%), access to digital educational resources (47.0%), and better multimedia equipment (43.6%). With lower frequency, respondents pointed to foreign internships at schools (27.5%), participation in international conferences (24.8%), individual work with a methodologist (20.8%), participation in national conferences (14.8%), coach support (13.4%), language courses (12.6%), and postgraduate subject studies (10.7%). The least frequently mentioned was postgraduate internships (6.7%). Additional responses included job shadowing, international exchange, teachers' observations. Although digital resources were appreciated, the lack of follow-up and opportunities for practical application diminished their long-term effectiveness.

Detailed distributions of responses are illustrated in Figure 2.

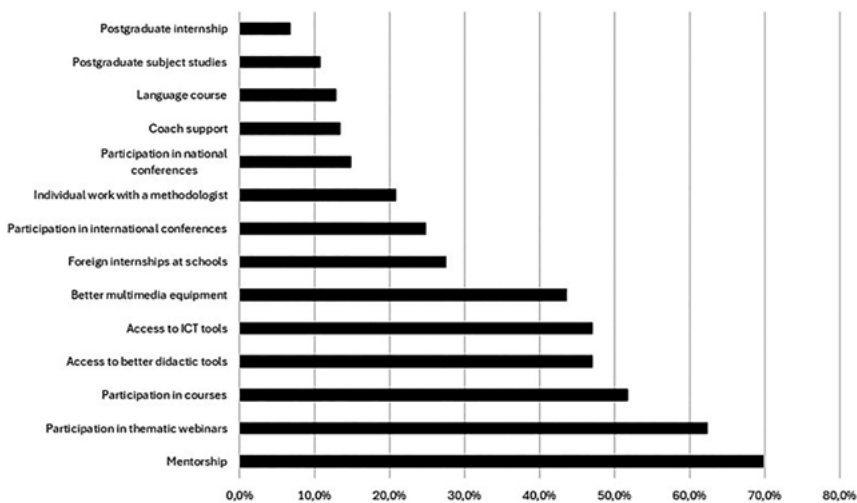


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents selecting each recommended type of support for novice teachers (multiple responses allowed).

## Discussion

This study examined statements and perspectives formulated by experienced English language teachers in Poland. The aim was to identify factors that, in their view, influence the development of didactic competences in early stages of teaching. The research highlights the essential role of mentoring, collaboration, and

access to tailored PD programs. The findings extend Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) Interconnected Model of Professional Growth (ICMPG), which conceptualizes teachers' professional learning as a dynamic, non-linear process that might occur in four domains: personal (knowledge, beliefs, attitude), external, domain of practice, and domain of consequence. Changes within the described domains are influenced by teacher reflection and enactment. Through which teachers reflect upon their experiences, change their beliefs, and transfer new knowledge and skills into practice. This non-linear trajectory shows that professional development is interconnected "growth network" (p. 958). Additionally, the authors describe the perspectives of teachers' change. They perceive it as the result of training, adaptation, personal development, local reforms, systematic restructuring and growth or learning. In the context of this study, the findings demonstrate that limited institutional support, mentoring can substitute for formal PD systems and still lead to professional transformation.

From the perspective of Labouvie-Vief's (2015) theory of adult cognitive development, the process of becoming a competent English teacher can be understood as a form of postformal thinking. In this view, PD represents a lifelong process through which teachers move toward greater autonomy, flexibility, and self-realization. PD, therefore, is not merely about methodological training but about holistic growth across cognitive and emotional dimensions of teaching. In the light of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), mentoring provides constructive feedback, scaffolding that enables novice teachers to internalize complex teaching practices through guided participations.

The study integrates the abovementioned competence theory (CEO, 2022; Filipowicz, 2024; OECD, 2019), showing that the development of didactic competences is embedded in a dynamic process of applying knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values in an authentic context. That perspective strengthens the idea that didactic competences are not static attributes, but evolve through interactions, experiences, practices, action, and reflection.

Many teachers express a preference for CPD programs rather than isolated ones, which aligns with broader literature emphasizing that PD is most effective when it comes to engagement, practical implementation, and reflective learning (Avalos, 2011; Guskey, 2002). Moreover, although numerous PD opportunities exist for English teachers, many are provided by private institutions, raising concerns about unequal access. To promote lifelong learning, universities should offer free PD programs to their graduates, ensuring broader accessibility.

A notable concern raised by many teachers was the gap between the expectations set during their studies and the realities they faced in the classroom. This discrepancy underscores the need for substantial reforms in teacher education

programs. Furthermore, the frequent changes in the Polish educational system create confusion and disorientation, which undermines teachers' motivation for PD. Findings suggest that universities and educational institutions could offer a diverse range of training opportunities that are responsive to the evolving needs of teachers and aligned with the dynamic nature of 21st-century education.

By situating the Polish experience and teachers' realia within European competence, the study provides evidence that novice teachers' PD programs must evolve from individual to collaborative practices, ensuring equitable access to lifelong learning for all educators.

### Conclusion

This study contributes to a better understanding on how English language teachers in Poland perceive the development of didactic competences. While several official documents outline the legal framework for teacher professional development in Poland, it is primarily defined in the *Education System Act* (Prawo Oświatowe, Dz. U. 2017 poz.59) and the *Teachers' Charter* (Karta Nauczyciela, Dz.U. 1982 nr 3 poz.19). However, the actual developmental path that teachers take largely depends on their individual choices and awareness (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Lo, 2020; Yuan & Lo, 2023). Many young teachers entering the profession are often unsure of what kind of support they might need. Although every novice teacher is officially assigned a mentor, in practice, many of them are left to navigate the early stages of their careers on their own. This raises important questions about whether the role and responsibilities of mentors are clearly and comprehensively defined in the abovementioned documents, what criteria are used to select mentors within schools, and whether mentors themselves are adequately prepared to guide novice teachers in ways that foster both their professional and personal growth in line with the principles of mentoring.

By examining the experiences of teachers with long experience, the study highlights the urgent need to strengthen mentoring as a structured, evidence-based approach to teachers' PD. Creating clear national standards for mentor selection and training could raise the quality of support provided to novice teachers and have a meaningful influence on their development.

The results of this study will need to be confirmed by further studies comprising a much greater number of novice teachers and experienced English teachers. These studies should address two major areas: the need to gather data on mentoring (especially group/collaborative forms) and teachers' perceptions of developing didactic competences.

Although this study offers insights into the development of didactic competences, it also has several limitations. Firstly, the research relied on self-reported data from experienced teachers, which may reflect their personal perceptions. Future studies could incorporate classroom observations or mixed-method approaches to triangulate findings. Secondly, the study focused on teachers with a minimum of six years of experience, which provides a valuable retrospective perspective, but does not reflect the real-time challenges faced by novice teachers. Finally, as the research was conducted in the Polish context, comparative or cross-cultural studies could help to identify the most effective practice of PD.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need for systemic changes in the professional development of English language teachers in Poland. Establishing strong mentoring systems, fostering collaborative practices, and ensuring equitable access to digital tools and resources should be prioritized. Addressing these issues will not only improve the quality of teaching but will also benefit students, ensuring long-term improvements in educational outcomes.

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