

Teaching Slovak in Hungarian-language primary schools in Slovakia

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Abstract

The modernisation of the Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching is driven by several political, social, and linguistic demands to enhance the quality of teaching the Slovak language as a second language. This paper aims to analyse the importance of further developing educators' competencies and the necessity of implementing student-centred learning in the educational system. The paper concentrates on the practical utilisation of language, the advancement of students' creative and intellectual capabilities, and the appreciation of Slovak cultural values. The study analyses the importance of developing educators' competencies and implementing student-centred learning. Key focus areas include supporting individualised learning, creating inclusive classroom environments, and integrating interactive teaching materials and digital resources. Additionally, the study reviews existing research on the quality of Slovak language teaching in Hungarian-language schools, highlighting the necessity of enhancing teachers' digital competencies to innovate educational programmes.

Key words: Slovak language, primary school, national language, elementary schools, teacher training

Introduction

In most European countries, individuals are proficient in two or more foreign languages due to the necessity of communication within their own country or with neighbouring nations. The goal of learning a foreign language is not to achieve native speaker fluency and accuracy but rather to cultivate a language repertoire that encompasses all language skills, knowledge, and experiences. Children from national minorities and ethnic groups are guaranteed the right to learn the national language, and the significance of their proficiency in the national language is supported by various European recommendations.

Current social changes affect the system of education in several ways. The educational system emphasises the students' active command of the Slovak language across all types of schools, including learners whose language of instruction is the language of national minorities. These minorities often find themselves in a challenging situation as, for the majority, Slovak isn't their first language. On the one hand, acquiring proficiency in the national language at a level appropriate for their age is crucial. On the other hand, it is evident from the current situation that implementing new didactic strategies and innovative techniques to enhance the command of the Slovak language is only minimally applied in schools.

Considering Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in the 1st grade of primary school, all non-native learners' positions are not identical. Attention must be paid to students starting their first year of primary school with language skills that are differently developed. Educators and students face a similar challenge at the beginning of the 5th year of primary school, where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction. The proficiency level of the students' active command of the Slovak language on the transition to a higher educational level varies based on factors such as the language environment and the school, the level of their expressive abilities in their first language, their innate language abilities, and psychological and age characteristics.

1 Stages of acquiring the national (official) language

Following ontogenetic psychology, it is necessary to strictly follow a division of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching into three stages. Considering the documents related to teaching the Slovak language as a second language, binding requirements for students' knowledge and skills are defined at the end of each stage (Alabánová, 2005).

- a) *Initial stage (1st-3rd year of elementary school in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction)*
The first three years of elementary school form one cycle with interconnected content. In the initial stage of developing linguistic competence, the subject's content consists of listening comprehension, speaking, oral interaction, independent oral production, fluent reading aloud, reading comprehension and writing with the possible maximal differentiation of outputs concerning the different language competencies of the learners. An introductory oral course should be offered in the 1st grade of elementary school (Barnová et al., 2019). This course is based on listening comprehension. Its duration is dependent on students' existing knowledge and linguistic competencies. From the beginning of the 2nd grade, reading and writing are gradually included in the school and knowledge of learners. The focus gradually shifts towards spoken and written production (a partially reduced oral course with acquiring the basics of reading and writing).
- b) *Continuing stage (4th-6th year of elementary school in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction)*
In this stage, the conscious acquisition of the Slovak language is gradually developed. Grammatical phenomena should be practised within the context of communicative topics. There should be an increased focus on developing listening and reading comprehension (Bendíková, 2020).
- c) *Final stage (7th-9th year of elementary school in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction)*
Creative cognitive approaches should gradually replace the imitative-memorisation model. Emphasis is placed on the students' grammatically correct oral and written output (Bernáthová, 2003).
The proposed stages and the current division of the school system are not mutually exclusive.

1.1 Functions and goals of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the primary level of education in elementary schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

The goals of Slovak language teaching at the primary level of education in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction are set concerning the diverse language skills of first-grade learners. This diversity can be attributed to several factors (Halászová & Döményová, 2014):

- preschool attendance (compulsory preschool attendance only in the last year of nursery school (in the Slovak Republic), different lengths of preschool attendance, optional language preparation in nursery schools),
- different linguistic and social environments of learners (sociocultural environment),
- school maturity (biological prerequisites, dynamics and pace of development, individual characteristics of learners: emotional and intellectual – IQ, EQ),
- different linguistic competencies of the learners, even in their first language.

Given these factors, it is essential to tailor the content, teaching methods and techniques, forms, and even the pace of teaching to the students' language proficiency. Consistent application of communicative principles in Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching is also essential.

In the initial stages of the primary level of education in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction, the goal can be identified as the acquisition of fundamental language skills. This goal is realised through the execution of the subsequent tasks (Halászová, 2002):

- shaping the skill of a smooth transition from a reproductive to a productive form of communication,
- enhancing the communicative skills of the learners,
- fostering the ability to engage in communicative situations based on the learner's everyday life, with adequate knowledge of grammar, if possible, ensuring the monolingual nature of teaching.

The goal of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the primary level of education can be characterised as the development of four learners' language skills (Halászová, 2002):

- understanding (listening comprehension),
- speaking (guided spoken interaction and independent spoken production),
- reading (reading comprehension),
- writing (independent written production) in Slovak.

The development of language skills is based on descriptions which provide detailed content specifications. Listening comprehension is based on understanding instructions, commands, communicative expressions, short texts and dialogues, games and dramatisations. Speaking concentrates on acquiring receptive and productive skills, such as developing brief conversations and independent spoken production in everyday social situations based on the learner's everyday life. Reading focuses on the mastery of reading techniques and reading comprehension. Writing is based on mastering Slovak letters and basic spelling skills (Hašková & Danko, 2020).

Proficiency in the Slovak language at the primary level of education in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction should align with the European Language Portfolio. This portfolio has been adapted to the peculiarities of the Slovak language and Slovak literature in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction (Szökö, 2023).

Slovak language teaching at the primary level of education can be divided into an initial and partially continuing stage of language acquisition. The initial stage begins with an introductory oral course. In the introductory oral course, the emphasis is placed on listening comprehension, incorporating the so-called quiet period. The learners' insufficient expressive ability characterises this period, i.e. their productive skills have not yet reached the required level. Nevertheless, they like to engage in various playful speaking activities, which is why they can respond to the teacher's commands and instructions with movement (Lajčin & Porubčanová, 2021). The initial stage is suitable for the development of non-verbal communication. Due to the learners' different proficiency levels in the Slovak language, the length of the introductory oral course should be determined flexibly. Listening comprehension and spoken production are gradually integrated into a guided conversation (Marks & Lajčin, 2017). The partially continuing phase concentrates on a more advanced level of Slovak language acquisition. This is accomplished by integrating cross-curricular learning into the educational process and specific everyday situations and illustrative and demonstration teaching, enabling the creative application of acquired knowledge. From the beginning of the development of speaking skills, a focus is placed on accurate articulation and standard pronunciation. Emphasis is given to reading aloud, reading comprehension in the Slovak language, and improving vocabulary.

The conversation topics correspond to the issues in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and have been unified at all levels of education. The Slovak language and Slovak literature classes are based on the learners' knowledge of their first language, i.e. they learn the Slovak language based on their knowledge of their mother tongue. Slovak language teaching is, therefore, closely related to other subjects. Learners of this age mainly prefer games and playful teaching techniques. At this age, with appropriate motivation, it is possible to create and cultivate positive attitudes of pupils towards the Slovak language as a second language. In this context, the Slovak language is not only a communication tool but also enables the learners to express their thoughts at an age-appropriate level. Slovak language teaching, therefore, allows the complex development of the learner's personality (Halászová, 2002).

Slovak language teaching, similarly to foreign language teaching, is based on a communicative, action-oriented approach. Communicative language teaching is characterised by the principle of purposefulness, the subordination of grammatical rules to the training of communicative skills, taking into account the functionality and appropriateness in the process of selection of language means, with particular regard to contextualisation, contrastiveness, and long-term, authenticity of communication processes (Oberuč, Zapletal, 2017b). The communicative approach to selecting content and teaching, learning and acquiring the Slovak language is based on the principle of thematic language modelling. In this context, it is essential to mention the crucial role of games (social language games and individual activities) and aesthetic activities (singing, retelling and rewriting stories, as well as listening, reading, writing and speaking about students' fictional texts, performing playful scenes according to a script or without a script, etc.) in learning and developing language (Tóblová et al., 2017).

Psychological principles and principles of foreign language teaching also apply to Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching. Comenius already emphasised the importance of appropriate methods and techniques in teaching (Oberuč & Zapletal, 2017a). He underlined that the proper methods and techniques should reduce "the demanding character of learning so that nothing disgusts the learners and does not scare them from continuing their studies." Considering the initial stages of language acquisition, optimal methods and techniques enable natural communication and stimulate learners' interests in other areas of social life. Speaking is combined with movement in the first two grades of primary education. The introductory oral course is taught using the structural-global audio-visual method combined with the linguistic-motor method (Pokrivčáková & Pokrivčák, 2014). The next stage is taught utilising the linguistic-motor combined with a partially reduced direct method. Considering the goals of communicative teaching, it is essential to ensure that the difficulty of the content and inappropriate educational techniques do not create a psychological barrier, making the production of the Slovak language impossible.

Regarding the choice of vocabulary and word associations, it is necessary to consider learners' cognitive developmental specifics. In the educational process, the first language code acquired by the learners must be respected. At the same time, the second (Slovak) language code acquired by the learners through the natural acquisition of the Slovak language in a bilingual environment must be respected (Prokypčáková et al., 2006).

1.2 Functions and goals of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the secondary level of education in elementary schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

Functions and goals of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the lower secondary level of education are determined by the level of proficiency in the Slovak language upon completing the 4th grade of primary education. This level of proficiency is shaped by the linguistic environment of the learners and the school, as well as by the level of the learners' language skills development in their first language, their innate abilities for language acquisition and their psychological attributes (Alabánová, 2000).

Considering the lower level of secondary education, it is vital to consider the biological and developmental characteristics of 10-15-year-old students. The gradual formation of grammatical and critical thinking, awareness, responsibility, and a sense of justice characterises this period. Conscious mastery of the Slovak language at the lower secondary level, particularly in the higher grades (7th-9th), thus requires more advanced cognitive skills: the ability to analyse, synthesise, compare, and perform various transformations. It also requires more psychomotor skills: response flexibility, adequate pace of solving tasks, coordination of activities, promptness, etc (Prucha, 1997).

Based on the different developmental characteristics of learners at the lower secondary level of education, the acquisition of the Slovak language is divided into a continuing stage with a pre-advanced and advanced level (5th and 6th grade and partly 7th and 8th) and a final stage (9th grade) with advanced and higher level of command of the Slovak language (9th year of elementary school).

The goal of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the lower level of secondary education is to develop learners' communicative competence, necessary for the active use of the Slovak language in everyday social situations, as well as to foster an active reader of Slovak literature (Šenkár, 2019). The goals mentioned above are realised by continuous development and building on the knowledge, skills and habits of learners related to Hungarian language and literature teaching, as well as basic language skills acquired in Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the primary level of education. The target key competence is a developed communicative competence in the Slovak language, i.e. the ability to express and interpret one's thoughts, feelings and information in the Slovak language verbally and to engage in communication in various social contexts (Szarka, 2017).

The general learning objective related to Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching at the lower secondary level of education is a complex objective that can be divided into the following specific objectives (Halászová, 2002):

- To develop listening comprehension skills, dialogic communication, the production of oral and written outputs, silent reading with comprehension (including reading and understanding of age-appropriate fiction and non-fiction), and other forms of reading, such as pre-reading, selective reading, and speed reading.
- To acquire basic knowledge of the structure of the Slovak language and the ability to implement this knowledge into spoken or written production.
- To obtain a brief overview of Slovak literature and the ability to work with an artistic text.
- To develop the ability to acquire knowledge and information independently, as well as the ability to use dictionaries, to work with facts and concepts, and to analyse connections between them.
- To develop the ability to draw an analogy, generalise, compare, analyse, and synthesise.
- To adopt the methods and techniques necessary for conscious and effective learning of the Slovak language.
- To develop the ability to establish social contacts and to create relationships with others.
- To acquire the ability to behave assertively, as well as the ability to work within a group.
- To develop the ability to adapt and form attitudes, recognise social values, and argue for universal values and ethical standards (for example, love, truth, humanity, beauty, goodness, peace, and tolerance).
- To acquire the ability to solve problems, the ability to survive, the ability to develop oneself, the ability to cope with one's deficiencies, to develop personal awareness and responsibility, self-esteem and self-confidence.
- To acquire cultural and multicultural education, attitudes, relationships and behaviour, as well as the ability to appreciate the culture and social rules.
- To develop the ability to appreciate the Slovak nation's literature, art, music and other forms of cultural heritage.

The general learning objective is achieved by:

- developing students' basic communication skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as secondary skills: pronunciation and spelling,
- developing students' knowledge, skills and habits, shaping their attitudes and their aesthetic values,
- appropriate motivation in acquiring the Slovak language, as well as developing the ability to appreciate the Slovak language and culture,

- creating and developing students' linguistic, sociolinguistic, sociocultural, strategic, textual and multicultural competence,
- purposeful planning of language acquisition realised by gradually broadening language standards, including the receptive acquisition of the language employed in fiction, non-fiction, scientific texts related to other teaching subjects, and standard communication (Šenkár, 2019).

2 Planning Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

Children and learners from national minorities and ethnic groups are guaranteed the right to learn the national language. The carefully planned educational process considers social requirements and the significance of learners' proficiency in the national language, supported by various European recommendations. To be able to achieve all objectives, as well as to increase the effectiveness of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction, long-term planning of the educational process is necessary, i.e. annual plans of Slovak language and Slovak literature teachers for individual grades. What is more, all Slovak language and Slovak literature lessons must be included in schedules in such a way that daily contact of the learners with the Slovak language is ensured. The Slovak language and literature lessons must be integrated into the class timetable no later than the fifth lesson (maximally twice a week). At the same time, the Slovak language and Slovak literature lessons cannot alternate with other language lessons. In terms of planning the time allocation for the lessons, it is recommended (Szököl & Puskás, 2021):

- to take into account the language environment of the school and the language competence of the students,
- to ensure differentiated and compelling Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching that will be based on school peculiarities and students' level of knowledge,
- Contrastingly, divide classrooms into smaller groups and ensure suitable conditions for effective Slovak language and literature teaching.

Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction is a complex process. Similar to teaching foreign languages, this research paper recommends dividing Slovak language and Slovak literature classrooms into smaller groups. Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching is based on the language standard used in the everyday social contexts of a student of a given grade and type of school with an appropriate number of nonstandard expressions. Considering the lower level of secondary education at elementary schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction, a proper number of specific terminology expressions is also incorporated. The content, the learning process, and the language acquisition planning should be planned simultaneously.

Moreover, it is also essential to consider the planning of Hungarian language and literature learning and the extra-linguistic elements of the learning content. Language is a dynamic, open-ended, and constantly changing system. That is why language teaching methodology cannot be viewed as a standardised, accepted procedure and technique. The content, methods, procedures, techniques, and pace of teaching must be adapted to learners' language skills with the consistent application of the communicative approach. Activities outside the classroom can positively influence the overall level of the Slovak language.

2.1 Pre-service and in-service teacher training of Slovak language and literature teachers in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

Several factors impact the Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction. These factors cover not only geographical, economic and political aspects but also the school employees. Practical teacher training for future Slovak language and Slovak literature teachers at Slovak faculties of education should consist of theoretical and predominantly specific training. This training should accompany pedagogical practice, enabling future teachers to apply their knowledge and skills in schools. In-service teacher training must be per the new concept of teaching the Slovak language and literature. It is necessary to consider new effective forms of teacher motivation to achieve efficiency in Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction. In terms of binding documents, the further development of teachers' competencies needs to be focused more on the practical application of a student-oriented approach, on the support of individualised learning, on the ability to create an inclusive classroom environment, on the specification of the output competencies of students according to the language and social environment, on the creation of interactive teaching materials, on more efficient and effective use of information and communication technologies and open educational digital resources. To improve the quality of Slovak language and literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction, it is recommended to

provide regular teacher training for teachers (professional development of teachers, lectures, seminars, workshops) focused on didactics, methodology, conversation and on specific issues of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching. Considering plans, it is crucial to organise joint seminars, workshops, and meetings of primary and secondary school teachers of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction (Szököl & Takács, 2020).

3 Pedagogical research findings: Quality of Slovak language and literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

Research into the level of teaching of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction confirmed the successful implementation of the communicative approach into teaching but also revealed specific severe problems. The problematic aspects can be characterised as follows:

- The Hungarian language and the Slovak language – due to their different linguistic structure, disproportionately great importance was placed on morphological differences at the expense of training lexical, phonetic-phonological and syntactic differences.
- Principles – the principles of communicative language teaching were not consistently observed in the educational process: the principle of thematic modelling of language and the principle of transferring language through the speech channel; among the organisational forms of work, frontal collective work prevailed instead of work in groups, in pairs and individual work of pupils.
- Grammar – grammar was taught as an isolated component; no particular attention was paid to training contrasting phenomena; teachers applied communicative grammar to a small extent.
- Communication – unequal development of particular forms of communication; insufficient development of listening comprehension at the primary and the secondary level of education; insufficient development of reading comprehension at the primary and lower secondary level of education in elementary school; and insufficient development of various types of reading at lower secondary level of education in elementary school (Szököl, 2022).

3.1 Pedagogical research findings: Quality observation of Slovak language and literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction

The research findings indicate the need to innovate the valid Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching concept, taking into account the communicative approach and already existing and valid pedagogical documents. The teacher and their professional training play a crucial role in implementing communicative teaching into the educational process. It is also important to say that the basic philosophy behind the currently valid Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching concept is still topical, and the goals of the presently valid teaching concept have not been consistently fulfilled.

The above aspect is confirmed by the findings collected from Slovak language and Slovak literature teachers in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction. The last questionnaire was primarily aimed at the level of implementation of the communicative approach to Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching.

- The teacher and his teaching (methods, procedures, techniques and forms), and the content and how the content is incorporated into the lesson significantly influence the student's interest in Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching.
- Teaching in small groups and unique language classrooms is recommended as the most effective form of language teaching (foreign, first, second). Concerning Act no. 245/2008 Coll. on education and training (School Act), May 22, 2008, and on amendment of certain acts, as well as valid documents based on this act (except for Ordinance no. 65/2015 Coll. on secondary education), there is no explicit legal requirement to divide Slovak language and Slovak literature classes into small groups. As part of the research, it was confirmed that the possibility of dividing classes or teaching in particular language classrooms is not sufficiently ensured.
- Among the organisational forms of work in the classroom, the most common type can be characterised as frontal collective work at all levels of education, which implies that effective teaching techniques and methods are not applied to the desired extent.
- To a considerable extent, it is problematic for learners to acquire subject competence (oral and written production, listening comprehension, reading and reading comprehension) at all levels of education.
- Concerning motivation factors, for primary-level learners, the most significant factors can be characterised as the effort to get a good mark and meet the teacher's and parents' expectations. Another factor can be characterised as competitiveness. For lower secondary-level learners, the most significant factors can be the effort to get a good mark and the ambition to gain admission to a higher secondary education or a university. The

ability to communicate in the Slovak language was the most significant factor for the first time among higher secondary-level learners.

- Even though most teachers know the need for continuing education, they do not take advantage of all forms and possibilities of continuing education. Teachers prefer mostly methodical materials. Open lessons are also popular among teachers at the primary level of education. The most popular form of continuing education is self-study. However, according to their statements, teachers do not use academic or scientific literary sources to teach foreign languages, nor Slovak novelty books for children and juvenile readers.
- In lesson planning and preparation, teachers predominantly use valid textbooks and workbooks to teach the Slovak language and literature. They use Slovak novelty books for children and juvenile readers and academic or scientific literary sources to a lesser extent.
- Books and the equipment of school libraries are not at an optimal level. Schools have not taken advantage of the opportunity the Ministry of Education offers to revitalise their school libraries, and even teachers do not use the services of well-equipped school libraries (Szökö, 2022).

Based on the observation of the lessons, the following findings can be emphasised:

- The principles of communicative language teaching were not consistently applied.
- Teaching was mainly bilingual at the primary level of education.
- Listening comprehension and reading comprehension were developed to a lesser extent. Speaking and writing prevailed at the expense of reading at the primary level of education.
- Teachers mainly preferred controlled teaching techniques instead of partially controlled and uncontrolled techniques. Among the organisational forms of work in the classroom, the prevailing type can be characterised as frontal collective work. Group work, pair work, and individual work were implemented to a lesser extent.
- Textbooks and workbooks for teaching Slovak language and Slovak literature were used predominantly. On the other hand, Slovak books for children and juvenile readers and available didactic materials were used to a lesser extent. Magazines for children and teenagers were used only occasionally.

Based on the findings of the latest research, it has been confirmed that the following serious deficiencies persist (Szökö, 2023):

- The training of morphological phenomena still prevails in teaching, and less attention is paid to lexical, phonetic-phonological and syntactic differences between the Slovak language and the language of instruction.
- The secondary level of education in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction is also more focused on the grammatical component at the expense of other elements. Slovak literature teaching was predominantly focused on literary theory.

Conclusion

The complex goal of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools in which Hungarian serves as the language of instruction is determined by the modernisation of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching and by the political, social and linguistic demands of society. Based on the principle of age appropriateness, this goal primarily covers practical, active command of the Slovak language and knowledge of the cultural values of the Slovak nation. Concerning Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction, emphasis is placed on developing students' communicative competence to achieve bilingualism or multilingualism. In this context, it is vital to achieve bilingualism at the level of the functional definition of bilingualism. According to this definition, a bilingual speaker is a person who uses two languages daily, regardless of the level of their mastery. Research into the level of teaching of Slovak language and Slovak literature teaching in schools where Hungarian serves as the language of instruction confirmed the successful implementation of the communicative approach into teaching but also revealed specific severe problems. These problems can be characterised as not consistently observed principles of communicative language teaching, grammar taught as an isolated component and unequal development of particular forms of communication.

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