

SLOVAK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE SLOVAK UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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Borovská, Edina. 2022. „Slovak as a foreign language at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava.“ *Philologia* 32 (2): 81 – 91.

Abstrakt: V centre predloženého príspevku stojí výučba slovenčiny ako cudzieho jazyka na vysokoškolskej pôde. Príspevok analyzuje motiváciu siedmich zahraničných študentov, ktorí študovali na Stavebnej fakulte Slovenskej technickej univerzity v Bratislave v akademickom roku 2021/2022. Pre tieto účely sme použili jeden z nástrojov kvalitatívneho výskumu, interview. Získané výsledky naznačujú, že vnútorne motivovaní študenti vyvinú väčšiu snahu osvojiť si cieľový jazyk a taktiež sa snažia vo väčšej miere používať ho aj mimo vyučovacieho procesu v každodenných komunikačných situáciách. Výsledky zároveň ukazujú, že výučba slovenčiny ako cudzieho jazyka má veľké opodstatnenie. Podľa zistených výsledkov znalosť angličtiny nie je dostatočná pre život na Slovensku.

Kľúčové slová: slovenčina ako cudzí jazyk, vnútorná motivácia, vonkajšia motivácia, Slovenská technická univerzita v Bratislave

Abstract: The presented paper focuses on Slovak as a foreign language in the university environment. In the foreground there are seven foreign students who came to study at the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava in the academic year 2021/2022. Their motivation to acquire the target language is examined by means of qualitative research, by conducting an interview. The results show that intrinsically motivated students are willing to go beyond the classroom with their involvement, as opposed to extrinsically motivated students. Furthermore, the obtained data indicate that the knowledge of Slovak in Slovakia is essential, as six of the seven interviewed respondents claim that English is not always sufficient in everyday life.

Keywords: Slovak as a foreign language, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava

INTRODUCTION

English, as lingua franca or bridge language, enables communication among people who do not share the native language. English is taught in Slovak schools as a mandatory subject and there is a great effort to learn this language, which is confirmed by plentiful English language classes offered by numerous language schools. However, Slovak still has its role in everyday life in Slovakia. The question that arises is, though, whether and to what extent foreigners living in Slovakia experience the need to speak Slovak. This would, as a result, manifest itself in the motivation to learn the country's official language. If English is used extensively in everyday situations, the effort to acquire Slovak is expected to be limited.

Before the motivation of foreign students is concentrated on, the start of perceiving Slovak as a foreign language is looked at.

BEGINNINGS OF TEACHING SLOVAK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The theory of teaching Slovak as a foreign language in Slovakia dates back to the 1960s when foreign students were offered lessons of Slovak language in learning centres in Senec. Subsequently, the Summer School of Slovak Language and Culture (*Letná škola slovenského jazyka a kultúry*) was founded at the Faculty of Philosophy at the Comenius University in 1965 in Bratislava. Its establishment was conditioned by the arrival of foreign students at Slovak universities. It was the beginning of perceiving Slovak as a foreign language to be taught. Ways of teaching and explaining, relevant learning content, and suitable teaching approaches began to be explored. The Studia Academica Slovaca Methodical Centre (SAS), established in 1992, changed its focus and became SAS – Centre of Slovak as a foreign language. It has studied the teaching methodology of the Slovak language as a foreign language, trained teachers and has been actively publishing scientific papers in the discussed field. The centre annually organises the already mentioned Summer School of Slovak Language and Culture. There are also numerous language schools that offer Slovak courses for foreigners at all levels from A1 to C2¹ with the overall aim of reaching communicative competence in the target language. Apart from the basic language courses focusing on productive (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (reading and

¹ A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 are language proficiency levels organised by the Common European Framework of Reference.

listening) in everyday language situations, they offer specialized classes as well, e.g. business Slovak or medical Slovak. In that case, specialized vocabulary and specialized language contexts are practiced. Additionally, several universities provide courses of Slovak during both semesters for foreign students, e.g. the Faculty of Medicine at the Comenius University in Bratislava, the Faculty of Applied Languages at the University of Economics in Bratislava, the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, etc. The interest in such courses indicates relevance and the need to speak Slovak when living in Slovakia.

LEARNING MATERIALS

There are several possibilities and sources when searching for teaching and learning materials; thus they do not need to be created anew. This can, however, be claimed when referring to adult education, as most of the currently available materials for learning Slovak as a foreign language are meant for adult learners.

The most frequently used is the *Krížom krážom* series that consists of four coursebooks with the following language proficiency levels: A1, A2, B1 and, for more advanced language users, B2. The supplementary exercise book (A1/A2) can be used to strengthen the already explained and learned content. They offer a variety of exercises, e.g. Filling-In-Activities or True-False Statement, as well as creative tasks and dialogues encouraging language learners to speak. It is to highlight that, already in the beginner level, A1, there are plentiful texts for practising reading comprehension that lead to conversations in the classroom. That way, the vocabulary is not to be memorized as isolated items, but the words are remembered in and from contexts. The presented vocabulary can be applied in day-to-day situations. Grammar explanations, rules, and exceptions are included, but they are perceived as a means only that helps to achieve the goal which is communicative competence.

The Radio Slovak International is also to be mentioned in this context, as they have recorded lessons that teach vocabulary in chosen situations. The phrases are explained and pronounced by a Slovak native speaker and subsequently repeated by a non-native speaker of the target language.

Apart from the traditional printed learning materials, there are online sources and platforms for both teachers and learners with exercises, audio recordings, and explained grammar rules. Moreover, there are various interactive apps that teach and strengthen vocabulary and practise grammar rules. All these modern sources might significantly contribute to the motivation of students, as they tend to be entertaining but at the same time educative and interactive.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF SLOVAKS

If the knowledge of English is sufficient in Slovakia, then the motivation to acquire one of the most challenging languages, as Slovak tends to be referred to, could be expected to be limited. Since English is lingua franca, this West Germanic language is one of the mandatory subjects taught already in primary schools in Slovakia. Besides, it is not unusual to encounter English as a foreign language at a very young age in kindergartens and in pre-school institutions.

To determine the English language proficiency of Slovaks, the EF English Proficiency Index, an international benchmark of English skills, can be employed. It evaluates English language skills of adults through an online test. It compiles the world's largest ranking of countries and regions and is available online for everyone. In 2021, Slovakia was in the 20th place of 112 countries. It was preceded by Hungary in the 17th position and succeeded by the Czech Republic in the 27th position (EF English Proficiency Index, 2021). These results show that the knowledge of English among Slovaks is decent. It indicates that foreigners in Slovakia could carry out their daily activities in English with ease.

Good knowledge of English, but also numerous international companies residing in Bratislava, which are potential employers for foreigners, where English (and in some cases German) is used as the communication tool, might lessen the need to learn Slovak.

MOTIVATION

Successful learning of a foreign language is conditioned by various factors. The extent of striving to reach the set goal is decisive for its success because all applied learning activities are filtered through the students' motivation. Gilakjani, Leong and Sabouri see motivation as absolutely vital and call it "the essence of language teaching" (Gilakjani, Leong and Sabouri 2012, 10). Doubtlessly, it conditions the success of the learning process, as it incites and stimulates students to go with their engagement beyond the lesson. It is absolutely crucial in case of language learning due to limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom. Even in the discussed context, when students learn Slovak in Slovakia, there could be no sufficient input in the environment, since foreign students tend to befriend foreigners. As a result, English is the communication tool.

When discussing motivation, it is essential to differentiate between two types that determine the nature of the student's involvement. On the one hand, there is intrinsic motivation that stems from the inside of an individual, and it refers

to activities that are performed or to the effort that is made for the pleasure of its own sake and for personal rewards only. On the other hand, there are extrinsically motivated individuals who engage in an activity or act in order to get something in return or to avoid some kind of punishment. The type of motivation a student has might impact their learning progress. Intrinsic motivation tends to be more powerful as there is a huge difference between an activity that an individual does because they want to do it and when it is done because it simply has to be done. Internally driven individuals are more passionate about their engagement and more involved in the task.

Students' motivation and its extent can be significantly influenced by the teacher. Simply put, there cannot be much enthusiasm expected from students when the class is taught by a non-enthusiastic, lethargic teacher. Keeping this thought in mind is important, as teachers' attitude has an enormous influence on lessons, that is, on students as well.

Teaching motivated students is probably wished by all teachers. There are cases, however, when the teacher needs to trigger their interest first. If the students' passion for the target language (or any other subject) is developed, then they will want to work hard and failures will become precious steppingstones to success, not reasons for quitting. The passion of students can be found using materials that are relevant to them, be it music, videos, films, or various personalized tasks. These are especially relevant because if such materials are implemented, the content of the class will (to some extent) reflect the students' own personal life. Kvapil emphasizes the use of students' own sources because everyone has the need to talk about their happening inside and everyone needs to express their attitude (Kvapil 2018, 20). In this way, the learning process becomes more learned-centred and the learning itself gets more meaningful, and the students' action is incited and stimulated.

SLOVAK AT THE FACULTY OF CIVIL ENGINEERING STU

The Faculty of Civil Engineering at the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava offers foreign students classes of Slovak language. Every winter semester a course of Slovak without any previous knowledge of the target language is taught. Subsequently, in summer semesters, a follow-up course is provided. They are realized weekly as double-lessons. The aim is to teach students to communicate in the target language. In this sense, communicative competence is to strive for, i.e. the ability to use and adapt the learned knowledge of the target language appropriately in given contexts. To acquire the communicative competence, basic language skills are practised. The sound

system, the lexical, morphological, and the syntactic level of the language are focused on.

The same goal was set for the ACURE Summer School that was organised for the first time in July 2022 with the support of the Visegrad Fund. However, this educational activity was only offered to students from Ukraine who wish to get a university education at STU. For that reason, they need to be able to speak Slovak. The interest in study of Ukrainian students has significantly grown in the last months, which is caused by the ongoing situation disturbing world peace in Ukraine (Gluchmanova 2022, 70).

Generally, the motivation of foreign students to acquire Slovak at the faculty can be said to differ depending on their intention to relocate to Slovakia for some time period, beyond their study at the faculty. The effortlessness of their learning progress seems to be conditioned by their effort made, of course, and by their mother tongue. The further away the native language from the target language, the more challenging it can be.

In the following practical part, the interview is discussed that aims to examine the motivation of foreign students taking the course of the Slovak language at the faculty.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

For the purpose of this paper qualitative research was conducted in the form of an interview. The interview was carried out at the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the Slovak University of Technology in the summer semester, in March 2022. The reason for its realization was the ambition to examine the motivation of foreign students attending Slovak classes. The interview was conducted orally without a time or duration limit. The respondents were assured that their answers were anonymous and the objective of the interview was explained. English was used as the communication tool, as all the respondents communicate in English effortlessly. They were asked one by one without the presence of their classmates and their lecturer. The answers were written down word by word and subsequently processed.

RESPONDENTS

In the academic year 2021/2022 there were seven foreign students taking the course of Slovak for beginners. None of them had prior knowledge of Slovak. Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that three students were advantaged

thanks to their mother tongue that belongs, just as Slovak does, to the Slavic language family, i.e. Russian and Ukrainian. For these students, it is significantly easier to master the target language as opposed to others coming, e.g. from Africa. Their nationalities are Russian (2), Ukrainian (1), African (1), Kazakh (1), Syrian (1), and Iranian (1). In the group, there were three female and four male students. The age range was between 20 and 35 years. Six of these students were studying for their bachelor degree and one was already working on their doctorate. According to the information provided by their Slovak language teacher, they all attended classes regularly, but some showed more and some less interest in learning during the lessons.

QUESTIONS

The interview consisted of 10 questions total. The first question [*What motivates you to attend the course of the Slovak language?*] focuses on the motivating factors to learn Slovak. This question has the potential to reveal the reasons for attending language classes. The answers were expected to differ. Although some of the respondents may plan to stay in Slovakia after their studies, some may wish to return to their home country or choose another country to live in. In this way, Slovak may be of limited importance. Furthermore, the ECTS credits that are obtained after successful completion of the course can motivate foreign students to attend these lessons without the actual desire to acquire the target language. The second question [*Is the knowledge of Slovak necessary when living in Slovakia?*] asks about the personal opinion of the respondents on the need to have knowledge of Slovak when living in Slovakia. The third question focuses on the potential real-life use of the target language. [*In what specific situations do you try to use Slovak as a means of communication in your daily life?*] The fourth question [*How are you working on your Slovak language skills outside of university lessons?*] is directed at activities that would enhance the process of acquiring the target language. This and the previously stated question provide valuable information on the engagement of the respondents that demonstrate their intrinsic motivation and their willingness to learn. The fifth question [*What is the most important factor that determines your success in acquiring Slovak?*] focuses on the factor that determines their success in learning Slovak. The sixth question [*Are you satisfied with the materials used during your Slovak classes?*] wants to find out whether the learning materials used in the educational process are suitable and appropriate from the perspective of the respondents. This question was included in the interview, as the appropriateness of the learning materials can have a major impact on the motivation of the learners.

The seventh question [*What number of Slovak lessons per week would be optimal for you?*] asks about the wished number of lessons per week. The desired level of Slovak in general is in the foreground of the next question [*What level of Slovak would you like to achieve?*]. The following question [*How many semesters/years are you going to study in Slovakia?*] focuses on the already approved number of semesters that they are going to spend in Slovakia as university students. The survey ends with a question about their wish or a possible plan to live in Slovakia after completing their current study programme [*Would you like to stay in Slovakia after your studies?*].

The above discussed questions were included in the interview as they relate to their motivation, i.e. to their actual effort to learn and to specific steps that they are willing to take in order to achieve the goal, to acquire Slovak. By identifying their engagement, the nature of their motivation becomes apparent. The results gained are discussed in the following step.

DISCUSSION OF THE OBTAINED RESULTS

The question regarding personal motivation to attend the Slovak course revealed that three respondents decided to participate in the class because they wished to learn the language, three respondents needed Slovak because of their studies, and one respondent wanted to learn a new foreign language for its pleasure. That way, four respondents seemed to be intrinsically motivated (these respondents are referred to as R1, R2, R3 and R4), while three respondents appeared to be extrinsically motivated (referred to as R5, R6 and R7).

Six respondents believed that it is necessary to speak Slovak when living in Slovakia (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R7). This implies the relevance to offer Slovak courses to foreigners. According to one respondent (R6) it is sufficient to speak English in Slovakia. This respondent attended the course of Slovak because it was required in some way by the nature of their study. Because the student saw no meaning in learning Slovak, challenges could be expected for the teacher to incite, arouse interest, and to engage them. It is advisable to get to know the student and their hobbies, e.g. favourite sport, music, or film genre. All this could then be implemented in the learning process. The other students could be guessed to stimulate (more) easily because they either learned Slovak for its pleasure (R1, R2, R3 and R4) or they saw sense in making the effort (R5 and R7) or both.

Four respondents did not try to use their Slovak skills in everyday situations (R4, R5, R6 and R7), whereas three made the effort to speak Slovak while shopping (R1, R2 and R3). Apart from the shopping, one of them tried to use Slovak in conversations with friends (R2) and one in their apartment with their

Slovak flatmates (R3). These findings underline their intrinsic motivation, that inner drive of these students; they were willing to go beyond the classroom with the language they were learning. At the same time, the results demonstrate the need to have language situations and language partners for practising.

Four respondents worked on their Slovak language skills in their free time by watching Slovak films (R3, R4, R5 and R7), one read books (R2) and one practised Slovak when shopping with the staff in stores (R1). The respondents R2 and R3 also meant earlier that they tried to use the already acquired language skills in shops but did not mention it here. This information was forgotten or not taken as a free-time activity. According to these data, all respondents did something to improve their Slovak skills apart from one respondent (R6).

Four respondents named as the most important factor that determined their success when acquiring Slovak the necessity to have a communication partner (R1, R2, R3 and R7). Two respondents did not know what that factor was (R5 and R6) and one respondent (R4) mentioned the needed time for practising speaking. Personal drive or effort was not mentioned at all.

The class used the *Krížom krážom A1* coursebook and their teacher prepared, on occasion, some extra materials. All seven respondents expressed satisfaction with the mentioned coursebook. One respondent (R3) specified that it was not only educating, but also entertaining and that the offered dialogues were brilliant. These results are extremely positive. They suggest that the coursebook has the potential to motivate language learners.

Three respondents said that the ideal number of Slovak lessons per week were two lessons (R5, R6 and R7), three respondents would like to have three lessons (R1, R3 and R4) and one would welcome four Slovak lessons (R2). The obtained responses indicate that the respondents were relatively satisfied with the intensity of their Slovak classes, which represented two lessons a week. The findings would be curious if self-study with an exam at the end of the semester was preferred or, on the contrary, significantly more lessons were requested.

Four respondents aimed to reach the C2 level (R2, R3, R5 and R7), two respondents wished to reach the B2 level (R1 and R4) and one respondent did not have any desired level of Slovak to be targeted (R6). The gained data show that most respondents have a clear goal set.

Five respondents planned to reside in Bratislava altogether three years (R1, R3, R4, R5 and R7) and two respondents for two years (R2 and R6). This planned duration can be shortened or prolonged, but at the time of realizing the interview, the learning agreement was set for the stated duration. These findings would be curious if there were students staying in Bratislava for significantly shorter or longer time. Learning Slovak would then either justify itself (long stay) or be superfluous (short stay).

Four respondents would like to stay in Slovakia after completing their studies (R1, R2, R3 and R5) and three did not know yet (R4, R6 and R7). The results show that no one responded negatively. It is possible that someone was reluctant to say “I do not want to.” or they really did not know at that time. Interesting is, though, that the respondent R5, who seemed to be extrinsically motivated when learning Slovak, could imagine to live in Slovakia after the completion of their study. It would imply that they might need Slovak for living in Slovakia in the future.

SUMMARY

The interview carried out on a sample of seven foreign students focused on their motivation to acquire Slovak as a foreign language. Valuable information on the willingness of the respondents to engage in the target language was obtained. In some cases an intrinsic drive was seen and in other cases an external motivation factor was present. Respondents that appeared to have an inner interest in the language showed to be more eager to implement the learned knowledge of Slovak in everyday life as opposed to respondents who attended the language classes because of an external need. This suggests that intrinsically motivated students need less motivating from their teacher than extrinsically motivated students whose interest in Slovak needs to be aroused. As the determining factor for successful language learning, appeared to be the existence of a communication partner. This outcome underscores the need for communicative language lessons.

The learning materials used in classes, the *Krížom krážom* series, were claimed to be appropriate for learning Slovak, as they motivate language learners. The evaluation of the series was highly positive. In addition to their educational function, the entertaining part was stated.

Although the English language proficiency of Slovaks is decent, English has not replaced Slovak in Slovakia yet. The interviewed respondents studied in the capital of Slovakia, where the English speaking skills of Slovaks could be assumed to be better than in other parts of Slovakia, given the possibilities that a capital city usually has. Thus, in other parts of Slovakia the importance of speaking Slovak can be expected to be even greater. It is possible to conclude that learning Slovak as a foreign language is relevant and justified.

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