

Teaching foreign languages in Slovakia (1918 – 2018)

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Abstract

The study is focused on the past and present of teaching foreign languages in the area of Slovakia from 1918 to 2018. It contains an overview of the way foreign language teaching in this area was organized for the period of hundred years. The study places the educational reforms concerning teaching foreign languages in a historical perspective which reflects the increasing importance attached to the teaching of foreign languages by national policy.

Key words: foreign languages, teaching, learning, Slovakia, development

After the founding of an independent Czechoslovak state in 1918, significant changes were made to the school system: the network of primary schools for general basic education was completed, the number of secondary schools was increased, and new universities were founded, e.g. Comenius University in Bratislava in 1919 (Zacharova, 2014). Before the Second World War, the Czechoslovak system of education ranked among the best developed in the world (Ernestova, 2007).

During the interbellum, there was at least one modern language being taught in the gymnasia next to Latin and Greek. In most cases this was German. The objective of foreign language teaching was for pupils to acquire a good understanding of oral and written discourse through theoretical exposition and the use of practice drills, which included reading, memorizing vocabulary, and oral and written exercises (Učebne osnovy pre stredne školy, 1939). The decree of the Slovak National Council of September 6, 1944, on the nationalization of schools turned all schools into state schools.

After the Second World War under the pressure of the relationship with the Soviet Union, German ceased to be taught at primary and secondary schools. It was replaced by Russian as the sole compulsory foreign language (with teaching starting from the fifth year of primary school). Russian also became a compulsory subject for final (maturita) examinations at secondary schools for the next forty or so years. Other foreign languages were taught only in school amateur clubs or as non-compulsory subjects.

In February 1948, a communist regime came to power and its subsequent educational reforms aimed at a uniform school that would fit in with communist ideology and central control (Zakon o jednotnej škole, 1948). In essence, this system would last until 1990. Teaching was strictly controlled through the curricula, through uniform textbooks, and through regular visits of inspectors to the schools.

The reform of 1959 introduced, among other things and for the first time, a second foreign language on the curriculum. It was taught as a non-compulsory subject in the afternoon classes from the 7th through 9th year of primary school. The next school reform, in 1961, increased the number of hours that could be devoted to a second foreign language for pupils from the 9th through the 11th year of primary school. The objective of foreign language teaching was to teach pupils to read and translate simple texts, and to provide them with the basics for oral communication (Učebne osnovy pre 9.-11. postupny ročník SVS, 1954).

From the 1960s, at selected primary schools, pupils were being taught three foreign languages, English, German and French, from the third year. These were the so-called schools with extended foreign language teaching, and such schools have

operated ever since (Eurydice, 2001). The 1966 curricula already differentiated between practical language skills and theoretical linguistic competence (Učebne osnovy pre SVS, 1966). The tendency to politicize the school system markedly increased in the 1970s, which was the period of the so-called ‘normalization’ following the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (Ernestova, 2007). Universities stopped preparing teachers of modern languages with teacher departments abolished during the 1970s. The only opportunity for studying modern languages was in the faculties of arts, where the number of students accepted was severely limited (Gadusova, Hartanska, 2002).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Slovak Pedagogical Publishing House in Prague started publishing foreign language textbooks which, unlike the ones used up until then, tried to reflect the directives of the approved curricula (Figure 1). The 1970s and 1990s were both very productive periods for reforms affecting foreign language teaching. The key reform of the 1970s was a project called “Further Development of the Czechoslovak Educational System” (1976). Its objective was to renew the educational content by switching from previous methods of teaching focused on mechanical reproduction of the learning material to the development of learners’ creativity. This document was the starting point for a team of experts at the Pedagogical Research Institute in Bratislava to work out new curricula aimed at the development of communicative skills, for use in gymnasia (Experimentálne učebne osnovy pre gymnázia, 1977).



Figure 1: English textbooks used in Slovakia before 1989 (examples)

However, teaching foreign languages in most cases remained by the formal instruction of the teacher, with a strong emphasis on comparative grammatical exposition, the memorization of word lists, all of this in large classes with little opportunity for individual participation beyond answering questions and reading aloud short passages, and with hardly any visual aids. The methodology used was a combination of the grammar-translation, reading, and audio-lingual methods, with a large amount of memory work, error correction, and knowledge testing. Promoting linguistic, communicative competence through the use of set topics for speaking was hardly seen as a necessary part of the teaching process (Sim, 2008).

Perfecting one’s mastery of a foreign language in its natural environment was at the time feasible only for teachers of Russian. As a rule, they were sent to a partner university in the Soviet Union for a two-month stay. For non-qualified teachers of Russian in Czechoslovakia, a re-qualification programme was set up at domestic

faculties, ending in a final eight-week stay in the Soviet Union. In addition, teachers of Russian could spend one semester at a Soviet institution of higher education. From the 1980s, this semester became compulsory, in line with the new conception of teaching foreign languages at Czechoslovak schools.

In the period from 1948 to 1989, a number of basic human rights were severely restricted in Czechoslovakia, e.g., the right to political and religious freedom, the right to freedom of speech and freedom of education, and the right to assembly. Teachers of the so-called western languages were most affected by the limitations on the free movement of persons. As they were neither given travel permits nor access to foreign currency, these teachers did not have any opportunity to practice their foreign language skills in a real communicative situations and environment (Wang et al., 2018).

And so, teachers relied exclusively on theoretical sources. The absence of direct contact with native speakers showed itself in a lack of communicative skills (Figure 2). The generation brought up during the communist era is still suffering from the consequences of this “second language illiteracy” (Medgyes, 1997, p. 188). In an attempt to control the “infiltration of bourgeois ideology,” western language radio channels were jammed, and people caught in the act of listening were persecuted (Enyedi, Medgyes, 1998). In addition, movies from western countries were not subtitled but were dubbed in Czech or Slovak, depriving teachers of the possibility to listen to the living language. Only for Russian, there were language courses on the radio given by native Russian speakers.

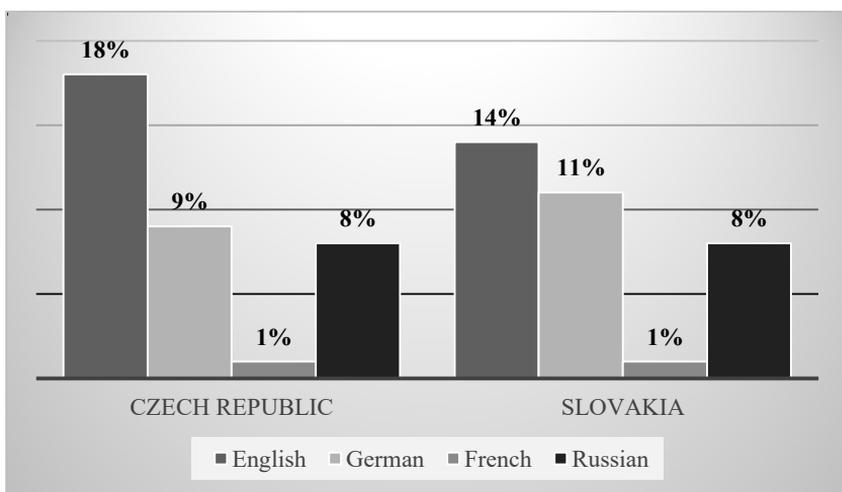


Figure 2: Self-perceived communicative competence (Special Eurobarometer 386)

At the same time, a huge number of extramural courses were organized. Special mention deserves the so-called People’s Courses of Russian. Also, for teachers of Russian, various linguistic and didactic journals, specialized bi-lingual dictionaries and textbooks were being published. For pupils willing to learn Russian, there were organized summer camps attended by Soviet children of the same age and Soviet

teachers. From 1959 on there was also a recitation competition named “Pushkin’s Memorial” and a Russian-language Olympiad annually held.

Teaching and learning of English or any other western language was not an easy thing to do. There was a shortage of resources: books in English and textbooks of English were scarce, to say nothing of audio and video materials. Other than locally published teaching materials were hardly available and, in the darkest periods of communism, were forbidden (Enyedi, Medgyes, 1998). The existing textbooks followed grammar-translation methods with the same structure in every unit: a text followed by translation and grammar exercises.

The Velvet or Gentle Revolution of 1989 was a non-violent transition of power in Czechoslovakia. Forty-one years of communist rule came to an end, and the transformation to a parliamentary democratic republic was begun. These socio-political events led to major changes in many aspects of life. In the educational sphere, one of the most striking changes was the sudden boom in the teaching and learning of western languages, especially English (Figure 3). Until 1989, the study of “capitalist” languages had been more or less limited. During the transition to a market economy, the importance of English immediately became abundantly clear, and this resulted in a veritable boom in its learning and teaching (cf. Krechetnikov, Pestereva, 2017; Melnichuk et al., 2017).

Also as a result of these socio-political changes, Russian lost its dominant position. Now, pupils at primary and secondary schools were given the opportunity to choose from a range of languages: besides Russian; there were also English, German, French, Spanish and Italian (Birova et al., 2017). General secondary schools offering bilingual education began to open from 1990 onwards. In 1990, bilingual gymnasia were created offering languages such as English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish (Eurydice, 2001). A plethora of private language schools mushroomed in the 1990s, but many of them were run without sufficient quality control.

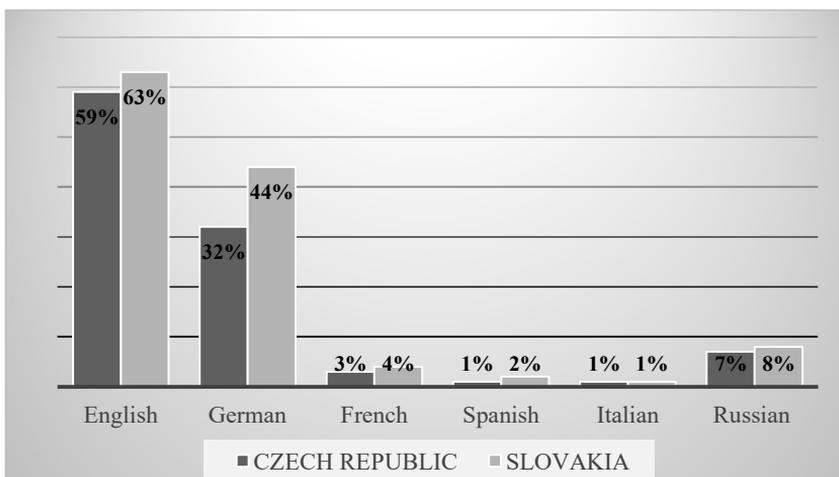


Figure 3: Opinions about the most useful languages (Special Eurobarometer 386)

In 1989 there were only two faculties which trained teachers of English (in Bratislava and in Presov). By the turn of the century, twelve English teacher training faculties were established (Gadusova, Hartanska, 2002). Since the 1990s the amount

of teacher training programmes in Slovakia has increased, and the curriculum on offer has changed substantially, reflecting new methodology requirements. Slovakia needed 3,000 English teachers but had less than 2,000 in place (Gill, 1995). In order to meet the demand for language teachers, study programmes at a level equivalent to a university degree have been introduced for a limited transition period. The Ministry of Education adopted a new regulation, to be valid until the year 2000, entitling teachers qualified for any other subject to also teach foreign languages, provided they pass a special examination to certify their language proficiency (Eurydice, 2001).

In order to increase the number of qualified English teachers within the shortest possible time, several measures were taken, for example, the Russian retraining programmes. Former teachers of Russian, who had become superfluous, received a one-year re-qualification course of English. As well as teachers with only a maturita (secondary school) language examination, and teachers of other subjects whose teaching loads were covered by lessons of a foreign language. In the years 1992 – 1997, the fast-track 4-year degree programmes were introduced with the assistance of the European Union within the PHARE programme with the focus on practical language and teaching skills were run at some teacher training colleges. English native speakers were often hired as teachers of English, and their native command of English was sometimes thought to make up for their incompetence as teachers (Enyedi & Medgyes, 1998).

Foreign languages were now being taught from textbooks published abroad, and the teacher training was transferred to various institutes, as the British Council, the United States Information Service, Fulbright Foundation, the Goethe Institute, or the French Institute. We also should not underestimate the support lent by foreign embassies in this respect. Likewise, from 1990, the non-governmental and non-profit Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA) and Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation (SAAIC) help promote the internalization of education and science in Slovakia through their various programmes and services.

The institutions have educated local teachers, both in-service and pre-service, have invited lecturers from abroad (through various organizations such as Peace Corps, East European Partnership or Education for Democracy) to contribute to our new cross-cultural experience (Tabackova, 2014), have established resource centres and libraries, e.g. the Info USA centres (Kralova et al., 2014); and have produced teaching materials and organized teachers' courses abroad (e.g. the English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme (ELTECS) within the British Council). One of the successful training programmes for in-service teachers of English was run by regional training centers in six sessions a year with English native speakers as lecturers (Gill, 1993). A number of teacher education projects have been implemented with means from the European Social Fund. In Slovakia, the National Institute for Education has offered primary school teachers an eight-semester course based on the national curriculum to achieve level B2 in a target language in the period from 2008 to 2013 (Beresova, 2011).

After 1989, a majority of teachers refused to continue using the officially endorsed Czechoslovak textbooks and started more and more to use textbooks published abroad (Figure 4). Foreign publishers with attractive format textbooks quickly established themselves in the newly open market, often running promoting workshops for foreign language teachers. Later, people began to stress the need for "home-made" textbooks, specifically tailored to the needs of Slovak speakers, which would eliminate the negative interference of the mother tongue when learning a foreign language. Joint publishing projects of local authors and native English speakers appeared to be very effective in this context (Tan & Hsu, 2018). The Ministry of Education asked a group of experts to evaluate and recommend the most

suitable English textbooks for schools to avoid confusion on the book market (Gadusova & Hartanska, 2002).

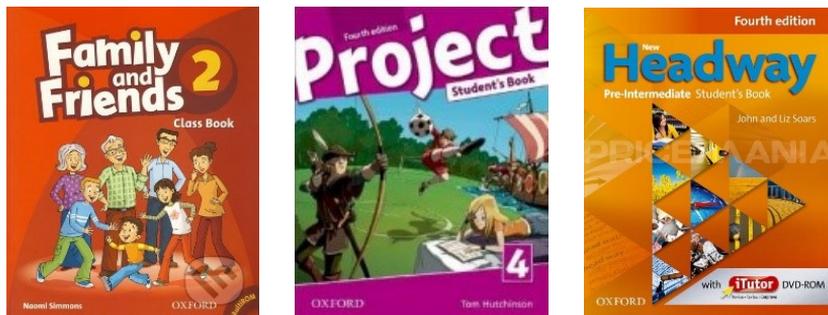


Figure 4: English textbooks used in Slovakia after 1989 (examples)

Language associations dealing with a single foreign language were the first to point out the need for innovation and systematization in the education of foreign language teachers. Both the Association of Teachers of English of the Czech Republic, established in 1991, and the Slovak Republic English Teachers' Association, established in 1992¹, became affiliated to the British-based International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) in the early 1990s. Nowadays, a professional association of EFL teachers (the Slovak Chamber of English Teachers), an IATEFL associate, together with the Slovak Association for the Study of English (SKASE), a member of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), promote research and education in the field of the English language and literature in Slovakia.

The radical changes in our society after 1989, and above all the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic on January 1st, 1993, and its subsequent entry into the European Union on May 1st, 2004, also required changes to the existing school system, including innovations in the educational content of foreign language teaching. First, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, signed in Lisbon on April 11th, 1997, supported a convergence in European education requirements through the recognition of documented competence, knowledge and skills. Slovak teachers called for a more objective assessment of learning foreign languages, and in 1997, the Slovak Association of Teachers of English (SAUA/SATE) started to work on the New "Maturita" Project in co-operation with the British Council in Slovakia (Gadusova, Hartanska, 2002).

Then the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), published by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe came in 2001 after a lengthy period of research and pilot projects that lasted from 1993 to 1999. The main idea of the project was to facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications, to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabi and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. The CEFR has played an important part in the changes that have occurred in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since its introduction. In Slovakia, the impact of the CEFR was immediately reflected in the

¹ The self-determined dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic took effect on 1 January 1993.

new English language syllabus relating to the common referential levels in order to set objectives, communicative competencies (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic), and, in addition, to emphasize an action-based rather than a knowledge-based approach in teaching foreign languages (Beresova, 2011).

One of the key elements of the Millenium Programme – The Slovak Republic National Pedagogical and Educational Programme for the ensuing 15 to 20 years (2001) was the development of a framework for teaching foreign languages. The basic direction of the new “Concept for Teaching Foreign Languages in Primary and Secondary Schools” (2007) was to lend support to the formation of multicultural European society, for which communicative competence in at least two foreign languages was deemed necessary. Compulsory instruction in a first foreign language was moved up to the third year of primary school, in a second foreign language to the fifth year. At the same time, the number of hours of instruction was raised. The objective was to have pupils achieve communicative competence at level B1/B2 (as defined by the CEFR) for the first foreign language and level A2/B1 for the second foreign language by the end of secondary school.

On the 22nd of May, 2008, Slovakia adopted a new School Law, integrating our education system in the European framework. It contains a national education programme, which serves as a binding document for formulating any and all school education programmes. This curricular reform in language education should bring to an end the existing wilderness of learning plans and improve the quality of foreign language teaching. It takes as its starting point the tenets of the European Commission about effective language instruction at an early age, as precisely then key attitudes towards other languages and cultures are formed, and the foundations are laid for further language acquisition (Reid, 2010).

The document “Concepts for Teaching Foreign Languages at Primary and Secondary Schools” (2007) hints at several current problems in the field of teaching foreign languages. For instance, it refers to the significant percentage of unqualified teachers, the high degree of fluctuation among teachers, and the low interest of new graduates in the teaching profession. Despite the high number of graduates with pedagogical qualifications, there is in primary and secondary schools still a relatively high number of unqualified foreign language teachers (Figure 5).

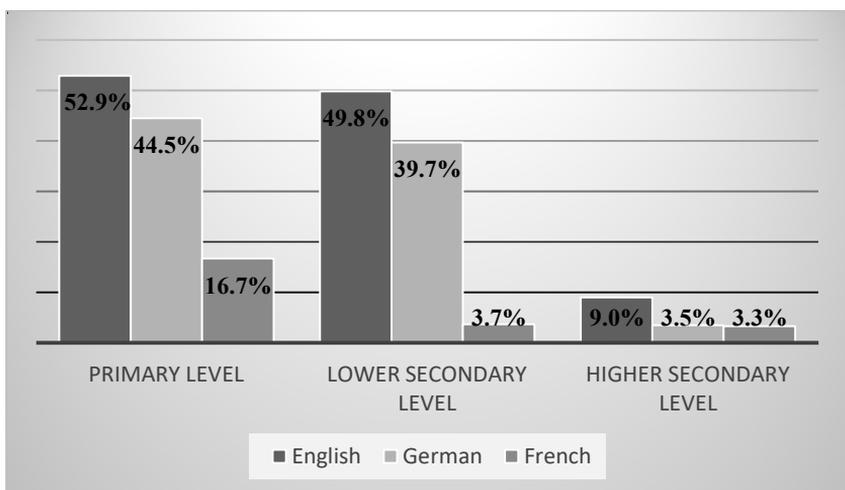


Figure 5: Unqualified foreign language teachers in Slovakia (Tandlichova, 2008)

It is alarming that only a small percentage of qualified graduates from pedagogical or arts faculties decide on a teaching career at a state school. A majority of graduated language students prefers employment at (better paying) private schools or at companies looking for foreign language expertise. Many gifted and language-proficient young people seek employment abroad. The current unfavorable situation is caused not only by a lack of financial means to keep teachers from migrating to other, more lucrative, jobs in business, banking or tourism but also by insufficient material and technical resources in the schools for teaching foreign languages (Soradova, Kralova, 2017). From available documents (cf. Magsumov, 2017), but also from interviews with parents of primary and secondary school pupils it becomes clear that there is a general dissatisfaction about foreign language instruction, having to do mainly with the fact that many teachers are unqualified to teach a foreign language, mostly English. These teachers face obstacles to communicate, they easily make grammar mistakes in their utterances, and their pronunciation is often faulty, and all this despite the fact that today teachers are trained to apply new methodologies, concentrating more on language as a means of communication rather than just on rules (Lewandowska, 2017).

A 2014 survey by the British Council of Slovakia among teachers of English shows that they appraise the conditions for teaching English in Slovakia as unsatisfactory. Most clearly felt (by 95% of respondents) were the lack of a structure for additional in-service training (nothing to do with the current credit system) and the lack of opportunities for a language stay abroad. Because these needs are being insufficiently met, only 17 – 21 percent of the interviewed teachers say that they feel fully confident in their command of English. As to technical resources, most respondents (93%) perceive the absence of integrated teaching materials (including didactic and digital content supplementing the textbooks) to be the major shortcoming. Most of these findings are identical to those in a number of other European countries (Enever, 2011) where the same need is felt for qualified teachers in primary schools, for higher standards in teacher training, and for additional in-service courses, also mainly for primary school teachers.

The result of having unqualified teachers in the schools is, of course, a low level of foreign language competence in their pupils (Santana et al., 2017). In a recent test conducted in a sample population of 8th and 9th-year pupils, the average success rate for a foreign language was only 40%. This fact should send a clear signal for the need to enhance the quality and effectiveness of foreign language instruction, beginning with raising the A2 CEFR level of foreign language qualification of the first grade primary school teachers, with emphasis on communicative competence (conversation, dialogue, individual oral communication) and on the didactics of foreign language teaching for their target group of pupils. Another important element, for instance in the framework of life-long learning, should be to provide for professional mobility amongst teachers through language courses abroad, so teachers might become self-confident and even fluent in command of their foreign language of choice, and would not be “only two lessons ahead of their pupils”, as is often the case today.

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