Retrospective view on teaching the Slovak language at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

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Abstract
The paper deals with teaching Slovak at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra with the emphasis on the period 2000 to 2016. It provides an analysis of this period in different areas – courses, teaching methods, teaching materials, an interest of students and their academic performance, the impact of research activities on the educational process and international relations – using archive materials of the Department of Foreign Languages, the Rectors office and the authors own materials. At the same time it points out the relations between these areas, their interaction as well as the tendencies and perspectives of the Slovak language.

Key words: courses, evaluation and tendencies, international cooperation, number of students, research work, study results, teaching Slovak language, textbooks

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1. Introduction
The department of Languages at the Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA) in Nitra was founded in 1952 and was initially managed directly by the Rector. After several reorganizations, it was affiliated to the Faculty of Economics and Management (FEM) in 1959. The department has undergone many personnel and structural changes, so changing the name into the Department of Professional Language Education in 2002, and consequently return to its original name in 2012 can be considered only a detail. In the beginning, teaching was focused primarily on the Russian language; other non-Slavic languages – English, German, French and Spanish - followed afterwards. The arrival of foreign students at the SUA raised the need to teach Slovak as a foreign language. The first teachers of Slovak as a foreign language were doc. PhDr. Ľudmila Jančovičová, CSc., Mgr. Emília Rákošiovaá and doc. PhDr. Edita Rohaľová, CSc. Current model of teaching Slovak for foreigners was set by PhDr. Edita Rohaľová, CSc. in 1990s; our colleague worked at the department until 2007. Later we started two different courses of Slovak for foreigners – General Language and the Slovak Language for Foreigners. In accordance with other courses taught at the Department of Languages, two-semester courses are to be completed by zapocet at the end of the winter term, and by a final exam at the end of the summer term. After satisfactory progress students receive an adequate number of credits. Soon after, a one-semester course was introduced – The Basics of Slovak for foreigners- which is completed by a final exam at the end of a term. This course is primarily for those students who come to study at SUA as a part of an exchange programme Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, etc. These courses were tutored by PhDr. Jana Vrbová, PhD between 2007 – 2010. At present their tuition is divided among qualified teachers as follows: PhDr. Jana Vrbová, PhD - The Basics of Slovak for foreigners; Mgr. Viera Prídavková - courses of Slovak for foreigners – General Language and Slovak for specific purpose. Mgr. Zuzana Rebičová, PhD. is currently a guarantee for all courses of the Slovak language for foreigners.
2. Data and Methodology

The aim of the paper is to look at the position of the Slovak language in the teaching and learning process at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra and how it is managed by the Department of Foreign languages at the university. Based on data collected from written documents of the Department of Foreign languages at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, the Rectors office, the university information system, and from documents of former teachers of the Slovak language, we have concentrated on the last decades, looking at them from the following perspectives:

- Subjects and teachers
- Used textbooks
- Students and their academic performance
- Research and international cooperation

The important part of the paper concerns the characteristics of students of the Slovak language, to analyse their communication problems in speaking and writing. We go out from the quantitative processing of data on the number of students and their academic performance, and move on to concrete examples. We will evaluate mistakes students have made so they could be placed into logical groups based on common features.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Textbooks and teaching material

At the very beginning it was necessary to introduce relevant teaching materials and textbooks. The textbook written by MISTRÍK Jozef: Basic Slovak, 1. vyd., Bratislava: Slovenské pedagogické nakladatelstvo, 1981, 151 pp was used to teach the course, The Basics of Slovak for foreigners. In 1990s there were several books for teaching Slovak. Mostly, they were reissued and available on the market, so there was no need to write our own textbooks. The textbook by HOLÍKOVÁ Klaudia a kolektív: Dobrý deň, slovenčina + 3 magnetofonové kazety, 1. vyd., Bratislava: Ústav jazykové a odbornej prípravy zahraničných študentov Univerzity Komenského, 1991 is an example of a really textbook one that was used for a long time.

Homogenous English-speaking groups of students were using the textbook BÖHMEROVÁ, Ada: Slovak for You: Slovak for Speakers of English – Textbook for Beginners = Slovenčina pre vás: Slovenčina pre anglicky hovoriacich – učebnica pre začiatočníkov. Perfekt, 1996 (1. vydanie), 1998 (2. vydanie), 141 pp., that was adapted to the needs of English-speaking students and supplemented by a series of audiotapes.

Francophone groups of students were using the textbook BALÁŽ, Peter – SERAFÍNOVÁ, Danuša. Parlons slovaque ou Les amis de l’internet. Guide pour les étudiants francophones. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského, Studia Academica Slovaca, 1999, 143 pp. Later, both the contents and the form were updated.

In recent decades, a scientific theory of teaching Slovak as a foreign language has been developed, mainly due to the collective of Studia Academica Slovaca at Comenius University in Bratislava. A practical outcome of their effort is a series of books, which has been prepared according to the requirements of the European Language Framework and divided into levels A1, A2, B1. It includes a Student's book, Workbook and CDs.
The important teaching aid is, for sure, an online course of the Slovak language in6enio by authors Mária Užáková and Jana Vrbová.

In the years to come, the SUA in Nitra stopped issuing its own teaching material for the Slovak language courses. The teachers of Slovak use authentic printed or web material. This should be changed, because although the Internet provides a really big number of material, searching for it, its selection and adaptation to meet demands of teaching Slovak for Specific Purposes requires a lot of time and energy of tutors.

3.2 Students and their academic performance

At this point we should emphasise that this is teaching Slovak as a foreign language, and it is exclusively designed for foreign students. The origin, nature and characteristics of students vary depending on the specific socio-political situation and every time is different. So, we can divide students into several groups:

1. Slovaks living abroad coming mostly from Serbia, Romania, but also from Spain or Bosnia. They are descendants of Slovaks who, have emigrated to those countries and settled there. Some of these students have completed their primary or secondary education in the Slovak language. They can understand Slovak in spoken and written form, but their Slovak is archaic, often marked by a dialect that their ancestors brought to their new homes and has, along with folk customs, preserved until today. They come to our country to study for a Bachelor degree in the Slovak language. These students only enhance general language, because their Slovak is at the same level as the Slovak of those Slovak students who come from different dialectal areas of Slovakia. At the same time they study Slovak for specific purposes - oral presentation of written work, preparing PowerPoint presentation, public speaking, stylistic peculiarities of speech and they learn the difference between an abstract and annotation, summary and conclusion.

2. Students coming from Slavic countries, e.g. from Russia, Poland, Ukraine and Serbia. Some of them have already spent some time in Slovakia or the Czech Republic. They can understand the spoken and, to some extent, the written language, but we can definitely say, that they have not mastered Slovak yet. In their communication they use a mixture of Slovak and their mother tongue, or very often switch into English. Some of these students study in the Slovak language,
the others in English, so their attitudes towards learning Slovak highly depend on the mentioned fact.
3. Students coming from non-Slavic countries (Spain, France, China, Vietnam, Iran, Afghanistan, Ecuador). These students have completed 1 year of intensive Slovak course at the Institute for Language and Academic Preparation for Foreign Students at Comenius University in Bratislava, where they studied Slovak for about 10 lessons a day. These students are well prepared and are able to undertake the whole Bachelor study programme in Slovak. They are generally highly motivated to study Slovak, show a great effort and responsibility because they are aware that mastering Slovak will help them in their study and understanding of technical subjects.
4. Students coming from different Slavic and non-Slavic countries for 1 or 2 terms as a part of Erasmus or Erasmus Mundus exchange programmes. They study technical subjects in English, and need Slovak language only for day-to-day communication and obtaining ECTS credits. In this group it is important to emphasise the intercultural aspects along with teaching the basis of the language. The department of Foreign Languages at our university has responded to an increased number of these students and offers courses of Elementary Slovak for Foreigners. As we already mentioned, exchange programmes usually last one term, so in the summer term there are new students to come, though that term is generally less busy.

Graph 1 shows the number of students studying the Slovak language. We can see that the number of students in the winter semester and the summer semester slightly differs. In the summer semester there were students (most of them were 1st year students) because the 1st year at the university is generally difficult and requires a lot of study. For international students it is extremely difficult. Change of environment, language and cultural shock, homesickness, high academic demands, etc. cause that some students leave their studies after the first semester. By 2012, the numbers of students of the General Slovak Language course and the Slovak for Specific Purposes course were the same, and then the students started to use the option not to sign for both courses.

Graph 2 shows the average grades for the last decade. The study results are fairly balanced in all courses of the Slovak Language and are relatively very satisfying. The average grade oscillates between 1.2 and 1.5. There are several factors that have an influence on the very good study results of students: high professionalism of tutors, an adequate curriculum and study material in individual courses, and a responsible approach of foreign students who realize that mastering Slovak leads to successful studying at a Slovak university.

Quantitative data do not tell us about problems that international students face when studying our language. These data can be obtained only by a qualitative analysis of their study results - the written language is documented in tests; the evaluation of the spoken language is based on oral exams and presentations.
3.2.1 Phonetics and phonology
Mistakes in speaking are often related to students’ backgrounds and their mother tongue. In a suprasegmental area we often face the wrong accent (not on the first syllable), improper melody of speech (rising melody in declarative sentences), sentence segmentation (breaks in a wrong place, e.g. between a proposition and a noun) and inconsistent articulation, which can cause misunderstanding. There are also many mistakes in pronunciation: improper pronunciation of double consonants, ignoring soft pronunciation of consonants de, te, ne le, di, ti, ni, li. Perhaps, we can mention the fact that many students, who come from countries where Cyrillic is used, read letter y as [u].

3.2.2 Orthography

There are many students coming from countries which use different graphics systems (Cyrillic, Arabic, Chinese characters). These students study our Slovak alphabet and accented letters (á, é, í, ú, š, č, t’, ž, etc.) first. Using accented letters also makes problems for students from Slavic countries, for example Serbs, Croats, Russians and Ukrainians simply because they do not have them in their alphabets. Ukrainian students often write a letter i instead of e - darčik, musil som, stromčik instead of darček, musel som, stromčík; Serbian students write h instead of ch - prihodim zo Srbska, hudožny kraj, Tehnická fakulta instead of prichádzam zo Srbska, chudobny kraj, Technická fakulta. Slovak students also make some spelling mistakes, e.g. writing ľ – y, proper using of commas, misuse of prepositions s (Instrumental) and z (Genitive), simple and vocalized prepositions s / so, z / zo, v / vo, k / ku; they confuse case ending - ou (feminine singular instrumental) with the suffix – ov (masculine plural genitive) e.g. pečenie koláčikou a perníčkou. English speaking students have problems with the correct use of capital letters in multi-word names Slovenská Polnohospodárska Univerzita v Nitre instead of Slovenská poľnohospodárska univerzita v Nitre.

3.2.3 Lexicology and stylistics

Looking at language issues of foreign students more closely we notice that students coming from Slavic countries face different problems to students from non-Slavic countries. The latter ones have very limited vocabulary and often understand only one meaning of a word, even of an ambiguous word. Even when using dictionaries, they are not able to pick up the correct meaning. Similarly, we see an excessive use of personal pronouns to emphasize a subject in a sentence. These kinds of mistakes are done also by students of Slovak nationality coming from Serbia; they are descendants of Slovak emigrants. Very often they use archaic language or dialect words, which have petrified in areas where they come from - ešče, všeci, kôli, pokým, mám lem prednášky. A typical problem is an incorrectly used univerbation (the diachronic process of combining a fixed expression of several words into a new single word), shortening of words, or the use of collocations instead of formal multi-words expressions - bývam na intráku, cestujem busom, mám cviko z matiky. Some mistakes are subject to the influence of English, which has promoted as a new „lingua franca“— universal language of communication, e.g. the excessive use of anglicisms and their distorted slovakized words – kompjuter, spíker, sejvnúť, deletovať.

3.2.4 Grammar and syntax

Grammatical gender is a problem area for some students from non-Slavic countries (three genders – masculine, feminine and neutral) and declination (in their mother tongue there are no grammatical cases).

Serbian and Croatian students tend to form a past tense in the same way as is done in Serbian or Croatian language – an auxiliary verb in all grammatical persons, whereas in Slovak it is not used in the 3rd person: on je čital, to je bol problém, oni sú prišli.
Generally, most students have problems with the use of prepositional cases (but this is also observed in the Nitra region, e.g. „pri Tesco“, instead of “k Tescu”), and do not understand nuances:

preposition v (place) / do (direction) – v škole / do školy,
v / na – v škole, v Rusku, v Anglicku – na Slovensku, na univerzite,
na + locative / na + accusative– Študujem na univerzite. / Idem na kávu, na obed.
pred + instrumental (place) / pred + accusative (direction) – Som pred triedou. / Idem pred triedu.

Next, is the correct/incorrect use of word order in sentences, the use of reflexive pronouns sa, si and their proper position in a sentence.

Due to the limited space it is not possible to list all mistakes, so we have mentioned those, which are, in our opinion, the most frequent and the most serious ones.

3.3 Research and international cooperation

The principal business of the Department of Foreign languages is to teach foreign languages. Teaching Slovak has always been of little importance at the university. We take for granted everybody can speak it well, for it is our mother tongue, so no special attention has ever been paid to it. Although teaching the Slovak language has not been included among scientific and research tasks, the most important activities in this field are the following:

2001 – 2003 Mgr. Viera Pridavková worked as a lecturer of the Slovak language at the Université Michel de Montaigne de Bordeaux in France

2000 – 2004 International scientific project Socrates, no.114034-CP-1-2004-ES-LINGUA-L2-CALL@C&S – Online Courseware for Learners of Czech and Slovak

Project participants: doc. PhDr. Mária Užáková, CSc., PhDr. Jana Vrbová, PhD.

2005 – 2009 Mgr. Viera Pridavková worked as a lecturer of the Slovak language at the Université de Strasbourg in France

2012 Project no. 12204-0298/NITRA02 under the Lifelong Learning program, Erasmus – Intensive Language Courses (EILC).

Project participants: PhDr. Jana Vrbová, PhD., Mgr. Viera Pridavková, Mgr. Zuzana Rebičová, Mgr. Katarína Klimentová, Mgr. Andrea Holúbeková, PhD., Mgr. Mária Fördösová, PaedDr. Ľubomíra Moravcová, PhD.

2013 Project no. 13204-0369/NITRA02 under the Lifelong Learning program, Erasmus – Intensive Language Courses (EILC).

Project participants: PhDr. Jana Vrbová, PhD., Mgr. Viera Pridavková, Mgr. Zuzana Rebičová, Mgr. Katarína Klimentová, Mgr. Andrea Holúbeková, PhD., Mgr. Mária Fördösová, PaedDr. Ľubomíra Moravcová, PhD.

4. Conclusion

Courses of the Slovak language have never been of great importance at the Department of Foreign Languages at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. Teaching foreign languages has always reflected the need of the society and time. The arrival of foreign students at our university raised the need to teach the Slovak language starting with elementary Slovak, followed by more advanced levels of the language.
However, we can see that the existing structure of courses does not entirely fit changing political and economic situation. The formation of the independent Slovak Republic, the emphasis on the use of the state language, the requirements for the development of language culture at schools at all levels are the factors that suggest that there is a need for teaching Slovak students the Slovak language. Not only because the Slovak Constitution, article 6, paragraph 1 declares: „Slovak language is the state language of the territory of the Slovak Republic.” but also because the Ministry of Culture continuously monitors the level of the language culture in all public institutions, sets tasks and checks compliance therewith. One possible response of the SUA in Nitra on these requirements could be an introduction of a new course, for example the Slovak Language for Academic Purposes. Its main aim might be the raising of linguistic culture of university students, the basics of rhetoric and stylistics, teaching them how to present and defend their opinions and instruct them in the area of social behaviour.

The report on the state of use of the state language of the Slovak Republic states the following: “… to introduce obligatory lectures of Slovak terminology concerning a particular field of study” (Report on the state of use of the state language of the Slovak Republic 2014, Education, Chapter 5 Final recommendations, paragraph 3). The Government resolution only “advises” rectors of universities to implement the relevant parts of the report, but it is a signal that it is necessary to make changes in this area.

In conclusion we can assume that in the future, the teaching of the Slovak language will not only depend on tutors and students studying at the university but mostly on the developmental concepts and strategies drawn by the leading managers of individual faculties at the university. They will affect future graduates, finances, courses and consequently an interest of students in taking up Slovak language courses.

References


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