

SLOVAK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN TERMS OF THE INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT: The article represents a methodological starting point for research on teaching Slovak as a foreign language in the Slovak Republic. After the Slovak Republic joined the eurozone, it was necessary to start understanding Slovak as the state language – as a compulsory subject for Slovaks, but also to start teaching it to different groups of foreigners moving to Slovakia. This need has become even more pressing since February 2022, when the war conflict in Ukraine forced thousands of Ukrainians to leave their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Slovakia. This raised the question of how to deal with Slovak as a foreign language within the educational system of the Slovak Republic. Legislation (a law on the Residence of Foreigners in Slovakia) is also currently being prepared that will require foreigners asking for living in Slovakia to take a standardized test/exam at an accredited educational institution. However, since very few research studies on this topic have been conducted, this scholarly article lays foundations and poses methodological questions within five key thematic areas (i.e., learners' motivation, intermediary language, textbooks, testing reference levels and error analysis, particular case studies) when directing a follow-up series of research studies and to justify why these issues are relevant. Therefore, the article explains the starting points that are anchored in previous scientific works in the field. Furthermore, the elaborated theoretical foundations and proposed research studies that will be carried out by university teachers and educational researchers are aimed at deepening scientific knowledge not only in the context of Slovak as a foreign language, but also of other minor foreign languages (e.g. Polish, Czech, Croatian, etc.).

KEYWORDS: case study, education, eurozone, intermediary language, methodology, research, textbooks, Slovak as a foreign language, tests

Introduction

Interest in Slovak as a foreign language has been growing in recent years for several reasons. They include migration, the expansion of Slovak companies, tourism, cultural influence, the online environment, education, the genetic relationship of languages (Slovak as a Slavic language related to Polish, Czech, Croatian, and Russian), government and intergovernmental programmes to support the inclusion of foreigners, and last but not least, the war in Ukraine.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people who have migrated to Slovakia from various countries, including Ukraine, Serbia, Romania and Belarus. These migrants need to learn Slovak in order to integrate into society and find work. Slovak companies expanding abroad are also looking for qualified employees who speak Slovak fluently. This motivates people from abroad to learn Slovak in order to improve their chances on the job market. Slovakia is also becoming a popular tourist destination, and the number of tourists coming here is increasing. Knowledge of Slovak is a benefit that allows them to get to know the country and its culture much better. Slovak culture and art are also gaining international recognition, which leads to interest in the language and a desire to learn more about it. A number of online platforms and websites offer Slovak language courses for foreigners. This makes learning the language easier and more affordable for people all over the world. Slovak universities are also attracting students from abroad who need to learn the language in order to study at Slovak universities. The Slovak government supports the spread of Slovak abroad and offers programmes to support language learning for foreigners at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Ottawa; University College London; Oxford University, among others. However, the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine is one of the many reasons for the importance of learning and teaching Slovak. It creates sufficiently serious arguments for Ukrainians to escape from the danger zone to the nearest possible country where there is peace and creates a relatively stable environment for foreigners to establish themselves in a new geopolitical and cultural environment.

Moreover, since April 2024 a law of the Slovak Republic on the Residence of Foreigners in Slovakia has been prepared (currently in the consultation phase). According to this law, every foreigner who wants to obtain a residence permit in the territory of the Slovak Republic will have to take a test of Slovak as a foreign language at an institution authorized to carry out state language examinations. There are few such institutions in Slovakia and they face serious tasks:

- a) identify the needs of foreigners in the language area, specifically for what purpose they need to study Slovak and for what purpose they will need to take a Slovak language test;
- b) ensure the content focus of teaching Slovak as a foreign language with regard to the needs of clients;
- c) create specialized testing teams of experts who will focus on the preparation of accredited tests and accredited examinations.

Obviously, this requires research and research analysis of the needs of clients learning Slovak. Extensive research in the field of teaching and learning Slovak as a foreign language is limited. Partial research results were published by Borovská, 2022; Čížmárová, 2018; Dzuganova and Balkova, 2007, 2008; Gluchmanová, 2022; Kováčová Švecová & Smalley, 2020; Pekarovičová, 2020; Pokrivčák – Pokrivčák, 2016; Prídavková and Matušeková, 2016; Szököl and Puskás, 2021; Šarvajcová & Štrbová, 2021; and Uličná, 2018. The main goal of the series of research studies we are planning to conduct is to bridge the gap in an area which deserves intensive examination under the influence of changed cultural and political conditions at present. Therefore, this study lays the foundations for subsequent research series on the following issues:

1. Research and analysis of learners of Slovak as a foreign language (social and geographical characteristics of learners and their motivation and needs).
2. Research and analysis of the role of the intermediary language in creating homogeneous/heterogeneous learning groups when teaching Slovak as a foreign language.
3. Research and analysis of the views of teachers and learners on textbooks for teaching Slovak as a foreign language.
4. Research and analysis of the results of testing the reference levels of learners and the most common mistakes made by learners.
5. Case studies (attitudes of migrants and their parents about the use and the teaching of Slovak as a foreign language in Slovakia).

The research will utilise a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, including questionnaires and the statistical processing of data, in-depth interviews, focus groups and case studies. The results of the research will be used to develop more effective teaching methods and materials, and methodological guidelines for both teachers and learners of Slovak as a foreign language in Slovakia. Furthermore, we aspire to contribute to the growing body of knowledge and expertise in teaching and learning Slovak as a foreign language.

1. Research and analysis of learners of Slovak as a foreign language (social and geographical characteristics of learners, and their motivation and needs)

Demographic characteristics

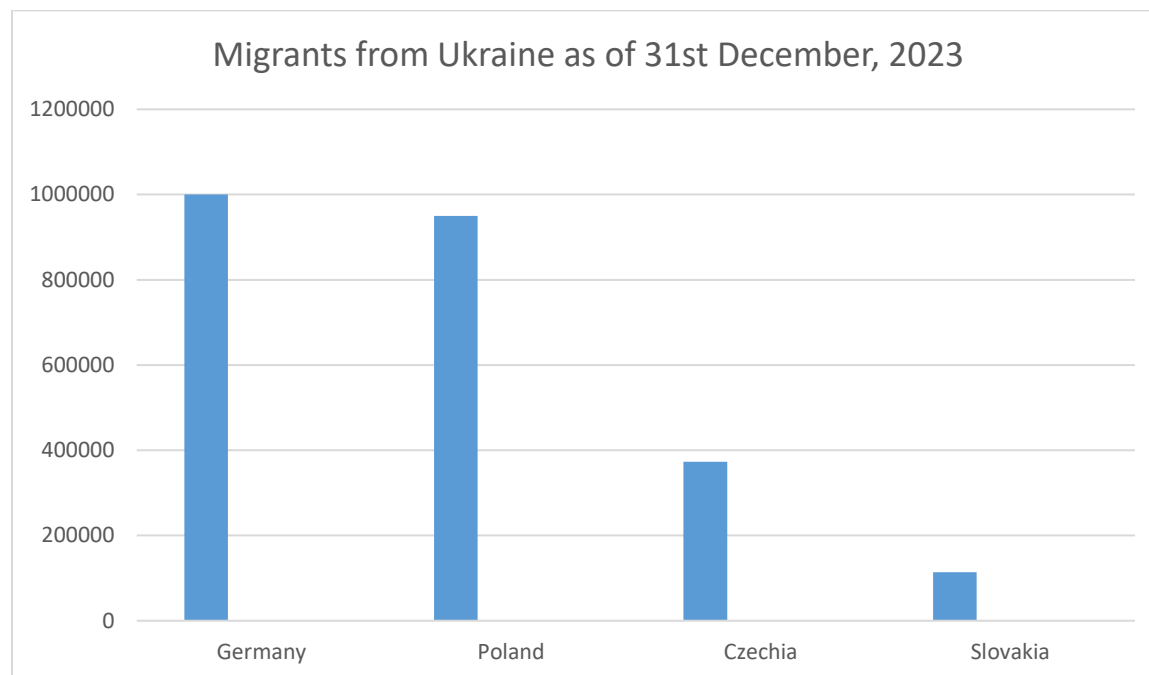
For many years, Slovakia was primarily a destination for citizens of other European Union (EU) member states. However, this trend has shifted in recent years, with a notable increase in the number of individuals from countries outside the EU migrating to Slovakia. In 2018, for the first time, the total number of third-country nationals surpassed that of EU citizens. This surge continued to intensify in 2019 and 2020. By the end of 2020, Slovakia's population included 31,000 more third-country nationals than citizens from other EU member states.

According to Eurostat's Migration and migrant population statistics, as of 1 January 2022, there were about 22 200 third-country nationals (TCNs), representing 0.4% of the population, and another 37 900 EU citizens (0.7%) living in Slovakia. In addition, on 1 January 2023, according to the country's interior ministry, 222 525 TCNs legally resided in Slovakia. They represented 4.1% of the total population. This notable rise was due to the number of displaced persons from Ukraine. Most TCNs came from Ukraine, Serbia, and Vietnam. Slovakia also has sizeable communities from the Russian Federation, North Macedonia, Georgia, and China. Of these TCNs, 98 281 had valid temporary residence permits, 28 794 were permanent residents, and 95 450 had tolerated residence status. In 2022,

42% of temporary residence permits granted were for entrepreneurship, 23% – for employment, 11% – for non-nationals of Slovak descent, and 13% – for family reunification.

By the end of November 2023, a total of 113 110 displaced persons from Ukraine were under temporary protection in the country (see monthly updates in the numbers of temporary protection beneficiaries on Eurostat).

According to Eurostat sources, 114 226 refugees from Ukraine were granted temporary protection in Slovakia as of 31 December 2023, which represents about 2.7 per cent of the total number. There are 21 Ukrainian refugees per 1,000 Slovak citizens.



Graph No. 1 Migrants from Ukraine as of 31st December, 2023.

Source: Eurostat 2024, available at: <https://www.napalete.sk/na-slovensku-je-viac-ako-100-000-odidencov-z-ukrajiny-s-docasnou-ochranou/>

The recent influx of Ukrainian and Serbian immigrants, coupled with the more established presence of persons from Vietnamese, Russian and Chinese communities, underscores the diverse immigration landscape of Slovakia. Understanding the unique dynamics of each group is crucial for developing effective integration policies and fostering a cohesive multicultural society.

Motivational Characteristics

The aforementioned statistical indicators on the movement and residence of foreigners in Slovakia provide sufficient grounds for analysing the group of the foreign population that has enrolled in Slovak as a foreign language course or plans to do so. We will be interested why these foreigners enrolled in Slovak language courses and decided to learn Slovak as a foreign language. We assume that the language proficiency of foreigners can be a stimulus to strengthen the purpose for which they decided to stay in Slovakia. Generally available statistics indicate that the main motivational factors, regardless of the level of proficiency in the state language, are employment, business, research and development, family reunification, study, special activities, and other unspecified purposes. However, this data comes from the statistical offices upon the initial registration of a foreigner when crossing the border of the Slovak Republic. We assume that foreigners interested in working in science and research will not be able to do so without studying Slovak and that the specific organizations they want to work for will require them to be proficient in the state language. On the contrary, the motivation of foreigners who do not care in what field they find a job will be significantly lower, almost minimal, and they will rely on gaining the basics of communication in the state language in everyday practice. This assumption was proved by Borovská (2022) who carried out interviews on a sample of seven university students focusing

on their motivation to learn Slovak as a foreign language. The findings proved both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivational drive. Respondents who 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. As the author claims, this suggests that intrinsically motivated students need less stimuli from their teacher than extrinsically motivated students whose interest in Slovak needs to be aroused.

Unfortunately, no comprehensive research studies exist that examine the motivation of foreign learners to learn Slovak as a foreign language as an incentive to strengthen the purpose of staying in Slovakia. Therefore, we adopted a 6-factor questionnaire (originally developed by Gonzales, 2006) to find out the motivation of foreigners to learn Slovak. The factors are as follows: Factor 1 – Desire for career and economic enhancement; Factor 2 – Desire to become a global citizen; Factor 3 – Desire to communicate and affiliate with foreigners; Factor 4 – Desire for self-satisfaction; Factor 5 – Self-Efficacy; Factor 6 – Desire to be integrated with other cultures. The data collected through the questionnaire and statistically processed will enable us to assess the relative importance of each motivational factor among foreign learners of Slovak. Understanding the motivations of foreigners for learning Slovak can have significant implications for language education programmes and integration policies. Tailored language learning opportunities and support services can be designed to address the specific needs and aspirations of foreign learners. By fostering an inclusive environment that supports language learning, Slovakia can encourage foreigners to integrate into society and contribute to its cultural diversity.

2. Research and analysis of the role of the intermediary language in forming homogenous/heterogeneous learning groups when teaching Slovak as a foreign language

This task also requires research analysis in order to find out how learners of Slovak as a foreign language accept an intermediary language during this learning process. The issue of intermediary language has not been given ample attention in teaching Slovak as a foreign language yet. We understand intermediary language as the language by means of which phonetic and phonological, grammatical, lexical and stylistic phenomena typical for a foreign language are explained. The main function of the intermediary language is to convey important information about the target language. Hrdlička (2010) understands the term intermediary language as a communicative code (i.e. primarily verbal language, but also elements of a non-verbal nature) which is used for classroom communication between the teacher and the foreign language learner. The author distinguishes three basic cases in teaching practice: 1) both the teacher and the learner have a common linguistic code (it is the mother tongue of the learners and the teacher or another language); 2) teachers and foreign language learners have only partial knowledge of a common mutually intelligible language code; 3) there is no mutually intelligible language code (yet). Likewise, Zaripova (2023) claims that the intermediary language performs various functions, in particular, the motivational-educational function, the organizational function and the cultural-educational function. The most significant function of the intermediary language used at all stages of the training session is motivational and educational, which first and foremost manifests itself in the motivational attitude. Zaripova (ibid.) also points out that the use of an intermediary language should be directly dependent on the level of linguistic training of the students: the higher the level, the lower the necessity to use the intermediary language. Thus, it is necessary to regulate the use of the intermediary language by the teacher in the learning process. Zaripova (2023) also adds that the issue of intermediary language has caused heated debates among methodologists regarding its role in teaching foreign language speech activity. Some believe that the use of an intermediary language helps in language learning, others believe that the so-called immersion of students in a natural speech environment with the complete exclusion of the intermediary language from the learning process is necessary.

The question of using an intermediary language and its volume as a percentage in case of use in teaching Slovak as a foreign language has yet to be researched. Moreover, this issue needs specific attention in Slovak classrooms due to the nature of homogenous and heterogeneous language classes. The distinction of homogenous and heterogeneous classes gives rise to another challenge which needs relevant attention. By homogeneity of the language class, we mean learners whose mother tongue is the same or linguistically (genetically) related (e.g., Russian and Ukrainian). In contrast, heterogeneous classes are composed of learners whose mother tongues are not the same or not linguistically

(genetically) related (e.g., Russian or Ukrainian learners placed in the same class with Arabic, Vietnamese, Chinese, Romanian learners, etc.). In many cases, practice shows that the common language that is more or less familiar to all the learners in a heterogeneous class can be English. The choice of English as an intermediary language can be explained by the role it plays in international communication and its wide representation in the educational process. It should be noted that research focusing on the formation of homogeneous or heterogeneous groups has not yet been carried out in Slovakia. In most cases, language classes are created according to the criteria of a particular educational institution (language school), which does not consider the mother tongue of learners in advance, but recruits learners in order to form a group according to quantitative indicators (e.g., learners register for courses online via so-called language e-shops). Through online portals prepared in this way, candidates can register for a group until it is closed after the quantitative quota (max. number of students in the group) is filled.

Thus, the proposed research, which will be aimed at investigating crucial aspects influencing the teaching and learning process with regard to the diversity of language classrooms, has the ambition to confirm or reject established hypotheses about the relevance and importance of the intermediary language, the functionality or non-functionality of the homogeneity or heterogeneity of language classrooms and the need for its further development within the framework of ethnolinguistics and linguodidactics. We agree with Pozdnyakova et al. (2021) who claim that the importance of the designated problem and the expediency of its further development features two main aspects: 1) the aspect of ethnolinguistics, which presupposes a competent selection of interlanguage material from different fields of knowledge, and 2) the aspect of linguodidactics, which presupposes the development of new forms and methods of working with this material.

3. Research and analysis of the views of teachers and learners on textbooks for teaching Slovak as a foreign language

According to Gluchmanová (2022, p. 70), “interest in Slovak as a foreign language is growing from year to year. Teachers of Slovak as a foreign language face difficult tasks: to motivate foreign students to learn the Slovak national language, to focus on a communicative approach to teaching Slovak as a foreign language, innovate study programmes, prepare high-quality printed or digitized study materials.”

Although there is a variety of online (interactive) language teaching materials, workbooks, translation dictionaries, conversation practices and guides focused on the effective development of receptive and productive skills in accordance with the requirements of the CEFR in the age of electronization and digitalisation, textbooks still play an irreplaceable role as a link between the interested language learner and the environment in which the learner is situated. It can be considered an axiom that language textbooks represent a guide to the prescribed curriculum and syllabus since they enable the transmission of knowledge of the language means, language skills, attitudes and cultural values to the teacher and student alike. Language textbooks are important and beneficial for teachers and students alike, since they make the teaching process much easier and students can practise better and more extensively and effectively. We agree with Oates (2014, p. 5) who claims that “the move to on-line materials is a significant matter. But it would be naive to ignore the way in which existing carefully-designed textbooks have played a crucial role in improving educational outcomes.”

In terms of textbooks aimed at teaching Slovak as a foreign language over the decades, there have not been many teaching aids (apart from the linguistic content) whose modern design and reflection on the contemporary way of life of Slovaks and the Slovak Republic would attract attention. Currently, the situation on the market of modern teaching aids is somewhat better, but as far as Slovak as a foreign language is concerned, the variability of teaching aids is lacking.

Comprehensive research on the analysis and effectiveness of foreign language textbooks used for teaching foreign languages in Slovakia is scarce. This issue is partly dealt with in theses and dissertations by university students. More comprehensive data is mostly summarised by the state institution responsible for education in the Slovak Republic, currently the National Institute of Education and Youth (NIVaM). One of the elaborate reports by Bockaničová et al. (2018, p. 35) presents substantial research findings in terms of the selection of didactic resources and textbooks. The authors of the research stress that the role of the teacher, who is most familiar with the conditions under which the learners will be taught, the nature of the learners, their needs, interests and learning styles, is

irreplaceable in the selection of an appropriate textbook. The research proved that in almost all surveyed schools (369 schools out of 409), the selection of the foreign language textbook (English, German, Russian, French and Spanish) was the responsibility of the subject committee (250 schools; 61.12%) or of each particular language teacher (119 schools; 29.10%). In 14 schools (3.42 %), the head of the subject committee was responsible for the selection of textbooks, and in 26 schools (6.36 %) it was the school management. As the authors point out, the finding that more than 90% of schools use uniform textbooks for all classes in a particular grade is not surprising, although it would be desirable when choosing a textbook, teachers should also take into account the specificity of particular classes and the personalities of the learners.

However, the above research does not include textbooks used for teaching Slovak as a foreign language. Therefore, we consider it necessary to bridge this gap and to conduct extensive research focused on: analysis of the status and quality of textbooks of Slovak as a foreign language; analysis of the rationale for the choice of a particular textbook; and the advantages and disadvantages of the textbooks used in particular groups of learners.

In the past, textbooks of Slovak as a foreign language focused on the grammatical and lexical aspects of the language. They lacked a communicative and, more importantly, a cultural emphasis. Texts, tasks and supplementary material should integrate linguodidactic and psychological components with the information and tasks related to area studies and cultural awareness. According to Kollárová (2008, 2013), a textbook should at least present the cultural background of the country to the learner; her concept of synthetic culture as an indispensable element of a textbook is global and can be applied to any foreign language since this element should integrate the textbook and create an integrity that allows the learner to understand why the language is the way it is. Thus, as stated above, teachers should be able to select appropriate textbooks which combine the essential components of teaching and learning Slovak as a foreign language.

We assume that among the currently available textbooks, *Tri, dva, jeden – slovenčina A1 – A2 (Three, Two, One Slovak A1 – A2)* in combination with *Hovorme spolu po slovensky B1 – B2 (Let's Speak Slovak Together B1 – B2)* and *Krížom krážom (Slovenčina A1 – B2) (Criss-cross Slovak A1 – B2)* will dominate the teacher's selection. These textbooks are representative samples of two different directions of the didactic arrangement of language material and follow the requirements of the heterogeneity (*Three, Two, One – Slovak A1 – A2*) and homogeneity (*Criss-cross Slovak A1 – B1*) of language learner groups. The most distinguishing aspects of *Three, Two, One – Slovak A1 – A2*, written by Uličná et al. (2015), are the motivational and illustrative material for developing learners' language skills in meaningful, real-life communicative situations, while taking into account the most common mistakes and problems of foreigners learning Slovak. *Criss-cross Slovak A1 – B1*, written by Kamenárová et al. (2011, 2012) and *Criss-cross Slovak B2* written by Gabríková et al. (2014), feature richly illustrated and didactically well-elaborated content that enables meaningful practising of all four communicative skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) in accordance with the requirements of the Common European Framework (CEFR) at particular proficiency language levels. On the basis of her survey conducted on this textbook, Borovská (2022, p. 89) points out that all seven respondents expressed satisfaction with it. Moreover, one respondent specified that it was not only educational, but also entertaining and that the dialogues were brilliant, thus having the potential to motivate language learners.

We suggest that language teachers' views on the use of these textbooks will vary depending on their students. Even today, most educators believe that the textbook is the most important element for students to reach the desired language level. On one hand, it should be emphasised that textbooks have a great impact in the teaching and learning process for both language teachers and learners, as they provide a carefully prepared syllabus and sets of ready-made texts and tasks. On the other hand, there is no perfect textbook for every group of language learners and class situation. Therefore, language teachers should carefully select the appropriate textbook, which meets their students' needs and can achieve the learning objectives. The essential question is not whether to use textbooks or not, but how language teachers should use them in appropriate and productive ways. Teachers should be able to adapt the textbook based on particular teaching and learning conditions.

In spite of the highly valued status of the textbook regarding teaching Slovak as a foreign language, we assume that the subjective attitude of teachers in relation to textbooks will prevail over its objective status. Through research, we plan to verify this attitude and thus confirm the validity of our

claims. We anticipate that two groups of teachers will emerge, and within them different views on the particular textbooks used. The first group will likely trichotomize their views on the use of a specific textbook as follows:

1a) The textbook is the binding and only document on the way to the tested language level, and all groups of language learners should use the same textbook aimed at a particular language level.

1b) The textbook is the binding and only document on the way to reach the tested language level, and homogeneous groups of language learners mainly profit from the use of the (*Crisscross Slovak A1 – B2*) textbook series.

1c) The textbook is the binding and only document on the way to reach the tested language level, and heterogeneous groups of language learners mainly profit from the use of the (*Three, Two, One Slovak A1 – A2*) textbook series as well as (*Let's Speak Slovak Together A and B* by Bortlíková et al., 2017). The latter series of textbooks are suitable for short-term, long-term, evening, summer and individual courses. The pack also focuses on the preparation of foreigners who want to study at Slovak universities as well as those who want to master Slovak for personal or other reasons.

The second group will include teachers who do not consider the textbook as a binding pedagogical document. We assume that this group will be in a minority and will not insist on the uniformity of teaching materials used in language classrooms. Therefore, more systematic and detailed research on textbook policy and on the evaluation of textbooks used to teach Slovak as a foreign language is required due to the fact that the interest in learning Slovak has been growing in our country and it is assumed, also due to migration trends, that this interest will continue to grow in future.

4. Research and analysis of results of testing the reference levels of learners and the most common mistakes made by learners

Current trends in the testing of foreign languages are unilaterally focused on quantitative data based on the performance of tested benchmarks. This phenomenon is almost irreversible in almost all European and non-European education systems. The learner is viewed through the achieved quantitative indicator. Individual data are collected, statistically evaluated in percentiles, lists of rankings are created and produced at regional and even international levels.

There is a strong tendency towards the globalisation of these results and the subsequent evaluation of individual national education systems. The biggest shortcoming of these statistical studies is the lack of dissemination of identified shortcomings, which are insufficiently analysed, thus leading to the absence of studies on the key problems of language learners and the origins of these problems. We believe that each deficiency should be properly analysed, not only statistically processed, but above all, qualitatively and linguistically and then methodologically elaborated into coherent studies. Ideally, language teachers should be provided with the results of these research studies to enable them to modify the instruction aimed at reinforcing work on those problematic linguistic phenomena.

Partial research results and articles pointing out learners' errors and mistakes carried out by Dziganova, 2007, 2008; and Gluchmanová, 2022, have been published. We agree with Gluchmanová (2022) who notes that students have a great advantage in studying Slovak because they can learn the language in an environment that forces them to communicate. They can watch Slovak television, listen to Slovak songs, read Slovak newspapers, magazines, books and professional literature. However, although they have a richer vocabulary, they do not yet know the grammar rules. In her study carried out on the sample of 140 foreign students of Slovak as a foreign language in the 1st year of bachelor's degree at the Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies she found out that many students knew the grammar rules but failed to apply them in writing. The most problematic issues involved the correct use of quantity and accent in Slovak, the use of diphthongs, the use of only one phoneme / i / in Slovak, and correct consonant palatalization. They used adjectives to a greater extent in describing the properties of technical materials. Those in Slovak differ from adverbs in quantity. This caused mistakes in distinguishing between using adjectives and adverbs appropriately.

Dziganova and Balkova (2007, 2008) highlighted the most frequent pronunciation and grammatical mistakes of foreign students studying Slovak as a foreign language at Jesenius Faculty of Medicine. The authors noted the incorrect pronunciation of the palatalized consonants *d', t', ň, l'* and their syllabic equivalents *de, te, ne le, di, ti, ni, li* and combinations with diphthongs *-ia, -ie, -iu*; the pronunciation of voiced and voiceless consonants, especially when a voiceless preposition precedes a voiced word and vice versa; the pronunciation of vocalized prepositions; consonant assimilation; the

incorrect usage of the stress, which is on the first syllable in Slovak, as well as the pronunciation of words formed just from consonants, which, as the authors note, is beyond the students' abilities. In the follow-up article, Dzuganova and Balkova (2008) focused on the most frequent grammatical errors of foreign students learning Slovak. They analysed several problematic cases: conjugation and use of the first verbs *byť* (to be) and *mať* (to have) followed by other types of errors due to the overuse of the reflexive pronouns; distinction of grammar genders (masculine, feminine, neuter); the conjugation of verbs and problems with the formation of imperatives is very closely connected, as well as the use of modal verbs; the incorrect usage of prepositions such as *za – behind/for*, *s/so – with*, *z/zo – from*, *o – about*, *do – into*, *v/vo – in*, etc, which results in communication completely different from the intended meaning. As the authors emphasise (2008, p. 425), “genders and declinations in Slovak remain a puzzle for foreigners forever.” They add (2008, p. 427) that “at the beginning, when students hear that there is only one past tense in Slovak, they are very happy. But later when they have to distinguish between perfective and non-perfective verbs, they feel completely lost.”

Unfortunately, as stated above, extensive research and testing in this field are lacking. Therefore, in the fourth series of our research we want to find out whether the choice of a particular textbook utilised in a particular homogenous and/or heterogeneous learning group will have an impact on the results of the educational process and learners' achievement. For this purpose, we will prepare tests according to the CEFR reference levels from A1 to B2. In addition to collecting quantitative indicators, we will conduct a linguistic-methodological analysis of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar tasks with subsequent pedagogical implications based on the research results.

5. Case studies (attitudes of migrants and their parents about the use and teaching of Slovak as a foreign language in Slovakia)

There are no case studies aimed directly at Slovak as a foreign language; however, research in the context of genetically similar languages (Polish and Czech) has been published (Neu, 2008; Převrátilová, 2023). Neu (2008) conducted a case study of an American English learner of Polish in which she examined classroom instruction in the United States and the “natural” learning situation of living in the target language country. Převrátilová's (2023) qualitative, multiple case study explored the motivation to learn Czech as a second language in Czech language courses for Erasmus students in the Czech Republic through the lens of the second language motivational self-system (L2MSS). She found that in the profiles, the ideal second language self closely tied to the sojourn in the country, and the second language learning experience in the language course were the most prominent components of the L2MSS. Therefore, we aim to shed light on unique cases by which we can understand learners' directions. In order to meet this aim, we will rely on utilising the qualitative methodology, in particular, the interpretative potential of conducting case study research.

According to Stake (1995, 2000), case study research stems from a special interest in individual cases. He posits interpretive orientations towards case study, which include naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods, and distinguishes between three types, the intrinsic, the instrumental and the collective. In an intrinsic case study, the researcher examines the case for its own sake. For instance, why does student A, age eight, fail to read when most children at that age can already read? In an instrumental case study, the researcher selects a small group of subjects in order to examine a certain pattern of behaviour, for instance, to see how tertiary level students study for examinations. In a collective case study, the researcher coordinates data from several different sources, such as schools and individuals. Unlike intrinsic case studies, which set to solve the specific problems of an individual case, instrumental and collective case studies may allow for the generalisation of findings to a bigger population. Stake (1995, p. 16) gives important advice about the initiation of the two types of case studies: “for intrinsic case study, the case is dominant; the case is of highest importance. For instrumental case study, the issue is dominant; we start and end with dominant issues.”

Regarding the outline of conducting case studies, we agree with Stake as reported in Yazan (2015, p. 141), namely, when doing data collection and analysis, researchers need a set of two or three sharpened or evolved issue questions (research questions) that will “help structure the observation, interviews, and document review.” We plan to exploit observation, interview and document review as data gathering tools accordingly. Moreover, Stake's flexible approach will allow us to analyse data either

by categorical aggregation or direct interpretation, which he presents as two general strategies to handle case study data. We agree with him that “each researcher needs, through experience and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him or her” (Stake, 1995, p. 77).

Merriam (2009) claims that since case studies are anchored in real-life situations, they provide a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. They offer insights and illuminate meanings that expand the reading experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case studies play an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base. Therefore, as she points out, case studies have proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs and informing educational policy. Furthermore, Stake (2005) adds that readers can learn vicariously from an encounter with a case through the researcher’s narrative description.

Conclusion

While research on Slovak as a foreign language is less abundant compared to that on major languages, we have laid theoretical foundations based on previous scientific work and proposed to deeply examine several key research areas in the field of teaching and learning minor foreign languages (e.g. Polish, Czech, Croatian, etc.). In the proposed research series we will examine learners’ motivation and attitudes as a comprehensive understanding of why foreigners choose Slovak and how to keep them motivated throughout the whole process; explore various factors influencing the teaching and learning process, e.g. the role of an intermediary language in forming homogeneous/heterogeneous learning groups; effective teaching materials and textbooks, and desired proficiency levels which can be tested via appropriate batteries of tests. Furthermore, we consider it important to focus on examining challenges learners face with verb conjugations, grammatical cases, prepositions and the demanding pronunciation of Slovak consonant groups as well as the unique Slovak alphabet with diacritics. There is an urgent need for conducting several case studies, since the diversity of the backgrounds and needs of learners call for exploring curriculum development, namely creating appropriate learning materials and curriculum structures specifically tailored to their achievement. Special attention will be assigned to exploring learning situations, which are related to the rise of online learning platforms and language learning apps and their integration into the teaching and learning process. Last but not least, special case studies will be conducted in the area of teaching Slovak for Specific Purposes. We assume there are learners who need Slovak for specific professional or academic contexts. Therefore, research in this area can lead to valuable findings required for creating tailored learning programs focused on business Slovak, medical Slovak, legal Slovak, etc.

Data collection, evaluation, and research analyses based on the proposed five research tasks will be gradually disseminated to the professionals in state educational institutions that are authorized to provide accredited education to foreigners and offer them the opportunity to take accredited testing with the possibility of obtaining state certificates for granting long-term residence in Slovakia or for obtaining Slovak citizenship. Up to now, such a massive system of accredited education and testing has not existed in the Slovak Republic, and in view of the growing number of migrants, especially from the former Soviet republics, the competent institutions must be able to provide their clients with quality language education.

To conclude, since the main goal of any foreign language classroom is to develop a learner’s language skills and overall communicative competence, the nature of teaching and learning Slovak as a foreign language should lie in the authenticity of the material, and its meaningfulness and relevance to students’ lives. Learners of Slovak as a foreign language should be able to utilise their prior linguistic knowledge and connect it with their life experience in the Slovak language environment. Extensive research focused on particular aspects of Slovak language teaching and learning processes is rare. By elaborating theoretical foundations and focusing on the above-proposed research areas, we strive to make a significant contribution to the growing body of knowledge and expertise in teaching and learning Slovak as a foreign language.

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