

TEACHING ENGLISH IN SLOVAKIA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The contribution presents basically a brief history and current state of the art of teaching English as a foreign language in Slovakia. The authors divided the article into five principal parts, out of them the first one is devoted to a brief description of the situation with teaching foreign languages before 1989 and with the impact of political changes in 1989 on the current state of teaching EFL. The main body of the article are the three parts which then follow. The first part presents the state of the art with teaching English at primary and lower secondary schools. It also brings a case study about teaching English to young learners in Slovakia and the results of this experimental teaching. The next part shows what is the situation with teaching EFL to learners in higher secondary schools and indicates three main problems. It pays some attention to teaching materials and out-of-school activities too. In this part of the contribution another case study is presented –“*the New Maturita Project*”. Finally, there is a part dealing with university level of FL teaching. This part of the contribution has several sub-parts devoted to teaching ESP at universities, to training translators and interpreters, as well as to pre- and in-service teacher training. A special sub-part gives a description of the third case study: a new specially developed intensive study course –so called *Fast Track*– for student

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teachers. The final part of the article gives some expectations for the future of teaching English as a foreign language in Slovakia.

RESUMEN

Esta contribución presenta básicamente una breve historia y un estado de la cuestión acerca de la enseñanza del Inglés como lengua extranjera en Eslovaquia. Las autoras dividen su trabajo en cinco partes esenciales, de las cuales la primera se dedica a una breve descripción de la situación en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras antes de 1989 y el impacto de los cambios políticos de 1989 y su repercusión sobre la situación actual de estas enseñanzas. El cuerpo principal del trabajo son las tres partes que siguen a continuación. En la primera se aborda el estado de la enseñanza del Inglés como lengua extranjera en el nivel primario y en el primer ciclo de secundaria. Se incluye también un estudio de caso sobre la enseñanza del Inglés a niños en Eslovaquia y los resultados de esta enseñanza experimental. La parte que sigue da cuenta de la situación en niveles superiores de la educación secundaria y destaca tres tipos de problemas más acuciantes. También dedica alguna atención a los materiales didácticos y a las actividades extracurriculares y extra-aulares en lengua extranjera. Se incluye igualmente otro estudio de caso denominado "*El proyecto del Nuevo Bachillerato*". Finalmente, hay una parte dedicada a la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en los estudios universitarios. Esta última cuestión se divide en varios apartados que incluyen la enseñanza del ESP en las universidades, la formación de traductores e intérpretes, así como la formación inicial y permanente del profesorado. Un apartado especial da cuenta del tercer estudio de caso: un nuevo programa intensivo, desarrollado especialmente, llamado *Camino Rápido*, destinado a los alumnos que se preparan para ser profesores. La última parte del trabajo presenta algunas expectativas de futuro para la enseñanza del Inglés como lengua extranjera en Eslovaquia.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette contribution présente fondamentalement une brève histoire et un état actuel de l'art d'enseignement de l'anglais comme la langue étrangère en Slovaquie. Les auteurs ont divisé l'article en cinq parts principales. La première partie consiste d'une brève description de la situation de l'enseignement des langues étrangères avant 1989 en accentuant des changements politiques en 1989 sur l'état courant de l'enseignement de ALE. En continuant, le corps de l'article est créé par les trois parties suivantes. La première nous fournit de l'art de l'enseignement d'anglais dans les écoles primaires et dans la première moitié des écoles secondaires. Elle comporte aussi des études de l'enseignement d'anglais aux jeunes étudiants en Slovaquie et les résultats de cet enseignement experimental. La partie qui suit montre quelle est la situation dans les écoles secondaires et indique les trois problèmes principaux. Les supports de l'enseignement et les activités hors-école sont aussi accentués. Dans cette

partie, un autre cas d'études est présenté –“*Le projet-nouveau baccalauréat*”. Finalement, il y a une partie concernant le niveau universitaire de l'enseignement de LE. Cette partie de contribution comporte plusieurs sous-parts dédiées à l'enseignement de l'anglais de spécialités dans les universités, à l'entraînement des traducteurs et interprètes, ainsi qu'à la formation continue des professeurs. Une sous-part particulière présente une description du troisième cas d'études –un nouveau cours d'étude intensif spécialement développé– soidisant *Chemin Rapide* –pour les futurs enseignants. La partie dernière de l'article présente quelques aspirations pour l'avenir de l'enseignement de l'anglais comme la langue étrangère en Slovaquie.

1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN SLOVAKIA
(THE IMPACT OF THE POLITICAL CHANGES IN 1989 ON THE CURRENT STATE
OF TEACHING EFL)

Foreign language education has had a very long tradition in Slovakia (in the former Czechoslovakia). Due to its geographical position it was considered natural for the peoples living in Central Europe to speak one, two, or even three foreign languages. However, the attention paid to a particular foreign language among the school subjects varied during different historical periods. Moreover, the foreign language itself, which was at the centre of the society interest, varied too. During the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire the stress was put on Hungarian and German for the common people but for scholars Latin and French played a prestigious role. In the so called first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939) the situation was similar, with German as the first foreign language. After World War II and the political changes at the end of the 1940s the situation with FL teaching radically changed. Owing to the isolation of former socialist countries, their political leaders did not support foreign language education except for the teaching of Russian, which used to be a compulsory subject in all types of schools for many years.

In primary schools (grades 1-4, age of pupils 6-10), however, no foreign language was compulsory, neither was it offered as an optional subject. In lower secondary schools (grades 5-9, age of pupils 11-15) in the 5th grade pupils immediately started learning Russian as a compulsory subject. Other foreign languages (mostly German, rarely English) were offered only as options in the grades 7-9 in the form of a 90-minute lesson once a week. The effectiveness of this kind of teaching was naturally very low. Compulsory

teaching of modern European languages (except firmly rooted Russian as the first foreign language) was a part of education only in some of the higher secondary schools (grades 1-4, age of students 16-19) which prepared students for tertiary education/university studies. In secondary grammar schools ("gymnazium") there were two possible streams of education: 1. natural sciences, and 2. humanities. In the first stream they had just one foreign language, excluding Russian, while in the stream of humanities students could study not only one compulsory modern European language but also another one as an option. In other secondary types of schools (vocational, technical and apprentice) many modern European languages was offered only as an option. In addition, it is interesting that at tertiary level all types of institutions, regardless the graduates' profile, had a foreign language incorporated into their curricula as a compulsory subject in the first two terms of the study but, again, with only one 90-minute session per week.

As to teacher training, in the 1970s modern language education was completely abolished in all teacher training colleges and the only opportunity for studying other modern foreign languages was in the faculties of arts, where the number of students accepted was severely limited. Consequently, after 20 years of neglect of foreign language teacher education there was a serious shortage of them.

Political, economic and social changes in 1989 highly influenced the thinking of our people and resulted in a serious reform of foreign language education. Since then FL teaching has been introduced into the curricula at all school levels and the English language has been playing a major role. FL education has been given more "space" (i.e. more teaching hours per week) and a wider range of teaching materials have become accessible and have been used by teachers. However, what has to be emphasized is the fact that foreign languages are taught not only at primary and secondary schools as compulsory subjects, but the social demands of people called for the establishment of a number of private foreign language schools too. The new social demands of the people came out of their "new" but natural needs and desires for travelling, professional growth and communication and co-operation with other nations. Media and information technology became the main and the most powerful channels through which English was spread and it seems impossible to be competitive in the labour market and "survive" in the current world without speaking and understanding this foreign language.

2. THE STATE OF THE ART AT PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

2.1. *Primary schools*

Teaching foreign languages at primary schools was a completely new reality after the 1989 changes. There was the pressure of parents on headmasters of primary schools to start with early foreign language education for children. The headmasters were very open and co-operative in meeting the parents' demands and willing to introduce FL teaching into the school curriculum.

In the early 90s the situation was quite confused –there were various attempts to introduce a FL (either English or German) as early as possible, even into some kindergartens (4-5-year old children). In primary schools foreign languages started to be taught in any grade—either from grade one, two, three or four; either as a compulsory or as an optional subject with a various number of lessons (from two to four) a week allocated to their teaching. Depending on the grade that pupils started to learn the FL at, the core of the FL course differed –for very young learners (non-readers and non-writers, age 6-7) the courses were just audio-oral and learners had to learn everything at school, for 8-9-year olds the courses were aimed at developing all four skills from the very beginning. All these “spontaneous experiments” were evaluated in some way and the Ministry of Education simply had to react to the bottom-up demands and by the end of the 90s they approved an innovated curricula for primary schools thus officially introducing FL teaching at this school level.

Regardless of the previously unofficial or currently official status of teaching foreign languages in primary schools the lack of qualified teachers for this level has still remained the major problem which has to be faced and solved.

2.1.1. Case study: experimenting teaching english to young learners and its results

Before the official introduction of foreign languages into the primary school curricula the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, due to the lack of any experience with teaching foreign languages to 6-8-year olds, decided to verify the effectiveness and reasonability of this early start to language learning in a form of experimental teaching in five selected schools in Slovakia. One of these schools was based

in Nitra and as the lecturers of the Department of English and American Studies, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, were guarantors of the experiment and the case study below presents the results achieved at this school.

The experimental teaching of foreign languages –English and German– to young learners at Banisova Primary School in Nitra started in the 1992/93 school year. The project was designed to provide systematic and efficient teaching of foreign languages at primary school level and to continue the pre-school foreign language education of children in the kindergarten. The project was highly monitored, controlled and guided by a psychologist who was testing the children after they applied for this school to be a part of a foreign language experiment. It means that not all of the children were found capable of coping with this project because of the lower level of their mental, intellectual, emotional and language development. The pupils were, then, regularly observed, tested and interviewed by the same psychologist to help record their overall progress.

Besides the psychologist and pupils and teachers, there were also other administrators involved in the experiment–such as the head of the regional methodological centre, the school inspector, and the guarantor.

Experimental teaching of foreign languages started in the first class with the 6-year-olds. They could not read, nor could they write, so all the teaching had to be audio-oral only and the pupils were acquiring only two skills –listening and speaking. Exposure to exclusively oral and aural language was designed to last two years and only after this long period of the development of listening and speaking were the pupils allowed to start with reading and writing. All the work during the first two years of teaching foreign languages to young learners had to be done at school. That is why the pupils had a language lesson four times a week to ensure constant practice in the target language and to support the memory of the learners.

But, on the other hand, a traditional 45-minute foreign language lesson was too long for this age range. Pupils cannot concentrate for such a long time and this was the reason for the introduction of relaxation elements (breathing exercises, spells of yoga, etc.) into the last part (10-15 minutes) of the lesson. Pupils calmed down, relaxed and had a possibility to digest what they learned. All the teaching was carried out using a topic-based syllabus, and the techniques and methods the teachers used were highly activity-based –quite a lot of them total physical response inspired–. The pupils did a lot of making and doing, miming,

drawing, painting, colouring, picture matching, memorizing rhymes and tongue-twisters, singing, playing games, pairwork and groupwork, role-playing, etc. All these activities were organized and prompted by the teachers, but not only verbally –the use of a great variety of visuals by teacher was essential–. And it was also essential for a coursebook to provide the learners with imaginative and creative materials. It was discovered that “Toy-Box” coursebooks for the first year of learning as well as “Splash” and “Tip-Top” coursebooks for the next three years of teaching/learning were well-mixed.

After three years of running this experiment, in June 1995, written tests were given to the pupils who were in the third year of this experiment and could already read and write. Guided oral interviews were recorded with all the pupils involved in the experiment. The total number of the written tests was 30 and 82 pupils were interviewed.

The results of the written tests showed that the best developed skill of the pupils was listening with a very high percentage of success –96%, then vocabulary followed (87% success rate), grammar (75% success) was the next and the worst results were attained in reading (55% success). The results reflected directly what was happening in the classrooms during those three years: the pupils were listening a lot and from the very beginning of their foreign language learning –so they were best at this skill. At the same time, teaching them the foreign language was a process of constant vocabulary building –so they knew vocabulary very well, too. Grammar, or better to say, the use of some structures for expressing certain functions, was quite important as well, but there was not much attention given to accuracy training. That is why the results were as they were. There were three general areas of grammar problems the pupils had to face. A big issue was the 3rd person singular of the present simple ending -(e)s and the expression of negation by means of do not/does not. There were quite a few mistakes in the use of possessive pronouns (his/her), which showed that pupils “knew about them”, but they probably did not have enough time to practise them. They performed worst in reading comprehension, which was comparatively the newest skill for pupils and they did not have enough training in it by then.

The oral interview was topic based: the questions the interviewer asked included such topics as greetings, me, my family, numbers (date), time (days), address (where I live), colours, animals, clothes, food, weather. The structures used in the questions were: “wh” questions, can you ...?, can (s)he ...?, do you like...?, simple present tense, present

continuous tense, past tense, comparison of adjectives, prepositions of place and time.

The number and difficulty of questions/prompts was graded: first-grade pupils were asked only very simple questions and the number of verbal prompts was 18. The questions for the second-grade pupils were much the same but the number of prompts increased to 25. The structural difficulty, complexity and number of questions were appropriately increased for the third-grade pupils.

All the interviews were recorded and on the basis of their transcripts fluency, comprehensibility and accuracy of the pupils' oral performance were evaluated. The data showed that the longer pupils learnt the language the better they performed, i. e. they answered immediately, they did not hesitate with an answer, they did not need the question to be repeated, their reaction was almost always in English, their English was more accurate and responses more comprehensible and complex.

Out of 18 prompts for 1st grade pupils there was one third of them which almost all the pupils were able to answer immediately, but there was also one third of the prompts to which more than 3 (up to 11) pupils needed a repetition. And even after several repetitions there was one third of the questions which more than 3 pupils were unable to answer at all. Some pupils had problems in distinguishing between the question "How are you?" and the question "How old are you?" the structure of which is very similar. Quite a few pupils hesitated when they had to answer the questions about where things were. The problem, however, was not understanding the question but the pupils were, in some cases, not sure which preposition of place to use. The only real problem for more than two thirds of the interviewed pupils seemed to be the answer to the question "What has (s)he on?" What made it difficult for them was not the vocabulary they might have needed to answer it, but the use of quite a different structure of question in comparison with the pupils' mother tongue. As soon as the pupils were asked about a colour of a particular piece of clothing, their answer was usually immediate, adequate and correct.

The 2nd grade pupils responded to all the prompts more quickly and they did not need prompts to have them repeated in as many cases as the 1st grade pupils. There was just one exception: a great deal (two thirds) of the 2nd grade pupils had forgotten about the structure "can you/he, she...?". They needed several prompts to be able to react to this structure and even then, their reactions were not very accurate

and comprehensible. The reason why this was so is probably connected with the processes of a child's memory: they forget more quickly about the structure if it is not repeated enough. The 1st grade pupils' responses to these prompts were much more spontaneous, because they were practising this structure a lot during the first year of their learning English.

Second-grade pupils concentrated more on practising present simple and present continuous tense structures during the school year and that is why they could understand and use them better.

The biggest difference between the 3rd grade pupils and the first and second grade pupils was in the accuracy, the comprehensibility and the complexity of their reactions to the prompts. There were very few incomprehensible reactions and the 3rd grade pupils were much more accurate in the use of different structures. The development of their foreign language acquisition overcame the stage of one word reactions (so typical for 1st grade pupils) but became more complex and sophisticated.

The following assessment of the experiment was carried out in June 1996 at the end of the fourth year of the experiment. The written tests were distributed to third and fourth grade pupils. This time testing was focused on skills, mainly on listening, reading and writing. Grammar and vocabulary were not tested separately but they were an integral part of the skills tested. Speaking skill was assessed during regular lessons, some of which were recorded on a video, but no special topic-based oral interviews were recorded and analysed. The total number of the pupils tested was 26 in the third grade and 13 in the fourth one.

A general comparison of the third grade pupil results achieved in June 1996 with the results from June 1995 shows that the range of the results achieved in the different skills in June 1996 was not as wide (from 66% to 84%) as it was in June 1995 (from 55% to 96%). What is interesting is the fact that in 1996 it was the reading skill which scored the best results (84% success rate), while in 1995 it scored the worst (55% of success). In 1995 the best results were attained in listening (96% of success), while in 1996 the success rate in listening dropped to 71%. The reason why pupils succeeded so highly in reading in 1996 can be explained by the use of a different testing technique (mechanical vocabulary comprehension vs. a ready made choice of possible answers). As for the writing skill, of course in its simplest form, the achieved results were approximately at the same level (79% of success in 1996 in comparison with 75% of success in 1995).

Though there were some differences in the results attained in individual skills during the two years, we can make a conclusion that the global level of the pupils' language performance was quite high, as the average success rate was more than 75%.

It was also important to find out and record the further development of the same pupils after another year of the language learning. The analysis of their results in all the three tested skills was rewarding and highly above the average. Though there was one drop down the scale in listening –which was for the third grade pupils 96% of success and for the same pupils then in the fourth grade it was 88% of success –both the other skills, i. e. writing and reading scored much higher results. The success in writing was 75% (in 1995) and 78% (in 1996), and in reading it was even better –71% (in 1995) and 94% (in 1996). A little bit worse of a result in listening for the fourth grade pupils resulted from the more complex testing technique in 1996, when testing listening included following a written tapescript of the recorded material and filling in (in a written form) the missing words in gaps. The very high increase (23%) of the success rate in reading can be explained by the length of time devoted to practising reading. As was mentioned, the pupils only started with reading in their third year of language learning and that is why their reading skill was not so well-developed after 9 months of reading practice in 1995 as it was after two years of practice in 1996.

The total improvement of the pupils' language performance after another year of language teaching increased from a 78% up to an 83% success rate.

The analysis of the achievements in foreign languages, mother tongue learning and overall psychological development of the pupils was reported to the Ministry of Education and the very positive results as well as the experience of the teachers, pupils and their parents made it possible to transform the experiment into one of the alternative forms of language teaching in primary schools in Slovakia from September 1996. The implication of this research also started to affect pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes which traditionally overlooked the teaching of young learners.

2.2. Lower secondary schools

Nowadays teaching foreign languages at this level of education is compulsory and is an inseparable part of the curricula. The first foreign

language (usually either English or German, rarely French) is taught from the fifth grade –three times a week in compulsory 45-minute lessons and, as an option once a week, an additional 90-minute so called conversation lesson. The second foreign language is optional (45-minute lessons taught twice a week) from the seventh grade on.

The aforementioned extensive teaching of foreign languages raised two difficulties which still, unfortunately, have to be faced: a lack of qualified teachers and a lack of appropriate teaching materials.

The situation with the qualified teachers was partially solved by the newly developed courses offered by teacher training institutions (see part 4.3 below) and in the early 90s Slovakia also received and welcomed a number of native speakers –voluntary teachers of English– recruited through various foreign organizations, e.g. EFD, The Peace Corps, EEP. However, there are still geographically disadvantaged areas and schools in Slovakia where there is a big demand for qualified language teachers and not surprisingly, in the capital, Bratislava, too. The answer to why this is so can be found in more attractive (especially financially) offers in the labour market and in an undervalued social status of teachers in general and language teachers specifically.

In the early 90s there was a general lack of up-to-date teaching materials which was considerably quickly solved by ample imported teaching materials published mostly by British publishing houses. To limit the wide possible range of textbooks used in lower secondary schools and thus help teachers to avoid confusion on the book market the Ministry of Education asked a group of experts to select and evaluate the most suitable textbooks for these schools and on the basis of this evaluation it recommended and even sponsored two titles: at first it was Discoveries by Abbs –Freebairn (Longman) and a few years later Project English by Hutchinson (OUP) which are still in use. In the course of the time of their use teachers, however, have found not only their strengths but have had to face their weaknesses too. A survey among the teachers using Discoveries showed that the most serious drawbacks of this textbook are: a lack of grammar presentation and practice exercises, a lack of variety of texts and communicative activities, and a very stereotyped layout.

As for Project English, the textbook is usually considered to be more challenging for both teachers and learners, but, on the other hand, the technique of making up a project brings some discomfort for those teachers who prefer traditional methods of teaching. Furthermore, some

teachers claim that the textbook is more suitable for brighter learners. Anyway, the majority of teachers appreciate that Project English is colourful, provides many pictures and add-ons, makes learners active at the lessons and develops their speaking and listening skills. Of course, years of practice lead to stereotype, routine and boredom, so no wonder many teachers become more critical about the materials they use. Unfortunately, the financial situation does not allow them to experiment with introducing other suitable textbooks unless they find sponsors or persuade the school authorities or parents to purchase them. Recently in some schools the following titles had been used too, e.g.: *World Club* by Harris and Mower (Longman) and *Go for English* by Elsworth and Rose (Longman). The more the teachers are professionally skilled, the more they become demanding and creative and responsive to students needs. That is why nowadays they call for a national textbook of English, reflecting the needs of Slovak learners but not lagging behind the high standard of universal textbooks published by British or American publishing houses.

3. THE STATE OF THE ART AT HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOLS

At this level of education teaching foreign languages is comparable with the situation at lower secondary schools. This means it is compulsory and is an inseparable part of the curricula. The first foreign language is usually the one the learners started to learn at lower secondary school and they continue learning it at this type of school at a higher level of proficiency. The second foreign language is either compulsory or optional depending on the type of secondary school and profile of education. In all grammar schools ("gymnazium") as well as in hotel and business academies it is always compulsory with more FL lessons per week in classes focused on teaching humanities than in those classes focused on teaching natural sciences. Whereas, in vocational, technical and apprentice secondary schools the second foreign language is taught as an option. The range of teaching lessons is between two and four lessons per week plus two compulsory or optional conversation lessons.

Though approval of the curricula incorporating foreign languages as a school subject was not a big problem even at the early 90s, the creation of new syllabuses was a much more demanding and troublesome job. The reasons are as follows:

- A problem with determining the right level to start with FL learning at secondary school, i.e. a different level of learners' FL proficiency after completing lower secondary education due to having a different number of years of FL study or having it as a compulsory or optional subject, as well as using different textbooks, or even more, taking extra lessons either in language schools or privately.
- A problem with the appropriate placement of students conditioned by a number of administrative regulations, e.g. prescribed minimal number of students per language class, prescribed different number of FL lessons per week, availability of qualified language teachers.
- A problem with the selection of appropriate teaching materials. Due to a lack of networking among the different levels and types of schools the same title of textbook happened to be used at various levels and schools.

All these problems resulted in a non desirable, nearly chaotic, situation with teaching foreign languages in the 1990s when nobody exactly knew what learners' level of proficiency should be achieved by the secondary school leaving exams ("*maturita*") as no standard syllabuses were made up until the year 2000. In the late 90s many teachers called for a solution to the situation and raised their demands for more objective assessment of the results of teaching foreign languages at one of the national conferences of their professional association SATE (the Slovak Association of Teachers of English). One of the outcomes of the conference was the proposal of a new form of the secondary school leaving exam ("*maturita*") from English.

3.1. Case study: New "*Maturita*" Project

The principles of a communicative approach to teaching foreign languages had already started to penetrate the Slovak system of techniques and methods in language teaching by the 80s, but the system of assessment remained traditional, i.e. mostly knowledge about the language and not of the language was evaluated. The traditional school leaving examination in English was and still is based on 25 topics, the content of which is not externally checked and within a 15-minute speech by students (mostly monologues) teachers usually assess what they have learnt. The different types of secondary schools, different syl-

labuses, different number of lessons per week, unclear distinction of learner's proficiency, non-standardized marking criteria make the final examinations invalid, unreliable and subjective.

That was why in 1997 SATE started to work on the New "*Maturita*" Project in co-operation with the British Council in Slovakia. The project aimed to standardize secondary school leavers' FL knowledge and communicative proficiency by means of the introduction of an external part to the "*maturita*" exam and make its results more objective. The written test, assessing student's communicative competence at all secondary schools in Slovakia, was designed in four parts: listening comprehension (three tasks), language in use (three tasks), reading comprehension (three tasks) and writing (letter-controlled writing). There was a 30-minute time limit for each part. The test was marked by a board of external examiners following the same assessment criteria agreed on in advance. Each part of the test was given equal value. To ensure at least a minimal standardization of the test before its country-wide administration each year it was pretested at two different schools.

As there had not been any experience with an external part of the "*maturita*" exams before, it was advisable to introduce it in a form of an experiment and to persuade not only teachers but learners and the general public as well of its value. Schools from all over Slovakia were addressed and could voluntarily be involved in piloting the experiment during the four years of its duration.

The results presented in this case study are based on data achieved in the school year 1998/99 when the total number of participating schools in the experiment was 28. The statistically processed data showed quite striking (but after all, to some extent, expected) results. The first unpleasant finding was the fact that the overall achievement of students in all the parts of the test was very low, the total average being just 53%. The best results were achieved in the Reading Comprehension part (68,08%), followed by the Language in Use part (65,27%) and the Listening Comprehension part (61,87%). The worst results were achieved in the Writing part (only 16,77%). This means that the efficiency of teaching English was not satisfactory, though if compared with the marks given to the same students at the traditional "*maturita*" exams the efficiency would not be considered so bad. The comparison (expressed in percentage) of the marks given to the students at the traditional "*maturita*" exam with the possible marks which would have been given to the same students on the basis of their results achieved in the pilot "*maturita*" tests is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparison of marking in traditional and new "*maturita*" exams.

<i>Mark</i>	<i>Traditional "maturita"</i> (% of students)	<i>New "maturita"</i> (% of students)
Excellent	44,7	7,1
Very good	38,2	24,4
Good	13,9	39,1
Satisfactory	3,1	24,4
Unsatisfactory	–	3,9

The discrepancy between the two approaches to assessment of secondary school graduates is the result of a very subjective assessment criteria of teachers and thus it was proved that the marks given by different teachers at different schools are unreliable. In practice it means that the excellent mark at one school has a different value at another one. The most subjective seems to be the value of the "excellent" mark as it is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Range of achieved results in new "*maturita*" written tests for the marks given in traditional "*maturita*" exams

<i>Mark in traditional "maturita"</i>	<i>Range of achieved results in % in new "maturita"</i>
Excellent	96-25
Very good	91-27
Good	72-23
Satisfactory	48-17

Though there were several excellent students who achieved results over 90%, a number of regarded "excellent" students did not achieve even 50%, but some did not overcome the 30% limit and can actually be regarded as very weak students. The similar picture is shown by the results of the students regarded as "very good". A more realistic assessment is in the case of so called "good" or "average" and "under average" students.

The above stated data, however, cannot be regarded as absolutely reliable and objective. The reason for this is that the quality of the pilot "*maturita*" test itself was not 100% reliable and valid and the students themselves were not acquainted enough with the new testing procedure and techniques. The teachers' comments and the findings of the assessors showed the main problems were:

- varied difficulty of the four parts of the test,

- unbalanced degree of difficulty of individual tasks,
- unclear testing techniques to the students,
- not well estimated time allocated to the parts.

The test writers had to solve these in the following years of the experiment so that the new “*maturita*” test would be of a high quality upon its country-wide introduction in all schools from the year 2005. This is the year when the “*maturita*” exam from a foreign language will become compulsory for every secondary school graduate.

A slight improvement could be seen in the following year (1999/2000), when teachers regarded the test more appropriate and relevant, and as some learners were already introduced to the used testing techniques, many more schools (173) applied to participate in the experiment and the achieved results were better (total average 60%).

In addition, the piloting of these tests also showed that it is not possible to expect reliable and comparable results just through the administration of unified or even standardized tests if there are no standardized achievement requirements throughout the whole period of foreign language study at schools. The effort appeared to be an incentive to start thinking about the creation of a number of new school documents – syllabuses, educational standards for two levels of students’ FL proficiency and catalogues of target requirements for the “*maturita*” exam. The two levels of FL proficiency stated in educational standards reflect the existing Council of Europe content specification of the Independent User level B1 (Threshold) and B2 (Vantage).

3.2. Teaching materials and out-of-school activities

3.2.1. Coursebooks

By the year 1989 there was the national curriculum with matching sets of national bilingual (English – Slovak/Czech, German – Slovak/Czech, French – Slovak/Czech) coursebooks used for teaching FL in all types of schools in Czechoslovakia. Their quality, both factual and physical, was rather poor and without any add-ons. No wonder the first monolingual English coursebook available on the market (Strategies by Abbs and Freebairn, Longman) scored a huge success with all English teachers in the early 90s. Since then the market has been flooded with ample competitive and attractive coursebooks, many times confusing their users. Unlike with the lower secondary schools, the professional association SATE did not recommend any central coursebook that resulted

in a wide range of more or less suitable coursebooks used at various secondary schools. The meaning of the word “suitable” itself was dubious, as there was no (until the year 2000) national syllabus created which would guide teachers in the process of coursebook selection. To present a complete list of coursebooks used by different secondary schools in the last decade is almost impossible. Among the most effective and widely used titles are the following: Headway by J.&L. Soars (OUP), New Headway English by J.&L. Soars (OUP), Streetwise by R. Nolasco (OPU), New Streetwise by R. Nolasco (OPU), Blueprint by Abbs and Freeman (Longman), Look Ahead by Hopkins and Potter (Longman), New First Certificate by Haines and Steward (OUP), Opportunities by Harris and Mower, Sikorzynska (Longman), Cambridge Masterclass (Longman). All these coursebooks pay attention to the development of students’ communicative competence, naturally, each of them having its strengths and weaknesses (e.g. Blueprint and Look Ahead in comparison with Opportunities or Headway do not offer enough grammar practice exercises).

3.2.2. Language competitions

Language competitions –so called Olympiads– have had quite a long tradition in our country; students participated in them before the political changes and the tradition has been kept up, of course, in a more up-to-date form. While in the past mostly secondary grammar school students took part in the competitions and only a few pupils from special lower secondary schools with extended teaching of foreign languages participated in them, currently there are three levels of Olympiads: 1. pupils of the last two grades of lower secondary schools (13-14-year olds), 2. students of the first two years of higher secondary schools (15-16-year olds), 3. students of the last two years of higher secondary schools (17-18-year olds). The competition consists of two parts:

- a written part (students demonstrate their knowledge of FL grammar, vocabulary, and skills of listening and reading comprehension);
- an oral part (guided interview and a story made up of picture prompts).

A new type of competition introduced after 1989 is Essay Writing in which competitors show their FL creativity. It is organized in such a way that three topics are announced yearly and students choose one

for their essays. The essays are evaluated in accordance with the competitor's age and proficiency level.

The competitions are very popular among both teachers and students and are organized in several rounds: through school, district, regional and national ones.

4. THE STATE OF THE ART AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

In this part the current situation of teaching English at Slovak universities which prepare professionals in non-teaching study fields and, separately, the state of the art in foreign language teacher training is presented.

4.1. *Teaching ESP at universities*

The position of the English language at all universities in Slovakia is very strong. They have departments of foreign languages among which English is given a leading role. These departments were established either centrally, covering the needs of all university faculties, or more often there is a foreign language department at each faculty within the university. As faculties prepare experts in different fields of study and their study courses are approved by their own Boards of Trustees they have the power to tailor their language curricula in accordance with the faculty needs. That is why one can find some differences in the character of teaching ESP at different faculties and universities.

Among the basic (major) differences we can list the following ones:

– *Entrance exams:*

At many faculties they have a compulsory entrance exam in English or some other foreign language (German, French, Russian). The faculties where this requirement exists are mainly the faculties oriented in humanities, social and political sciences, art, economics and law. Some of these are so rigorous that they require as a compulsory condition for an applicant's acceptance either a successful school leaving "*maturita*" exam in English or a certificate either from an officially accredited language school or from a foreign institution, such as e.g. FCE from UCLES, Cambridge. The universities take a certain level of an applicant's proficiency in EGP for granted. However, the way they design their entrance

tests to assess the required proficiency level does not always meet the officially stated communicative aims of teaching a foreign language in higher secondary schools. They often test the knowledge of the applicant and not his communicative skills, i.e. tests are very much grammar and realia oriented.

– *Curricula:*

Individual faculties vary in the number of weekly foreign language lessons. They usually can have from two to four lessons a week. This may also differ according to the position of the language –whether it is the first or the second foreign language. Then, the faculties also vary in the number of semesters assigned for foreign language teaching, the range is from two semesters (terms) minimum up to eight semesters, depending on the final exam required.

The aims of teaching English differ from faculty to faculty. Those which test applicants for their acceptance have naturally higher requirements. Technical or natural science faculties which accept applicants without entrance exams and, moreover, where many of their applicants are from secondary vocational and technical schools (the focus on learning a language is not the priority there) have lower requirements. They cannot avoid combining teaching ESP with EGP.

– *Teaching materials:*

The first years of teaching ESP at these respective faculties were highly dependent on using imported coursebooks and study materials published by renowned British and American Publishing Houses. Recently we have been witnessing the creation and usage of specially designed teaching materials written by experienced faculty teachers and reflecting the real needs and wants of their students. Out of the large number of them let us mention at least a few: e.g. Keith, T. A. - Motešická, Z. - Archlebová, Z.: English for Architects. STU Bratislava 2001; Ondrová, D. - Badinská M.: International Relations. UMB Banská Bystrica 2001; Zaujecová, M. - Balasičová, I.: Úvod do odborného anglického jazyka KP a HCP (Introduction to Teaching English to Criminal Police and Border and Alien Police). Bratislava, APZ 2002.

Coursebooks and specially designed teaching materials are, of course, not the only possible study texts. Teachers often make use of journal texts and articles, internet articles and materials and other technical media.

– *Final exams:*

The final assessment of students FL competence depends on the aforementioned aims and curricula. Practically it means that some students just pass a regular exam at the end of the semester and get a credit. The other group of students, usually having more than two semesters of FL, can choose the possibility to pass the so called Basic State Language Exam or the so called Specific State Language Exam (if they had ESP predominantly). At faculties of economics, social and political sciences, humanities and law they have to pass a state exam in a foreign language as a compulsory part of their diploma course.

4.2. *Training translators and interpreters*

The training of translators and interpreters in Slovakia has had over a 30-year long tradition. Until recently translatology and interpretation as a special field of study were taught only at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. At present the training of translators is offered by the faculties of humanities at three more Slovak Universities (in Nitra, Banská Bystrica and Prešov) and is overcoming several changes influenced by the prospects of Slovakia becoming a EU member state and by the gradually increasing economic and cultural co-operation with other European countries. First of all it is the change of the dominant position of Russian translations by English ones in comparison with the years before 1989. The next change concerns the type of translation: the dominant position of literary translations has been replaced by technical translations. It is impossible for translators to translate any technical texts, thus they have started to specialize in a few out of a wide range of different professional fields. Then, there is a much higher demand for skilled interpreters than before. The major criterion is the professional quality of graduates of translation and interpreting courses, who have to meet the high expectations of the EU labour market and be competitive there.

The variety of types of courses has been diversified: the traditional five-year MA study in its full time and part-time forms is not the only possible one, new training courses have been designed and developed: a special three-year study course of translatology within the five-year MA study course of teacher training, a special two-year postgraduate translation course aimed at the translation of technical texts within life-long learning as well as other alternative forms of translator training (e.g. Summer schools of translation, studios of literary translation, etc.).

4.3. *State of the Art in teacher training*

4.3.1. Pre-service training

In 1989 there were only two faculties (the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava and at P. J. Šafárik University in Prešov) which trained teachers of English. In the early 90s six more faculties of arts were either newly established or re-established. At the turn of the century a following four new teacher training faculties were set up. This means there are currently 12 teacher training faculties in Slovakia where teachers of English are trained.

The increased number of these institutions is a result of the earlier lack of qualified teachers of foreign languages at all school levels. This deficiency was also the reason why the traditional foreign language teacher training courses were diversified and restructured. By traditional foreign language teacher training at faculties of arts we understand undergraduate five-year two-subject MA courses. These were almost exclusively courses for full-time students. An urgent social need for qualified FL teachers was one of the incentives for the introduction of a new type of part-time courses –so called “requalifying/retraining” courses– for already qualified teachers of other subjects who spoke modern European languages but were not qualified to teach them. The courses were designed as single subject courses which lasted three years. Their content was similar to the full-time course curricula and syllabi, though they were slightly more intensive and part of them was transferred to individual self-study. As all the participants of the courses were already teachers from schools who wanted to keep on their professional careers, high motivation, strong will and devotion to study were natural for them. The existence of these courses was, however, limited by language proficiency and willingness of in-service teachers to be re-qualified on the one hand, and by the period of time the market became saturated by new qualified language teachers on the other hand. This is the reason why the retraining courses were in operation “only” for about 5-7 years in the first half of the nineties.

4.3.1.1. Case study: Fast Track

The other way to meet the market needs was to offer full-time teacher training courses in modern European languages to young secondary school graduates which would last less than five years. This intention was put into practice with the assistance of the EU within the PHARE programme

called Renewal of the Educational System, subprogram II. B Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the years 1992-1997. The original project was designed as a three-year study programme but due to its incompatibility with Slovak legislation its extension into a four-year single subject study programme was inevitable. The project started at the Faculties of Education in Bratislava and Nitra with the largest number of students and languages covered. Later on, these faculties acted as pivotal institutions in the project. Among the basic sub-project II.b objectives were:

- to train ca. 1.500 qualified FL teachers for primary and secondary schools,
- to design a four-year intensive single honour degree FL teacher training programme,
- to develop an adequate instrument for educational process monitoring, resulting in feedback information on the gradual increased efficiency of students' training for their future professional career,
- to focus on the achievement of communicative competence and the performance of students in respective languages with active assistance from native speaking teachers,
- to strengthen the methodological element in FL teacher training and allocate more space to the teaching practice of students at different types of schools,
- to teach future FL teachers how to use and work effectively with professional literature, how to select, analyze and evaluate information,
- to prepare future FL teachers to adequately exploit current multimedia technology,
- to ensure the compatibility of FL teacher training in Slovakia with the standard teacher training in Slovakia and with the standard FL teacher training in the countries of the EU (Butaková, 1997).

Newly developed curricula and syllabuses of these so called Fast Track courses in English, German and French, and also Spanish and Italian, were designed for an intensive four-year single subject teacher training course. All the documents developed within the Fast Track courses were assessed and evaluated by experts from universities in EU countries (the U.K., France, Germany, Spain and Italy) and many foreign lecturers were hired through different organizations and agencies (the British Council, EEP, the USIS, The Peace Corps, etc.) to teach these courses in Slovak universities. One of the specific features of the Fast track programme was the development and delivery of a compulsory

10-day intensive language course for all the five languages aimed at the highest possible improvement of participants' communicative FL competence and performance.

Due to the fact that the programme was closely monitored by EU experts, a set of unified tests was designed and applied to verify the achieved graduates' final professional competencies. With financial help from the EU, Slovak universities could also equip their libraries with current literature in the field as well as with modern technical teaching aids and to send their teachers and mentors for refreshment language courses and study stays abroad. 13 titles of referential teaching materials were published for the courses and teachers of these courses could exchange and share their experiences at four national conferences and four workshops with the participation of foreign experts. Furthermore, many students of the Fast Track courses were fortunate to have exceptional possibilities to study one semester at a foreign university, since in 1990s several TEMPUS projects subsidized student mobilities abroad. The total number of Fast Track graduates in all five modern European languages was 1,384 out of which 603 are English teachers.

4.3.1.2. Entrance exams, curricula, teaching materials, final exams

Though the social status of teachers in Slovakia is not very high, the number of applicants for the teaching profession still exceeds the acceptance possibilities of teacher training institutions. Entrance exams, in this situation, are thought to be unavoidable. Quite often they only have a written form, but for foreign languages they usually have an oral part too. In the period of the last decade the structure of EFL entrance exams has changed, and attention is paid not only to language knowledge but to skills too. Of course, the focus cannot be put only on the fluency of the applicant (as is done in non-teacher training faculties), but accuracy and comprehensibility is very much taken into account too. The entrance exams are quite complex, the applicants have to prove their language proficiency, their interest in realia and literature as well as their attitude towards the teaching profession.

Looking at the development of curricula within the last decade of the 20th century there were many changes in the character of their content, though the basic components in their structure were respected and preserved. The traditional three main areas of linguistic, literature and methodology disciplines also appear in the current curricula of all teacher training institutions in the country. The main difference can be seen in

the way the courses were offered to teacher trainees. At the turn of the eighties and nineties all the curricular components were compulsory and rigidly prescribed, i.e. students did not have any choice in what or when to study. Moreover, the main emphasis was put on the theoretical knowledge and factual information about the language and literature, and not on FL communicative proficiency and teaching skills of trainees. In the mid-nineties the new design of the curricula was highly influenced by British models and the needs of Slovak schools reflecting the situation in the labour market.

The influence of British training models caused the main focus to be shifted onto practical aspects of training: fostering a high level of communicative competence and teaching competence and the skills of trainees. The extension of EFL teaching at Slovak schools made teacher trainers introduce new methodology courses in teacher training: secondary vocational and technical schools needed teachers skilled in teaching ESP, whereas primary schools needed teachers trained in teaching English to young learners. Moreover, cultural aspects in teaching EFL were shifted from teaching about British life and institutions to teaching cross-cultural issues, as a result of using English not only for communication with native English speakers but also as a language of international communication, i.e. lingua franca. In addition, the rigid structure of compulsory courses was loosened by introducing a number of electives and optional courses. Furthermore, the content of the curricula was also reflected in a new modular and credit system of study. The aforementioned changes resulted in a slightly different trainees' professional profile whether within a faculty or faculties in Slovakia.

For the near future it seems a necessity to pay more attention in EFL teacher training to the question of test-writing/development and assessment so that the needs of new "*maturita*" exams will be respected. The other hot problem to be solved is connected with the dynamic development of multimedia and getting teachers ready for their use in all types of schools. Both these problems are not only questions of training, but also of the economical situation in the country and the school/university budgets.

The traditional approach to teaching languages at universities, particularly the linguistic part of this process was based on a comparative study of a foreign language and the mother tongue, which is why university lecturers used to prefer materials written by national respected scholars following the principles of the Prague Linguistic School. Anyway, the importing of literature from behind the "iron curtain" was not

desirable in the totalitarian regime and the publishing of materials for teaching EFL or any other modern European languages on a large scale was not allowed. It is clear that at the moment the political climate changed there was a big lack of suitable and up-to-date teaching materials. Then, within a couple of years the market was flooded with foreign publishing houses products of various quality and range. Thus, libraries were resourced with lots of interesting materials and soon teachers started to select what they and their students really needed. Accessibility to foreign teaching materials was a great challenge and foreign teaching materials still have not lost their value and are highly in use. But over the last few years teachers have started to think about tailor-made courses for their students reflecting the specific features not only of a foreign language but of students' needs in Slovak schools as well.

Respect for the mother tongue in the process of teaching linguistic disciplines, however, does not mean that it is used as a language of instruction. All the courses are delivered exclusively in English. One of the substantial differences is that even fiction is required to be read by students in the original language (i.e. in English) and in a non-edited form compared to a traditionally more indulgent approach which allowed students to read literary texts in translation.

The study is accomplished after several weeks of final block teaching practice, followed by a defence of a diploma work and an oral state exam comprising of three parts: linguistic, literary and methodological. The graduate is awarded a diploma enabling him to teach the language at any type of school.

4.3.2. In-service training

With graduation from university a teacher gains the status of a qualified teacher. However, university has only given him a basic theoretical orientation in the subject studied, and he has not acquired enough practical skills. The skills he still lacks are acquired during his professional maturation.

An integral part of a teacher's maturation should be the well-designed and functional system for his life-long education. During the 80s, the further in-service training of teachers followed a three-stage system (Act No 65/1985). The task of the first stage was to introduce fresh graduates into school practice and help them to transform their acquired knowledge and skills into practical teaching. They were to be guided and helped by experienced supervising teachers in the schools they taught at.

The second stage had an updating function. Teachers were supposed to be informed about the latest research and knowledge in pedagogy, psychology and their majoring subjects. The studies were run by teacher-education institutions. This method of post-graduate education has a long tradition –it was introduced in 1967. Unfortunately, it has slowly lost its progressive character, finally becoming formal.

The third stage had a special function, mainly to prepare school leaders and their possible substitutes. It was provided by different institutions, such as the Institute of Teachers' Further Training, regional and district educational centres, and others.

After the political changes in 1989, this model ceased to exist. The only part which is still in existence is the function of a supervising teacher. The other stages are not compulsory and operate spontaneously on the basis of a teacher's willingness and enthusiasm through the District Methodological Centres –they organise different courses, lectures, workshops and seminars–, the Central Institute for Teacher Training and the State Pedagogical Institute. The Slovak Pedagogical Publishing House, different educational journals and periodicals, and media broadcasting for schools support the individual needs of teachers within their self-study.

Though a lot of these activities are of a high level of quality and are presented by top experts (from Slovakia and abroad), for various reasons the number of participating teachers is not satisfactory and cannot be regarded as a substitute for the former system of postgraduate education, apart from the fact that it completely lacks coherence.

That is why experts have been asked to work out a new functioning modern system of Life-Long-Learning (LLL). One of them was prepared by a team of university teachers in the College of Education in Nitra and submitted to the Ministry of Education for national debate. The system suggests a three-stage LLL, the parts of which are mutually linked and influenced. The first stage is obligatory for all teachers in all types of schools. The second and third stages are optional but of a professional and financial benefit to those teachers participating in them.

In-service FL teacher training, however, has some specifics. The big demand for FL teachers resulted in the recruitment of different types of "teachers" into Slovak schools after 1990:

- unqualified teachers with practical knowledge of a foreign language,
- teachers qualified in other subjects than a foreign language but with a command of it,

- qualified FL teachers with no previous practice of teaching it (due to the previous undesirability of teaching modern European languages),
- qualified teachers with practice in FL teaching,
- mostly unqualified foreign lecturers - native speakers.

In-service training for all the above-mentioned types of “teachers” existed to some extent, but there was hardly any system to it. The only system providing proper and recognized qualification for unqualified teachers were so called “requalifying/retraining” FL courses. Besides these, there were a great number of other courses, cyclic seminars, regular workshops and summer schools of a high quality which were tailor-made to meet the needs of teachers. Having been organized as non-accredited courses, run by foreign institutions (the British Council, Fulbright Foundation, USIS, Goethe Institute, French Institute), the participants’ certificates were not officially recognized as a form of in-service training. Enthusiastic and good teachers welcomed the chance to refresh their FL knowledge and the challenges of new methodology ideas and were eager to participate in these forms of in-service education regardless of the many obstacles they had to overcome (e.g. lack of understanding from the side of their headmasters and other colleagues, no financial travel subsistence or salary reward). On the other hand, the unqualified, inexperienced, and “weak” teachers with a low command of the FL and poor teaching skills, i.e. those who badly needed these forms of training, ignored them.

5. VISIONS FOR FUTURE

The study presented above clearly shows that FL teaching in Slovakia is given much support and attention and it has become more systematic and efficient during the last decade. Innovation of old school documents and the introduction of a number of new ones has determined its development, directions and strategies. New methods of teaching FLs, new teaching materials and the prospects for the use of FLs attract both language teachers and their students who are aware of their importance and necessity for their future life and competitiveness in the European labour market.

In the coming years there are still some challenges which have to be coped with. One of the most demanding challenge is the creation of national (bilingual) sets of FL coursebooks and some supplementary

teaching materials making use of modern media and technology. As for technology and media, this is another big challenge not only for learners who are very keen on using them, but also for their teachers who have to be trained (pre-graduates) or re-trained (post-graduates) in this field so that they can appropriately and efficiently use them in everyday teaching.

In-service training and education for schools has to become more systematic too. The introduction of officially approved and compulsory systems of up-dating and refreshment language courses seems to be inevitable, various methodology workshops and seminars which would be a condition for any type of teacher's promotion.

Furthermore, to ensure a satisfactory number of possibilities for PhD. studies and the defences of higher university degrees (Ass. Prof. and Prof.) for university FL teachers is another crucial task to be resolved.

ABBREVIATIONS

EC	the European Community
EEP	East European Partnership
EFD	Education for Democracy
EFL	English as a foreign language
EGP	English for general purposes
ESP	English for special purposes
FCE	First Certificate in English
FL	foreign language
LLL	life-long learning
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

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