Innovative and Creative Solutions in Educational Programmes of Studia Academica Slovaca

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Abstract

In this paper the authors focus on three most significant educational programmes of Studia Academica Slovaca (SAS) with respect to their contribution to the field of creative and innovative teaching of foreign languages.

The first programme is funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic which has defined the content, aims and methods of the contact and distant forms of language education for foreigners in line with individual language levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. One of the results of this project is a series of textbooks Krížom-krážom, which has a number of innovative aspects: no mediating language, explaining the lexis and grammar by means of internationalisms, schemes, pictures and tables, communicative and up to date language. The didactical content of these textbooks was adapted for the e-learning course www.e-slovak.sk and also for e-learning courses of Slovak language for the California University of Pennsylvania in the USA.

Another project - Slavic Network is the joint work of 6 universities. It has been funded with support from the European Commission and its major aim is to encourage people from Slavic or non-Slavic countries to learn Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian and Bulgarian languages.

At present the last project, in which SAS participates, is the international project Prolang. This project promotes learning Slovak, Lithuanian and Slovenian languages on the web portal www.prolang.net and has been funded with support from the European Commission.

1. Introduction

Studia Academica Slovaca (SAS) – Centre for Slovak as a Foreign Language (Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia) is a research and pedagogical centre which for the last 50 years has been engaged in language education for foreigners at all levels of language competence. SAS organises the Summer School of Slovak Language and Culture, publishes a large number of materials on both theoretical and practical basis and carries out a lot of important projects focused on contact and distant forms of education.

2. Textbooks *Krížom-krážom* [1]

In Slovakia there is still a lack of textbooks about Slovak language for foreigners on the intermediate – advanced level, so we have prepared didactically elaborated series of textbooks and workbooks which is devoted to the great number of people interested in the study of Slovak language. Our main criterion was the communicative approach to the processing and mediating of language reality. The main target group consists of students and people who come to study and work in Slovakia and they want to be able to communicate effectively within the local environment. The series of textbooks *Krížom-krážom* is ideal for students who are coming to study in Slovakia. Another significant group consists of students studying the Slovak language at universities across the world. *Krížom-krážom* is a supplementary study material (in

addition to basic textbooks focused on a description of particular language levels) devoted mainly to language exercises with a posted lecturer or some other native speaker.

The title *Krížom-krážom "Criss-Cross"* was chosen because it best reflects our desire to link various aspects of the Slovak language with usual and frequent situations and also to convey additional information about Slovak culture (film, theatre, customs and traditions etc.), history and society. *Krížom-krážom* A1 and A2 introduces basic knowledge and information which can be further developed and explored at more advanced levels of study. The textbooks are divided into ten chapters which can be mastered within 70 lessons. Every chapter has a key to exercises, grammatical survey tables and Slovak - English dictionary. Audio recordings (dialogues and exercises) are divided into 2CDs.

This series of textbooks is innovative in the fact that the grammar is absolutely subordinated to communication themes. Themes of particular chapters are selected according to frequency in communication as well as they are set into the current time and geographical space of the present-day Slovakia with a special focus on the community of young people and their way of life. [2] This fact is also reflected in the sequence of acquisition of cases in declination. All instructions and information in the textbooks are transparently shown by means of icons which are explained in English in the foreword. Illustrations and photographs are functional and easy to understand, the graphics of the book is transparent and it facilitates orientation in the text. We have decided to use the Latin terminology when speaking about grammatical phenomena rather than Slovak one or to replace the customary model words for declination types with more frequent words. We have tried to utilize the graphical representation effectively in explaining grammatical phenomena in the level A1 which means that we have eliminated the use of mediating language to a minimum. We have used a color differentiation for a thematic sub-morpheme what helps students to orientate in classification of verbs. The chapters regularly contain exercises and notes devoted to special phenomena of Slovak, like word order and rhythmical shortening. By means of a graphical representation we have also tried to capture a difficult problem of the grammatical gender of nouns, derivation of verbs, overlapping of meanings of verbs. In level A2 we use simple definitions in Slovak but the explanations of grammatical phenomena is still supported graphically. New vocabulary is, in the most cases, explained by pictures, descriptions or with the help of international synonyms. The last method of explaining the vocabulary has proven very effective mainly during the first lessons, moreover it is a significant motivational element in an acquisition of large number of words in a short time. On the other hand we also pay attention to confusing language interference and to many other practical statements that have a positive response from the students.

3. Slovak A0 (http://www.slovak-a0.sk/cms)

One of the most significant projects, in which SAS is currently involved, is the creation of distance language course of Slovak for foreigners at level A1 up to level B2.

The course is a part of a larger project of the Faculty of Philosophy at Comenius University in Bratislava, iLearn CA and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. The aim of this project is to establish the University Centre of Slovak language at California University of Pennsylvania in the USA. The objective of the Centre will be to promote and teach Slovak in the USA, since approximately 1.2 million people live there claiming Slovak nationality and their biggest concentration is mostly in the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio and New Jersey. The Centre should gradually be able to offer university studies of the Slovak language in a classical form as well as a distance one to achieve Bachelor's and Master's degrees and to prepare qualified teachers of Slovak. The objective, among others, is to make approximately 1 per cent (12,000) of people living in the USA and claiming Slovak nationality acquire Slovak at different levels. The target groups of the whole project are: 1) organisations in western Pennsylvania, eastern Ohio and western Virginia, 2) American companies and organisations with business contacts in Slovakia, 3) individuals interested in Slovak and finally 4) people interested in university studies of Slovak.

Slovak A0 is the newly created complete beginners' module under the e-learning course *Slovak as a foreign language.* It is aimed at acquiring basic language skills which can be applied in everyday situations. Gradually we will complete modules for levels A1 up to B2 according to the criteria of *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. The course content corresponds with textbooks *Krížom-krážom* and is based on the communicative method of education.

The course made in Learning Management System Moodle is adapted in terms of design and function. Regarding a variety of target groups we have chosen a simple design of the course, which enables simple orientation and navigation for the user.

The distance learning managed from Slovakia, among others, will use virtual classes for synchronic learning which integrates audio, video, virtual blackboard and chat. For better acquiring of learning content we will also use the methods of microlearning together with the KnowledgePulse® application developed by Research Studio Austria (http://www.knowledgepulse.com). Microlearning refers to learning process in small steps in mediated environments: viewing flashcards or answering multiple choice questions in quizzes on mobile phone or tablet in regular intervals. The learning content is presented in small units or micro-units (such words or phrases) which are not time demanding (the time to solve a learning task takes few seconds up to few minutes). Students can also add their own teaching cards. Students can be in contact with the foreign language anywhere and anytime. This methods and design of microlearning reflects the working context, behaviour as well as learning of contemporary people – the users of modern technologies.

4. Slavic Network (http://www.slavic-net.org)

The project Slavic Network was created within the Socrates Lingua Programme in 2006 and it is aimed to promote linguistic and cultural diversity as well as integrity. It is a common work of employees of 6 universities: University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland), Palacký University in Olomouc (Czech Republic), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia), Sofia University of „St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria), Martin Luther University in Halle (Germany). The main output of the project is a website with 11 comprehensively parallel modules showing linguistic and cultural differences and similarities among Slavic languages (Polish, Czech, Slovene, Bulgarian and Slovak). The website should encourage people, particularly those for whom a Slavic language is the mother tongue, but also other people, to get to know other Slavic languages, as well as to enable further linguistic education to everyone who already knows any Slavic language. The method of such multilingual studies of foreign languages has been defined by students in seminars on comparative grammar in individual partner universities. The project has been evaluated as an interesting and useful secondary audio-textual material for comparative studies of Slavic languages.

5. Prolang (http://www.prolang.net)

The last of the presented projects is the project *Prolang.* Its goal is to promote learning of less common European languages (Lithuanian, Slovenian and Slovak) focused on young Europeans. The practice shows that English has become the communication instrument of inhabitants from different EU countries and the tendency to overlook "minor" languages is apparent when other language choices are offered. The target groups are young people travelling around Europe, students of different mobility programmes, (Erasmus and Leonardo) as well as providers of other less widely used European languages courses, mobility institutions and other potential users (schools, tourist offices, international associations etc.). The major objectives are: 1) to identify the best promoting tools within EU countries, 2) to create a website, 3) to create an online language test with a goal to raise an interest in learning Slovenian, Slovak and Lithuanian. The website (http://www.prolang.net) was created to give interesting facts about Slovenia, Slovakia and Lithuania together with the "language-tasting" of the individual languages.

This project is coordinated by Spinaker (Slovenian) with a participation of SAS as well as University of Ljubljana, Vilnius University in Lithuania, Slovenian consultancy agency Virtualis, Polish company xceed Michal Juda and finally CESIE - Centro Studi e Iniziative Europeo from Palermo in Italy. The project *Prolang* is supported from Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission.

6. Conclusion

Even though Slovak language belongs to the less-used languages in the world, there is still an interest and need to learn Slovak abroad. The direct face-to-face learning is very difficult at some places around the world, so the center Studia Academica Slovaca have prepared and successfully realized several projects which were presented in our paper and which help to overcome these constraints.

References

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