



What All Can a Classroom Where We Learn Slovenian Language Be?

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Abstract

As part of the Year Plus module offered by the University of Ljubljana to its international students, around 350 students learn Slovenian each year. The largest number of these students (since 2016) has been students coming from the Western Balkan countries. The aim of the module is to support students in learning and progress in their knowledge of Slovenian. They need it for their studies, but it also helps to facilitate and integrate more quickly into Slovenian society and adapt to life in Slovenia, either during their studies or in the longer term, as some of them plan to continue their life in Slovenia. Slovenian language course is held once a week for three lessons in a classroom in groups of up to 20 students. This is not an optimal solution. That is why learning of Slovenian is supplemented by a range of additional activities that enable more lively and active contact with Slovenian, with people in Slovenia and their lives, with Slovenian society, all of which is possible because learning Slovenian takes place in a Slovenian-speaking environment.

From the classroom, learning Slovenian moves to different places in Slovenia, to the tops of the hills around Ljubljana, to theatres, cinemas, museums, galleries, concerts and fairs, to the Parliament or the House of the European Union. It also extends to Slovenian literature, music, architecture and cuisine, areas that are also represented in the teaching of Slovenian abroad (e.g. in the Slovenian lectureships at universities abroad). These activities can be classified as activities that enable the development of intercultural competence (Byram 1997), but they also represent a form of experiential learning (Kohonen et al. 2014). While presenting activities where we encounter a different approach to language teaching outside the classroom (Benson and Reinders 2011), we will also look at how these activities are received and responded to by the students.

Key words: *Year Plus, learning Slovenian, additional activities*

1. Introduction

Language learning outside the classroom (Benson and Reinders 2011 [1]; Richards 2022 [9]) is nowadays mainly thought of as a complement to traditional language teaching in the classroom, using various online tools, apps, media, social networks, i.e. mainly as a complement to teaching in a virtual environment. However, the purpose of including additional activities that take place outside the classroom, as well as the purpose of our paper, is the opposite. We want to complement Slovenian language teaching and its perception as classical language teaching in the classroom with a live experience. This is also because, at least since the covid-19 pandemic, we have noticed that the classroom is no longer classical and traditional, as it is constantly using various ICT technologies. Therefore, in our case, activities outside the classroom really mean activities that actually physically take place outside the classroom, i.e. in the real world, or that complement the Slovenian language course in a way that builds on and complements it and goes beyond the narrow field of learning Slovenian as a foreign language. Such activities are organised within the framework of the Year Plus module, which is briefly presented below.

2. Year plus and additional activities in the Slovenian language course within the module

The University of Ljubljana offers the Year Plus module to its international students who are regularly enrolled in first-cycle, second-cycle or single-cycle Master's programmes in the first year of their



studies in Ljubljana. The programme is not intended for students on mobility, i.e. students on study exchange, as they are offered different opportunities to learn Slovenian.

The majority of students enrolled in the Year Plus module come from the countries that were formed in the former Yugoslavia, i.e. Serbia, Bosnia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Croatia and Montenegro. These students are joined to a lesser extent by students from other countries of the Slavic world, especially recently from Russia and Ukraine, but each year we also have a group of students who are not speakers of any Slavic language.

Each academic year, since 2016, approximately 350 students have been enrolled each year, which means that so far around 2500 students have studied Slovene as part of the module Year Plus. Learning and knowing Slovene is essential for students studying at the University of Ljubljana, as Slovene is the only language of instruction in almost all subjects at the University.

In addition to learning Slovenian, the Year Plus module also allows international students to extend their first year of study by one year if they meet certain conditions (30 ECTS in the first year instead of 60 ECTS), so they can complete their first year in two years instead of one.

The module mainly consists of two courses, Slovene as a Foreign Language - tutorial 1 and tutorial 2, which together comprise a total of 120 hours of classroom instruction in Slovene, yielding a total of 6 ECTS. Classes are held once a week for 3 three lessons (2,5 hours) in groups of up to 20 participants. As this type of organisation is not optimal, we try to complement the classroom teaching with a variety of activities that take place outside the classrooms.

In the academic year 2022/23, in addition to the regular classroom work, which also includes independent work in the e-classroom and homeworks, we organised a range of additional activities for students, which were either compulsory or optional for the participants. To be eligible for the final exam (oral and written), participants had to have 80% attendance, complete all the compulsory additional activities and three optional activities each semester.

As compulsory additional activities, students had to attend four phonetic lessons in the phono lab or by zoom, performed a speech in Slovene and attend a workshop or lecture on the rules of academic writing in Slovene during this academic year.

Beside that students had to choose three optional activities per semester (six altogether during the academic year) from the extensive list below. The list included a walking tour of Ljubljana, a visit to a book fair, a self guided tour of a chosen museum or gallery, a guided tour of the Museum of Contemporary History, a workshop on Slovenian popular music (in two parts), a workshop on the use of online language resources and tools for Slovenian, a trip to a Slovenian town (three visits were organized and guided: to Škoja Loka, Kamnik and Novo mesto), a literature workshop, reading Slovenian literature (according to a list, prepared in advanced and regularly updated), watching a theatre performance, watching a Slovenian film (several Slovenian films were suggested on the list), a visit to the House of the EU, a Friday hiking club (five hikes in the hills around Ljubljana), a lecture on Slovenia, its architecture and cuisine, and a translation workshop.

All additional activities listed were prepared, organised and implemented by the Slovenian teachers who teach Slovenian as part of the Year Plus module.

3. Why additional activities?

The reasons for introducing so many additional activities for the participants of the Year Plus module are manifold. First of all, there are purely practical reasons: the additional activities were introduced because the timetable could not allow two two lessons slots per week for the Slovenian language tutorial. Therefore, in addition to the 45-hour course, held in the classroom, it was necessary to provide 15 additional contact lessons outside the classroom. Equally important, if not more so, were the pedagogical, psychological and sociological reasons for introducing additional activities.

The activities mentioned in the previous section enable students to develop their intercultural competence. The activities expose them to different aspects of Slovenian society and culture and



allow them to experience parts of life in a Slovenian-speaking environment. They can compare Slovenian society with their own culture, look for positive and negative aspects of it and adapt to life in Slovenia.

In this way, their learning of Slovene language becomes experiential (Kohonen 1992 [3]; Kohonen et al. 2011[4]). In an authentic environment, they get to know parts of Slovenian reality, which they try to integrate into intensively during their stay and studies in Slovenia. At the same time, they also have the opportunity to test their knowledge of Slovene language acquired in the classroom in an authentic environment, i.e. to test their communicative abilities in Slovene both when communicating with foreign speakers (their classmates) and with native speakers of Slovene. In most cases, the activities mentioned above are events and activities that international students would find difficult to encounter on their own, without the guidance and direction of their teachers, and might not pay attention to them or be able to experience them.

During activities outside the classroom, participants socialize even more intensively with their peers and start to form a supportive social network. This also offers psychological support to individuals in need, which is particularly important when starting their studies and stay in Slovenia. In the evaluations of the Year Plus module, students report the great value of attending Year Plus, especially in terms of making contacts, and they report the socialisation opportunities of spending time together with peers who have similar experiences, needs, expectations and, last but not least, similar or identical problems at the beginning of their stay and studies in Slovenia. They also report a feeling of a safe environment that is created by the implementation of the Year Plus.

4. Additional activities to learn Slovenian outside the classroom

In the literature (Benson and Reinders 2011 [1], Nunan and Richards 2014 [6], Nunan 2014 [7], Richards 2015a [9], 2015b [10], Lin and Reinders 2018 [5], Reinders 2020 [8]), considerable attention has been paid to forms of language learning outside the classroom. More recently (Reinders 2020 [8]), the focus has been mainly on activities that take place in a virtual environment (from connecting language learners on online social networks, to the various uses of digital media, to virtual project work). However, especially since the pandemic, we have noticed that more and more digital tools are penetrating the (classical) classroom itself, and that there is thus more and more teaching taking place in a virtual environment, our idea was the opposite: to complement the classical classroom with as many activities as possible that take place in the real world, in an authentic environment, where language learners are able to interact as much as possible directly with both native and non-native users of Slovene. Given the diversity of the activities presented, it is clear that interaction is more and less central in some of them, but all of them provide an opportunity to get to know the Slovenian reality and thus promote intercultural dialogue and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Additional activities that are experiential in this way can also be a starting point for independent or autonomous learning. Participants can build on and complement them on their own, according to their interests: visit more museums or galleries, read more texts in Slovenian, listen to more Slovenian music, watch more Slovenian films, visit more Slovenian places, etc. They can also report all this to their teachers in different forms (e.g. report, report, diary, worksheet), who will make sure that they respond appropriately to the activity.

5. Student responses to the additional activities of the Year Plus

Since the very beginning of the Year Plus (2016), we have also been monitoring student responses to the part of the Year Plus that takes place outside the classroom. Thus, twice a year, at the end of each semester, students are asked to report on the activities they took part in and how they would rate these activities. The response to the evaluation studies varies from year to year, but the number of respondents always exceeds 100. The average ratings of the extra activities are consistently high (between 4 and 4.6 out of a possible 5 (the highest score)). In the academic year 2022/23, the ratings of the extra activities mentioned at the beginning of the paper were the highest ever, with an average of 4.6 out of a possible 5 (the highest score).



In this academic year, we also asked students which three activities they had taken part in that they considered to be the most meaningful complement to their regular Slovenian course. The results showed the following.

Participants rated visits to Slovenian towns as the most meaningful additional complementary activity. Four such visits were organised in the academic year 2022/23. Teachers accompanied students to Ljubljana, Škofja Loka, Kamnik and Novo mesto. The participants seemed to have little knowledge of Slovenian towns, including Ljubljana, even though they are studying there, but wanted to get to know them and learn more about them. We are therefore planning to visit various places in Slovenia in the future, and we will not avoid tourist attractions such as Bled or Piran, as students want to get to know them but do not organise their own visits to these places. The workshop on Slovenian literature and the guided reading of Slovenian literature were rated similarly highly as visits to Slovenian places. This is to be expected, as literature and its reading is a standard complement to classical language learning. Visits to museums and galleries were ranked third most meaningful, perhaps because students were mostly able to organise them themselves or went to museums and galleries on their own when they had the time and inclination to do so.

The same applies to Slovenian film viewing, as this is an activity that requires students to leave their comfort zone as little as possible: they watch the film in the comfort of their own home, when they have enough time to do so. In addition to the above, the most meaningful activities were sports hikes on the hills on the outskirts of Ljubljana, a translation workshop in which they translated contemporary Slovenian short fiction into their first languages, and an overview lecture on Slovenian culture, architecture and cuisine.

6. Further development and forms of work at Year plus

In the light of our experience and the results of the surveys carried out so far, we consider that the above-mentioned additional activities constitute a meaningful and qualitative complement to the regular work in the Slovenian language course within the Year Plus module. We will therefore continue to do so in the future. We will need to do more to integrate these activities into the course itself, especially in terms of better preparing students for the implementation of each activity. We are aware that preparation for the activity itself is one of the key stages of experiential learning. Similarly, more energy will need to be invested in the phase of direct response to the activity, which is also an important phase of experiential learning.

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