

# **History of teaching English as an academic subject in Slovakia**

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## **Abstract**

The article presents results of the bachelor thesis which offers a general overview of foreign language education history in Slovak Republic, more thoroughly, teaching English as a foreign language. Initially, the article introduces a reader into brief description of the history of teaching foreign language in Slovakia and situation before and after 1989. Afterwards, it presents eleven parts which fully cover the results of research being made in the selected educational institution and maps its entire history of teaching English as a foreign language since 1994 till 2013. Those eleven parts provide answers to several research questions and deal with the key reasons of beginning teaching English at the selected school and various documents, decrees and laws which have to be kept. Furthermore the article presents all the teachers of English who worked/have worked at school, which qualification they had/have, which school books, handbooks, dictionaries, magazines or other educational equipment were/are used in teaching and learning process as well as the number of pupils who were taught English, etc. The conclusion sums up and presents the results of the research.

## **Key words**

school, foreign language, English, teacher, pupils, school book, teaching, learning, classroom, education

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, the importance of being well educated, especially in language area, is simply indisputable. Ability to communicate with the whole universe has been demanded for centuries and has become an essential feature of human capital in the globalizing world. The mankind has been learning foreign languages for 5000 years whether for a scientific or pragmatic reasons reflecting the personal interest but also the needs of the market, economy, policy, culture, etc. (Bálintová, 2003, s. 5-6).

Firstly, the article will briefly discuss the most relevant parts of very long and rich history of teaching foreign languages in Slovakia and

afterwards, it will narrow its focus to teaching English as a foreign language and its overall status before and after 1989.

Secondly, the article will present the results of the research which maps entire history of teaching English language as an academic subject at selected Primary school with preschool Oravská Polhora 130. It will present the aim of the research, five research questions, research sample, research methods and overall results of the research which will deal with the beginning of teaching English at school, which grades were/are taught English, teachers who taught/teaches English subject and their qualification, the school books, dictionaries, magazines, facilities which were/are used in English educational process, which documents, decrees or laws have to be kept by the school, which English extracurricular activities the school offers or how the English education process looks like since, respectively, how the process has changed.

Finally, researched history of teaching English language as academic subject at selected school will be compared to overall history of teaching English language at Slovak republic in order to find out whether the school fit or differ from majority.

### **Materials and Methods**

The research which maps the history of education of English language as a foreign language at selected educational institution has been done by the intervention of the school ethnography (It prefers the direct contact with the informants, using the form of interview, important for obtaining reliable and factually accurate materials/data (Švec, 1998, p. 230-237) and historiography (It gives the form and the content to the history of mankind and selects all what is considered worthy for the recording in terms of the present, Švec, 1998, p. 238-243), according to the pedagogical-methodological handbook and through the researching and studying of the school archive materials, the teaching handbooks, the schoolbooks and the interviews with a school director and the teachers of English subject.

## **Results**

The bachelor thesis maps history of foreign language teaching in Slovakia since 17th century, when the school attendance was not compulsory, proper education was a matter of wealth and Latin was dominant. The era of formalism and dogmatism was later on changed by teaching methods and educational theories embraced in J. A. Comenius's works (Balintová, 2003). The enlightenment widened education of classical foreign language by new, modern ones, such as German, French and Hungarian. However, German and Hungarian languages were taught naturally in order to denationalize Slovak children, which also raised counter demands to pay more attention towards national languages and education of foreign languages base on mother tongue (Balintová, 2003). Significant change in foreign language education was made in 20th century when traditional grammar-translation teaching methods were shifted into the direct communicative method (Balintová, 2003). The Slovak school system underwent many changes in case of foreign language education till the present. Recently, the new conception of foreign language teaching at primary and secondary schools was made, based on effort to create multicultural European society, by achieving communication skills in at least two foreign languages as well as communication level B1/B2 for first and level A2/B1 for second foreign language.

Afterwards, the thesis pays much more attention towards teaching of English as a foreign language in Slovakia. At the beginning, it generally states that there were several historical changes which affected not only the particular society and people's foreign language interest, but also school system which caused that foreign languages, such as German, Hungarian and Russian, which were currently in the center of attention was substituted by another ones, especially English. This global and international language was firstly taught as optional foreign language in 7th – 9th grade at primary school, with very poor 90 minutes time dotation per week. However, in the 1970s education of modern European languages was completely abolished in all teacher training colleges and

the only” place for studying them was in the faculties of arts, with limited number of students was limited which caused serious shortage of teachers qualified for teaching foreign languages. In 1989, Slovakia experienced political, economic and social changes which significantly influenced the way of thinking of people and resulted in a serious reform of foreign language education. Education of foreign languages has become the part of the school curriculum; Russian language has lost its dominant position as a compulsory subject and English language has risen to the very top. Education of foreign languages has been given more teaching lessons per week and wider range of well accessible teaching material, which markedly reflected people’ new desires for travelling, professional growth and communication and collaboration with other nations. In the bachelor thesis there are furthermore several chapters describing English language education at all levels of schools after 1989 and then the attention is pointed to translators and interpreters, teacher training, fast track, examination, curricula, teaching materials and in service training, which are efficiently characterized. The final paragraph states that however the foreign language teaching in Slovakia has improved a lot; there are still some challenges, which have to be solved, such as a creation of national foreign language school books, and supporting teaching materials incorporating *a modern technology*, etc. (Gadušová & Hartánská, 2002, p. 251-252).

In the part of the bachelor thesis where the results of the research are presented, the reader is initially introduced to the aim, which is to map history of teaching English language as an academic subject at selected educational institution, and subsequently with five partial aims reflected in five research questions, focusing on the beginnings of teaching English at the school, teachers of English, all kinds of educational equipment and methods used to teach English, extracurricular activities at school and the future perspective of teaching English at the school.

Afterwards, the research sample itself is presented from the organizational, environmental, social, personal, educational, philosophical, athletic, sciential, cultural and extracurricular perspective.

The last paragraph of this complex characterization is devoted to foreign language teaching and it states that German is taught unprofessionally, while English, Russian and French professionally. The school seeks international cooperation, predominately with Poland school in order to provide an opportunity of exchange trips (Primary School..., 2013).

When research methods, which have been already discussed in this article, are presented, the research results take their turn. The chapter called "*The starting point*" explains the beginnings of foreign language education at the school after 1989, when Decree allowed teaching German and Russian. However, people got a hankering to travel to work much further and their foreign language knowledge were for the Francophone and the Anglophone countries insufficient, what subsequently raised new demanding. English was introduced at the school in 1994 and was taught by unqualified teacher with an exception from education. English as an academic subject has started being taught in two classes of 5<sup>th</sup> grade which were classified upon eight grades school system, however, a few pupils continued and finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade.. From that point, English has been taught at upper degree of primary schools till presence. In school year 1999/2000 the school started teaching English experimentally at lower 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. This experiment was stopped and restored several times per decade. The significant change came in 2011 when English language became established as 1<sup>st</sup> compulsory foreign language being obligatory taught from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade from legislative. Till that year, English was also taught as the second foreign language, firstly in 6<sup>th</sup> grade experimentally, secondly in 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade after the curricula had been modified in school year 2010/2011.

Next very interesting chapter maps the amount of the pupils who were/has been taught English at school since the very beginning. Those numbers will not be presented in this article, because there is too many of them and we have to keep in minds that the pupils who attend the school make it a living organism which acquires constantly year after year a new face which means that the numbers of the pupils at school or in each class change every school year and this happens for a plenty of reasons, such as

the grade repetition, the change of the school, the family relocation, etc. The chapter notices the number of English learners predominantly at lower 3<sup>rd</sup> and upper 5<sup>th</sup> grade, rarely in lower 1<sup>st</sup> grade and each five years, the statistic reports show the total numbers of the pupils in these very school years. But to give you just a taste of it, in the school year 1994/1995 the pupils of 5<sup>th</sup> grade divided into two classes got an opportunity to choose English, German or Russian, as a foreign language, which they wanted to learn and English was chosen by 14 pupils from the total number of 57. In the school year 2012/2013, the school established one pure English class of lower 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with 19 pupils. The number of 5<sup>th</sup> graders divided into three classes was 53 which equal the number of English learners. The school taught English 339 pupils. The main aim of this chapter is simply to show, how the interest of English has grown throughout two decades.

Following chapter deals with all teachers who taught or have taught English at the school. Particular paragraphs present each teacher as employee and give information about his / her studies and qualification. Afterwards, the thesis names the educational equipment for teaching and learning English. In 1994, when English began to be taught problems with finances and a lack of the school books were present, but fortunately, the school somehow managed it and soon, all pupils had their first school books named "*Angličtina 1 pre základné školy*". These school books were in the school year 1997/1998 replaced by "*Project English 1<sup>st</sup> edition*", in 2003/2004 by 2<sup>nd</sup> edition and in 2010/2011 by newest 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. All project books were supported by workbook, CD, teacher's book and in case of project 3<sup>rd</sup> edition also by DVD worksheets and tests plus brand new Culture DVDs and new Project iTools. All projects are also supported by web pages. At lower grades was used "*Chatterbox pupil's book*" also supported by Activity book, Teacher's book and Cassette. Since the school year 2010/2011 Chatterbox has been replaced by "*Family and friends*" also accompanied by Class Book with MultiROM, Workbook, iTools, Teacher's Book, Audio CDs and Readers. The school works with two kinds of dictionaries, bilingual Lingea pocket dictionary and monolingual

Oxford Basic English dictionary. The school started ordered a magazine Hello to enrich pupils' vocabulary, gain new knowledge about culture of English-speaking countries and other topics reflecting life. The school established two special foreign language classrooms with all needed equipment and interactive whiteboards to all classrooms in order to meet needs of pupils and improve educational process. Beside these innovations, pupils use computers, English CD-ROMs, DVDs and visit several internet websites for learning and practicing foreign language. Next few chapters deals with extracurricular and extra-ordinary activities closely connected to English, all important documents, decrees, laws regulating teaching English, sufficient characterization of ways of teaching English at the school since beginning and additional perspective of further English language education.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The total time needed to finish the research was approximately 1 and 1/2 year and a lot of required information had to be collected, evaluated and processed. The research was based on investigation of the school ethnography and historiography, according to the pedagogical-methodological handbook and through researching and studying of school archive materials, teaching handbooks, schoolbooks and interviews with school director and teachers of English language. The reader can find the overall result containing the wide range of relevant information gained by investigation which unambiguously contributes most to achievement the main stated aim of research. One can find the thesis very interesting thus beside of giving wide and detailed look into the history of teaching English language in Slovakia it incorporates its concrete application in research at real school. The facts in the bachelor thesis are not only built from dry theoretical and historical facts, but also contain a practical research, which definitely changes a reader point of view. This kind of research itself can be highly useful especially for future potential teachers of not only English language. The entire process of working and exploring the unknown, in order to finish the research,

significantly enriches an individual by essential knowledge from school practice, answers many yet unanswered questions and raise awareness of thorny the school system really is.

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