

**A PROJECT
FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF TEACHING
SLOVAK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
IN NATIONAL MINORITY LANGUAGE SCHOOLS
THROUGH THE METHODOLOGY OF SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING
(WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON SCHOOLS USING HUNGARIAN AS A
LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION):
THE NITRA MODEL**

“The right of persons belonging to national minorities to maintain their identity can only be fully realised if they acquire a proper knowledge of their mother tongue during the educational process. At the same time, persons belonging to national minorities have a responsibility to integrate into the wider national society through the acquisition of a proper knowledge of the State language.”¹

Thus it is a necessary condition for the integration of minorities to learn the official language of the state. However, minority children should not learn the official language by giving up the school with mother tongue instruction. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Dunbar² consider the *submersion program* one of the most frequent and most dangerous educational methods because minorities learn the majority language at the expense of their mother tongue. The Hague Recommendations also emphasize that “submersion-type approaches whereby the curriculum is taught exclusively through the medium of the State language and minority children are entirely integrated into classes with children of the majority are not in line with international standards”.³

It is the state’s task and responsibility to guarantee the legal, professional and financial conditions with the help of which the minorities can acquire the state’s official language in the process of school education. One of the necessary conditions for this is the preparation of

¹ *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Note*. Hague: Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 1996. p. 5.

² Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove – Dunbar, Robert: *Indigenous Children’s Education as Linguistic Genocide and a crime Against Humanity? A Global View*. Geaidnu/Kautokeino: Gáldu Čála, Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights no. 1/2010.

³ *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Note*. Hague: Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 1996. p. 14.

appropriately trained teachers. According to the Hague Recommendations about the educational rights of national minorities and language human rights experts (for example, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas⁴), the state language should be taught by bilingual teachers:

“The minority language should be taught as a subject on a regular basis. The official State language should also be taught as a subject on a regular basis preferably by bilingual teachers who have a good understanding of the children's cultural and linguistic background.”⁵

If we accept the fact that everybody has a mother tongue and consider the right to learn (a) the mother tongue and (b) the official language as a school subject natural, then we should notice a fact that cannot be neglected when developing the materials and the methods of language education. In the case of those children whose mother tongue is the official language, learning this language will cover the rights indicated in (a) and (b) simultaneously. In the case of minority learners, however, (a) means the *mother tongue*, while (b) refers to the *official language*. Different language teaching methods should be used in both cases.

Thus, organizing the education of the official language (state language) in schools requires special attention and circumspection. That is why the project for the improvement of teaching Slovak language and literature in national minority language schools through the methodology of second language teaching is noteworthy. It is a project being realised with international collaboration with a special focus on schools using Hungarian as a language of instruction in Slovakia. Within this scheme, collaborating with experts from several countries, the lecturers of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (*János Baukó, István Kozmács, Gizella Szabó Mihály, Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy, and Ildikó Vančo*) developed the complete program of a university course ‘The improvement of teaching Slovak language and literature in national minority language schools through the methodology of second language teaching’. How to make the official language to be acquired does not mean a challenge only for Slovakia.⁶ In Ukraine the state should also face the fact that the mother tongue of a

⁴ Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove: *Language, Literacy and Minorities*. London: A Minorities Rights Group Report, 1990.

⁵ *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Note*. Hague: Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, 1996. pp. 6–7.

⁶ See Mária Pisnjak ed. *PRIROČNIK za učitelje dvojezičnih šol v Prekmurju*. Lendava: Zavod za kulturo madžarske narodnosti, 2013. (http://www.e-kompetencia.si/images/epublikacije/prirocnik/e-kompetencia_modszertan_prirocnik_20131024_splet_kazalo.pdf) about Slovenian problems of different character, but essentially similar to the ones discussed here. About problems in

considerable part of its population (nearly one third) is not Ukrainian. The educational project developed by the lecturers of the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra is also a crucial result for the Transcarpathian Hungarian community living in the westernmost part of Ukraine. The materials designed within the project can be adapted by Uzhhorod National University and the Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute (Beregovo).

The Hungarians living in Ukraine (Transcarpathia) have to cope with numerous difficulties when learning the official language in the school. Besides the specific and complicated language policy situation, it is also a problem that the Ukrainian state has not created the conditions necessary for the successful acquisition of the state language.

The following factors hinder the teaching of the country's official language in schools of Ukraine:

- the lack of qualified teachers;
- the lack of appropriate coursebooks;
- the lack of appropriate perspectives and methods;
- the lack of clear-cut objectives;
- the homogenization: universal curricula, coursebooks and methods;
- the deficiencies of language education in kindergartens;
- professional teacher training corresponding to the aims and special situations.

The discipline titled 'Language pedagogy. The theory and practice of teaching the second language', developed at the university in Nitra with the help of cooperating international experts, consists of two parts (theory and practice) and is taught in 36 (24+12) academic hours altogether. The developers of the discipline approach the topic of teaching the official language from functional linguistics. They pay a special attention to its being theoretically grounded: at the beginning of the course various theories of language education are introduced, as well as connections between language pedagogy and the description of language. We consider it crucial and novel that the course developers have the view as a starting point that the description of language and teaching grammar cannot be the aim. Teaching grammar is only one of the means of language acquisition being successful. During

Serbia, Slovakia and Romania, see: Kiss, Zsuzsanna Éva: Az államnyelv elsajátításának oktatáspolitikai akadályai a Felvidéken, a Vajdaságban és Erdélyben. [The education policy barriers to state language acquisition in Upper-land (Slovakia), Voivodina (Serbia), and Transylvania (Romania)] *Kisebbségkutatás* 2011/1. pp. 73–109. Similar to the situation in Ukraine, see: Cserniczkó, István: Megtanulunk-e ukránul? A kárpátaljai magyarok és az ukrán nyelv. [We learn to Ukrainians? The Hungarians in Transcarpathia and the Ukrainian language.] Ungvár: PoliPrint, 2012.; Cserniczkó, István: The linguistic aspects of the Ukrainian educational policy. *ESUKA – JEFUL* 2011/2–1. pp. 75–91.

the course students will learn that the language system only exists in usage, and the best method to acquire the grammar system is to apply grammatical structures in practice, since the system and the usage are linked according to functional language theory: the system and the usage are the two facets of the same phenomenon – the language. Teaching grammar is not opposite to the usage but stands out together with it because grammar is functional in that it expresses meaning, and is not an empty, meaningful structure. However, developing the learners' language and grammatical competences will gain meaning together with the communicative competence.

The course takes the general principle as a starting point that the aim of teaching the official language is forming a personality who speaks both their mother tongue and the state language and who is able to acquire a profession and get a job. This is reached by applying the theoretical and practical factual knowledge of functional linguistics. For the sake of reaching the aim, they contribute to successful language teaching by working out a methodology, or syllabus that is based on linguistic bases and takes into consideration the socio-cultural characteristics. Outlining the cultural background is also an integral part of the syllabus.

Discussing the general and specific similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the second language is emphasised in the syllabus of the discipline. Forming the contrastive language attitude and comparing the various grammatical structures of the mother tongue and the second language help the acquisition of the second language.

The syllabus of the course is worked out in detail. It helps training such pedagogues who can teach effectively Slovakia's official language to Hungarian schoolchildren in Slovakia applying the theoretical frames of modern language pedagogy and functional linguistics. The cultural factors and the attention paid to the socio-cultural background make language teaching more lifelike. University students obtain appropriate theoretical background to teaching the grammatical material.

In my opinion, even more attention could be paid to practice besides the theoretical knowledge. It may be appropriate to review briefly those successful language pedagogy practices which provide positive examples for future pedagogues. For the same reason, it is worth introducing some language teaching programs with low efficiency because learning the negative examples and practices and understanding the reasons of failure helps the good and effective educational programs and practices become rooted.

The course should also call the attention of future language teachers to the necessity of creating situations in school lessons which assure favourable conditions for the practical use

of language. Learning by doing and the situational activities in real life context develop the language learners' language and communicative competences.

In sum, the discipline developed during the collaboration of the Nitra colleagues and the international professional team (together with the relating theoretical and practical materials⁷) is a well-compiled syllabus both from theoretical and practical points of view. The way the Nitra lecturers and researchers cooperated closely with the experts representing several countries is also exemplary.

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⁷ For instance, the functional and cognitive language pedagogy chrestomathy. Vančo Ildikó ed.: *Funkcionális és kognitív nyelvpedagógia. Szöveggyűjtemény.* [Functional and cognitive language pedagogy. Chrestomathy.] Nitra: Univerzita Konštantina Filozofa v Nitre, 2014.