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Review of:

*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 importance of the project**

I got acquainted with the project by participating in the kickoff workshop in Nitra, Slovakia on May 27–30, 2014. Since then I have discussed issues on the topic continuously with Ildikó Vančo, István Kozmács, Gizella Szabómihály and Gábor Tolcsvai Nagy. Among others, we have consulted on the writing and editing of the project materials.

I find the basic goal of the project, the improvement of teaching Slovak language in minority schools, very urgent need indeed. I base this opinion on my experience gathered during fieldwork (2009–) in South-West Slovakia, including several visits to Hungarian medium schools and interviews with headmasters, teachers and children as well as parents. All the interviewed minority language speakers spoke about the need and desire to master the Slovak language. However, many of them also mentioned the problems in learning it and the failure to learn Slovak in the desired manner and level. A returning criticism of Slovak teaching in Hungarian medium schools was that the youth in Hungarian majority villages lacked the linguistic competence needed to participate in the prestigious education available only in Slovak, and did not come into contact with the everyday registers of Slovak needed to communicate with their Slovak peers.

Many people might think it would be a good solution to attend a Slovak medium school instead a minority institution. However, as Ildikó Vančo (2015) makes it clear in her contribution, it is not a good solution for Hungarians in Slovakia to choose a Slovak medium school at least for two reasons. First, in Hungarian majority villages in Slovakia which I studied, Hungarian adults that had attended Slovak medium schools told shocking stories of their first school years, when they could barely communicate with the teachers. For such reasons, also people of other ethnicity such as the Roma choose the Hungarian medium school in Hungarian majority municipalities of Slovakia. Secondly, in bilingual regions, Hungarian medium schools safeguard the minority language and identity and in general contribute to the maintaining of bilingualism and cultural diversity in Slovakia. For Hungarians in bilingual villages and towns it was also important to attend Hungarian medium schools, since there they could see their bilingualism recognized as a resource and learn about their history and culture and learn to appreciate the regional and family heritage. At the same time, in such municipalities there was a growing tendency among the Hungarians to choose a Slovak medium school instead, for reasons of presumed socioeconomic advancement, which seemed more valued than maintaining balanced bilingualism and a Hungarian cultural identity in Slovakia.

The participants to my interviews asserted that the major reason for Hungarians failing to reach the skills in Slovak they desire at school was the emphasis of teaching formal grammar and literary history after the first grades. In general very few of the interviewed teachers, headmasters or parents in sites with a Hungarian majority were satisfied with the curriculum of Slovak in Hungarian medium schools. As Alabánová (2015), writes, the problem of the subject has been that it too often “teaches about the [Slovak] language but not the [Slovak] language”.

I would like to emphasize, that the case of Swedish medium schools in Finland shows that **it is fully possible** – and most often even relatively easy – **to learn the majority language as a school subject** in a minority language of instruction school (see Laihonen 2015). However, at the same time, the schools should have the chance to locally decide on having more or less teaching hours in the subject. Obviously schools in Hungarian dominant contexts would need more hours for Slovak language teaching – perhaps on the expense of Slovak literature history and descriptive grammar, which I consider replaceable. In bilingual contexts teaching Slovak cultural history and descriptive grammar in Slovak make much more sense.

The subject, Slovak language and literature appeared to be not a problem in the (Slovak dominant) bilingual villages and towns, there even the first graders in Hungarian medium schools I observed could speak fluent Slovak and teacher-pupil interaction was carried out in Slovak in a natural manner. It is very obvious that a diversified curriculum and perhaps even a different subject as in Finland (*Finnish as a second national language*, *Finnish as a near native language for bilinguals*) would be needed to fulfill the needs of different Hungarian medium schools and pupils. Also the number of teaching hours should be higher for Slovak in regions where Slovak is barely spoken, and lower in regions where Slovak is the dominant language and many Hungarian families are undergoing a language shift to Slovak.

From these premises – especially in the case of the schools in the region where Hungarians form the majority, and where most of the pupils have relatively little exposure to Slovak beyond the school – teaching and learning of Slovak seems to be a central issue deserving instant intervention. On a general level, I find the project suitable for dealing with the above mentioned problems.

**On the proposed language pedagogy course**

The course: *Language pedagogy: theory and methodology of teaching a second language* (Nyelvpedagógia. A második nyelv tanításának elmélete és módszertana)is intended for teacher students at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, which is a good way to introduce the needed change in language education. The proposed functional model of language and language learning are capable for reforming the teaching of Slovak language in Hungarian medium schools. Through it the *usage-based* concept of language – a commonplace in international educational linguistics (e.g. Aalto, Mustonen and Tukia 2009) – should be transmitted to future teachers, instead of the *grammar and translation* (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 3) or *prescriptive and normative linguistics* approach, still very typical for language education in many contexts (van Lier 2004: 26). According Aalto, Mustonen and Tukia (2009: 404), an ideal language education program connects the everyday encounters with a second language and helps to understand and interpret the language exposure of the life outside school and thus use the environment as a basic resource and site of learning the second language. In the case of Hungarians in Slovakia, some exposure to Slovak is inevitable even for children. For instance, during my fieldwork I experienced that computer programs and mobile phones, daily used by children had most often Slovak as their language. Thus, I find it very a useful solution of the course description to interpret Slovak for pedagogical purposes as a *second language* in Hungarian medium schools rather than as a foreign language (but see Gadušová 2015). In the functional model, focus is not on learning *language,* rather it is on learning *language* skills (Aalto, Mustonen & Tukia 2009: 405)*.*

 The functional approach to language learning does not mean that language structure is no longer taught (cf. van Lier 2004: 28). Rather they are connected to activities and processes done through language, such the construction of genre characteristics. Relating grammatical categories to usage, a personal relationship to language learning can be constructed. Presenting just the structures, such as a grammar chart, does not enable the pupils to analyze language themselves and construct the rules themselves. Through personal involvement, the grammatical rules are also more confidently applied in real life situations (Aalto, Mustonen & Tukia 2009: 415–417).

 The course description combines the functional approach with a contrastive approach, which is very much in line with the goal of raising bilinguals. However, in some cases the course description could be made more explicit on how the usage-basedapproach is taken into account when comparing phenomenon such as for instance polysemy. Even though the reader makes such connections succinctly clear (see also Kozmács’ [2015] nice demonstration of teaching analogy), it could be stressed more in the course description as well.

 I find it very important that the course contains references to taking the sociocultural context as well. In general, in Hungarian medium schools more attention could be directed towards projects and exercises where students explore their linguistic environment and advance from basic awareness to critical and problem-seeking and participatory attitude (cf. Titman 1994). That is, students could explore where Slovak is used in their environment, why and with what meaning. This exercise could be connected with a discussion of language rights, delightfully connected to the course description as well. If school children do not get to know their language rights and reflect on them, they might have language problems later due to avoiding certain language use situations. The right to use the minority language can also be de facto lost, if the existing right for a certain service in the minority language is not practiced.

 The course description takes no stance on whether parallel monolingual practices (keeping Slovak and Hungarian separate in most situations) are targeted as Alabanová (2015) suggests, or rather translangual practices are used as a resource, which is a common suggestion of international literature on bilingual education. In any case, dialect variation and contact phenomena are part of the everyday of the minority speakers. Translangual practices enhance the status of the local language varieties, and also promote a positive attitude towards the regional variety and the minority language. In this way they also promote positive self-identity and belonging (place identity). I would also like to stress that prescriptive practices are counterproductive in comparison to the approach of encouraging language use and authorship in language (cf. Titman 1994). For example, Gorter (2015) has lately proposed translangual exercises for Basque medium schools in Spain that include beginning a text or a story in one language and continuing in another.

 Finally some remarks on the learning aims and intended outcomes. At the moment they are focusing on knowledge and understanding (“A hallgatók megismerkednek, A kurzus külön ismereteket ad…”). I would suggest putting more emphasis on learning how to *evaluate, apply, cooperate* and *practice* usage-based language pedagogy*.* That is, I suggest to discuss and explicate in the course description what the students should be able *to do* if/after they understand the principles of the functional model.

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