

## Modern Trends in Teaching English at Comenius University, Bratislava

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### ABSTRACT

Recent changes in the Russian system of higher linguistic education, introduction of the two level education for future teachers of foreign languages according to the Bologna agreement, alterations to the existing university syllabi necessitate a close study of the international experience in this sphere. Therefore careful evaluation of the best practices of European universities in organizing teaching of English to future teachers of foreign languages at the undergraduate and graduate levels has become significant and crucial. The article aims at systemizing some approaches to the English instruction of future teachers of foreign languages, which are used in Slovakia. It is based on the observations and the module analysis conducted at the Comenius University (Slovakia). The article brings to light some modern methods of teaching English in Slovakia, a country in Eastern Europe which has already passed a long period of transition from a Soviet like system of education to the latest innovations in the EU education policies. The facts and conclusions referred to in the given article can be used in upgrading higher linguistic and teachers' training education in Russia as well as other countries.

### KEYWORDS

higher education, international experience, language learning, bachelor and master programs, Slovakia, English, speech practice

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## Introduction

The growing status of foreign languages in the Russian Federation which is determined by stronger economical, political and cultural ties of Russia with other countries, globalization of information resources and mass media have a great impact on the contemporary demands to a foreign languages teacher and the necessity of their upgrading.

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Modern standards of professional higher education in the Russian Federation make a special emphasis on the results of future foreign languages teachers' training. They include acquirement of common cultural, common and specific professional competences which are needed in teachers' every day practical work in the spheres of education and management and as well in research. These competences also involve future teachers' excellent command of foreign languages. All these factors keep up to date theoretical and practical issues of linguistic and methodological education of future teachers of foreign languages in accordance with contemporary trends (Bezukladnikov, 2011; Malyov, 2012).

Transition of the Russian system of future teachers' training to the two level pattern, introduction of extended school practice sessions according to the latest standards of higher education implies considerable changes in the curricula and the necessity to redistribute workload of teachers of foreign languages to be with the English speech practice courses being in the centre of attention. That is of a great importance for future specialists in foreign languages, teachers and linguists, who study now at the undergraduate and graduate levels since English is an obligatory subject for them. Most of the European countries including Slovakia have already undergone this shift and successfully implemented new bachelor and master programs in the field of teachers' education (Hrabinska and Pribisova, 1999; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2015; European Commission Brussels, 2013; Farrington and Palfreyman, 2012). The best experiences of Slovak universities in this area, analysis of modern informational recourses and methods might become a potential tool in reforming the system of higher pedagogical education in Russia. Introduction of the latest and the most effective methods and approaches to teaching foreign languages and especially English used at Slovak universities will improve and modernize training of future teachers of foreign languages at Russian universities on both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The Comenius University in Bratislava is the oldest university in the Slovak Republic. It is famous for its Faculty of Education which is has been training highly professional teachers for 70 years. Well-known for its new undergraduate and graduate degree programs in linguistic education, the Department of English Language and Literature of Faculty of Education provides students the opportunity to master a number of various courses of study in English grammar, phonetics, speech practice, literature and culture. During its history the Department of English Language and Literature has become renowned for its researches including phonetics and phonology, grammar, applied psycholinguistics, psychology of language learning, literature, linguistics, theory of translating and interpreting and others (Pavlik, 2015; Lancaric, 2008; Lojova, 2011; Repka, Pcolinska and Siposova, 2015). Since English Speech Practice is one of the parts in the curriculum of future teachers of foreign languages at Russian universities, this area of Slovak experience deserves special attention.

### ***Aim of the Study***

The aim of this study was to examine new ways of teaching English in the Slovak system of higher education which is in the process of transition to the

European Educational Area and to find out which of these methods can be implied in training future teachers of foreign languages in Russia.

### **Research questions**

The overarching research question of this study was as follows:

What are the specific modern methods used for teaching English to future teachers at the Department of English language and Literature of the Comenius University in Bratislava within the frameworks of the Bologna Agreement?

### **Method**

This paper results from a research project, conducted at the Department of English language and Literature of the Comenius University in Bratislava (Slovakia) in October 2015 under a grant of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. During the research the following methods were used: theoretical (analysis, synthesis, generalization and systematization); sociological (observation, interviews, expert estimation).

### **Data, Analysis, and Results**

The Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education is the centre for language teacher training in English at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. Courses, reading and discussions are conducted in English and require a good command of the language both in oral and written form. The major objective of the Department is to educate and train creative and flexible English language teachers at a high professional level who are able to meet the needs of our contemporary society.

Future teachers of English are trained on both undergraduate and graduate levels. In Slovakia a university or college graduate with a bachelor's degree in education can only be employed as an assistant teacher. As very few secondary schools hold such positions, all the students who wish to work at schools after graduation must continue their studies the graduate level to obtain a master's degree.

The duration of the undergraduate English language program is three years with one major and four years if two majors are chosen. 180 ECTS points are needed to get a bachelor's degree. In case of one major 90 ECTS points should be obtained through linguistic courses and the other 90 points are given for taking courses in didactics, TEFL and psychology. If undergraduates enroll for two majors, they should get 60 ECTS points studying linguistics, 60 points studying didactics, TEFL and psychology and 60 points being trained the their second major. It can be not only a foreign language but also other humanitarian subjects.

The undergraduate program of the Department includes courses in modern standard language, literature, didactics, psycholinguistics and culture of Great Britain and the USA. First, there are courses focused on theory and practice which are essential to the English language teaching at a given type of school. The sequence of courses ranges from introductory to specialized, some of them designed to achieve a high level of students' competence in the four language skills, others to gain theoretical knowledge and understanding of various facets of the language that are considered as necessary for language teaching, both theory and techniques. Included are courses for the advanced study of British

and American literature and a systematic description of the English language: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicology, study of idioms, intercultural communication, stylistics, history and linguistic analysis.

Modern standard English is taught through a number of courses both on the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is assumed that all the applicants who enter the Faculty of Education and enroll into these courses already have a good command of English at the Upper Intermediate or B2 level. For the undergraduate students the English language subjects are among compulsory, compulsory elective and elective courses.

The compulsory English language courses include English Phonetics and Phonology I, English Language Grammar I, English Language Grammar II, English Language Grammar III, English in use – Advance I.

English Phonetics and Phonology I is taught in the first semester of the first year. Training is provided in the form typical of humanitarian departments of Slovak universities. A class is a combination of one academic hour of lecturing and one contact hour of a seminar. The aim of this course is to raise the level of listening skills, to improve pronunciation and attain an appropriate level of intelligibility, to be able to read transcribed words and sentences, to familiarize students with basic terminology in this field. The course is concerned with both theoretical and practical questions of pronunciation. Students focus on a systematic description and analysis of the English phonic system from a predominantly articulatory point of view, learn the basic principles of transcription, and introduce the main phonetic and phonological terminology. The course activities include listening to recorded material, oral reproduction of the sounds of English, transcription of English words and sentences, pronunciation of words and sentences. Grading is based on four assessments: three in-semester and one post-semester. The first in-semester takes place after the sixth week of studying, the second and the third – at the end of the semester. In-semester assessments include the following tasks: pronunciation and transcription of 10 English words, pronunciation and transcription of phrases and short sentences (with a special emphasis on sentence stress, linking, elision and assimilation), and presentation of a memorized audio-sample prepared at home. In-semester tests must be taken before the beginning of the examination period. If students pass all the in-semester assessments they can get up to 60 points in their final grade. Post-semester assessment which takes place during the examination period consists of a theoretical test and a practical written test in which students transcribe sentences. This final assessment comprises 40 points or 40% of the examination grade.

Grammar of English is represented by a three level course system. The first stage, English Language Grammar I, is obligatory for studying in the second semester of the first year. Its goal is to acquaint students with the basic concepts and aspects of linguistic grammar relevant for the learning and teaching English; to develop grammatical thinking. It helps to systematize knowledge about nominal phrases and understanding their function in communication. Comparative analysis is provided through highlighting the differences between English and Slovak grammar in structural and functional terms. The course also aims at improving the ability of practical application of linguistic grammar and developing grammatical procedural knowledge. The majority of exercises are

entirely practical and are based on modern English, covering a variety of topic and intending to help learners increase their own mastery of English.

The next stage is English Language Grammar II which is taught in the third semester of the second year. This course aims at systemizing and expanding students's knowledge of verbs, verb phrases, adverbs, prepositions, and various grammatical categories. It offers a more detailed insight into the differences between English and Slovak grammar in structural and functional terms and develops students' structural-functional grammar thinking.

Finally, English Language Grammar III systematizes knowledge about the syntax of the English language with an emphasis on structural and mainly on functional characteristics, develops structural-functional grammar thinking with focus on the need to proceduralize declarative grammatical knowledge in the process of foreign language learning. The course includes revision of phrases and clause elements, syntactic characteristics of clause elements, classification of sentences, variations on clause types, subject-verb concord, negation, types of questions, negations and directives, pro-forms and ellipsis, coordination, the complex sentence, classification of dependent clauses, conditional clauses, relative clauses, direct and indirect speech. This course must be taken in the fourth semester of the second year. The overall pattern of the three grammar courses is the following: a lecture (one contact hour) and a seminar (two contact hours) a week. The system of grading is identical in all the English Language Grammar courses and involves two in-semester tests which can give up to 60% of the final grade and an exam test which comprises 40% of the final grade on condition of its successful passing.

English in use – Advance I is an obligatory course for the third year students and is usually taught in the fifth semester. It is focused on gaining communicative competence in the English language. This course is dedicated to expanding vocabulary, learning of the correct pronunciation and at the same time, it aims at improving all language skills. Required in the Cambridge Advanced English Exam. Seminars (two contact hours) on this course are held weekly. Some English language courses are obligatory elective, i.e. students must choose several subjects from the range they are offered. These courses fall into the following categories: Linguistics, Literature, Didactics, British and American Studies, and Additional linguistic disciplines.

The block Linguistics is represented by the course English Phonetics and Phonology II. It is a one semester practical course with three academic hours a week. The course aims at the development of listening skills, improving pronunciation of individual words within multiword structures and sentences and attaining a high level of intelligibility. Students are taught to read transcribed texts and to transcribe texts themselves. While completing this course students are also familiarized with the main phonetic and phonological theories.

First year students need to choose either one or two courses from the block Additional linguistic disciplines. These courses are united by one and the same heading – Language in Use – and represent various speech production and acquisition skills: speaking, reading and writing. Each course requires two contact hours of classroom studies a week.

Language in Use – Speaking is focused on gaining communicative competence in English. The purpose is to eliminate inhibitions and to increase

the confidence in oral speech. The course is also devoted to expanding vocabulary, studying correct pronunciation and fluency of speech. In addition, students improve skills associated with the Speaking Paper of Cambridge Advanced English Examination.

The next course, English in Use – Writing provides assistance in improving writing skills with a special focus on the characteristics of the written form of the English language. Another goal of the course is elimination of the negative transfer of the mother tongue. Students develop the acquired skills by writing in both formal and informal styles. This course like Language in Use – Speaking helps students get ready for Cambridge Advanced English Examination by preparing them for the Writing Paper.

The final one from the group is English in Use – Reading. The course aims at improving students' ability to read different texts, to understand formal and informal style, to enrich their vocabulary and to help students to understand complex texts. During the course preparation for the Cambridge Advanced English Examination touches the Reading Paper.

There are some more elective English speech practice courses offered to the first year students during the first semester. This fact highlights the emphasis the Department of English Language and Literature puts on the development of the productive language skills at the initial stage of a future teacher. These courses are Language and Communication, English Grammar Practice and Practical Introduction into Acoustic phonetics. Each of these practical courses can take place once a week during two contact hours.

Language and Communication focuses attention of students on grammatical phenomena that are particularly problematic for students, i.e. word classes, parts of speech, sentence elements, verbs, modal verbs and their usage in different meanings, definite and indefinite articles, nouns, prepositions. The course aims at providing extensive practical training and meticulous discussion of these phenomena.

English Grammar Practice deepens the practical ability to apply knowledge of linguistic grammar and to develop grammatical procedural knowledge in oral and written speech. It improves the ability of practical application from linguistic grammar and develops grammar procedural knowledge. The majority of exercises are entirely practical. They are based on modern English, cover a variety of topics and are intended to help learners increase their own mastery of English. During the course continuous assessment is used with additional points given for active participation in discussions and correctly completed homework. End of the semester assessment which takes place during the examination session consists of a final test and oral testing. Use of oral examinations at the linguistic departments of Slovak universities is a feature which sets them apart from most of the similar departments in West European universities where even exams in languages tend to be held in the written form. A typical class English Grammar Practice is a combination of homework analysis and explanation of new material together with exercises on it. Students are encouraged to take an active part in the discussions. Their participation is recorded and later taken into account while calculating exam grades. A teacher, however, seems to play the key role in all the classroom procedures.

Practical Introduction to Acoustic Phonetics is a good example of applying information technologies in English language teaching. In class students are

familiarized with hardware and software resources used in acoustic research. They learn about modern methods and techniques of sound recording and analysis of human speech and study the fundamental acoustic differences between English and Slovak syllables.

Special courses aimed at developing practical language skill are a part of the curriculum on the graduate level in the fourth and fifth years. The only obligatory course here is Language in Use – Advanced II which offers a complex language preparation for the state examination in the English language, summary of the previous subject matter, using all four language skills.

In addition to this course there are three obligatory optional courses: Language in Use – Integrated I, Language in Use – Integrated II, and Language in Use – Presentation Skills. Language in Use – Integrated I aims at developing students' skills in writing, speaking, reading and listening. This course concentrates mainly on writing and speaking. Listening and reading are meant to serve as instruments for writing and speaking. At the same time students improve their skills necessary for the Cambridge Advanced English Examination.

While mastering the course Language in Use – Integrated II students continue the integrated development of language skills and their communicative use. In the writing and speaking sections emphasis is put on longer written discourse and presentation skills. Among reading and listening skills special attention is paid to the acquisition of micro skills. As well as in Language in Use – Integrated I students develop the skills necessary for taking the Cambridge Advanced English Examination.

The innovative course Language in Use – Presentation Skills familiarizes students with the rules of designing and delivering effective presentations on various topics in English to an audience. According to the course syllabus students need to present the chosen topic in front of the audience and actively practice this skill. The course develops only the basic techniques, but students learn to build upon these and become competent public speakers in their future professional lives. The course Language in Use – Presentation Skills can be called a unique one. Presentation skills are usually taught to some extent in the frameworks of various speech practice courses and requirements of speaking in public are cited by many course syllabus. A separate course devoted to the development of this ability is certain to make a far-reaching contribution to students' productive language skills as well as boost students' self-confidence. Being competent in public speaking is an important quality of a teacher, and the Slovak system of higher education seems to pay special attention to its development.

The optional Speech Practice courses include Professional Language, English Grammar Exercises II and Language in Use – Conversation. The Professional Language course implies active work with professional papers concerning pedagogical, psychological, social work, politics, sociology, economics, technical and natural science documents. Students practice their linguistic and essay writing skills. They are helped to build confidence in speaking, listening, reading and writing using authentic English materials from different fields and spheres and get ready for communication in the real world. The course syllabus includes different kinds of texts with a variety of topics from current news stories, papers, journals, the Internet in order to strengthen students' language

skills. They are taught to understand the differences between formal and informal styles and enrich their vocabulary, to promote understanding and respect for 'otherness' within intercultural competence and communication.

English Grammar Exercises II offers active practicing of the grammar rules to achieve fluency in the proper use of grammatical phenomena with an emphasis on oral communication.

The main objective of the course Language in Use – Conversation is to develop the communicative competence in the English language. A further aim is to resolve students' inhibitions as well as to increase self-confidence in everyday conversations.

Almost all the English Speech Practice courses imply completion of two test papers or a test and an essay during a semester. The grade for these papers comprises 40-50% of the final grade which is formed according to the in-semester and post-semester assessments results. At the exams students are usually given both oral and written tasks.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Previous few studies on this issue have been devoted to Language education policy in Ireland (Council of Europe Language Policy Division, 2007), latest trends of learning and teaching at European universities (Sursock, 2015), improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions (European Commission, 2013), the reforms of the higher education system in Slovakia (Caplanova, 2000), the research capacity of the Slovak higher education (Jensen et al., 2008) and others.

However, analysis of scientific papers devoted to the modern approaches to teaching foreign languages at Slovak universities in the new European educational environment is extremely small, and they have only fragmentary-controversial nature.

Globalization has brought the English language to a new level of its development and has made it a lingua franca for billions of people all around the world. Starting from September 2015 teaching of two foreign languages has become compulsory at secondary schools in Russia. It is to make the final exam in English obligatory for school leavers in the year 2022. Therefore training of highly qualified teachers of foreign languages is crucial in today's Russia.

Modern teachers of foreign languages need to obtain advanced language skills. Doing that under the conditions of limited language media which is typical of Russia presents a serious challenge. Special methods need to be used to create artificial language media and involve students into vigorous participation in classroom activities. The project helped to witness how these methods are successfully taught at the Comenius University in Bratislava. This foreign experience is of an utmost importance for Russian universities as globalization brings common standards in education as well.

Accurate and careful selection of data presented in the syllabi of courses, its division into compulsory and elective, feedback and active discussion in class, solving difficult tasks both in problem groups and with a professor, team work, continuous education at both undergraduate and graduate levels together

provide steady development of speech practice skills. The Comenius University in Bratislava approaches of teaching English language practice courses to undergraduate and graduate students who major in education are worth considering and successful, making students teachers with an excellent command of English.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Implications and recommendations for future studies are as follows: it is necessary to lay emphasis on certain modern trends in teaching English at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Firstly, teaching practical skills of English should cover all the years of training a future teacher of foreign languages. Various courses devoted to different aspects of the languages should be included into both undergraduate and graduate curricula. The most important knowledge can be presented in obligatory courses while elective courses syllabi can include training of additional skills.

Secondly, a deep involvement of students in the classroom activities contributes to the development of their language skills as well as prepares them for working at secondary schools. Students should be encouraged to prepare extra information for a class. Team work and peer education make a considerable contribution to their research and teaching skills. Working in class needs to be evaluated and grades for it should be included into final grades. Use of continuous assessment certainly helps to make exam grades as objective as possible.

Thirdly, teachers of foreign languages need to have special courses which would enable them to speak in public. Teaching presentation skills is essential for their personal and professional development as well as career growth. Such courses facilitate productive language skills by encouraging students' involvement in creative work.

Fourthly, it may be useful not to separate theoretical classes from practical ones but join them during one session. It helps students see useful implementation of linguistic theories and their role in developing all the four language skills.

The results of analyzing the English speech practice courses undertaken at the Department of English Language and Literature of the Comenius University in Bratislava can be used in modernization of syllabi for undergraduate and graduate college and university students who major in EFL and are going to become teachers of foreign languages in the future. These data can be applied to the Russian system of higher education and the new programs for bachelors and masters of education.

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