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Continuous Improvement of the Teaching Process in Primary Education

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Abstract

Continuous improvement of the teaching process requires teachers to constantly think, analyse and evaluate their own work and try to improve its quality. The paper deals with the introduction of quality management in the teaching process, since one way of improving the quality of education is to build a quality management system at primary schools, focusing exclusively on schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The paper includes the climate survey of the school class aiming at verifying the current state of the social climate of the class in the subject of Slovak language and Slovak literature. When teaching this subject at the primary level of education, attention has to be paid to the fact that pupils in the first year of primary school with Hungarian language of instruction come with different linguistic and speech competences.

Key words: primary education, teaching process, quality management, schools with Hungarian language of instruction, school climate

Introduction

At present, quality in general has a dominant role in all areas of life. The European Union (EU) emphasizes the need for "multilingualism" among Europeans. The majority of European nations can speak two or more foreign languages because of the need to communicate in their own country or with the members of neighbouring countries. The aim is not to master foreign languages at the level of a native speaker, but to develop a language repertoire that applies all language skills, knowledge and experience. The children and pupils of citizens belonging to national minorities and ethnic groups are guaranteed the right to acquire the state language. The importance of speaking the majority language by the members of minority is supported by several European recommendations.

Current social changes influence the education system, which emphasizes the active usage of the Slovak language by students at all types and kinds of schools, taking into account students with the language of instruction of national minorities, whose situation is even more complex as for most of them Slovak is not

the mother tongue. On one hand, it is essential for students to master the state language at a level adequate for their age, on the other hand pedagogical practice shows that new didactic approaches and innovative methods are not applied in schools in order to improve Slovak language skills.

1 The continuous improvement of the teaching process

Continuous improvement of the teaching process requires teachers to constantly think, analyse and evaluate their own work and try to improve its quality. A systematic approach called the PDCA cycle should be an indispensable part of their work.

The goal of the permanent improvement of individual steps and activities is a good and reliable process, because if all steps and activities are done correctly, then the assumption is that the entire workflow will meet customer expectations. If a service (e.g. the teaching process), despite the well-done steps and activities, does not meet the expectations of the partners, then there is nothing else to be done only to plan a new process (Horváthová, 2010, p. 45).

An inalienable part of the teacher's work should be a systematic approach called the PDCA cycle. This cycle consists of four stages:

1. Planning activities aimed at improving the quality of teaching (planning the process validation and the deployment of some innovations, no matter how small).
2. Plan implementation during the teaching process.
3. Evaluation of activities using appropriate methods and techniques.
4. The analysis, reflection on and assessment of activity results, which result in a new plan of activities (Albert, 2002).

An important fact when carrying out the PDCA cycle is that the proven innovation becomes a regular part of teaching (a standard procedure) and a new innovation is being tested.

Creating a favourable climate during teaching

The climate in the classroom is usually understood as the atmosphere and the mood that prevails in the classroom. According to Mareš (2001), the term climate, from the point of view of the content, includes settled procedures of the perception, experience, assessment and response of all class participants (pupils, teachers) about what has taken place or what is taking place or is about to take place in the classroom. Albert (2002) understands the term climate as typical, relatively permanent interpersonal relations, ways of mutual communication that affect the experiencing, the impressions and the feelings of the persons involved.

The climate of the class significantly affects the motivation of the pupils. In successful schools, teachers show their interest in the subject and knowledge in general. There is a climate of sophistication where the teachers constantly make it clear by their attitudes that they require good performance from pupils, and they are convinced that the pupils "can make it" to achieve them. Pupils learn to a large extent as their teachers think they will learn (the Pygmalion effect). It is important that the teacher in the classroom should create an environment that encourages motivation (by the appropriate choice of curriculum, methods and tools) (Doményová & Halászová, 2014).

Teachers should create an environment in the education process where pupils are not be afraid, are not stressed or bored. They should allow the pupil to experience success, encourage the development of his/her personality, and put demands corresponding to the pupil's individual abilities. Through their creative work they must strive to humanize the world - not only themselves but also the wider environment, society and nationality (Šenkár, 2016, p. 16).

According to Průcha, the following are involved in building classroom climate:

- communication and teaching practices,
- pupil participation in teaching,
- preferential attitudes and expectations of teachers towards pupils,
- school climate.

For the improvement of classroom climate, Mareš (2001) suggests focusing on three areas of teaching. These are the following:

1. *Improving relationship among pupils* – trying to increase class consistency, organizing actions in and out of school, integrating situations in which pupils will co-operate rather than compete, using work in pairs and groups more often than whole-class teaching, preparing tasks that can be solved in groups, to lead pupils to find a suitable solution for interpersonal conflicts, eliminating bullying and aggression.
2. *Increasing pupils' interest in the education process* – making classes more interesting, using tasks that show the practical use of the subject, giving pupils topics that lead them to overcome the school context and to establish contacts with other people, saturating pupils' needs for competence, self-esteem and self-reliance.
3. *Ensuring peace and order in the classroom* – it may be cheerful during the class, but it is necessary to eliminate targeted disturbance of the class (Čáp & Mareš, 2001).

The climate of the class influences the mentality of both teachers and pupils, and thus has an impact on the course of the education process. Examining the influence of classroom climate on the teaching process did not receive much attention in the past. However, its importance in the teaching process is undeniable. One of the important prerequisites of successful pedagogical work is good social climate, so we paid appropriate attention to it and conducted a survey.

2 The survey of school class climate

In the academic year 2016/2017, we conducted a survey aimed at mapping the climate of classes at primary school. The survey covered four classes from the third and the fourth grade (3.A., 3.B., 4.A., 4.B.), i.e. 91 pupils, including 42 boys and 49 girls.

Aim of the survey: To find out the climate in the classes of Slovak language and Slovak literature.

Survey method: Questionnaire

The questionnaire surveyed the state of the social climate of teaching SL and SL. It contained 24 questions that were divided into the following six dimensions:

1. The interest of pupils in the class.
2. Relationships among pupils.
3. Teacher's help to pupils.
4. Orientation of pupils to tasks.
5. Order and organization in the teaching of the subject.
6. Clarity of the rules for the class.

In each dimension, the arithmetic mean and percentage of success were calculated. In the questionnaire, the pupils circled the answers (yes - no) with which they agreed, which they considered correct. There were no correct, good or bad answers.

As it can be seen from Table 1, the smallest percent of success in each class was gained in these three areas:

- *the interest of pupils in the class,*
- *orientation of pupils to tasks,*
- *order and organization in the teaching of the subject.*

The factors that contribute to the climate of the school class are different. It is not possible to think more deeply and to draw specific conclusions from this survey, but it will serve to determine the current state in each class.

Tab. 1: Evaluation of the survey investigating the social climate of the class

Dimensions (%) / classes	3. A.	3. B.	4. A.	4. B.
1. The interest of pupils in the class	60.5	50.9	55.3	61.3
2. Relationships among pupils	79.7	76.6	71.2	87.1
3. Teacher's help to pupils	70.3	80.4	59.8	80
4. Orientation of pupils to tasks	48.9	47.4	54.5	71.6
5. Order and organization in the teaching of the subject	60.5	52.8	56	73.3
6. Clarity of the rules for the class	89.1	86.2	64.3	87.5

3 Findings from pedagogical research *Monitoring the level of teaching Slovak language and Slovak literature in primary schools with Hungarian language of instruction (2016 – 2017)*

The research findings suggest the need to innovate the current SLSL Teaching Concept from 1991 in the sense of a communicative approach, taking into account already existing and valid pedagogical documents. The teacher, his/her linguistic and professional-methodological competence have a key role in the realization of a communicative lesson. It is a fact that the basic philosophy of the current 1991 Concept is still up-to-date and its goals have not been fully fulfilled, which has been confirmed by the most important findings of the latest questionnaire survey for SLSL teachers in schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The questionnaire primarily focused on finding out the implementation of the communication approach to teaching SLSL.

- The teacher has the greatest influence on the *pupil's interest* in the subject SLSL and its teaching (methods and forms), but also the content of the subject and its didactic processing.
- As the most effective *form of* (foreign, non-native, second) *language teaching*, it is recommended to teach in small groups and in special language classrooms. However, the requirement of dividing classes during SLSL lessons does not appear explicitly in the Education and Training Act no. 245/2008 Coll. of 22 May 2008, as amended, and the documents in force thereon (except for Decree No. 65/2015 Coll., on secondary schools). Research has confirmed that the possibility of class division or teaching in special language classrooms is not sufficiently ensured.
- The most common *organizational form* in class is frontal work at all levels of education, which implies that effective teaching techniques and methods are not applied to the required level.

- Pupils have great difficulty in acquiring *subject skills* (oral and written work, listening comprehension, reading resp. reading comprehension) at all levels of education.
- For first level primary pupils, the most *motivating factors* are the effort to get a good grade, to meet the expectations of the teacher and the parents and competitiveness. Higher grade pupils predominate in trying to get a good grade and the ambition to get to secondary school, respectively university. Efforts to speak in the Slovak language are evident only among the students of secondary grammar school and secondary specialized education.
- Despite the fact that most teachers are aware of the need to continue learning, they do not use all forms and opportunities for *further education*. Teachers prefer methodological materials the most, and open lessons are also popular on the first level of primary school. The most popular form of further education is self-study. Teachers, however, do not, in their own terms, use the literature on foreign language teaching nor the new book publications from the Slovak literature for children and youth.
- Teachers use primarily SLSL textbooks and workbooks in the *planning and preparation process*, they use current Slovak literature for children and youth, and specialized literature less often.
- The *equipment of school libraries* is not at the optimum level. Schools have not made use of the opportunity offered by the Ministry of Education to revitalize their school libraries, and even teachers do not use the services of well-equipped school libraries.

Based on the observation of lessons, we report the following findings:

- the consistent principles of communicative language teaching were not fulfilled,
- on the first level of primary education, teaching was predominantly bilingual,
- little attention was paid to developing listening and reading comprehension; on the first level of primary education, speaking and writing prevailed at the expense of reading,
- teachers mainly preferred controlled, managed teaching techniques instead of partially controlled and uncontrolled techniques; out of organizational forms of work frontal work prevailed, little work was done in groups, in pairs and individual work of pupils,
- they almost always used only valid textbooks and workbooks from SLSL, Slovak literature for children and youth and available material didactic tools were used just rarely; they rarely worked with children's and youth's magazines.

On the basis of recent research findings, it has again been confirmed that the following serious shortcomings persist:

- the teaching of morphological phenomena continues to prevail, less attention is paid to the lexical, phonetic-phonological and syntactic differences of the Slovak and the teaching language,
- similarly, at the second level of primary and secondary schools with Hungarian language of instruction, more attention is still paid to the grammatical component of the subject at the expense of other components; the teaching of literature focuses largely on literary theory.

The above findings and conclusions from the research constitute an argumentation apparatus to justify the need for the elaboration of the Concept.

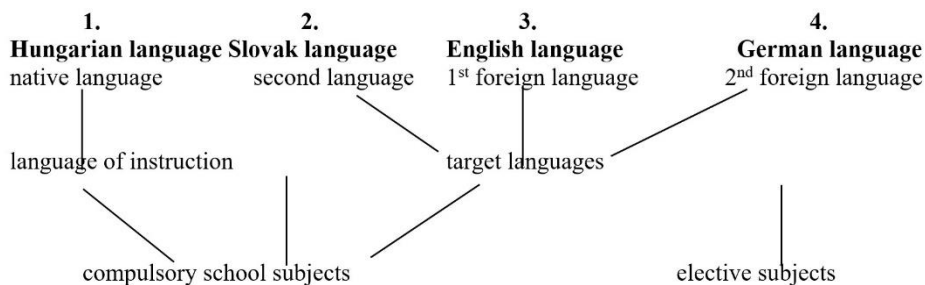
4 Analysis of the current state of teaching Slovak language and Slovak literature in schools with Hungarian language of instruction

In the Concept from the year of 1991, the goals of teaching Slovak language and literature in schools with Hungarian language of instruction state that it is necessary to consider the unreality of the requirement of true, symmetrical bilingualism, because in reality one language is always dominant. In an effort to reduce pupils' overload, it is important to respect the fact that the social environment in which many pupils grow up is not typically bilingual resp. multilingual. The content requirements of the SLSL subject should therefore be similar to the requirements of foreign language teaching.

In the teaching of Slovak language and Slovak literature at the first level of primary education, great attention must be paid to the fact that pupils in the first year of primary school come with different language and speech competencies. We also encounter a similar challenge at the beginning of the fifth grade of primary schools with Hungarian language of instruction, as the level of control of the Slovak language by pupils in transition to the higher level of primary education differs according to the language environment of pupils and schools, according to their level of expressive ability in their mother tongue, innate language skills, psychological and age specificities.

The fundamental difference is that teaching foreign languages in the planning of their content and educational process does not take into account the pupils' already acquired knowledge and skills in the Hungarian language. In SLSL lessons pupils perceive Slovak language and gain skills in Slovak language learning from the first year on the basis of acquired knowledge and skills in Hungarian language.

Fig. 1: Status of languages in schools with Hungarian language of instruction



The status of Slovak language – the Slovak language is the state language in the Slovak Republic, its use is governed by the Language Law¹ and its active knowledge is a social requirement. The Slovak language is a language of communication of citizens of Hungarian nationality in contact with nations and nationalities in the Slovak Republic. The social environment in which pupils grow up is not typically bilingual. Most pupils come from an environment where they mostly communicate in Hungarian. The Slovak language for the pupil of schools with Hungarian language of instruction is a second language (L₂). From its specificity it follows that the SLSL school subject occupies a very important place in the hierarchy of subjects. In the framework curriculum for schools with the language of instruction of national minorities, the SLSL subject has the same number of lessons as the language of instruction. Upon entering the school, the child already knows the Hungarian language (his/her mother tongue), has a developed articulation base, in the school s/he improves the use of language by adopting its rules and norms. The results of the monitoring of the level of teaching Slovak language in 1999-2002 show that about 50% of pupils at primary schools with Hungarian language of instruction had contact with the Slovak language only at school and at the beginning of compulsory school attendance about half of the children did not speak Slovak.

Innovated State Educational Program for Primary Education – First Level of Primary School. The document states that, in view of the objectives of communicative teaching, great care must be taken not to create a psychic barrier

¹ Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic no. 204/2011 Coll. of 28 June 2011 amending the Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic no. 270/1995 Coll. of 15 November 1995 on the State Language of the Slovak Republic.

in the use of the Slovak language by the difficulty of learning content and by inappropriate educational techniques. For the specific choice of words, it is necessary to take into account developmental specificities in the formation of word associations, for the younger children there are typical syntagmatic associations that imitate speech, thus meeting the communicative goal of teaching.

4.1 Factors supporting the acquisition of the Slovak language

Skutnabb-Kangas introduces four factors supporting L2 acquisition and the formation of bilingualism, which can be successfully applied in the teaching of Slovak as L₂.

1. **Organizational factors** – among them, alternative learning programmes are important with high degree of success and ensuring the teaching of the second language by a bilingual teacher with good professional and methodological competence.

It is necessary to apply alternative teaching programmes for teaching Slovak as L₂ first of all for the different language environment of the pupils. Alternative learning programmes can be part of the innovated school education program (hereinafter as ISEP); they can be a guarantee of success also in the acquisition of Slovak language from the first year of primary school to the final leaving exam at secondary school.

2. **Factors of affinity** – are related to the humanization of the educational process as well as to the appropriate motivation of pupils' learning activities, e.g. a favourable learning environment, non-authoritative teaching, and internal motivation are related to understanding and sympathy for learning goals.
3. **Factors related to learning** – creating conditions to ensure a small degree of anxiety, a high degree of motivation, and a high level of self-confidence (feeling of success).
4. **Linguistic-social factors** – relate both to language and to the social and linguistic background of pupils. An indispensable linguistic factor in the process of acquiring a second language is the high quality teaching of the Hungarian language, because if the child learns to use the language in thinking and problem solving in one language, this potential can also be translated into other languages.

The process of teaching the Slovak language is the opposite of teaching the mother tongue. While in the mother tongue, the procedure is from the spontaneous use of the language toward its conscious use, in the Slovak language, it moves from a conscious acquisition to a spontaneous use of the language.

4.2 Priority strategic areas for further development

Building on the goals and successful implementation of the results and conclusions of the National Project, a qualitative shift in these strategic areas is expected.

A) Strategic area focusing SLSL teachers

- improving the relationship of the teacher with the Slovak language, the teaching of SLSL, the Slovak nation and Slovak culture,
- improving the communicative competence of SLSL teachers, especially the cultivated usage of the Slovak language,
- increasing the professional competence of SLSL teachers, especially in the area of SLSL teaching in schools with Hungarian language of instruction and the methodology of teaching foreign languages,
- improving the work of teachers with pedagogical documents in the field of teaching process planning and preparation for SLSL teaching,
- improving cooperation between primary and lower secondary education SLSL teachers,
- improving cooperation between SLSL teachers within the subject committee for SLSL and the methodological association within the school.

B) Strategic area focusing on the teaching of SLSL

- the teaching process must be governed by the principles of teaching foreign languages,
- increasing the effectiveness of the SLSL teaching process by dividing the classes into groups,
- increasing the efficiency of the SLSL teaching process by applying a communicative approach and applying an activity-oriented approach,
- improving the efficiency of the use of material-didactic tools in the SLSL learning process,
- improving the ratio of bilingual and monolingual teaching in favour of monolingual.

C) Strategic area focusing on pupils

- creating and fostering a positive relationship of pupils to the subject of SLSL, the Slovak language, the Slovak nation and Slovak culture,
- improving the communicative competence of pupils in the Slovak language by respecting the principle of the support of the mother tongue,
- improving the pupils' communicative competence in the Slovak language by using activating methods,

- improving the smooth transition from reproductive to productive forms of pupil communication,
- more effective use of Slovak language by pupils in authentic communication situations,
- improving the pupils' study results from Slovak language and Slovak literature.

Conclusion

In the process of improving the quality of the school, the knowledge and analysis of the teaching process also play an important role. Quality teaching should result in a good level of knowledge and skills of pupils, which gives the best prerequisite for the success of graduates in the labour market. Introducing some innovation, no matter how small, leads to an improvement in the teaching process. Careful attention should also be paid to the class climate that should be diagnosed and continuously optimized in order to improve pedagogical work and pupil work.

In order to improve the teaching of SLSL in primary schools with Hungarian language of instruction, it is recommended to provide regular training for teachers (continuous education, lectures, seminars, workshops) focusing on methodology, conversation and the specific issues of teaching Slovak language and Slovak literature. It is essential to organize joint seminars, workshops, meetings of first level teachers and teachers of Slovak language and Slovak literature at the second grade of primary school with Hungarian language of instruction systematically and continuously in the future.

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