

THE TEACHER OF SLOVAK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN THE CONDITIONS OF SLOVAK PRE-GRADUAL PREPARATION

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Abstract: The new contexts of education for the future implicitly include new requirements for teachers. If we expect teachers to properly handle their demanding job, its problems and constantly changing rules and conditions of its realization, they must be well prepared. Compared with the past when a teacher in Slovakia used to be perceived only as a source of information for pupils, today a teacher is required to teach students how to find information, how to process it and utilize it in favour of his/her personal development, to develop pupils' competencies crucial for their future personal as well as professional life and to positively influence behaviour and students' conduct in society. The article deals with the issues of pre-gradual preparation of teachers in Slovakia. It introduces the models of pre-gradual preparation while specifically focusing on the teachers of Slovak language and literature.

PRE-GRADUAL EDUCATION OF TEACHERS

In legal documents of Slovak Republic a teacher is characterized in the Act No. 317/2009 on pedagogical and professional staff. Paragraph 13 of the Act states that "a teacher performs pedagogical activity with an aim to carry out the school educational program or provide continual education". Pedagogical activity is defined in paragraph 3 which states that "pedagogical activity is a set of actions performed by direct educational work as well as other closely related activities which are instituted by an employer in his operating procedures. Direct educational activity is characterized as a direct teaching that fulfills the school educational program or the program of continual education and as a direct nurturing that fulfills the nurturing program". Paragraph 6 introduces and in further paragraphs elaborates on the preconditions for performing an educational and professional activity which are qualification, integrity, health and the knowledge of the state language. A teacher is thus an erudite professional with an appropriate university degree and a moral profile, is a mature personality that through educational process influences the overall direction of the whole society. The progress of a society depends on the education and upbringing of its members.

A similar definition of a teacher can be found in the Dictionary of Pedagogy (Kolář and co., 2012, p.156) which describes teacher as a qualified pedagogical worker with a special qualification for educational work with children and the youth in the framework of a school (of any type or level). He/she directs the school activity of pupils and utilizes his/her own strategies of teaching in line with the targets of the educational process and his/her own understanding of the process. The definition, however, also stresses out that a teacher "hands down the culture of the humankind, traditions, values and socio-cultural environment to younger generations". In this definition we can already see a new understanding of a teacher's status and role today – a teacher is not only an educator, but also a guide on the path of forming the personalities of children and young people. Z. Pinc (In. Gáliková - Tolnaiová, 2007, p. 199) states that "the institute of a teacher is historically established on the instrumental basis – a teacher as an extended and enlivened index finger of the desirable direction. Rather than a teacher like this I think of a scholar, one that is capable of learning: to be taught and to teach". The world pedagogy also diverges from perceiving teaching as a technological process, but instead considers it a complex, variable and creative process of personal encounter of a teacher and a pupil through the content of education (Kosová and co.,

2012). It implies that a teacher's expert knowledge is not the knowledge of sciences, art, sport, technology etc. A teacher must be equipped for the diagnosis and the development of inner qualities of another being as well as his own, should be most of all an expert in making it easier for others to learn and in solving any educational situation. Based on the above it is thus necessary to continually improve pre-gradual preparation of teachers.

Pre-gradual education in Slovakia consists of pedagogical-psychological preparation and the study of a particular specialization of choice. The pedagogical-psychological preparation is an inseparable and important part of the study because it creates a theoretical as well as practical base of a teacher's occupation. T. Šeben Začková (2014) confirms this view and states that the quality of education is influenced by a teacher's work, it primarily depends on his/her pedagogical activity and methodological approach of the educational process. "In most schools specialized in preparing future teachers the pedagogical-psychological preparation consists of teaching pedagogy, psychology, professional didactics and practical pedagogical training," says O. Šimončík (2005, p. 23) while adding that current study programs do not allocate enough time to pedagogy, psychology, professional didactics and practical pedagogical training.

Pre-gradual preparation of teachers has a long history in Slovakia and in the course of this history the teachers' education has been influenced by changing socio-economic formations. Also today it is being greatly influenced by social and political requirements. The society continually develops and the perception as well as the position of a human existence, work, family's life is changing with it. Technological advancements yield not only positive developments, but often result in growing socio-pathological behavior of children and young people. The crisis in family, negative influence of media and social networks, absence of positive role models either in family or in a wider social environment force us to think about the teachers' influence on their students' behavior. To be able to educate today's children a teacher must become a positive role model of their behavior, must understand their needs and help complexly develop their personalities. It is important to prepare a future teacher for the new tasks and methods. Pre-gradual preparation at a university must, therefore, fulfill two basic requirements – to provide a good theoretical and at the same time a good professional preparation. The theoretical part consists of the basics of scientific disciplines that the teacher draws from during his/her work, scientific basics of chosen specialization, pedagogy, psychology or other relevant subjects, particularly the theory of teaching in general, meaning general didactics. General didactics is the bridge between the theoretical and professional parts of the preparation. The professional part of the preparation consists of those elements that lead to the acquirement of competencies necessary for a high standard of job performance, mainly expert didactics, didactically and reflexively oriented subjects, various practical trainings (communication, psychosocial etc.), projects oriented toward school and teaching and mainly practical teaching. As stated above this part of the preparation is influenced by the requirements of the state, which are:

- competencies framed by the conceptual requirements of the school system development on both the state as well as the international levels. One of these requirements (besides those mentioned above) is according to school system reform the requirement to teach students to learn all through their lives. This is not only the result of the school reform, but also follows the development of the educational science.
- competencies securing the teachers' professionalism, expert performance of professional activities in accordance with the theory of teaching profession (Kosová and co., 2012).

In Slovakia, similarly to other European Union countries, the pre-gradual education of

teachers is performed via a parallel model, often labeled as the integrated model. The essence of this model is the fusion of more types of future teachers' preparations. The student – future teacher during his study encounters subjects with common (general) base, subjects oriented to his/her individual specialization and subjects representing the pedagogical-psychological preparation for a teacher's profession. E. Lukáč (in Černotová and co., 2006, p. 114) states that “a student in this model is forced to fulfill several obligations from various fields at once, few hours are allocated to the pedagogical-psychological preparation, the number of hours dedicated to real practical training is gradually decreasing”. In practical pre-gradual preparation the above stated drawbacks can be, however, eliminated by the use of the parallel model and the positives of this model can be found mainly in the integration of knowledge of pedagogical and psychological disciplines and the knowledge of the specialization subjects. The second model used in pre-gradual preparation of teachers is the follow-up model, also labeled as the consecutive model. A student first finishes the study of his/her specialization which is then followed by the pedagogical-psychological preparation including practical training. The consecutive model allows for a more intense work with the students interested in acquiring teaching competence, their study is not divided into pedagogical-psychological and specialization education. The consecutive model can be divided into two basic subgroups. The first one is the single phase consecutive model that enables the student (after finishing the specialization study) to acquire the pedagogical qualification and immediately get a job as a teacher. This single phase consecutive model is used in Slovakia in the process of additional pedagogical education through which students of non-pedagogical subjects can acquire pedagogical competence. This study is legislatively defined by the Decree of the Ministry of Education and unlike the university pre-gradual education it has a precisely defined content as well as the extent. Although the study programs at teaching faculties have a similar configuration of disciplines, they differ mainly in hourly allocations of individual subjects and practical pedagogical training. The second subgroup is the two phase consecutive model which includes first the theoretical preparation that usually ends with a test and then is followed by the practical part of the preparation. The practical part is conducted directly at a school where students can improve their skills in the area of the didactics of their chosen specialization and develop the necessary competencies of their future job. To determine which of these models is the best is not easy. The positives and the negatives of each model should be adapted mainly to the school educational system, the conditions of education, the economic situation in the society and the mentality and the culture of a nation. One thing, however, remains clear and that is the need for unification of study programs in a way that would result in a continuous improvement of pre-gradual teachers' preparation which would produce professionals with developed competencies and positive personal characteristics.

The differentiation of the teaching study programs into bachelor and master levels seems to be another problem of pre-gradual preparation of teachers in Slovakia. Despite the fact that the educational systems in EU are considered specific to each member country and are not subjected to unification, the teaching study in Slovakia was (based on the Bologna process) involuntarily divided into discontinuous or just formal levels (unlike in other countries) and it makes it impossible to prepare teachers on an expert base according to successive interlinked phases that help to gradually form a teacher's personality. The fact that the bachelor study (Bc.) concentrates on the theoretical basis and the master study (Mgr.) includes didactical preparation and practical teaching training resulted in the cessation of the gradual development of a future teacher's personality:

- by isolating the theoretical preparation in chosen specialization from subject didactics,
- by isolating the theoretical preparation from practical training, it is impossible to create a system of practical trainings as a gradually progressing structure interconnected with an

expert reflection of the praxis,

- by limiting the types and shortening the length of practical training (mostly from 4 years to 3 semesters), i.e. insufficient time for developing a teacher's skills and competencies (Kosová and co., 2012).

Legislative framework of the Act No. 317/2009 on the pedagogical and professional staff defining the education requirements and the scope of a teacher's work stipulates in paragraph 7, section 2 the Qualification Requirements stating that the minimum required education of a teacher is a university education of the second degree. This means that there is practically no possibility for the graduates of the Bc. level to perform the job of a teacher as they are not sufficiently qualified and the profile of the Bc. study is set for professions that do not exist in real life (assistant teacher, pedagogical worker for after school activities, government worker in a corresponding field, school administrative-methodological worker according to subject specialization, e.g. management of school libraries, computer networks, school technological or laboratory equipment etc.). Similarly problematic seems to be for the Bc. graduate to continue his/her study at the master level. A graduate of a two subject teaching study cannot continue with any other program than the same two subject combination he has already concluded with the Bc. degree. Also a Bc. graduate of a non-teaching program would have difficulties with continuing at the master teaching program as he/she would not be properly prepared in the area of pedagogy, psychology as well as in the chosen specialization combination. We should then ask a question. Is the principle of Bologna agreement about the credit system in pre-gradual preparation of teachers effective in Slovakia? Return to the integrated master study with a space for high quality specialization, pedagogical-psychological preparation and practical training in schools could significantly improve pre-gradual preparation of teachers in Slovakia. The historical experience itself, current school system and the legislation all confirm that the integrated master education through high quality teachers and study programs is the right approach.

PRE-GRADUAL PREPARATION OF TEACHERS OF SLOVAK LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Universities in Slovakia offer study programs for future teachers of Slovak language and literature (in combination with other specializations). During the study students acquire professional competencies of teachers of Slovak language and literature. To gain a teacher's qualification one must successfully finish the first as well as the second level of the teaching study. The first level is not sufficient, the graduate only acquires prerequisites for a smooth transition into the second level in which he/she obtains necessary pedagogical qualification to teach Slovak language and literature at elementary and secondary schools. A graduate of the second level is professionally and pedagogically qualified to teach Slovak language and literature as he/she fully masters the psychological interpretation of human development, upbringing and education. During the 5-year study the pre-gradual preparation of future teachers of Slovak language and literature concentrates mainly on acquiring the expert orientation in the chosen specialization in a wider context of upbringing and education, learning the principles of creating and designing a proper pedagogical and didactical environment in elementary and secondary schools. In the two level teaching study programs a graduate progressively acquires information literacy in the area of the individual levels of the language and their didactical transformation into pedagogical praxis, masters the basic structure and content of the individual subjects of their chosen specialization. During the 3-year bachelor study a student gradually acquires the knowledge of the phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntax levels of the language. During the 2-year master degree study a student learns and masters the basic content and methodology of the individual

disciplines of his/her chosen specialization. Focus on the language part is wider compared to the bachelor degree study, besides learning about the system of Slovak language, its rules and conditions, an attention is paid also to the comparison of the Slovak language with other Slavic and non-Slavic languages. The target of the pre-gradual preparation is to direct future teachers, to make them capable of utilizing and interpreting the theoretical knowledge of system-linguistic, pragma-linguistic and socio-linguistic research. This knowledge is presented in a way which makes it possible for future teachers of Slovak language to be capable of passing on the acquired knowledge with an emphasis on the communication and pragmatic functions. In the system of teaching the mother tongue in Slovakia there is a divergence of two pedagogical opinions: grammarism and pragmatism. In the theory of teaching Slovak language there are, against the pragmatically oriented teachers accepting more users of the language, the normalists who emphasize the system, structure, norms and language codification. We think that in reality it is necessary to develop both educational tendencies. In the teaching of Slovak language they occupy an equal position. If we emphasized one of these, the students would exhibit a visible disproportion of the acquired passive and active knowledge and skills. In educating the teachers of the mother tongue the intention is to point out the importance of communicative teaching whose aim is to transform passive listeners into active interpreters. Therefore, the position and the requirements placed on teachers or pupils are changing while at the same time a road to an open dialog, mutual discussion, exchange of information, opinions and feelings is opening. The didactic preparation of teachers points to the obliterating of the authoritative border between the teacher and the student and to suggesting a more equal relationship of these two subjects. Methodologically the language knowledge is presented gradually and complexly starting from the phonetic all the way to the syntactic level in the bachelor level, in the master level the attention is paid to the stylistic, i.e. acquiring the expert knowledge of functional language styles and their pragmatic use in practical communication. Students master the knowledge of language elements used in oral expression and of the overall composition of the oral expression. The target in the master level of study is to acquire stylistic, communication and rhetoric literacy applicable in a teacher's occupation within communication-compositional and language-stylistic tasks. In the literature part of the study in the first level a student learns about the development of the nation's literature and its characteristic expressions in individual periods starting from the Middle Ages to the first half of the 20th century against the backdrop of the development tendencies in the world literature. In the second level a student learns about the literature from 1945 till today. The target of learning about literature is, besides acquiring the knowledge of the literature theory and the interpretation of a literary text, to also learn about the methods of acquiring reading literacy among pupils with an aim of gaining not only the functional but also the informational literacy. The forms and methods of education are reassessed and incorporated into new textbooks and methodological manuals. The attempts to create textbooks with more effective impact on acquiring communication competencies are preceded by many research projects and studies.

The state educational program sets the standards of the educational content in which it defines on one hand the linguistic terminology and on the other hand a set of competencies a student should acquire in the primary and secondary education. This state educational document presents an information guide for teachers of elementary and secondary schools. The document is taken into account even during the pre-gradual preparation so that the future teachers are informed about the content, aims and procedures of their future teaching process. The attention is paid to the methods of developing learning and oral competencies, memory, classification and application skills, communication and information skills, analytic and synthetic skills and last but not least to the methods of developing the creative skills. To

improve the future teachers' fixation and demonstrative skills there are updated textbooks corresponding to the standards of the educational content. In education the phonetic level and orthography represent the basic pillars for further understanding and bridging of the other language levels. The textbooks of Peter Gregorík (2014) are used for practicing the phonetic level of the language, the textbooks of Jana Pířová (2015) are used for the orthographic peculiarities of the language. For morphological needs there is a textbook of Eva Tibenská (2015) specially prepared for academic purposes. Other textbooks are regularly updated to keep up with current results of research in the area of linguistics and literary science and to reflect current needs of didactic transformation of knowledge into educational praxis.

Didactic disciplines include learning and mastering the organizational qualities of the school system, ways of managing schools with an aim to improve the quality of education in elementary and secondary schools. During the 2 years of master study a student adopts teacher's skills like designing, organization and realization of the educational process in a classroom. An important part of educating future teachers is imparting the findings of methodological approaches for acquiring knowledge which are constantly developing and progressing according to the changing needs in society. A future teacher flexibly reacts also through adjusting his/her educational process by utilizing information and communication technologies. The master level is purposefully focused on practical training at schools to make future teachers adopt practical knowledge and apply it in real educational process. A special attention is paid to developing pupil's receptive and productive skills. Students learn about the methods of applying the traditional methods of teaching while at the same time address the issues of alternative methods. The final part of the theoretical preparation of future teachers is the preparation for the transversal practical pedagogical training and its realization under the supervision of qualified teachers at various schools.

Pre-gradual preparation of teachers is purposefully focused on the application of the constructivist approach in education with the purpose of practical acquiring of knowledge which is useful and helpful to both the society and an individual. The task of a school is to transfer knowledge onto its pupils, but not through the prism of the teacher's cognition – through the pupil's own cognition. The traditional understanding of a school is in many ways surpassed and the new social situation requires a new approach to teaching. In the forefront stands constructivism, when a student constructs his/her own knowledge. The target of preparing future teachers for their job is to acquaint students with the new role of a teacher which has changed compared to traditionally viewed education: a teacher runs into a new position where he offers students space for self-realization when learning about a new fact, for solving problems themselves. Future teachers learn about methods leading to the fulfillment of the basics of the constructivist approach to master lasting knowledge applicable in real communication through experience, exploring and "living through" an activity. It is also a pragmatic view of educating seen as educating for life, when students deduce their own findings and plan practical steps for utilizing the acquired knowledge. Activating methods help to make this process easier, more effective, but require a maximum level of teacher's verve. Under a pressure of constantly preparing new activities a teacher often returns to traditional methods of mediating stable information. The use of activating methods brings a number of positive ratings also from subject didactics creators. Many agree that if future teachers understand the qualities of the techniques of innovative methods, or even identify with them, they are more likely to prefer them in practical educational process. When receiving and solving tasks connected to the innovative methods of education, the students learn about the process of designing a communicatively oriented creative lessons, are able to explore the procedures of innovative methods in practical situations and learn about a new

interactive approach to mediating information in the educational process. Active teaching requires a lot of time even before a teacher steps in front of the pupils, preparation for education requires creative ideas which must lead to constructive tasks. The teacher at the same time predicts pupils' reactions as some pupils react to certain tasks with enthusiasm while others with resistance. During activating lessons there should be a balance between the communicative (activating and interesting) approach and the theoretical (informational and conceptual) framing of activating activities. An activity must be followed by a summary of the activity's process, its results stemming from observing the activity so that the pupils come to a pragmatic understanding and reflection of their own experience. Activating methods offer a wide spectrum of possibilities for innovating and improving the educational process with an eye to fulfill the specified target. In the environment of current schools it is possible to work with cooperative methods, problem-solving education, project style education, experience-based education (dramatization), conceptual maps, methods of active reading and creative writing, brainstorming, question-storming, snowballing (gluing a snow ball), various intellectual and didactic games. The main target of pre-gradual preparation of teachers of Slovak language and literature is to encourage an interest of future teachers in some of the more innovative methods of education helping to create more communicative and creative teaching of Slovak language and literature. Innovative trends of education have permeated into university education with a primary target to: constructively and creatively enhance and subsequently evaluate knowledge of the language and literary part of education. It also resulted in an accompaniment of a didactic moment. It means that if innovative trends are targeted with a didactic intention as early as in pre-gradual preparation of teachers at universities, the final effect in linguistic and literary education in all types and levels of schools is not accidental and mediocre, but targeted and effective.

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