ENCOURAGING THE USE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOLS WHEN TEACHING SLOVENE AS A SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Each year, more students, who do not speak Slovene as a first language, are enrolling in schools in Slovenia. Some encounter Slovene for the first time, others already know the basics and are looking to build upon their knowledge. Knowledge starting points are determined with standardized testing. Educators then base courses on the results of these tests. After successfully completing the language course, students achieve the A2 language proficiency level, which is not yet sufficient for successful class participation, so additional work is recommended. In the submission I explain, how we can make traditional lessons more engaging. We can achieve this by including language learning tools such as dictionaries, lexicons, audio databases etc. The use of these tools in the classroom, I believe, should be mandatory, as digitalization is irrevocably changing the nature of our work. In the time of e-learning, every teacher had to adapt to the use of online tools. The opportunities for additional education were many, and veritable learning communities formed. One of these opportunities is the project Inovativna pedagogika 1:1.
By including foreign language students in regular classes everybody stands to gain something. It is an opportunity to encounter different cultures, build a culture of dialogue and break taboos. Many have learned that similar problems can have many causes, and that every individual needs opportunities for education and development.
Keywords: *innovative education, foreign language, Slovene as a second/foreign language, language learning tools*

Introduction

At the beginning of each academic year, our school organizes an intensive Slovene language course for students, who did not submit a certificate of A2 level language proficiency in Slovene. Groups of 4 to 6 students take 120 hours of classes, groups of 7 to 12, 160 hours, and for groups larger than 12 students, an additional 15 class hours are added per each student above 12. The course takes place in a condensed form in the first half of the school year, as prescribed by the *Rules on Slovenian language courses for secondary school students*, taking into account the students' normal weekly course load. Ideally, the course would take place before school starts for the year.

The course is very intensive, I've been thinking of the ways students could be prepared for further, independent work, so they could progress without the assistance of a teacher. To achieve this, I've started to include information technology practices, which did not pose significant problems, as most students already know how to search for information using smartphones, tablets, and laptops, and are accustomed to the digital environment. We've also created an online classroom, which enabled individual work. The students were highly motivated because they knew they required this knowledge to participate in their regular classes.
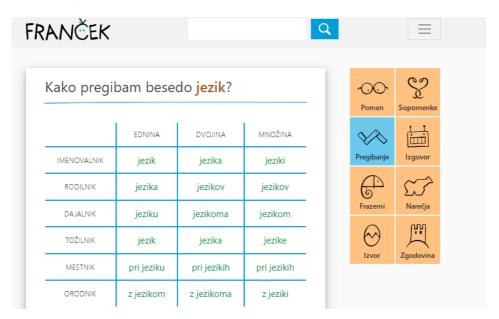
Beginnings

We begin by introducing the participants in the course.

Example: Ime mi je Sajjad, prihajam iz Irana, obiskujem Srednjo strojno šolo. (My name is Sayyad, I come from Iran, I attend the Secondary Engineering School.)

In these introductions, we encounter nouns in the masculine, feminine and neuter genders, and the 1st, 2nd, and 4th cases. When grouping words, we can see that feminine nouns generally end with the -a suffix, neuter nouns with the -o/-e suffixes and masculine nouns with the – Ø suffix. To make these tasks easier, we can look up charts in the textbook we use, or we can use an online dictionary (https://fran.si/). We look at a few examples of dictionary entries and discover what we can learn from them. In addition to this, we can also look up how individual nouns are declined (https://besana.amebis.si/pregibanje/ or https://www.xn--franek-l2a.si/beseda/s024584/jezik).

Figure 1
Franček, Language Portal – Declension

Let's also examine verb conjugation. In Fran, the online dictionary, we look up the entries for the verbs prihajati (to come, 1st person suffix -am), stanovati (to inhabit, 1st person suffix -ujem), obiskovati (to attend, 1st person suffix -ujem), pisati (to write, 1st person suffix -em), brati (to read, 1st person suffix -em) … We can look into special cases later. If we put enough time and effort into these introductions and teaching the use of language tools, the students progress at a faster rate, which is why we encourage the didactic use of information technology tools. Using the SAMR model for the identification of the level of IT integration in the pedagogical process, this part of the class would fit in the augmentation category, as traditional learning tools are made more effective with IT.

As the Slovene language course is taking place, the participating students are also attending their regular classes. In those, they come across new words and complicated sentence structures. Using internet tools, we can look up into which field of study the

words they learn fit, and how often they appear in different types of texts. We can find this out using corpora, electronic collections of texts.

Theoretical Groundwork – Language Varieties and Levels of Analysis

At school, students encounter different varieties of the Slovene language. Classes, and communication with teachers, are conducted in formal, elevated language, practical classes often include jargon, and regular conversations include slang, local varieties of the language and regional accents.

Language Varieties

a) Social varieties (register)

Students are taught formal, elevated Slovene, we also pay attention to examining differences between standard and elevated formal Slovene. Beginners tend not to have problems with the use of standard Slovene, as they aren't familiar with any different varieties. More effort is required when teaching students who already know a local variety of Slovene, as they often need to be corrected when their use of the language differs from the rules of standard Slovene.

b) Varieties differing by function

The focus of the course is teaching the kind of language that is used for general communication. In addition to texts which show examples of regular, everyday communication, the textbooks include examples of language used in publishing (news, reports on current events, and later even articles.) The publication Ljubljana (https://www.ljubljana.si/sl/mestna-obcina/publikacije-mol/) provides many interesting texts, usually articles about actors, athletes, scientists, natural landmarks and cultural goings-on. Learning about more literary and artistic language use is only possible with students who already know the basics of Slovene, as the texts are much more complex.

c) Varieties differing by medium

Students must learn both speaking and writing in Slovene. The classes put more focus on spoken language, students mostly learn written language by doing homework. As the course is completed, the students take the A2 level language use test, which is why they need to be able to form their own written texts in Slovene. This is, of course, only the beginning. As they continue their education, writing more difficult texts will be required of them – essays, resumes, complaints, commendations, requests… In addition to this, they will also regularly encounter written exams in their other classes.

d) Varieties differing in time

Beginner students are only taught the modern, standard Slovene language. They will encounter older varieties of the language when reading certain texts in their regular classes. We teach the oldest Slovene texts in the 1st year, 19th-century texts in the 2nd year, and in the 3rd and 4th years, texts from the 20th century and later.

e) Varieties differing in structure

In classes we generally interact with prose, but we sometimes include the language of poetry, to make classes more engaging - we encounter texts with rhythm and rhyme, folk songs, and lyrics to songs the students know. When we learn the language, we're also learning about Slovene history and culture.

Levels of Language Analysis

a) Pragmatic

When teaching beginners, we begin with the Slovene alphabet, and learning about grammatical rules as they come up. With students, who already know some Slovene, we systematically try to correct the grammatical errors they make. These errors are often dependent on the first language of the student, so individual work is required, as no two students will make the same errors. We also encounter students who are not used to the Latin alphabet.

b) Phonetic

Students, especially beginners, are introduced to the phonemes of the Slovene language, the relationship between letters and sounds (graphemes - phonemes), the system of Slovene vowels and consonants, and stressed and unstressed syllables. Paying attention to this from the beginning makes further work much easier, as there are fewer mistakes to correct. It is wise to offer students additional class time for phonetics.

c) Morphological

Slovene is an inflectional language. At the beginning, we determine word gender by looking at word suffixes. When teaching this we also teach how to use dictionaries and other language tools. We also teach the functions of the different noun cases.

When the motivation for learning falters, because there is so much to memorize, we can look up examples of how foreigners learn Slovene. Linguists, scientists, actors, and others explain how unusual they found noun declensions, list words that they found especially difficult or funny. One of these videos is included with the workbook Na pragu besedila 2 (Martina Križaj … [et al.], Rokus Klett, 2018). Chikako Shigemori Bučar, a Japanese lecturer at the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts talks about (https://folio.rokus-klett.si/?credit=NPB2DZ&pages=12-13) the process of learning Slovene, which she needed for her work at the university. She was surprised by noun declensions, which aren't found in English or Japanese, where nouns keep the same form regardless of context. Klaus Detlef Olof, a German poet and translator talks (https://folio.rokus-klett.si/?credit=NPB2DZ&pages=12-13) about how he spent years learning different Slavic languages, and how this made learning Slovene harder, as many words are similar or even the same, but have a completely different meaning. When he finds himself in the company of speakers of various Slavic languages (Slovene, Croatian, Serbian) he encounters many similarities between the languages that actually make it more difficult to understand each other. Jette Ostan Vejrup, a theatre performer from Denmark, stresses

(https://folio.rokus-klett.si/?credit=NPB2UC&pages=4-5) how much time and effort she put into learning certain sounds, like s, c, z and š, č, ž, as her profession requires perfect pronunciation.

All in all, the Slovene language has to be taught systematically.

d) Semantic

Beginners learn basic vocabulary (greetings, professions, nationalities, food and drink, stores, days, months, seasons, clothes, traffic, weather, family relations, school, friends, free time etc.) and in doing so learn compound words (diminutives, stylistically marked words). Students, who already know some Slovene, encounter set phrases and idioms, which are some of the hardest to learn parts of a foreign language.

e) Syntactic

Nominal phrases with premodifiers that match the noun in number, declension and gender generally pose no problems. Nominal phrases with premodifiers that determine quantity tend to be more difficult. Word order can also pose complications.

Two Examples of Good Practice, From the Time of Remote Learning

a) Introducing or describing a person

When learning a language, we also follow current events, politics, culture. In the middle of March 2020 standard classes were replaced with remote learning. We quickly got used to learning in this way, but still desired the closeness that comes with in-class work. We anxiously awaited new reports from the experts, and the day we would finally return to school seemed further away each week. During this time the doctor, immunologist, professor, writer and poet, Dr. Alojz Ihan made regular appearances on the daily news. In the publication from the City of Ljubljana, also accessible online, appeared an interesting article about him, titled: *Ljubljančan: dr. Alojz Ihan, Ljubljana ima na videz vse, kar si človek od zdravstva lahko želi* [Citizen of Ljubljana: dr. Alojz Ihan, Ljubljana seemingly has everything one could want from healthcare] (https://www.ljubljana.si/sl/mestna-obcina/mestna-uprava-mu-mol/oddelki/oddelek-za-zdravje-in-socialno-varstvo/koronavirus-informacije-in-ukrepi/ljubljana-ima-na-videz-vse-kar-si-clovek-lahko-od-zdravstva-zeli/).

Students will encounter Alojz Ihan in their 4th year, when learning about modern Slovene literature. They will learn about him as a poet and essayist, some may even go on to become his students after they graduate. An article like this can be used for many different activities, such as writing a text describing a person.

After reading and talking about what was read, we write down basic facts – profession, family, interests, a description of the regular workday. We learn new vocabulary and set phrases, and because of the time the article was published, we also learn about the virus, methods of protection from it and differences in people's habits. At this point the students can talk about their own experiences, form short texts, dialogs, interviews, descriptions of people that had an impact on them.

b) Terms regarding quantity, describing a process

I've mentioned that nominal phrases in which premodifiers use terms regarding quantity tend to be more difficult to learn. Why? Because they require the use of the 2nd case, and knowledge whether the premodifier is a countable or an uncountable noun. An excellent way to cover this is to use a cooking recipe. Because the year 2019 was the 200th anniversary of the death of Valentin Vodnik, we decided to use one of his recipes. *Vodnik's or "repuncle" salad,* which was published in the publication Ljubljana (number 3, 2020, Mestni svet občine Ljubljana, also accessible at https://gourmet-lj.si/si/aktualno/recept-vodnikova-ali-repunclova-solata). The original text from 1799 is also available (https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-MKZZ31GS).

Vodnik only lists the ingredients, there are no quantities listed. Students are asked to write down recipes of their traditional dishes and present them to the class. In this way, we don't only learn terms regarding quantity (liter, kilogram, a little, a lot, some, pinch, piece, spoonful, packet, cupful, a loaf, a glass, a handful) but also about their culture and home. We list nouns in the 2nd case (Koliko ČESA – how much *of what*?) and nouns in the 4th case (potrebujem KAJ – I need *what?*).

We write down the nouns in the 2nd case (how much *of what*?) and nouns in the 4th case (*I need what?)* and separate the nouns into countable and uncountable ones.

Example:

How many + 2nd case plural: apples, pears, lemons, oranges, cherries, peaches, cucumbers, courgettes…

How much + 2nd case singular: fruit, pineapple, salad, parsley, ice cream, bread, cheese…

Conclusions

Learning about foreign languages and cultures enriches us. When seeing the progress of students learning Slovene for the first time, other students get a different outlook on language learning. Teaching Slovene as a second language is very different than teaching it as a first. The education required is provided by the Center for Slovene as a second and foreign language, which works as part of the Department of Slovene Studies at the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Arts. They have published many textbooks, manuals, online resources, and in addition facilitate the tests that determine the language knowledge level when learning Slovene. The program *Slovene for children and teenagers* is intended for children, teenagers, and their teachers. In the courses for our students, we use the *Čas za slovenščino 1* and *Čas za slovenščino 2* (*Time for Slovene 1* and *Time for Slovene 2*). We also must keep in mind that students aren't only learning during the course, but also in their regular classes and when socializing with their classmates and interacting with their environment.

Did we measure anything? At the end of the course the students took the A2 level Slovene language test. The exam consists of a written and an oral part. In the written part, vocabulary, grammar, style, form, and content are assessed. In the oral part, vocabulary, grammar, content, pronunciation, and the use of the correct functional variety are assessed. For the A2 level, in order to pass, the student must reach a minimum score of 60%, the final grade is descriptive, not numerical.

Note

This is a revised and expanded version of the 5th International Scientific Conference on *Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Modelling in Education* paper in *Gamtamokslinis ugdymas / Natural Science Education*. The paper was recommended for republication by the conference scientific committee. Available: https://pce-fnm.si/conference-proceedings

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