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ДИСТАНЦІЙНЕ ВИКЛАДАННЯ СЛОВАЦЬКОЇ МОВИ ДЛЯ ІНОЗЕМЦІВ ТА ЙОГО СПРИЙНЯТТЯ СТУДЕНТАМИ

Пандемія COVID-19 змінила режим викладання та навчання з традиційного віч-на-віч на дистанційний в університетській освіті Словацької Республіки. Це стосується і Кошицького технічного університету (ТУКЕ), що стало новою ситуацією для багатьох його викладачів та студентів. Ця зміна здійснює значний вплив, особливо на студентів першого курсу із зарубіжних країн, які недостатньо добре розуміють словацьку мову і ще не знайомі з університетським середовищем. У цьому контексті це дослідження орієнтоване на українських студентів, які становлять більшість іноземних студентів, що навчаються у ТУКЕ.

Головною метою було дослідити їхні точки зору на дистанційне вивчення словацької мови, визначити переваги, проблеми та стратегії цього методу під час пандемії COVID-19. Для досягнення цієї мети було проведено онлайн-опитування. У ході дослідження використано опитувальник, щоб дізнатись про думки всіх студентів першого курсу із семи факультетів ТУКЕ, які вивчають словацьку мову як іноземну. Результати дослідження показали, що дистанційна освіта може бути альтернативою традиційній освіті. Учасники опитування заявили, що вона має для них як позитивні, так і негативні аспекти.

Ключові слова: мова, Інтернет, словацька мова для іноземців, опитування, COVID-19, дистанційна освіта, українські студенти, анкета.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully shifted the mode of teaching and learning from traditional face-to-face to online in the university education in the Slovak Republic. The same applies to the Technical University of Košice (TUKE), which is a new situation for many its teachers and students. This change has a significant impact especially on first-year students from foreign countries who do not understand the national language spoken in Slovakia well enough and are not familiar with the University environment yet. In this context, this study is focused on Ukrainian students who form the biggest majority of foreign students studying at TUKE. The main goal was to investigate their perspectives on online learning of the Slovak language for foreigners in Slovakia in relation to its benefits, challenges and strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, an online survey research was created and used. Survey questionnaire was used in the study to find out about the opinions

of all first-year Ukrainian students from seven faculties of TUKE who study Slovak as a foreign language. The results of the research indicated that distance education can be an alternative means to the traditional education. The participants suggested it has both positive and negative aspects for them. The feedback provided by them was very useful and can be used to improve the

foreign language tuition at the Department of Languages in the future.

Keywords: *language, online, Slovak for foreigners, survey research, COVID-19, distance education, Ukrainian students, questionnaire.*

INTRODUCTION.

Currently, we face an infectious disease called COVID-19. We are informed how to prevent infection, how to protect yourself and others from coronavirus, however, the disease spreads really fast and it has negative impact on our lives. It has influenced our everyday life, it has changed work conditions and has caused difficulties in education system. According to United Nations (2020, p.2), the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries.

Despite the pandemic situation, nowadays more and more students are interested in studying abroad. Better educational process can be achieved thanks to foreign students who can make teaching unit more attractive for native students. Moreover, they create multicultural atmosphere and can communicate in foreign language (Račková, Tkáčová 2020). This paper is especially focused on Ukrainian students who tend to enroll at Technical University of Košice more from year to year. Technical University of Košice offers very good qualification and students can choose from many attractive fields of study. For this reason, learning the Slovak language has become the centre of attention. Students need to acquire elementary language skills and improve fluency and accuracy in the Slovak language in order to enhance communicative competence in academic and professional terminology. All technical courses are taught in the Slovak language, so students have to participate in compulsory language courses that take two semesters. However, Michaleková (2019, p.15) states that the level of foreign language proficiency does not often correspond with the length of time spent by learning the foreign language. The success often based on learners' awareness about their learning process and how they are managed to self-direct their learning development.

Therefore, teacher is crucial part of educational process, but student's intrinsic motivation is the most significant element that propels attendant to pursue learning language. Many obstacles have to be overcome in teaching process that are going to be interpreted in the next part of this paper based on questionnaire, but following statistical data in the table shows that the number of Ukrainian students studying in the Slovak Republic has expeditiously grown.

The table below illustrates an interesting numbers of Ukrainian students attending public universities in Slovakia for the period from 2015 to 2019. From the table it is clear that the number of Ukrainian applicants has noticeably risen since 2017 compared with the years between 2015 and 2017.

The following data undoubtedly confirms that the migration is still increasing which inevitably results in cultural and educational challenges.

Table 1. Full time Ukrainian students attending public universities in the Slovak Republic

| Date | Number of Ukrainian students |
|------------|------------------------------|
| 31.10.2019 | 3 749 |
| 31.10.2018 | 2 747 |
| 31.10.2017 | 1 822 |
| 31.10.2016 | 1 152 |
| 31.10.2015 | 663 |

Source: štatistická ročenka – vysoké školy, CVTI, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015

METHODOLOGY.

In order to elucidate the current situation in Slovakia, a survey was carried out to identify the experiences, opinions and needs of Ukrainian students in the first year of their bachelor's studies at the Technical University in Košice in relation to the tuition of the subject "Slovak language for foreign students" upon their arrival in Slovakia. Their perspectives were recorded namely with regard to distance (online) method of teaching via the Microsoft Teams platform which is currently used at the Department of Languages during this semester (winter semester of the 2020/2020 academic year).

The questionnaire was sent to students of Ukrainian nationality at seven faculties, where students have Slovak for foreigners as a compulsory or elective subject in their first year of study. The survey was carried out using a standardised online questionnaire that contained 18 items and it was anonymous. The way questions were asked did not suggest answers.

The basic research sample consisted of Ukrainian students of the Technical University in Košice in the first year of their bachelor's studies. The participants were the students of the following seven faculties: Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics, Faculty of Mining, Ecology, Process Control and Geotechnology, Faculty of Materials, Metallurgy and Recycling, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Arts, and Faculty of Civil Engineering, who agreed to participate voluntarily in the research and answer the questions included in the questionnaire.

Empirical data was collected in the one-week period of October 2020, from beginning to end of the sixth week of the winter semester of the academic year 2020/2021 (26 October – 1 November 2020). Data collection was

carried out online. 80 respondents participated in the research – the first-year Ukrainian students studying the Slovak language. A link to the questionnaire was sent online to these students and the results were stored in the online Google Drive (a service covered by Google systems) accounts of both authors. Empirical data was processed and stored using Google Drive, Microsoft Excel, and Microsoft Word. The data obtained will be the basis for strategies aimed at improving the quality of Slovak language teaching as a foreign language for the above-mentioned students in the future.

BASIC FINDINGS.

The survey was carried out in the form of an anonymous online questionnaire wherein the students were asked to share their past experience and opinions on Slovak language teaching in the distance form. Two types of questions were used: open-ended questions aimed at collecting qualitative answers, and closed-ended questions with a choice of one or more answers to obtain statistics and quantitative data. By statistically evaluating the questionnaire submitted, the following results are as follows:

Based on the answers to the introductory socio-demographic questions, the following was found out: 70% of our respondents were males and only 30% were represented by females. Surprisingly, the average age of our respondents was 17,5 years – this is in sharp contrast with Slovak students, who usually start studying at universities at a more mature age of 19 and more years. 60% of Ukrainian first-year students are only 17 and two of them are only 16. The oldest respondent was 20 years old.

Most respondents (50%) come from middle-sized municipalities, 40% come from big cities with over 100.000 inhabitants and 10% live in small villages that have fewer than 1000 inhabitants. An interesting finding was noted among respondents from small villages – almost 60% of them have previous experience with distance learning from their secondary schools compared to just over 40% of those who do not. We expected the opposite findings.

Most of our respondents study at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics (61,3%), followed by the Faculty of Mining, Ecology, Process Control and Geotechnologies (20%) and the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (15%). The following faculties only had a negligible number of recorded responses.

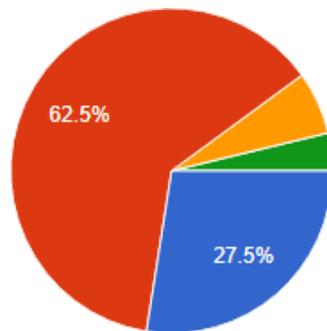
The opinions on the preference of the learning form were distributed in an unusually even way: 36.3% prefer the distance form and the same percentage of respondents favour the regular form where students learn in classrooms. These are narrowly followed by the third possibility, which is a combination of both methods – this was preferred by the rest 27.5% of students. It proves that our respondents do not have a common tendency towards either of these forms and it would be difficult for them to select one of them democratically.

According to the responses, the teachers of Slovak at the Department of Languages use the following in their lessons the most:

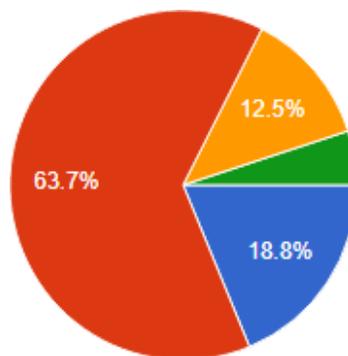
- descriptions of graphs, pictures, or processes (57%),
- presentations (48,8%),
- coursebooks (48,8%), and
- worksheets (47,5%).

On the other side, the least used according to the respondents were videos (20%) and Internet sources (32,5%).

The following two questions were aimed at finding out about how satisfied the students were with distance learning and how interesting it was for them (see below). Blue colour refers to “very satisfied/very interesting”, red colour means “satisfied/ interesting”, orange colour equals to “Dissatisfied/uninteresting”, and green colour “very dissatisfied/very uninteresting”. Fortunately, it is clear that the vast majority of our students were satisfied with online learning (90%) and consider it to be interesting (almost 83%).



Picture 1: The summary of responses to the question:
“How satisfied are you with the online learning of Slovak for foreigners?”



Picture 2: The summary of responses to the question:
“To what extent is learning via MS Teams interesting for you?”

The following responses show that the participants see some risks in online learning as over 62% are certain that they communicate more in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment than on the Microsoft Teams online platform. It is also clear that teachers use the frontal method the most

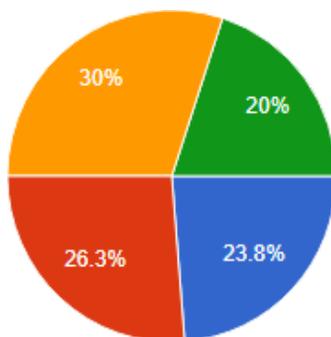
– 42,% ompared to 36% of individual approach or just 21% of those using group work. It can be attributed to the fact that neither students nor teachers are completely familiar with teaching/learning online and everything that the system has to offer yet.

Responses to the question “More of what would you welcome in your online Slovak lessons?” were very useful for the teaching staff at the Department of languages as it presents ways how to improve and make lessons of Slovak more interesting and beneficial for the students. The answers that scored top are as follows:

- conversation (speaking) - over 61%,
- grammar – 52.5%,
- general vocabulary – 42.5%
- specific and technical vocabulary – 37.5%, and
- text work (reading) - 37.5%.

When asked whether the participants experienced any problems during their online lessons, most of them reported having problems with the sound (47.5%) and insufficient Internet connection (47.5%). This is mainly because students connect to MS Teams in their dormitory rooms where there is only wi- fi option available. Unfortunately, such connection is not always strong enough at all times when the students need it.

It seems the participants do not have definite opinions on whether the pandemic negatively affects their education, 51% claiming yes, 24% saying no and the rest 25% saying “I don’t know”. The same applies to the question about their language competence and whether the pandemic causes its slower and smaller progress. It is obvious that responses certainly yes (blue colour), probably yes (red), no (orange) and I don’t know (green) are distributed extremely evenly in this case.



Picture 3: *The summary of responses to the question: “Do you think that online learning can cause less / weaker progress in your language skills?”*

The two final questions were open-ended. Students were asked to specify the negatives and positives they perceive in distance learning. Their responses can be analysed as follows.

- Negatives: These responses can be classified into two main groups: lack of contact (either with the teacher or classmates), and technical problems

(problems with sound or listening, connection problems, etc.). Some students also mentioned the inappropriate time of lesson which begins at 7:30 for some of them.

- Positives: We can categorise these responses into the following groups: those related to the comfort of students (“I can learn from my bed”, “I don’t have to travel to the University in bad autumn weather”, “I can get connected anywhere I am”), and time-saving reasons (more free time, not having to get up much earlier to get dressed and travel). Four students claimed it was more interesting for them than traditional learning and they also appreciated having study materials available online. Surprisingly, only two students mentioned health protection as the main advantage.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK.

Today, internalization of universities is described as the global trend refers to considerable challenge and ample opportunity to grow reputation, maintain quality of educational process and research (Zelenka, Páviš 2016). It is a good reason to provide better learning opportunities for students to make a university more attractive, design and modify new learning materials, and do extensive research on effective teaching and learning conditions.

Many different surveys about education can be and have already been conducted, but this specific one is very important for lecturers and assistant professors at Technical University of Košice, mainly for those teaching foreign languages.

Constructive feedback from the students about online form of learning has become relevant source of advantages and disadvantages of educational process. Moreover, this survey represents valuable perspectives on aspects that should be implemented or enhanced on lecturers’ online lessons.

Successful educational process is a result of cooperation between teacher and student, thus students’ responses are very significant for later preparation of online form of education. These opinions on distance learning are appreciated for lecturers to make lessons more inspiring for students, but on the other hand, the reactions may also help to reduce any negative elements of distance form of learning.

As Straková stated (2012, p.158), it is important to regard foreign language learning as a complex process which has many specific features for each age group as well as for each individual stepping inside this process. Even though the learning process has changed from traditional face-to-face format to distance, lecturers should be prepared to provide lesson unit that is aimed at achieving learning goals effectively.

In addition, it should be highlighted that delivering quality education is also based on turning teachers’ attention to a student. Students’ responses in the questionnaire reflected that many teachers (42%) prefer the frontal method, but Glowa and Goodell (2016, p.10) explain that the student-centered learning integrated system must support the complicated set of processes that make up personalized, student-owned, collaborative, anytime,

anywhere learning and competency-based education. Therefore, teachers should make an effort to accurately identify requirements for student-centered learning in online learning environment to meet students' expectations.

However, teachers should respect the aspects of lesson unit in order to fulfil teaching aims in a lesson. Attention should be paid to diversity of methods and approaches to meet the unique learners' needs. Even better results are achieved by applying different learning styles into lesson plan. By combination of these elements, an adequate teaching and learning process can be reached.

In conclusion, better teaching solutions can be developed based on summarizing teachers' previous experience with online teaching. It can be a great benefit to be better prepared and see innovative approaches in support of online education continuity. Teachers can make progress and utilize their knowledge and information from the research in this paper for their further professional development in distance teaching.

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