

# Challenges in Language Education

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**Abstract**—This article aims at presenting current concepts in language education and tendencies in language testing that reflect the changes in language teaching. The introduction of the common European reference framework in the Slovak national language curricula has significantly influenced language education, which resulted in measuring the learners' abilities of using languages in real-life situations. English as a lingua franca is becoming the most frequently chosen foreign language in the school-leaving examination, prior to gaining its status of compulsory subject in primary education. The achievements of students in the final examination in English are analyzed and discussed from the current trends perspective.

**Keywords**—*language competence, accuracy, appropriacy, authenticity, contextualization*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Slovak primary and secondary education, learning foreign languages still resembles studying other subjects that are part of the curriculum. Despite the fact that modern education is based on developing competences, teaching different subjects is still influenced by memorizing a large number of data and facts, which is usually the focus of classroom testing. A very similar way of assessment is recognizable in measuring language knowledge as many Slovak language teachers base their tests on testing grammar and vocabulary, preferably in isolated sentences, focusing directly on those grammatical patterns and words that were covered in a particular unit.

However, the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in language education supported the idea of focusing on four modes of communication (reception, production, interaction and mediation) guided by can-do statements that enable the language users to profile their proficiency [1]. Based on communicative approaches, teaching language systems has shifted toward teaching how these systems are used in real communication. The notion of communicative competence, narrowed as a concept that deals with what we know in order to be able to communicate effectively [2], was later broadened by a set of competences such as linguistic, socio-linguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, strategic and existential [3], some of them explicitly stated in the CEFR [1], covering the others as they are intertwined and mostly unseparated. One of the goals of today's communicative language teaching is to develop fluency in language use, which means natural language use and meaningful interaction but not at the expense of accuracy [4]. All these

new concepts have been introduced in the national language curricula, simultaneously in the catalogue of requirements and therefore both documents are supposed to be reflected in the tasks and items of school-leaving examinations in foreign languages. Item writers are obliged to become aware of them either through the above-mentioned documents or the specification of the examination.

## II. ENGLISH AS ONE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SLOVAKIA

Since 2014, English has been a compulsory subject in Slovak primary and secondary education. Despite the fact that some national linguists support the choice of a foreign language and both German and Russian seem to be a reasonable selection due to neighboring countries, English plays its role of a lingua franca and is becoming more and more popular with young learners and required by their parents. Despite the fact that legislation is still not reflected in the final years of secondary education, the increasing tendency of choosing English as a school-leaving examination is seen in Tab. 1.

TABLE I. STUDENTS' SELECTION OF ENGLISH TESTS

Year	Total number of applicants	English	%
2015	51,561	38,435	74.54
2016	44,991	36,142	80.33
2017	40,730	32,026	78.63
2018	43,605	36,366	83.40
2019	38,873	35,336	90.90

Tab. 1 presents students' selection of English before a new decree related to English as compulsory subject came into force in the final years of secondary education. Students who started to learn one of foreign languages on the basis of their choice can still apply for the final examination in that particular language. In the years 2001 to 2003, it was a significant decrease in the number of newborn children and this demographic decline is visible in the number of secondary-school leavers today. However, in 2019, the number of students who applied for the final examination in English has increased by 7.50 percent, which lowered the number of students applying for other languages. The decrease of applicants for a German examination was by 4.03 percent, while the decrease in applying for Russian was only by 0.56 percent. The interest of learning Russian is consistent and inspired language testers to introduce a test at level C1, which was added to

testing English and German at this level, officially introduced in 2017.

The numbers of students that applied for being tested in English prove that English has become the most frequently chosen language in the country, without any special legislation. It is considered useful to learn it due to its communicative value and spread across the Globe. Most students studying at secondary schools are admitted at different higher education institutions and need English during their studies, either reading technical literature or while writing their theses as most resources they use are taken from books published in English as well as articles presented at international conferences. Since English plays an important role in Slovak education, our research focuses on testing English in the local context.

### III. THE SCHOOL-LEAVING EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH

English is tested in relation to the CEFR and therefore learners are obliged to finish their language learning at level B1, completing their technical or vocational education, B2 at secondary-grammar schools and C1 at bilingual schools or bilingual sections of secondary schools. The Ministry of Education guarantees reliable and valid testing of two communicative skills (listening and reading comprehension) and language in use, while schools guarantee an internal part of the examination (writing and speaking). However, the writing task is officially presented the same day as the examinations are held and assessors are obliged to use the officially recognized marking criteria. Students' papers are marked by two independent examiners whose marks are combined, which produces a more reliable score than a single assessor.

All the tests are based on the concepts related to communicative testing such as validity, authenticity, contextualization, real-life situations, interactiveness, ethics, fairness, etc. [5]. The sections of the test related to measuring the ability of students to comprehend either main ideas or specific information delivered aurally or visually are comprised of three different texts that provide the context for the items that are tested. The language in use section contains either two or three different texts, which is dependable on the reference level. This presence of the accompanying text enables students to assign exact meaning to an item. The aspect of authenticity refers to authentic texts taken from different authentic materials and the task that is based on a realistic goal – what the learners can do in their real life while reading or listening to a text. Before the results of students are officially presented, statistical analyses are carried out in the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements, describing test scores, displaying them graphically and presenting all the items of the test with their facility indices.

#### A. An English Test at Level B1

The external part of the examination in English at reference level B1 consists of three sections: Listening comprehension (20 items), Language in use (20 items) and

Reading comprehension (20 items). While testing skills is based on three tasks for each, the abilities of learners to use grammar and vocabulary is measured in the multiple choice task (10 items) and the ability of learners to use proper grammatical patterns at both sentential and discourse levels is measured in a rational cloze-test (10 items). In 2018, the English test for B1 level was taken by 20,229 students studying at different technical and vocational schools from all over the country. The Cronbach alpha value of 0.91 proved the consistency of measures and enabled the statisticians to accept the scores achieved by students, analyzed the items and used test scores as a basis for making decisions. The mean score for listening was 61.1, language in use 44.4 and reading comprehension 56.2 with the total mean of 53.9.

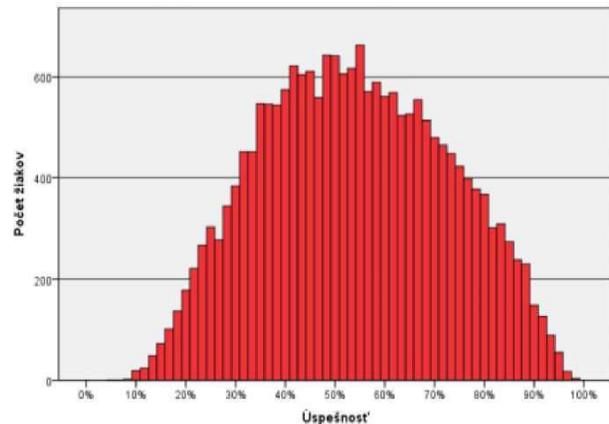


Fig. 1. The histogram of frequency distribution of language in use scores at level B1.

Despite the fact that the scores of students achieved in the language in use section were the lowest, it is important to mention that the score distribution makes it look like a bell-shaped curve. Both histograms of frequency distribution in the sections of listening and reading comprehension had the peaks toward one end of the distribution and longer tails toward the left hand-side, so they both were positively skewed and these sections of the test can be considered easier. Although the achieved score in the language in use section was the lowest, students accomplished a cloze-test task better than a multiple-choice task. While the former made them fill in the gaps, the latter was based on choosing the right answer from four options. Therefore, they achieved better scores in an open-ended task and worse in a close-ended one. The ability of students to use grammar and vocabulary appropriately in different situations is measured in testing productive skills. Writing is a section of the external school-leaving examination as the task is externally announced and two assessors are obliged to mark the papers, using the officially-recognized marking criteria. The results achieved in testing writing revealed that the students have problems to express their ideas and convey a message as the use of the mean score in grammar was 51.1 and vocabulary 54.8 [6].

### B. An English Test at Level B2

A similar principle concerning the number of texts and items in both comprehension sections is followed in a B2 test, yet the number of language in use items is increased up to 40 items: a multiple-choice task comprising 20 items, a word-formation task 10 items and a cloze-test 10 items. In 2018, the test was taken by 13,637 students primarily from the secondary-grammar schools, out of which 1,432 applicants were from secondary technical schools. The Cronbach alpha index 0.93 justified the stability of measures from the test and enabled the statisticians to analyze items. The score mean in listening was 66.0, language in use 52.8 and reading 71.6. The last one displayed by a positively-skewed histogram confirms that that this part of the test was not very difficult and despite the fact that it was at the end of the test students accomplished all the tasks and items. The total mean was 63.4 [6].

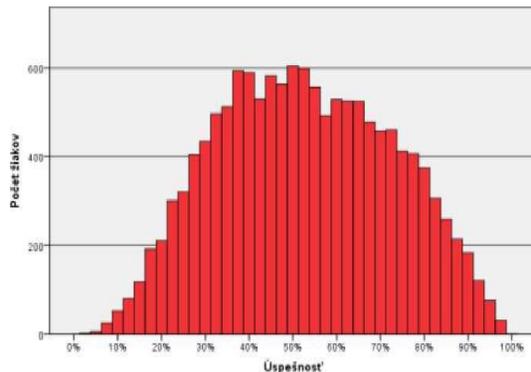


Fig. 2. The histogram of language in use scores at level B2.

The distribution of the scores, achieved by students in the section of language in use, to the right of the central score can be described as a mirror image of the distribution to the left of the central score and therefore it can be called symmetrical. While comparing it with the histograms referring to both comprehension sections, it can be concluded that both were positively skewed. However, the test measuring the ability of students to read and comprehend seemed to be easy for the tested population. The level of accuracy and appropriacy was confirmed by the results of students achieved in testing writing. While the criteria referring to task achievement and organization of the test were about 76-77, the mean score in the use of grammar was 67.8 and vocabulary 71.9 [6].

### C. An English Test at Level C1

Despite the fact that tests at level C1 have been administered for last three years, the number of students who apply for them is still about a thousand and five hundred applicants. This level was introduced for two languages: English and German three years ago when applied by headteachers of bilingual schools or bilingual sections of secondary schools. The third language in which this level was introduced is Russian. In 2018, the number of students who decided to apply for this highest level of

proficiency that is tested centrally in the country was 1,565. Analyzing the test, it is possible to conclude that reliability was 0.92 and the mean of scores achieved in listening was 69.1, language in use 60.8 and reading reached 70.6. The total mean of 66.8 can be concluded that the test was not very difficult and those who applied for it were able to answer more than 65% of the items [6].

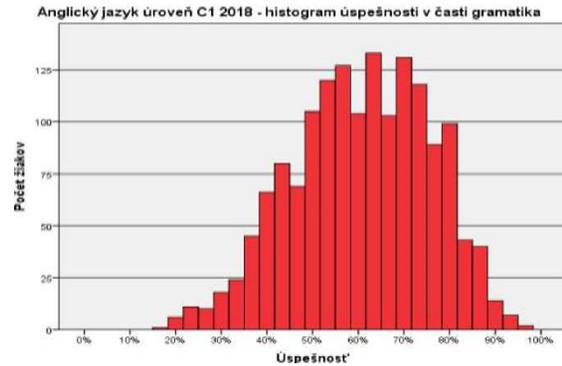


Fig. 3. The histogram of language in use scores at level C1.

The histogram displaying the distribution of scores achieved by students in the language in use section at level C1 was inconsistently peaked, still positively skewed, but less than those displaying the scores achieved in receptive skills, which justified their asymmetry. The mean score of 60.8 cannot be interpreted that the test referring to measuring learners' accuracy in using grammar and vocabulary was difficult for the tested population. However, the mean score in grammar (71.8) and in vocabulary (75.9) achieved in the writing section can be interpreted that a task was easy for tested students or assessors were less strict. Despite the fact that these students are exposed to English intensively attending at least 7 classes of English per week, their results achieved in using grammar and vocabulary accurately are high. The students were not allowed to use a dictionary as a range and control of vocabulary is one of the marking criteria. In addition to this, it is important to mention that communicative competence is rule-governed and students were expected to persuade the assessors that they have developed socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competences, apart from linguistic competence, at one of the highest levels of language proficiency. Descriptors referring to this reference level are comprised of key words such as well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length, reasons and relevant examples, etc. [1]. The students were expected to write an essay (260-320 words) discussing the topic concerning the impact of advertising on shopping. It was a structured task and students were obliged to use three bullet points that enabled them to develop the topic and justify their opinions.

On the contrary, English tests at lower reference levels, which measure students' ability to express their ideas in a written form, usually introduce the topics that are more general and student-friendly. In 2018, the topic referring to

presenting some recommendations on how to learn a foreign language was prepared for students who applied for a B1 test and B2 students were expected to nominate a teacher they like most to the Ministry of Education that decided to reward the teacher most popular with students.

In Slovakia, tests at all three levels have been made more communicative through the use of authentic materials and emphasizing both receptive and productive skills. However, teachers focus on linguistic competence and consider it very important as it involves control over the rules of language use and therefore the government supports testing grammar and vocabulary in an external part of the examination as well as in an internal part based on writing and speaking where grammar and vocabulary are two aspects of the marking criteria of the analytic scales.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The influence of communicative approaches is recognizable in the Slovak school-leaving examination in foreign languages. The national curricula supports the idea of an action-oriented approach and learning English is seen as developing communicative competence, including linguistic, socio-linguistic and pragmatic competences. This shift toward the effective use of language is seen in learning English for real-life situations, in which language is used as a means of communication.

Communicative teaching has resulted in communicative testing, in which the aspect of authenticity is seen in the degree to which tasks reflect real-life situations, that of contextualization, presenting language in a particular context, and that of validity when the test tests what it was intended to test. Despite the fact that can-do statements reflect what language learners are expected to do outside the classroom, the current trends in language education emphasizes a necessity to balance the accuracy-oriented activities with fluency-oriented activities in teaching as

they can help learners to overcome problems in choosing proper words and grammatical patterns while conveying their messages. Therefore, the Slovak school-leaving examination in English is designed to assess knowledge and skills that students accumulated over their years of study in order to provide them with information what they can do in real-life situations.

Despite the fact that CEFR descriptors for grammar and vocabulary are displayed in one scale for the former and two scales for the latter, many countries have developed their own descriptor profiles that are more detailed and generally acceptable in their local context. The goal of testing is to construct a valid and reliable test that measures language competence of learners objectively and trustworthy and provides any stakeholder with enough information on what a learner can do in a particular language. Therefore, the Slovak school-leaving examination in English is designed to assess knowledge and skills that students accumulated over their years of study in order to provide them with information on their abilities to use the language for real-life purposes.

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