



Language Testing and Certification in an International Context

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Abstract

Introduction. The aim of this research is to define what role continuous assessment plays in foreign language teaching. We analysed some of the most frequent communication and language mistakes by our research sample students in their written communications at the B2 level. We believe these correlations have yet to be closely studied in the context of the foreign language teaching process since there is a significant increase in the number of international students entering Slovak universities for programs implemented in the Slovak language. We also researched the current interest of our non-Slovak university students in verifying Slovak language competencies through ECL testing compared to the period before 2019 in correlation with their writing skills preparation.

Materials and Methods. Our research sample included 200 randomly selected written communications by first-year international students of our University in the period of 2019–2022 in various fields of study at the age scale from 17 to 42. The students were from Russia, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. We applied content analysis of the written communications concerning the most frequent mistakes from the morphological, syntactic and writing-accuracy points of view. We also used statistical methods to research the current interest in verifying foreign language competencies through ECL testing on the side of our international students.

Results. The results delivered that the most frequent errors are typographical, mainly related to spelling, punctuation and paraphrasing; therefore, we can claim that in the Slovak language learning, it is significantly beneficial to focus on formal correctness, i.e. consistent acquisition of the Slovak language grammar system. We also identified the sociolinguistic adequacy of written communication problematic, i.e. style, clear statements formulations, and adherence to the text composition. The results also demonstrated the increase in our international university students' interest in verifying foreign language competencies through ECL testing compared to the period before 2019.

Discussion and Conclusion. From the results it follows that teaching writing skills intensively with a focus on particularly identified problematic issues in written communications increases the learners' language acquisition level. This study presents results that may be useful in the targeted language preparation of the international students recruited to Slovak universities as their home universities and their further preparation for undertaking Slovak language proficiency official verification. In addition, the results of our study may contribute to the further development of general professional education in foreign languages.

Keywords: testing, assessment, language exam, writing communications, certificate

Conflict of interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

For citation: Zelenicka E., Pavlova R., Csalova O., Burcl P. Language Testing and Certification in an International Context. *Integration of Education*. 2023;27(1):155–170. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15507/1991-9468.110.027.202301.155-170>

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Оригинальная статья

Языковое тестирование и сертификация в международном контексте

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Аннотация

Введение. В связи с увеличением числа иностранных студентов, поступающих в вузы Словакии на программы, реализуемые на национальном языке, становится актуальной их языковая подготовка. В статье рассматриваются проблемы тестирования, проверки и сертификации коммуникативных и языковых навыков, приобретенных на курсах. Цель статьи – проанализировать роль непрерывного контроля знаний в обучении иностранным языкам, в частности словацкому, определить способ влияния контроля на качество усвоения словацкого языка, которое было измерено при анализе результатов усвоения словацкого языка иностранными студентами в рамках годичной языковой подготовки в Университете им. Константина Философа в Нитре в период 2019–2022 гг.

Материалы и методы. В выборку исследования вошли 200 бессистемно отобранных письменных тестов иностранных студентов (из России, Сербии, Казахстана, Узбекистана, Белоруссии, Украины и Чехии) первого курса Университета им. Константина Философа в Нитре в период 2019–2022 гг. по различным направлениям подготовки в возрастном диапазоне от 17 до 42 лет. Анализ письменных тестов относительно частых ошибок с точки зрения морфологии, синтаксиса и точности письма осуществлялся с помощью контент-анализа. Статистические методы позволили выявить потенциальные факторы, влияющие на качество обучения иностранным языкам в аспекте письменных навыков.

Результаты исследования. Результаты показали, что наиболее частыми ошибками являются опечатки, в основном связанные с орфографией, пунктуацией и перефразированием. В связи с этим сделан вывод о том, что в процессе изучения словацкого языка необходимо сосредоточиться на последовательном усвоении системы грамматики. Выявлена социолингвистическая адекватность проблематики письменного общения, т. е. стиль, четкие формулировки высказываний, соблюдение композиции текста. Результаты продемонстрировали рост заинтересованности иностранных студентов к проверке знания иностранного языка с помощью тестирования ECL, по сравнению с периодом до 2019 г., а также корреляцию между подготовкой к навыкам письма и интересом к проверке языковых компетенций.

Обсуждение и заключение. Результаты исследования могут быть полезны для целевой языковой подготовки иностранных студентов, принятых на обучение в словацкие университеты на основные образовательные программы, и их дальнейшей подготовки к проведению официальной проверки владения словацким языком. Материалы статьи могут способствовать дальнейшему развитию общего профессионального образования по иностранным языкам.

Ключевые слова: тестирование, оценка, языковой экзамен, письменные сообщения, сертификат

Конфликт интересов: авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Для цитирования: Языковое тестирование и сертификация в международном контексте / Е. Зеленицка [и др.] // Интеграция образования. 2023. Т. 27, № 1. С. 155–170. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15507/1991-9468.110.027.202301.155-170>

Introduction

The need for objectified and internationally verifiable certification of language efficiency has gained relevance as a response to the requirements arising from the subsistence of a common labour market within the European Union or the international and transnational labour market as internationally recognised certificates enable job seekers to prove the required criterion of foreign language knowledge at an appropriate level providing employers

with objective information about their language competencies. On the other hand, the certificate informs the language learner about the (un) successful completion of a certified measurement of language skills and may function as effective motivational feedback.

Recently, we have noticed a significant need for teaching Slovak as a foreign language in the Slovak academic environment since it has become a fundamental part of language preparation for university admission; therefore,

Slovak language courses have become a part of study programmes for international university students in Slovakia.

In the research, we focused on Slovak language education and training issues concerning international students at Slovak universities, their written communications analysis and the correlation between the quality training of the writing skills during their first year of Slovak language study and their interest in obtaining an internationally recognised certificate. We researched what role continuous assessment played in foreign language teaching, specifically Slovak language teaching, and how such an assessment influenced the language acquisition quality by the results' analysis of the Slovak language acquisition by international students of our University (University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra, Slovakia) within the period 2019–2022. We analysed some of the most frequent communication and language mistakes by our research sample students in their written communications at the B2 level. One of the aims also was to research the current interest of non-Slovak university students in verifying Slovak language competencies after taking the one-year Slovak language course focused on writing skills training during their university studies through ECL (European Consortium for the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages) testing compared to the period before 2019, where the focus was not specifically on the writing skills training.

These correlations have yet to be closely studied, since there is an increase in international students entering Slovak universities. We believe this phenomenon accentuates the relevance of the need for Slovak language preparation quality and research in this area to increase the interest of international students to obtain certificates that are internationally recognised.

Literature Review

The historical reason for the testing introduction into the learning outcomes evaluation has been the gradual increase in criticism of overly subjective language proficiency assessment. Efforts to the school system and knowledge assessment improvement have been emerging since its inception. In the period of humanism, J. A. Komenský¹ introduced an element of control into teaching by dividing the lesson into phases: “Druhé čtvrt hodiny ať je (učitel' – žiakov) examínuje, vyzuměli-li.”

In the second half of the 19th century, teaching and assessing approaches were affected by a new pedagogical direction called Herbartianism. As mentioned in M. Lapitka et al.², it followed the educational and pedagogical thoughts of German educator J. F. Herbart. Herbartianism was a new phenomenon in Central Europe; however, it did not gain adequate support³.

Pedagogues claimed to follow the five formal steps in teaching advocated by Herbart, but in the classroom, they continued to insist on rigid interpretation and memorization. Subsequently, Herbart's pedagogical approach divided into discrete steps: preparation, presentation, association, generalisation, and application, was an inspiration for B. S. Bloom, who then conceived the so-called taxonomy of educational objectives⁴.

This concept has been long time considered very beneficial in pedagogy. This taxonomy focuses on helping educators identify the intellectual level of best students acquire. The taxonomy helps encourage and teach students to make their own decisions just in a classroom setting but also helps promote a life skill. If a teacher wants to apply this taxonomy, first, he must understand the importance of the approach to education. It is not about knowledge itself in this taxonomy but about gaining the ability to use knowledge in everyday

¹ Komenský J.A. Didaktika, to jest, Umění umělého vyučování. Praha: Nákladem knihkupectví Theodora Mourka; 1871. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/janaamosakomensk00come> (accessed 01.09.2022). (In Czech.)

² Lapitka M. et al. Didaktické základy novej koncepcie vyučovania literatúry a štruktúry učebníc na strednej škole. Bratislava: Metodicko-pedagogické centrum; 2009. (In Slov.)

³ Protner E. Herbartianism and Its Educational Consequences in the Period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Berlin, Germany: Peter Lang Verlag; 2014. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-03911-5>

⁴ Bloom B.S., Engelhart M.D., Furst E.J., Hill W.H., Krathwohl D.R. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Vol. I: Cognitive Domain. New York: Longmans, Green; 1956. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/taxonomyofeducat0000bloo> (accessed 01.09.2022).



life and practice. Furthermore, teachers need to change their way of assessment and use formative assessment in the teaching process more often than summative.

The educational process and its main output – education – has recently been a significant social and political phenomenon; therefore, its results are of interest to society on an international scale. Thus, we can say that the result obtained by measuring the outcomes of the education system is socially considered a decisive one. There are quite a few variables to be measured, e.g. the number of students and teachers, financial costs of education, success and effectiveness of teaching, mastery of the curriculum, receptive and productive speech skills, and others. The control and classification of educational efficiency are part of this extensive way of verifying the functioning of the education system and are an important, albeit rarely credible, element.

Measurement is a relatively accurate fact-finding procedure. It first developed in the study of the properties of material objects (length, area) and only much later (in the 19th century) scientists began to deal with the idea of measuring social and psychological phenomena. This way of seizing reality has always brought certain mistrust and doubts, which we perceive in various forms even today. The essence of measuring physical quantities is applying a standard (measuring unit) to a selected attribute, in our case, to an educational phenomenon. One such phenomenon is the knowledge and skills condition that is the basis for further education. Students will use the acquired knowledge and skills in social and working life after graduating. According to J. Butaš, educational phenomena measurements are as quantifications of measured phenomena or qualitative research employment⁵. In the qualitative analysis, we deal with classification (tabulation) involving naming qualitative features (age and gender of students, error rate, passed/failed, etc.) at the end of the classification period.

Measuring language abilities in second language acquisition research, where language testing often serves as a criterion, can provide relevant input data for determining in the educational context. Moreover, it can be a valuable indicator in evaluating abilities or other elements of interest in research on language, language teaching and language learning⁶. According to L. Bachman [1], the uses of tests can be divided into two categories. The first category covers those situations in which language testing results serve to make a prognosis on the test-takers' language abilities to accomplish future tasks outside the test context. The second category involves situations in which test results enable to conclude about test-takers, such as selection, grading, and placement progress grounded on conclusions from test scores about the test-takers' level of mastery to perform future tasks outside the test context.

L. Hamp-Lyons argues for the existence of two often conflicting assessment cultures, a learning culture and an exam culture [2]. A. Davies notes: "... language testing has professionalised itself, as shown by research, university degree courses, international journals and publications, national and international language-testing associations and codes of ethics. A compromise was found early in the period between competence (structure) and performance (communication) following the brief venture into communicative language testing" [3].

There have been a lot of studies on language tests conducted and published on language testing owing to its vital role in language teaching, learning, research and decision-making within the context of education, e.g. G. Fulcher [4], C. Chapelle [5], J. Oller [6], M. Kane [7], P. Goundar [8], S. Phan [9], C. Morrow [10], J. Brown [11], L. Harding [12].

The qualitative research procedure frequently involves didactic tests, here students usually answer in a precisely determined way (closed tasks with structured options), or they

⁵ Butaš J. Meranie výsledkov vzdelávania pomocou testov. Ružomberok: Pedagogická fakulta Katolíckej Univerzity; 2009. (In Slov.)

⁶ Bachman L.F. *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1990. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/fundamentalconsi0000bach> (accessed 01.09.2022).

can give their answers (open tasks). This approach refers to the tests at the national level. Carefully constructed teacher-made tests involving open-ended tasks could play a more crucial role, as the teacher examines and evaluates each answer individually. The didactic test should be the very image of the learning process, and as a set of preferably randomly selected tasks, it is also a control tool.

However, considering the subject of the examination, it provides limited options since many elements in the educational objectives and content cannot be measured by the test. The use of the test is always a considerable compromise⁷.

At present, the search for tools for the objective measurement of foreign language skills has begun quite intensively. Due to changing orientation in foreign language teaching and testing, communicative testing spread in the seventies of the last century. The communicative teaching approach focuses on bringing real-life communication situations into class (interaction, improvisation, self-correction, etc.) and developing receptive and productive communication skills and lexical-grammatical competence as tools to achieve correct linguistic performance. The emphasis is on the communicative language function.

The shift in language objectives and methods understanding has roots in redefining what we mean by “foreign language proficiency”. The community of professional linguists adopted the concept of D. Hymes’ communicative competence⁸. Hymes extended Chomsky’s definition of language proficiency as the acquisition of language competence in terms of mastering the rules and structure of language and their use in practice. The idea of communicative teaching

was very quickly involved in the language programmes of universities and European language institutions.

Consequently, the need to develop and apply a communicative approach to examining has thus become increasingly urgent. There was a growing interest in this issue among experts in the 1980s and early 1990s. They concentrated on communicative testing, communicative competence development theory, and delivering communicative approach implementation in testing – for more details search for J. D. Brown⁹. A more specific definition of communicative competence was essential for the test construction process – the testing subject definition. There are various forms of elaborations, e. g. the theoretical framework/model proposed by M. Canale and M. Swain¹⁰.

It had at first three main components, i.e. fields of knowledge and skills: grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. L. Bachman and A. Palmer presented the two-level language competence division on organisational (grammatical and textual) and pragmatic (illocutionary, sociolinguistic)¹¹. D. Srikaew, K. Tangdhanakanond, and S. Kanjanawasee specify it into organisation knowledge (grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge (functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge) [13]. In addition, Bachman and Palmer suggested that students should demonstrate language proficiency through a performance test¹².

The theory of language deals with several issues and understandably does not lead to a consensual solution that would address all concerns. According to Canagarajah, the pedagogical priorities are changing, so we have to move away from a reliance on discrete-item

⁷ Rosa V. [Methodology of Creating Didactic Tests]. Bratislava: ŠPÚ; 2007. (In Slov.)

⁸ Hymes D. Two Types of Linguistic Relativity (with Examples from Amerindian Ethnography). In: Bright W. (ed.) Sociolinguistics: Proceedings of the UCLA Sociolinguistics Conference. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton; 1985. p. 114–167. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110856507-009>

⁹ Brown J.D. Testing in Language Programs. New Jersey: Prentice Hall; 1996.

¹⁰ Canale M., Swain M. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics*. 1980;1(1):1–47. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/1.1.1>; Canale M., Swain M. A Theoretical Framework for Communicative Competency. In: Palmer A.S., Groot P.G., Tropper S.A. (eds.). The Construct Validation of Tests of Communicative Competence. Washington DC: TESOL; 1981.

¹¹ Bachman L.F., Palmer A.S. Language Testing in Practice. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1996.

¹² Bachman L.F., Palmer A.S. Language Assessment in Practice: Developing Language Assessments and Justifying Their Use in the Real World. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Language-assessment-in-practice-%3A-developing-and-in-Bachman-Palmer/7112c87f832de110b82fa85cc844e7fcc418d280> (accessed 01.09.2022).



tests on formal grammatical competence and develop instruments that are sensitive to performance and pragmatics [14]. In effect, the assessment would focus on strategies of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire, and language awareness.

As J. Alderson and J. Banerjee remind us, this has been encouraged by the communicative movement, resulting in writing tasks being increasingly realistic and communicative giving more emphasis on language production and use than grammatical knowledge and formal correctness [15].

L. Harding discusses a range of current issues and future research possibilities in Communicative Language Testing (CLT) using, as its departure point, the key questions which emerged during the CLT symposium at the 2010 Language Testing Forum. He proposed a number of future research directions with adaptability at the forefront [12].

According to C. Morrow, in broad terms, a communicative test aims to find out what a learner can do with the language, rather than to establish how much of the grammatical/lexical/phonological resources of the language he/she knows. In this sense, a key feature of a communicative test is the focus on use rather than usage; related to this is the notion of purpose [10]. A communicative test involves the student in using the language for some explicit purpose. This purpose may relate to the everyday area of use (to explain to a visitor how to get to the airport in a speaking test, to find out about the facilities in a hotel in a reading or listening test, to complete a customer satisfaction survey in a writing test, etc.), or it may relate to some more specialised area of use (to make a sales presentation, to compare different reports of the same event in order to research an article on media bias, to write an application letter for a job, etc.).

D. H. Brown specifies five essential characteristics for designing a communicative language test¹³. These include *meaningful communication, authentic situation, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated language skills*.

According to R. Akhmedov, communicative language tests should revolve around three main areas, namely *grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics, and illocutionary competence*¹⁴.

National language qualifications, be they provided by the state or by quasi-private organisations, vary enormously in their standards – both quality standards and standards as levels. International comparability of certificates has become an economic as well as an educational imperative, and the availability of a transparent, independent framework like the Common European Framework¹⁵ is central to the desire to have a common scale of reference and comparison¹⁶.

The definition of communication competence(s) in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) accepted in the EU is crucial for the certification measures creation. The document describes the skills acquired by individuals studying a foreign language of an EU country and determines the language level and language learning level, and that is in different areas. It aims to providing a method for verifying language skills and their teaching applied in assessing language levels in all languages of European countries, and that is since the document entered into force in 2001. In November 2001, a European Union Council Resolution recommended using the CEFR to set up systems of validation of language ability. The six reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2) are accepted as the European standard for grading an individual's language proficiency. Efforts to find indicators

¹³ Brown D.H. Language Assessment: Principles and Classroom Practice. New York: Pearson Education; 2004. Available at: <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers.aspx?referenceid=654585> (accessed 01.09.2022).

¹⁴ Akhmedov R.Sh. Communicative Language Testing. In: Conference: Integration of World-Wide Theoretical and Practical Scientific Achievements in Teaching Foreign Languages, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Vol. I. Tashkent: Uzbekistan State World Languages University; 2017. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343098732_Communicative_Language_Testing (accessed 17.02.2023).

¹⁵ Spoločný európsky referenčný rámec pre jazyky. Učenie sa, vyučovanie, hodnotenie. [CEFR]. Bratislava: Štátny pedagogický ústav; 2006. (In Slov.)

¹⁶ Alderson J.C. European Language Testing in a Global Context: Proceedings of the ALTE Barcelona Conference, July 2001. Milanovic M., Weir C.J. (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2004. Available at: <https://uobrep.openrepository.com/handle/10547/623666> (accessed 17.02.2023).

that would objectively describe the achieved level of foreign language education are a part of this document.

The validity of a communicative test, which aspires to determine the level of communication competencies at which the test-taker would be able to communicate even in real situations, depends on the extent to which test constructors can integrate the characteristic features of the communication situation into the test tasks. Despite the various views on the minimal criteria for a proper communicative test, several authors agree upon the following facts:

1. The communicative test should include direct tasks (that force candidates to show skills and activities measured).

2. Then, integrating tasks (that integrate multiple communication language competencies, activities, and strategies).

3. Tasks set in an authentic socio-cultural, linguistic, and discursive context (by choosing an original, least edited text, or using natural language typical of the situation, etc.)¹⁷.

Certain authors like S. Hirschhorn use communicative language tests which are divided into PS (productive skills) and RS (receptive skills) sections and students, in pairs, are given tasks which require them to listen, recognise, react, interact and complete a number of communicative tasks successfully¹⁸.

Communicative examining has its place not only in the national and international measurements (certificates) but also in the partial pedagogical diagnostics in various classrooms and small groups. Measuring the foreign language proficiency levels through tests is a trend that persists; moreover, the introduction of the Communication from the Commission of the European Communities (Brussels, 16 April 2007) emphasises that multilingualism is at the heart of the European idea and thereby certifies this view. That makes Europe unique and contributes to the richness of its culture and society. Foreign language acquisition helps increase language users' confidence and mobility, which leads

to encountering other cultural environments and provides users with an opportunity to gain a more profound understanding of their own culture. According to I. Dulebová, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has thus become the fundamental guiding document in foreign language teaching in the EU¹⁹.

The CEFR respects and fulfils the requirement of the concept of foreign language teaching and reflects the need to create functional conditions for lifelong learning, while the basic philosophy of language policy reforms is to support the emergence of a multicultural European society, which presupposes the achievement of communication skills in at least two foreign languages. The general goal is to ensure the achievement of communication level B1/B2 according to CEFR in the first foreign language and communication level A2/B1 in the second foreign language for all students in Slovakia after graduating from high school.

The measurements and the methods must be standardised so that the results correspond to the achieved level of actual knowledge and is comparable with other learners of different origins. Language user levels, their classification, and content frameworks precede the optimal level of certification measurement. The CEFR distinguishes six levels. The content definitions of the framework for individual levels are taxative, precise, and unambiguous because they form the basis for a correctly set test specification for measuring the achieved level. These criteria are applied in certification by several testing institutions and not only in Europe (state basic and general language exams, Oxford exams, Cambridge exams, Goethe-Institute exams, ECL exams and others). Most testing centres focus mainly on testing English and German; therefore, the need arose to test other languages, too.

The European Union member states established an international Consortium with its seat in London in 1992. The Consortium developed a uniform language exam system

¹⁷ Weir C.J. Communicative Language Testing. Hertfordshire: Prentice Hall; 1990.

¹⁸ Hirschhorn S. Communicative Language Testing. *EFL magazine*. 2019;(4). Available at: <https://eflmagazine.com/communicative-language-testing%EF%BB%BF> (accessed 17.02.2023).

¹⁹ Dulebová I. Kritériá ERR a ich aplikácia vo výučbe predmetu reálií rusky hovoriacich krajín na EU v Bratislave. In: Odborný jazyk na vysokých školách 4. Praha: Česká zemědělská univerzita; 2008. (In Slov.)



for the EU member states languages with the support of the ERASMUS and then the LINGUA programme. In compliance with the harmonisation efforts of the EU, in 1999 the next phase of the ECL standardisation process was launched.

The authenticity notion was introduced in the 1970s in the 20th century and was related to the communicative language teaching approach.

According to L. Shuang, authentic materials should be the main component in language teaching [16]. Authenticity in language teaching implies not only materials but also authentic tasks and learning environments. Features of such materials are mainly related to learners' motivation, learner autonomy, communicative ability and linguistic knowledge. The author underlines the importance of exploiting authenticity in a learning environment and concludes that it is not only necessary but also practical to use authenticity at its maximum in language teaching.

The authenticity concept is now becoming a crucial examination criterion not only for exam candidates but also for examiners in communication language testing. In the context of language teaching and learning, assessment refers to the act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learner's knowledge of a language and ability to use it. Traditionally accepted criteria (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and aspects of pragmatics and sociolinguistics are essential in the evaluation; therefore, they are inevitable to meet the functional and communication assessment needs (style and communicative effectiveness assessment). J. Huszti discusses in her study linguistic-communicative competence in the semiotic approach of the oral text²⁰.

G. Halleck and C. Moder have covered research in this field and brought results that

indicate that the extent to which language abilities are critical to the teaching task varies with the learner's proficiency [17]. They claim that compensatory teaching strategies may enable more proficient students to overcome linguistic weaknesses, but it does not help less-skilled ones.

M. Alkubaidi views authenticity in testing as an ongoing process that uses specific validity constructs as a medium to achieve its designated purposes through the operation of primary resources as learning materials, to simulate an exclusive register²¹.

In her study, J. Lewkowicz deals with the authenticity concept and the authenticity notion development in language testing in general education. She states that this notion has notably developed since its introduction into language testing studies in the 1970s; however, there are still questions unanswered [18]. She also points out that test-takers want to and can identify the test attributes that have a crucial impact on their performance. However, they do not necessarily include the authenticity attribute, although it has been considered fundamental for all stakeholders in the testing process. We agree with her conclusion that much more research is needed if the nature and role of authenticity in language testing are to be fully understood.

According to A. Hilgers, authenticity as another principle of assessment should be considered and the authenticity of the test items should correspond to the types of real-life skills²².

T. McNamara perceives authenticity as the degree to which test materials and test conditions succeed in replicating those in the target situation²³. It is also indicated that there can be no such thing as a completely authentic language test.

S. Hasrol, A. Zakaria, and V. Aryadoust divide authenticity into situational authenticity (similarities between the content of the

²⁰ Huszti J. Authenticity in an International Language Examination System – The ECL (European Consortium of the Certificate of Attainment in Modern Languages) Examinations. In: Foreign Languages and the Contemporary Higher Education Conference Proceedings: VIII International Scientific Conference (23–25 June 2017, Varna). Bulgaria; 2017. Available at: <http://journals.mu-varna.bg/index.php/conf/article/view/3813> (accessed 20.09.2020).

²¹ Alkubaidi M. Authenticity in Language Test Design [Electronic resource]. 2009. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Miriam_Alkubaidi/publication/260432469_Authenticity_in_Language_Test_Design/links/0a85e53142f6356ba6000000.pdf (accessed 20.03.2022).

²² Hilgers A. Placement Testing Instruments for Modality Streams in an English Language Program. In: RED: A Repository of Digital Collections. 2019. Available at: <https://red.mnstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1231&context=thesis> (accessed 17.02.2023).

²³ McNamara T. Language Testing. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press; 2000.

test and language use in the target language use (TLU) domain or curricula and textbooks) and interactional authenticity (the resemblance between test-takers' cognitive processes under test and non-test situations) [19].

D. Burton investigated raters' perceptions or viewpoints on authenticity [20]. He discusses a range of criteria raters used in their judgements of authenticity when testing.

Bachman's (ibid.) Spoken Proficiency English Assessment Kit test, the Oral Proficiency Interview, and a performance test were also supported by B. Hoekje and K. Linnell in terms of their authenticity as language tests [21].

Materials and Methods

In the document of the Internationalisation Strategy of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra for the Period 2019–2025 [1], one of the main objectives is focused on the international students' recruitment to study at this University as their home university; therefore, there is a need for the Slovak language teaching as a foreign language provided in the specialised courses for students from abroad.

Long-term teaching of the Slovak language to foreigners in our institution thus has provided us with a sufficient amount of data and enabled us to conduct research with a focus on written communications, since we assume the correlation between writing skills training and the interest in obtaining an international certificate.

Our research sample included 200 randomly selected written communications by first-year international students of our University within the period of 2019–2022 in various fields of study at the age scale from 17 to 42. The students were from Russia, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic.

We approached the content analysis of the selected written communications concerning the most frequent mistakes from the morphological, syntactic and writing-accuracy points of view. However, first, we worked on collecting and organising the data.

Written communications we work with during the Slovak language trainings consist of two parts: the first and second parts contain the assignment to create the text; its structure must follow the syllabus, which involves questions on the assigned topic.

Mistakes in written communications are evaluated in formal correctness, with morphological and syntactic rules, in writing accuracy (punctuation, spelling), and in the active use of vocabulary. The author's style and communicative effectiveness of written communication are also a part of the assessment. In the error analysis, we apply a qualitative method to identify the most frequent problem phenomena in the researched sample.

Assessing the formal correctness of written communication requires a conclusive and diverse use of the grammatical structures fitting the particular level. For instance, there should be almost no inaccuracies in the syntax area at the B2 level, but if they do, they should not hinder comprehension. In the Slovak language courses, we do not consider fitting any proper level since the students' amounts of knowledge differ when entering university; however, when we approach error analysis, we apply the B2 level criteria to provide students with the complex commentary.

a) *Morphological phenomena*. In this area, the errors of the incorrect declension of nouns in the accusative have been noted, e.g. *počívam hudby; nechodíš na univerzite; akú praxu máme*. The ending *-u* in feminine nouns is acceptable only in words ending with the vowel *-a* in the nominative. The morpheme in the accusative in the word *prax* (practice) is the result of an incorrect transfer of one declension type to another declension type. The genitive is also a problematic grammatical case, e. g. in neuters declension, e.g. *spôsob odievania, podľa mojeho gustu*, the right form is *spôsob odievania, podľa môjho gusta*. The occurrence of errors in declension also applies to the accusative, e.g. *nechodíš na univerzite* (the right form is *na univerzitu*), *kúpiš niečo cez internete* (the right form is *cez internet*). Both forms are in the wrong position of the locative. They are bound to the accusative using the prepositions *cez* and *na*. Locative prepositional phrases, e. g. *v práce, v tričke*, points at unfamiliarity with declension types in words ending in a soft consonant, e.g. *práca – v práci* and in words ending in a consonant *k, g, h, ch*, followed by the suffix *-u*, e.g. *tričko – v tričku, tréning – na tréningu, roh – v rohu, vrch – na vrchu*. Inaccuracies in declension also concern pluralia tantum, nouns that appear only in the



plural form and do not have a singular variant for referring to a single object, e.g. *veľa peniazí, v džínsoch*, with the suffix *-ach* referring to the pluralia tantum of the female gender. The word *džinsy (jeans)* is a plurale tantum of the masculine noun (correctly *v džínsoch*).

In the case of adjectives, there are incorrect forms in the accusative: *väčšú konkurenciu* (correctly *väčšiu konkurenciu*), *ísť na technickej fakultu* (correctly *technickú fakultu*), disrupting the congruence of the suffix (*-ú, -u*) of the determinative syntagma.

We have noticed the determinative syntagma formed in this way in connection with *dištančnú vzdelávanú*, which does not correspond to the syntagmatic relation of accusative neuter identical to the nominative (correct *dištančné vzdelávanie*). The determinative syntagma congruence disruption also occurred in the local, e.g. *v dnešnom modernom dobe* (correctly *v dnešnej modernej dobe*). The errors also concerned adjectives in the plural, namely the specific masculine endings, for which the ending *-í* is typical, e.g. *závistliví ľudia*. In some cases, however, there was no distinction between specific and general masculines, and the specific adjective masculine was formed by the suffix *-é (závistlivé ľudia)*, typical of general masculine (*vysoké stromy, rýchle počítače*).

Incorrect grammatical gender assignment also caused errors in pronominal declension, e.g. demonstrative pronouns *táto: papier o tietom profesii* (correctly *papier o tejto profesii*) or possessive pronouns *moja: v mojom krajine (správne v mojej krajine)*. One of the repetitive mistakes is also the incorrect position of enclitics (i.e. unaccented monosyllabic words), e.g. in the personal pronoun (*ti pomáhať*) or a reflexive pronoun (*dúfam, že tiež ti sa bude páčiť*). We also noticed learners making mistakes in the long and short forms of personal pronouns, e.g. *odporúčam tebe programovateľku* (correctly *odporúčam ti programovateľku*).

Next, the formation of a plural of masculine nouns, e.g. *chodiť na kurze* (correctly *na kurzy*) or feminine nouns, e.g. *tieto práci* (correctly *tieto práce*), *smart funkcií* (correctly *smart funkcie*) is also problematic. In

the instrumental case, the errors often occurred after the verb *byť* (to be), e.g. *je tam dobrou atmosférou, príjemnou hudbou, zaujímavou dekoráciou*. The sentence of this type (*je tam*) requires the nominative subject (correctly *je tam dobrá atmosféra, príjemná hudba, zaujímavá dekorácia*).

In the position of verbs, we noticed errors in reflexive verbs within the sentences where the reflexive formant *sa* is elided, e.g. *musíme vždy vzdelávať* (correctly *musíme sa vždy vzdelávať*, *oplatí to* (correctly *oplatí sa to*), *chce obliekať* (correctly *chce sa obliekať*), *človek cíti lepšie* (correctly *človek sa cíti lepšie*), *čo myslíte vy?* (correctly *čo si myslíte vy?*). In some cases, the reflexive formant *si* was mistaken for a formant *sa*, e.g. *nemôžu sa dovoliť*, correctly *nemôžu si dovoliť*; *ja sa vyberám oblečenie*, correctly *ja si vyberám oblečenie*.

Incorrect forms in conjugation occurred mainly with the third person plural *kúpu* (correctly *kúpia*), *poslajú* (correctly *pošlú*). We identified verb forms with the suffix *-ovať* in the wrong conjugation form *študovaš* instead of the correct suffix *-uješ (študuješ)*. We also observed frequent confusion of perfective verbs with imperfective in the researched written communications, e.g. *kedy ho používame* (imperfective), correctly *použijeme* (perfective), *mohla som ti pomáhať* (imperfective), correctly *mohla som ti pomôcť* (perfective). In such cases, it is the so-called *non-preferred forms* in the Slovak language, which, however, do not appear disturbing in the text²⁴.

Errors also occurred in verbal prepositional phrases as incorrect prepositions, e.g. *vzdelávať sa cez celý život* (correctly *vzdelávať sa po celý život*) or wrong grammatical cases, e.g. *pomáhať pre teba* (correctly *pomáhať ti*). Forming negative constructions can also be problematic in the predicatives as to construct a negative of a non-full-meaning verb *byť* (f.e. *nie som*) is mistaken for a negative full-meaning verb with the prefix *ne-* (*neštudujem*), e.g. *vyberám výrobky nie najdrahšie* (correctly *nevyberám si najdrahšie výrobky*).

In examining the adverbs of manners, we observed an incorrect formation of the derivative

²⁴ Mošaťová M. Hraničné prípady pri anotovaní jazykových chýb v písaných textoch študentov učiacich sa slovenčinu ako cudzí jazyk. In: *Studia Academica Slovaca* 49. Prednášky 56. letnej školy slovenského jazyka a kultúry. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského; 2020. p. 113–124. (In Slov.)

morpheme *-e* instead of the correct *-o*. (*športove*, correctly *športovo*; *lacne*, correctly *lacno*).

b) *Syntactic phenomena*. When evaluating written communication within the syntax, we assess syntactic connectivity, correct use of conjunctions, semantic relations between sentences, and accuracy in using the correct grammatical tense of the predicate in the subordinate sentence.

In particular, frequent errors in written communications are also due to incorrect comma notation or its complete absence, e.g. *najlepšie je 0 keď sa spýtaš; keď pracujeme 0 oblečieme sa inak, sú pracoviská 0 kde je obligátne; na spôsob odievania má vplyv to 0 koľko máme rokov; ak máme trochu fantáziu 0 môžeme sledovať; nie je príjemný pre veľa ľudí 0 ktorí majú iný štýl; môžeš robiť 0 čo chceš; v dvadsiatom storočí 0 keď vieš používať internet; najlepšie je 0 keď sa spýtaš*.

Besides, we observed the incorrect usage of conjunctions, e. g. *kedy som sa narodila*, correctly *keď som sa narodila*; *myslím, aby som vedela* (correctly *myslím, že som vedela*). The subordinate clause with the conjunction *aby* requires a predicate in the past (preterite). Sentences formed with incorrect conjugation occurred in the subordinate sentence: *aby byť konkurenčný (aby bol konkurenčný), aby vyzerá dobre (aby vyzeral dobre)*.

The wrong word order mainly concerns the position of the enclitics, e.g. *že človek musí sa vzdelávať*, correctly *že človek SA musí vzdelávať*; *v módnych časopisoch môžeme zoznámiť sa s novými trendami*, correctly *v módnych časopisoch SA môžeme zoznámiť s novými trendami*; *nakoniec odporúčam ti veľa sa učiť (nakoniec TI odporúčam veľa sa učiť), mi sa to nepáči (nepáči sa MI to)*.

Morphological and syntactic errors that impair the understanding of written communication, make it impossible to understand the content and often lead to misinterpretation are also included in the assessment of formal correctness, e. g. *Odievanie podľa osobnostiam nie je čas v škole* (it follows from this context that while we go to school, there is no time to underline the importance of personality through clothing – *kým chodíme do školy, nie je čas podčiarknuť význam osobnosti oblečením*).

c) *Writing accuracy (grammar, spelling, punctuation, and paragraph structure)*. The

writing accuracy assessment focuses on the correctness of the text organisation into paragraphs, errors in spelling and punctuation, which, however, do not cause misunderstanding of the text. While researching our sample written communications, we observed punctuation errors related to omitting prolongation marks, e. g. substantives: *komunikacie, pracovníkom, dizajnerov, sú pracoviska, hľadajú ľudí*, adjectives: *ten najlacnejší, pohodlne šaty, obligatne dôvody*, verbal-nominal predicates: *býť konkurenčný, je dôležité*, verbs: *dávame pozor, musíš byť opatrný*, adverbs: *každopadne, obligatne, rýchlo*. Punctuation errors also occurred in the wrong positions of long syllables, e. g. *zarábiť peňaze, totiž, pohodlne šaty, z druhej strany*, or in rhythmical shortening (the rhythmical rule: two long syllables cannot occur consecutively), e. g. *európske jazyky* (correctly *európske jazyky*), *španelský* (correctly *španielsky*).

Errors also involve incorrect *i/y* notation, e. g. *takim spôsobom* (correctly *takým*), *detskými kútikmi* (correctly *detskými*), *musíme byť pozorný* (correctly *pozorní – pl.*), diphthongs (*cudzé jazyky, nakoniec*), circumflex in a rising-opening diphthong *ó (môžeme, podľa mojho názoru, sposoby, nemožu, tvój list, svoj štýl, svoj trend)*.

In the sample, we also observed that the softeners (palatalisation marks) were not signed in some cases of consonants, e. g. *lahko, detom, medzi detmi, zväčsenie skutočnosti, v dnešnej dobe, styl, najťažšie*, or, conversely, the soft consonant was in the wrong position, e. g. *v mal'om obchode*.

We also observed some common capitalisation errors, e.g. *Celebrity* (correctly *celebrity* since it does not indicate a proper noun), errors in hyphens in some compound words, e.g. *mini-sukňu* (correctly *minisukňu*), wrong negative prefix *nie-*, e. g. *niemusi* (correctly *nemusi*), and errors in numerals, e. g. *viac krát* (correctly *viackrát*).

Spelling errors occurred in words for which letter pronunciation was applied, e.g. *egzistuje* (correctly *existuje*), *pracovisko z dobrou náladou* (correctly *pracovisko s dobrou náladou*), *z novými trendami* (correctly *s novými trendami*).

When assessing vocabulary, it is a question of whether the author of the written communication accurately uses a wide range of selected vocabulary related to the assigned



topic, avoids repetition and uses idiomatic expressions at level B2.

When annotating errors at the B2 level, we noticed the following errors at the lexical level, when the author used an inappropriate vocabulary, often under the influence of incorrect word-formation, e. g. in substantives: *má dobrú financiú* (correctly *plat*), *predavateľ* (correctly *predavač*), *vymenie* (correctly *výmena*), adjectives: *falšové tovary* (*falšovaný tovar*), *najpotrebnejší jazyk* (*najdôležitejší*), *elegantenské šaty* (*elegantné*), verbs: *človek vyplatí značku* (correctly *človek platí za značku*), *dostať skúsenosť* (correctly *získať skúsenosť*), and in verbonominal predicates: *je povinné* (*ukazujú viac, čo je povinné*, correctly *ukazujú viac, ako sa patrí*).

Assessing the student's performance in written communication involves focusing on a student's ability to work in a particular genre and style (pragmatic and sociolinguistic adequacy). We evaluate whether all ideas are organised clearly and coherently according to the genre characteristics and the usage effectiveness of cohesive devices (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion).

The communicative efficiency assessment represents the extent to which all tasks have been completed and whether all assignments have been sufficiently and efficiently delivered.

In the first part of the research, we applied content analysis on the written communications concerning the most frequent mistakes from the morphological, syntactic and writing-accuracy points of view. Based on the obtained data, we could identify the potential factors influencing foreign language training quality regarding writing skills. We consider the most frequent errors are the key problems, the implementation of which in the teaching process demonstrably improves the results of the Slovak language study.

Then, we compared the study results of two groups of students. The first group consisted of 50 randomly chosen international students who attended the Slovak language course before the period of 2019. The focus of the language training balanced equally among speaking, listening and reading skills. However, the writing skill and working with the most frequent mistakes occurring in written communications

was only additional. After the first year of the Slovak language study, students took a final test focused on verifying all four skills at the B2 level. The average of their percentage of success was 58%. The second group consisted of 50 randomly chosen international students who attended the Slovak language course within the period of 2019–2022. The language training balanced equally among all four skills, whereas the writing skill and working with the most frequent mistakes occurring in written communications were not additional but rather fundamental. After the first year of the Slovak language study, students took the same final test as the first group, and the average of their percentage success was 88%. When we compare the study results, we can state that the most frequent errors are the key problems, the implementation of which in the teaching process demonstrably improves the results of the Slovak language study.

Then, we approached the statistical methods to research the current interest in verifying the Slovak language competencies through ECL testing in our institution on the side of our international students. We worked with the data within the periods 2016–2019 and 2019–2022. We registered only 15% of the international students applying for the ECL certificate after attending the one-year Slovak language course within the period 2016–2019, whereas only 10% succeeded at the B2 level. On the other hand, we registered 35% of the international students applying for the ECL certificate after attending the one-year course within the period 2019–2022, whereas all of them succeeded at the B2 level. When we compare the data, we can state that there is an increase in current interest in verifying the Slovak language competencies through ECL testing in our institution on the side of our international students compared to the period before 2019.

Results

The following graph shows the results of the evaluation of our students' written communications within the period 2015–2020 at the B2 CEFR level. Processing the outputs, we applied five criteria for an objective assessment of the formal and content aspects of the selected written communications. These are formal accuracy (0–5 points), spelling (0–5 points),



vocabulary (0–5 points), style (0–5 points), and communication efficiency (0–5 points), where 25 is the maximum points. The highest points on the scale are for the communication efficiency and vocabulary range scoring criteria (figure). Then, it is for the morphosyntactic well-formedness of generated texts. Finally, fewer points are for pragmatic and sociolinguistic adequacy aimed at the usages of the devices in the text to maintain its cohesion. The most frequent errors are considered typographical errors, mainly related to spelling, punctuation and paraphrasing.

Based on the above results, we can claim that while preparing for the Slovak language exam, it is crucial to focus on formal correctness, i. e. consistent acquisition of the grammar system of the Slovak language, especially in the field of morphology and syntax; therefore, an essential part of the text creation process is the correct spelling, i. e. writing accuracy mainly in punctuation, construction of the text into paragraphs, etc.

We also consider the sociolinguistic adequacy of the written communication as problematic, i. e. writer’s style, clear statements formulations, and adherence to the text composition. Therefore, in the preparatory phase for the Slovak language as a foreign language exam, it is essential to focus on practising writing to the same extent as other tested skills, namely reading, listening and speaking. In the second part of our research, we found out that by comparing the study results of the

selected groups of students, we can claim that the most frequent errors are the key problems, the implementation of which in the teaching process demonstrably improves the results of the Slovak language study.

We also delivered results proving a 20% increase in a current interest in verifying the Slovak language competencies through ECL testing in our institution on the side of our international students compared to the period before 2019; therefore, we can claim that there is a correlation between the writing skills, the most frequent errors’ involvement into the teaching process, the language study success and present interest of the international students in obtaining the Slovak language certificate.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have been noticing an international influx of predominantly students from Russia, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Ukraine, and EU countries, such as the Czech Republic, and other since 2018, and the number of applicants is growing every year. The new situation we needed to face prompted our reflection, and we started preparing specialised Slovak language and culture courses. So far, we have delivered several intensive, short-term and long-term Slovak language courses and many interactive educational activities, e. g. summer school of the Slovak language, Slovak history courses, creative culture workshops, traditional arts workshops, Slovak traditions workshops, etc.

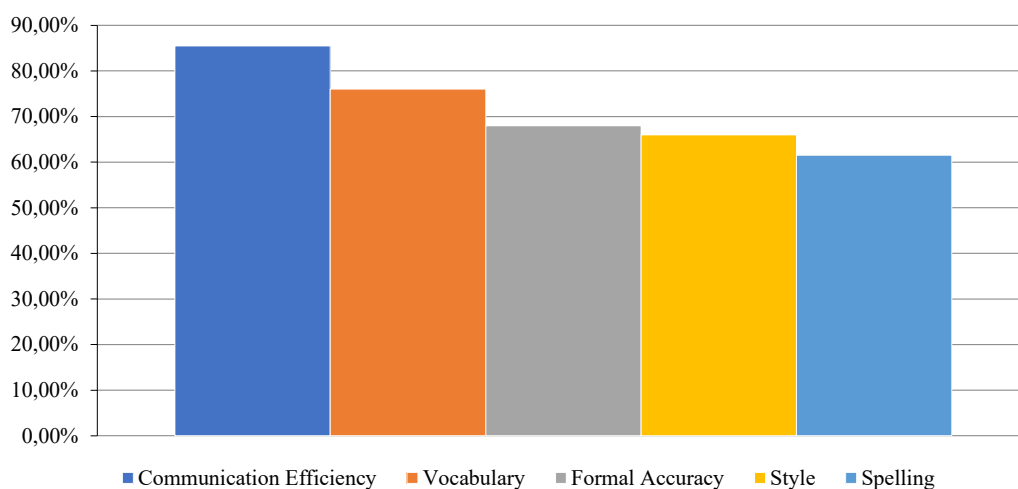


Figure. The success rate of the written part of the exam. Level B2

Source: Compiled by the authors.



However, we consider the preparatory intensive two-week language course the most required and predominantly demanded by would-be university students from Slavic countries. The course is thus offered annually and designed exclusively for their language needs. Since the course represents an inevitable language preparation for future full-time students at the University of Constantine the Philosopher, the stress is put on their high-quality acquaintance with the professional terminology of the selected field of study through work with appropriate teaching materials²⁵.

The language training takes place usually in two groups according to the entry-level language proficiency (beginners and intermediate). The study programme includes a presentation of grammatical phenomena, conversation classes, and workshops. Students acquire, deepen and improve their communication language skills, expand knowledge in the field of Slovak linguistics, and literature, learn about the history and culture of Slovakia, and thus build and strengthen personal relations with the Slovak language, culture, traditions and country. The lessons are fast and dynamic due to applying the principle of Direct Method learning, and they lead students to the active use of the Slovak language²⁶.

The programme also includes extracurricular activities, such as a thematic city tour. The advantage for these students is that the Slavic languages are closely related, but, on the other hand, language affinity alone is not sufficient for the student to study comfortably for the bachelor's degree and show a qualified understanding of the professional specifics of each field. Our major assignment is to create and provide high-quality knowledge transfer value through qualified professionals with several years of relevant work experience;

therefore, we follow the latest trends in further education, which we also apply in our educational programmes. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made students and teachers at all levels of education adapt quickly to online learning, and that is our case too. Educational programmes aim to increase individual competencies, apply the acquired knowledge in further study and practice, and thus advance their careers. P. Burel notes: "Academic and social practice has defined vocational language training as a clear necessity and condition for finding a job on the labour market"²⁷.

The university offers the opportunity to test and obtain a certificate from the European Consortium for the Certification of Modern Languages. The possibility to obtain a certificate is very motivating for students. Another target group of those interested in the ECL certificate are foreigners from the public, namely foreign employees of multinational companies operating in Slovakia, foreign life partners of Slovaks living in Slovakia, foreign language teachers in Slovakia, etc.

Based on our input data, we can say that lecturers who work at universities are those most interested in testing Slovak in Slovakia. Then, some foreign students or employees must present a certificate as proof of language proficiency for study stays, university admission, or employment interviews. In Hungary, they are students studying the Slovak language at the University of Budapest and Szeged. The majority of applicants are those who have Slovak roots or live in regions with foreign Slovaks²⁸.

The following table provides an overview of the testing of the Slovak language as a foreign language in the period from 2010 to 2020 in the Regional Testing Centres in Slovakia (SK) and the Testing Centres in Hungary (HU).

²⁵ Zelenická E., Pavlová R. Testovanie jazykovej kompetencie v akademickom prostredí.. Odborný cudzí jazyk: teória a prax. Nitra: UKF; 2020. p. 205–212. (In Slov.)

²⁶ Csalová O. Intenzívny kurz slovenčiny v Jazykovom centre [Electronic resource]. 2019. Available at: <http://www.jc.ff.ukf.sk/index.php/en/aktivity/ine-aktivity/189-intenzivny-kurz-slovenskeho-jazyka-pred-zaciatkom-zimneho-semesteru> (accessed 06.02.2022). (In Slov.)

²⁷ Burel P. Akademický jazyk vs. prax vs. Brexit. FORLANG: Cudzí jazyky v akademickom prostredí. Košice: TUKE; 2017. p. 15. (In Slov.)

²⁸ Zelenická E., Macho M., Machová R., Olšiak, M. Slovak LEVEL B2 ECL Practice Exams. Nyíregyháza: Szabó Nyelviskola és Fordítóiroda Kft.; 2014; Zelenická E., Macho M., Machová R., Olšiak, M. Slovak B1, B2, C1 – ECL Practice Exams. Nümbrecht: Kirsch Verlag; 2017; Machová R., Zelenická E. Testovanie a certifikácia jazykových zručností. In: Moderné jazyky v súčasnej Európe. Zborník k 15. výročiu Európskeho konzorcia pre certifikáciu znalostí moderných jazykov na Univerzite Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre. Nitra: UKF; 2018. (In Slov.)

Table. The number of certificates issued in the period 2010–2020

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
SK	7	14	30	17	22	22	25	26	29	31	8	28
HU	40	35	18	14	20	18	9	16	20	20	5	12
Total	47	49	48	31	42	40	34	42	49	51	13	40

Source: Compiled by the authors.

It is clear from the table that the number of certificates issued in the period 2010–2020 is approximately the same. We observed a slight decrease in 2013 and 2016, but since 2017–2019, the number of applicants has had an increasing tendency. We expected an increase next year due to the higher number of foreign students studying at Slovak universities; however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of candidates in 2020 has dropped significantly.

In this paper, we dealt with the need for education in the field of Slovak as a foreign language and the subsequent certification of language skills through testing according to the standardised criteria of the certified language exam. After three years of Slovak language training within the bachelor's degree and under the influence of the natural language environment in which they live, foreign university students experience a significant improvement

in language skills, which also increases their motivation and serious interest in confirming their language skills in testing their language competence at the C1 level.

From the results provided, it is clear that teaching writing skills intensively with a focus on particular identified problematic issues in written communications increases the learners' language acquisition level so that their motivation and interest in obtaining an official certificate of the Slovak language arise. This study provides results that may be useful in the targeted language preparation of the international students recruited to study at Slovak universities as their home universities and their further preparation for obtaining the Slovak language certificate.

In addition, the results of our study may contribute to the further development of general professional education in foreign languages.

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Submitted 23.11.2022; revised 09.01.2023; accepted 16.01.2023.

Поступила 23.11.2022; поступила после рецензирования 09.01.2023; принята к публикации 16.01.2023.

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Заявленный вклад авторов:

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Все авторы прочитали и одобрили окончательный вариант рукописи.