

The English language competence gap between the Cold War generation and the generation educated after the fall of socialism and establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to examine the English language competence gap between the Cold War generation of Slovak people and the generation educated after the fall of socialism in 1989. The first part of the paper defines the term language competence. In addition, it shows the results of the survey on foreign language competence conducted in the Slovak Republic in 2011. The second part describes the educational system in Czechoslovakia during the socialist period in general, and the foreign language educational system in particular, characterized at the time by the predominance of the Russian language. The third part of the article focuses on the reformed educational system after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989. The final part shows the different opinions on English language education and its impact on people's everyday lives as well as the English language competence of Slovak people in the context of preserving national identity.

Key words: language competence, educational system, English language, Cold War, socialism

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Introduction

The English language has become one of the most widely spoken foreign languages in Slovakia. Nowadays, learning English at primary and secondary school has become normal. Slovak people start to study foreign languages from an early age, mostly because the ability to speak English is considered a necessary skill for many positions in international companies, as well as in state-owned enterprises. Young adults, who have been educated after the educational reforms, have rather positive expectations about their future career. Thanks to many opportunities to learn English at school, individually or abroad, the level of their language competence is considered adequate according to the regional rankings of English proficiency.

However, is the English competence of the Cold War generation educated before the establishment of the Slovak Republic equal to the competence of the younger generation? We need to remember that there were few opportunities to study English at primary school in the socialist period. Due to the educational system of the socialist regime and the pro-Russian political orientation of Czechoslovakia, the Russian language was the first foreign language taught as a compulsory subject at schools. Instruction in other foreign languages was often only optional in school curricula.

Is the situation different nowadays? Foreign language education has become more accessible. However, the generation of Slovak people educated during the Communist regime, whose English competence is usually insufficient, may be put at a disadvantage by the overall tendency to promote English as lingua franca in various areas of everyday life (e.g. the Internet and IT in general).

Language competence definition

There are many different ways of defining the term language competence. According to linguist Noam Chomsky, the term competence simply refers to “*the person’s knowledge of language*”.¹ American anthropologist Dell Hymes defines communicative competence as “*a speaker’s underlying knowledge of the rules of grammar and rules for their use in socially appropriate circumstances*”.² As stated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, communicative competence is a term that in a narrower sense consists of

¹ T. McArthur (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford 1992, p. 242.

² *Ibid.*, p. 239

linguistic competences (lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic, and orthoepic), sociolinguistic competences and pragmatic competences (discourse and functional competence).³

According to the official educational framework of the Slovak Pedagogical Institute⁴, competence is defined as “*a system of knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and values which affect one’s behaviour*”. A fundamental principle of foreign language education is to ensure that a learner is able to: a) deal with various situations in everyday life in a foreign country; b) exchange information and ideas with people of all ages who speak this foreign language; c) better understand a way of life and thinking of other nations and their cultural heritage.⁵

The foreign language educational system in the Slovak Republic follows the European Indicator of Language Competence which is divided into three levels that are further subdivided into two levels. Each level describes what a learner is able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing.

A: Basic User, A1 Breakthrough or Beginner, A2 Waystage or Elementary

B: Independent User, B1 Threshold or Intermediate, B2 Vantage or Upper Intermediate

C: Proficient User, C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or Advanced, C2 Mastery or Proficiency⁶

Foreign language competence is evaluated worldwide and regionally. According to EF English Proficiency Index, the language proficiency in the Slovak Republic is moderate and Slovakia is rated 25th out of 70 countries.⁷ Various surveys are also made by other institutions such as The Institute for Public Relations, British Council, Goethe Institute, etc. However, these surveys are not conducted periodically and therefore it is difficult to observe continuous trends.

³ “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment”, *Council of Europe*, at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf, 21 October 2016, p. 108.

⁴ “Štátny vzdelávací program: anglický jazyk”, *Štátny pedagogický ústav*, at http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/anglicky_jazyk_a2_titul.pdf, 18 October 2016, p. 5.

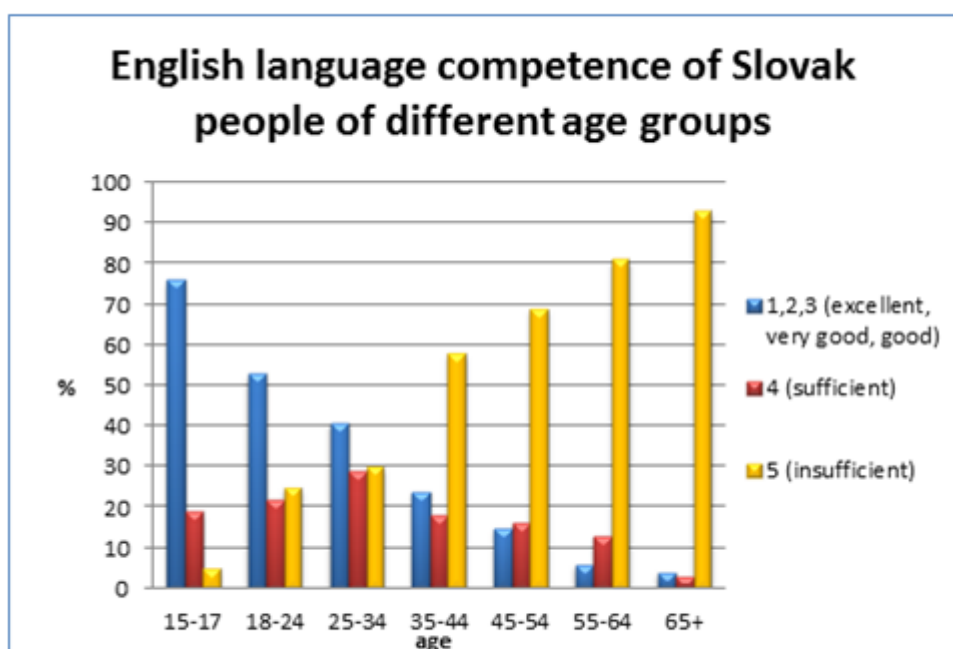
⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5

⁷ “The world's largest ranking of countries by English skills - Slovakia”, *EF English Proficiency Index 2015*, at <http://www.ef-slovakia.sk/epi/>, 7 October 2016.

In 2012, The Institute for Public Relations in Slovakia presented the results of a survey on the language competence of Slovak people. They interviewed 1,086 respondents aged 15 years or more. The results of this survey show that among six foreign languages (Russian, German, French, English, Spanish, Italian) the most frequently spoken are Russian, German and English. Some 54 % of respondents are able to speak Russian, 49 % German and 46 % are competent in English. French, Spanish and Italian are not considered very common in the Slovak Republic. Regarding the level of language competence, Slovaks are most proficient in English. Fourteen percent of survey respondents are able to speak or write “without any difficulties”, and another 14% stated that their level of English language competence is “very good”.⁸

Table 1: English language competence of Slovak people of different age groups



Source: data used from Bútorová, Zora – Gyárfášová, Oľga. *Jazyková kompetentnosť ľudí na Slovensku: nemecký jazyk v porovnaní s inými jazykmi*. Bratislava, 2011.

The above chart from 2011 shows the correlation between age and English language competence in Slovakia. The number of respondents whose English-speaking skills are excellent, very good or good decreases with the age of the respondent. Respondents aged 15-35 are able to speak English, but the English language competence of the generation of respondents aged 65 and above (which means those born in 1946 or before) is insufficient.

⁸ “Jazyková kompetentnosť ľudí na Slovensku: nemecký jazyk v porovnaní s inými jazykmi”, *Inštitút pre verejné otázky*, 30 March 2012, at <http://www.ivo.sk/6438/sk/aktuality/jazykova-kompetentnost-ludi-na-slovensku-nemecky-jazyk-v-porovnanii-s-inymi-jazykmi>, 10 May 2016.

What is the main cause of the generation gap in English language competence in Slovakia? Since language competence is mainly gained through formal education, to find the answer to our question we need to take a close look at the educational system during the Communist regime (1948-1989), especially at foreign language education in primary and secondary schools.

Education system in Czechoslovakia during the Communist regime

The years following the end of World War II had a significant influence on the further development of many European countries. For Czechoslovakia, February 1948 represents a turning point. That year, the Communist Party tightened its control over Czechoslovakia laying the foundations for 41 years of de facto one-party rule bringing with it policies affecting the development of the country in the political, industrial, social and also educational sphere.

The law on the fundamental re-organization of the school system, called the Uniform School Act, was adopted on April 21, 1948. Under the terms of this Act, nine-year compulsory school attendance was introduced. All children under 15 years of age could acquire education up to lower secondary school and thus have equal access to upper secondary and tertiary levels. All education was provided free of charge.

Primary school education

The goal of primary school education was to provide good vocational guidance, to ensure physical, moral and emotional growth, and to equip children with basic intellectual abilities and to prepare them for further studies. Subjects were taught according to a curriculum which included compulsory and optional subjects as well as hobby groups. Among optional subjects were: singing, cooking and sewing classes, games, practical work at chemistry and physics, exercises in mathematics and in the Czech/Slovak language, art classes and also foreign

Table 2: Basic nine-year school curriculum

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Czech and Slovak Language and Literature	11	12	10	8	8	6	5	5	5
Russian				2	2	2	2	3	3
Civics							1	1	1
Civil defence						0/1	1/0	0/1	1/0
History							2	2	2
Geography							3	2	2
Mathematics		4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Homeland study				2	3	4			
Physics								2	2
Chemistry									2.5
Nature study							2	2	2
Physical training	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Art	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1
Drawing									1
Music	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Workshop practice	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Total	20	22	22	24	25	28	29	31	30
Optional subjects	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Hobby groups				2	2	2	2	2	2

Source: P. Jenik, *The Czechoslovak Educational System, Prague 1980*, p.32

languages. Besides the compulsory Russian language, German, English or French were the most preferred choices.⁹

However, foreign language education in actual practice did not always correspond to the above description. Not every school had instructors or materials required to teach any foreign language other than Russian. Particularly, there was a lack of second foreign language education materials at primary schools in the countryside.

In 1978, a new educational strategy came into being: the Document on the Further Development of the Czechoslovak Educational System. The task of the new school system was to prepare young people with a higher level of general theoretical and technical skills, as well as to produce graduates with broad professional knowledge. These graduates would be therefore capable of quick adaptation to the rapidly changing needs of practical life and professional specialization.¹⁰ Foreign language education was still oriented toward Russian,

Table 3: Primary school curriculum

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	Total
Slovak Language and Literature	9	9	9	9	5	5	4	4	54
Russian language					4	3	3	3	13
Basics of science	2	2							4
Homeland study			1	2					3
History					2	2	2	2	8
Civics						1	1	1	3
Geography					2	2	1	2	7
Mathematics	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	39
Natural science			2	2					4
Natural history					2	2	2	2	8
Physics						2	2	2	6
Chemistry							2	2	4
Musical ed. and singing	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7
Art education	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	12
Writing		1	1						2
Training by work	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	12
Physical and sports ed.	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
Compulsory elective sub.							2	2	4
Total	20	22	24	24	27	29	30	30	206
Optional subjects	1	1	1	1	2(3)	2(3)	2(3)	2(3)	12
Hobby groups			2	2	2	2	2	2	12

Source: J. Lihocký et al., *The Forty Years of Slovak Educational System in the Socialist Czechoslovakia*, Bratislava 1989, p. 42

aim of secondary schools was to prepare young people for their further university studies and practical life.¹² Secondary vocational schools provided four-year specialized higher education courses. Students obtained a general education and vocational training for work in the national economy, state administration, building, transport, agriculture, industry, schools,

which was taught starting from the fifth grade. Pupils were allowed to choose a second foreign language (German, English, French or Spanish) as an optional subject from the fifth grade or as an elective subject from the seventh grade.¹¹

Secondary and higher school education

After primary schools, pupils had an option to continue their studies at three types of secondary schools: secondary vocational schools, secondary grammar schools, also called “gymnasia,” and secondary apprentice-training centres. The

⁹ P. Jenik, *The Czechoslovak Educational System*, Prague 1980, pp. 30-33.

¹⁰ J. Lihocký et al., *The Forty Years of Slovak Educational System in the Socialist Czechoslovakia*, Bratislava 1989, p. 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26

health services and culture.¹³ Secondary grammar schools provided students with a four-year general secondary education as well as with basic specialized preparation. After passing the school-leaving examination students could proceed to university or use their secondary school qualification to obtain a position in a relevant profession.¹⁴

Table 4: Models of standard curricula for secondary vocational schools

Subject of teaching	Broader branches (operating - technical)				Broader branches (such as economic ones)				Broader Branches (such as agricultural ones)				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	1.	2.	3.	4.	1.	2.	3.	4.	
Slovak Language and Literature													
	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	2
Russian language	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Another modern language	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	2	
Civics	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
History	2	2			2	2			2	2			
Mathematics	4	4	2	2	3	3	2	2	4	3	2	2	
Physics	4					2			2	2			
Chemistry	2	2			3				5	4			
Physical and sports ed.	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Para-military training	1	1			1	1			1	1			
Basic vocational training	6	10	10	5	6	8	12	7	4	5	8	6	
Vocational subject	4	4	12	16	5	5	8	12	3	4	12	13	
Total	33	33	33	32	32	32	32	30	31	31	31	30	
Optional subjects	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Source: J. Lihocký et al., *The Forty Years of Slovak Educational System in the socialist Czechoslovakia*, Bratislava 1989, p. 78.

Compulsory Russian language still occupied a dominant position in curricula. However, at secondary vocational schools, as well as at secondary grammar schools, students were taught a second modern language necessary for their specialization.

Secondary grammar schools prepared students for university studies. They were further divided into schools specializing in mathematics and physics, physical education, programming, foreign languages, cultural and educational work etc. In the period after World War II secondary grammar schools, especially their curricula, underwent frequent changes. In 1948, new subjects (Russian and Civics) were added to the curriculum.¹⁵ The content and concept of subjects taught were modernized by restricting the encyclopaedic character of instruction and creating a space for the development of the formative character of instruction and for creative ways of learning. The social and economic needs of society were taken into account while introducing new changes into the secondary grammar school system. The content of the gymnasia introduced in 1984 placed higher requirements on the profile of the

¹³ P. Jenik, *The Czechoslovak...*, p. 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35

¹⁵ J. Lihocký et al., *The Forty Years of...*, p. 67.

graduate. Instead of the great amount of factual data, the emphasis was laid on the solid polytechnic background of graduates, their theoretical mastering of basics of sciences and the ability of applying acquired knowledge to practical tasks.¹⁶ This idea was reflected in the curriculum, which contained subjects providing further general knowledge required for study at university such as Civics, Geography and History. Besides the Russian language, a second modern language started to be taught. The most commonly taught foreign language at secondary schools was German. The teaching of English or French was not very widespread, especially in Central and Eastern Slovakia.

In 1980, there were in total 36 universities¹⁷ in Czechoslovakia, which provided further education. Compared to primary and secondary school, English language education was more easily available. The number of teachers and lecturers was larger and study materials were easier to obtain. Also, attitudes towards foreign language education differed from one university department to another. However as this subject is not directly related to the present topic we will forego discussion of it here.

To summarize issues discussed so far, Russian enjoyed a privileged position in the foreign language policies of socialist era Czechoslovakia; students were obliged to study it starting in primary school. The number of hours set aside for Russian language education in primary schools far exceeded time allocated to any other foreign language. This situation reflected the dominance and importance of Russian language education during the socialist period.

Education system since the establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993

Table 5: Secondary grammar school curriculum

Teaching subject	1.	2.	3.	4.	Total
Slovak Language and Literature	3	3	3	3	12
Russian language	3	3	3	3	12
Another modern language	3	3	3	3	12
Civics			2	2	4
History	2	2	2		6
Geography	2	2			4
Mathematics	4	5	4	4	17
Physics	3	3	3	3	12
Chemistry	3	3	3		9
Biology	3	3	3		9
Basics of cybernetics				2	2
Physical and sports ed.	2	2	2	2	8
Para-military training	1	1			2
Basics of production and vocational training	2	2	4	6	14
Elective subject				3	3
Total	31	32	32	31	126
Optional subjects	2	2	2	2	8

Source: J. Lihocký et al., *The Forty Years of Slovak Educational System in the socialist Czechoslovakia*, Bratislava 1989, p. 68.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 68-69

¹⁷ P. Jenik, *The Czechoslovak...*, p. 43.

After November 1989, many changes of historical, social, political and economic character took place in the Slovak Republic. These resulted in fundamental changes in the field of education, in particular: new standards which were created were focusing not only on new provisions in the Constitution of the independent Slovak Republic, but also on the new international documents and guidelines such as UNESCO, OECD, the Bologna Declaration etc.¹⁸

However, during this period of social change educational policies were implemented under conditions which were not very favourable. The situation in the 1990's resulted in stronger differentiation among population and in undesirable changes within the hierarchy of values. In spite of that, we can find positive results achieved, for example: publishing new curricula for primary and secondary schools, new study plans for universities, creation of

opportunities for the establishment of alternative, church and private schools, implementation of a new, modern concept of organization of work at primary and secondary schools and universities, in compliance with European standards, etc.¹⁹

Table 6: Primary school curriculum (1st -4th grade)

Subject of teaching	4 years (number of hours in total)
Slovak Language and Literature	26
First foreign language / English language	6
Basics of science	3
Homeland study	3
Ethics or religious education	4
Mathematics	14
Informatics	3
Workshop practice	1
Drawing	4
Music	4
Physical training and sport	8
Total (compulsory subjects)	76
Optional subjects	20
Total	96

Source: "Rámcový učebný plán pre základné školy s vyučovacím jazykom slovenským", Štátny pedagogický ústav, at http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/rup1_si.pdf, October 21 2016.

Primary school education

Since 1997, the system of primary school education has been divided into two levels: a) the 1st level (1st-4th grade) and b) the 2nd level (5th-9th grade). These levels are differentiated according to the skills and interests of young pupils.

The compulsory education lasts for 10 years (nine years of primary school education + one year of secondary school education);

¹⁸ Ministry of Education of the SR (ed.), *Educational system in Slovakia*. Bratislava 2002, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

pupils are admitted to the 1st grade after reaching six years of age. Education is determined by general curricula and implemented according to study guidelines.²⁰

Since the school year 2011/12, English language education has become compulsory for every pupil starting with the 3rd grade of primary school. At four-year secondary grammar schools, according to the guidelines, the first foreign language is taught four times per week.²¹

Foreign language education strategy at primary and secondary schools is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, which provides a framework for formulating educational policy pertaining to foreign language education.²² In keeping with this document, foreign language education in Slovakia starts in the 3rd year of primary school. However, there are some primary schools where foreign language education starts even earlier, in the 1st year.²³

After the revolution in 1989, secondary grammar schools were transformed into a modern type of secondary schools offering general education, which prepares students especially for their university studies and for other forms of higher education. Fundamental changes took place within the concept of education, in particular: a) cancellation of compulsory vocational training; b) more emphasis has been placed on education in social sciences,

Table 7: Primary school curriculum (5th- 9th grade)

Subject of teaching	5 years (number of hours in total)
Slovak Language and Literature	23
First foreign language	15
Second foreign language	4
Physics	5
Chemistry	4
Biology	5
Civics	4
History	6
Geography	5
Ethics or religious education	4
Mathematics	19
Informatics	2
Working education	1
Technology education	1
Drawing	3
Music	3
Art	1
Physical training and sport	10
Total (compulsory subjects)	115
Optional subjects	31
Total	146

Source: "Rámcový učebný plán pre základné školy s vyučovacím jazykom slovenským", Štátny pedagogický ústav, at <http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/rup2.pdf>, October 21 2016.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 11-12

²¹ M. Kaliňák, "Súčasný systém výučby cudzích jazykov je naplnením programu Milénium", *Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu slovenskej republiky*, 26 February 2013, at <https://www.minedu.sk/sucasny-system-vyucby-cudzich-jazykov-je-naplnenim-programu-milenium/>, 7 October 2016.

²² "Štátny vzdelávací program: anglický jazyk", *Štátny pedagogický ústav*, at http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/anglicky_jazyk_a2_titul.pdf, 18 October 2016, p. 4.

²³ J. Bérešová, *Výučba anglického jazyka v primárnom vzdelávaní*. Trnava 2012, p. 7.

foreign languages and physical education, and curricula now include arts and ethics (or religion); c) significant change in study guidelines – permitting bilingual education, creation of eight-year grammar schools and strengthening the powers of schools to modify their curricula.²⁴

Nowadays, secondary education is provided by secondary grammar schools (4 years), 2nd level of eight-year gymnasia, secondary specialized schools and secondary vocational schools. The aim of secondary education is to prepare students for their professional and personal lives, as well as to provide necessary knowledge for further studies and personal growth.²⁵

Table 8: Secondary grammar school curriculum

Subject of teaching	4 years (number of hours in total)
Slovak Language and Literature	12
First foreign language	16
Second foreign language	8
Physics	5
Chemistry	5
Biology	6
Civics	3
History	6
Geography	4
Ethics or religious education	2
Mathematics	11
Informatics	3
Art and culture	1
Physical training and sport	8
Total (compulsory subjects)	93
Optional subjects	31
Total	124

Source: "Rámcový učebný plán pre gymnáziá so štvorročným a osemročným štúdiom s vyučovacím jazykom slovenským", Štátny pedagogický ústav, at http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/rup3_sjog.pdf October 21 2016

Foreign language education occupies an increasingly important position. However, as Šajgalíková states: "*the range of languages studied is decreased in favour of English. Despite the desire to conserve the multilingual character of Europe, English is the language studied by the greater number of young people at primary school and general secondary school everywhere in Europe.*"²⁶

In Slovakia, it is recommended to follow the European language portfolio and use modern teaching materials, as well as pay attention to innovative methods and forms of education.²⁷ The most often taught foreign languages at schools are English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Russian. At most schools English is the first foreign language taught, but there are

²⁴ Ibid., p. 14

²⁵ "Štátny vzdelávací program pre gymnáziá v Slovenskej republike ISCED 3A – Vyššie sekundárne vzdelávanie", Štátny pedagogický ústav, at http://www.statpedu.sk/sites/default/files/dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/isced3_spu_uprava.pdf, 21 October 2016, p. 6.

²⁶ H. Šajgalíková, *English for European Integration: Education*, Bratislava 2001, pp. 42-43.

²⁷ "Pedagogicko-organizačné pokyny na školský rok 2016/2017" Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu slovenskej republiky, at <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/9841.pdf>, 20 October 2016, p. 15.

also primary and secondary schools where children learn another foreign language first, followed later by English.

Nowadays, English education in Slovakia faces various problems. The most often mentioned problems are the lack of materials and qualified teachers. Based on the data of the Slovak Pedagogical Institute, 65% of first level (1st-4th grade) English teachers are qualified to teach, however, the rest (35% of teachers) lack full qualifications. The main reason is considered to be insufficient preparation for the introduction of English as a compulsory subject in 2010. Although the need for a greater number of better qualified English teachers was recognized, the government did not take action to provide additional training of teachers.²⁸ Furthermore, questions need to be asked about future trends in English language education. The policy of EU, Brexit, migration and the dominant position of the German economy in Europe are few of the factors which may influence decisions regarding the need to promote, or not to promote English education in the future.

Different views on the English language competence

During the Cold War, English language education was affected by a number of factors, one of the most important being politics. From 1948 to 1989 Czechoslovakia was a part of so called “the Eastern bloc.” The division of Europe into “the West” and “the East” was related to the complicated relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. This tension, called “the Cold War”, greatly influenced the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia. It was impossible to travel to western countries freely, and western influences were repressed. Pro-Russian orientation had a great impact on the educational system too. It was for this reason that Eastern orientation, Russian occupied a privileged position among foreign languages taught at schools. Other than Russian it was possible to choose German, English or French as optional subjects, but the primacy of Russian was never in doubt.

The Communist regime lasted in Czechoslovakia for almost 41 years (1948-1989). During this period, there were years when the attitude towards English was more liberal than in other years, especially in the mid-sixties and eighties. During these interludes, tensions eased, and Western culture along with the English language were more accessible to the public than before. However, in 1968 Czechoslovakia was invaded by the armed forces of the

²⁸ “Reakcia ministerstva školstva na list poslanca NR SR Miroslava Beblavého vo veci didaktických prostriedkov na výučbu anglického jazyka”, *Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu slovenskej republiky*, 10 April 2015, at <https://www.minedu.sk/reakcia-ministerstva-skolstva-na-list-poslanca-nr-sr-miroslava-beblaveho-vo-veci-didaktickyh-prostriedkov-na-vyucbu-anglickeho-jazyka/>, 7 October 2016.

Warsaw Pact²⁹, the Prague Spring came to an abrupt end and the political situation reverted to the usual Cold War pattern of severe limitation on contacts with the West.

In 1989 the Velvet Revolution took place and the Communist regime collapsed. Free travel to western countries became the norm. Since then, foreign language education came to refer to languages spoken in the countries of Western Europe. Slovak people who started to attend school since 90's had much better opportunities (more study materials, lecturers language schools) to study English.

Another factor is a location. Schools in Prague, Brno and Bratislava had rather better conditions to teach foreign languages. In industrial and cultural centres of Czechoslovakia the possibility that a school would have a teacher able to teach English language was greater than in the countryside where access to study materials was limited, not that such materials existed in great abundance in metropolitan areas either. But still, secondary schools and universities where the conditions for English language education were better, were located in the cities, not in the countryside.

The choice of secondary school and university also played an important role for individual learners of foreign languages. Certain training centres and departments provided more opportunities to study English than others. As we stated in the previous section, curricula depended very much on the orientation of departments. Departments of computer programming or English Studies naturally put a greater emphasis on English education than for example departments of agriculture.

A very important determining factor of foreign language competence is personal attitude. In contrast to the present, English as well as other foreign languages were available only as optional courses during the Cold War. Only students with enough motivation or personal interest would decide to take optional subjects.

The language proficiency gap between the generations educated in different environments is a very complex issue including almost every citizen educated in the Slovak school system. For this reason, a survey which could bring relevant results requires a great number of respondents and a significant amount of time. Interviews made for this paper did not aim to come up with general conclusions about the competence gap and its impacts on people's lives. Rather the purpose of the survey was to gather a variety of different viewpoints on this topic. Respondents describe their own views on the impacts of the English language

²⁹ D. Kováč, *Dejiny Slovenska*, Praha 1998, p. 291.

on their lives. The survey therefore should be seen as a starting point for further research in this area.

We asked 23 respondents between the ages of 40 and 82 various questions about English education during the socialist period and encouraged them to make comparisons to the present time. The opinions of people varied based on factors described above. We have chosen three from the total of 12 questions asked reproducing below a short selection of responses.

Does your insufficient language competence affect your everyday life?

„It definitely does. Nowadays, everybody expects you to speak English. If you can't, you are disadvantaged in job seeking, science, information technology and also in the entertainment industry...“ (Sales manager, 43 years old)

„My insufficient competence has a negative effect on my everyday life. One of the examples is the Internet, where most of the terms are in English which I do not understand. For example, I have often problems when buying cosmetic products, because almost everything is in English. I encounter English words I do not understand almost every day.“ (Nurse, 40 years old)

„Yes it does, especially when traveling to countries outside the region [of Central Europe].“ (Junior lawyer, 42 years old)

What is the attitude of present-day society towards the English language education?

„The English language starts to be a part of life since kindergarten; often there is a child who can speak both Slovak and English. Children have an opportunity to educate themselves in English. It is necessary for us. Children in preschool education are already able to understand instructions in English when working with digital tools without even realizing it.“ (Kindergarten teacher, 52 years old)

„It is the most preferred foreign language.“ (IT professional, 55 years old)

Do you think that the widespread use of English affects the cultural identity of Slovak people?

„In my opinion, it does and it has a negative effect. There are too many English names and words which are used in our mother tongue in daily life even if it is not necessary. Narrow

vocabulary of young Slovak generation is also another negative consequence.“ (Auditor, 58 years old)

„Yes, we lose our Slovak words, which are replaced by the English ones. I think that especially the older generation sometimes does not understand what others are talking about. I do not like it. We have many Slovak words, but we still replace them (budget-badžet-rozpočet) which I find unnecessary.“ (Sales manager, 47 years old)

„Every language influences the culture and level of intelligence of people. The more languages you know, the easier it is for you to deal with different situations. Deformation of mother tongue is caused mostly by the mass media’s unnecessary use of English terms. Mass media just do not search for Slovak equivalents.“ (Retiree - former university professor, 82 years old)

„Ability to speak English definitely positively affects the cultural identity of Slovak people. Knowledge of any foreign language creates new opportunities and brings new contacts.“ (Nurse, 40 years old)

Conclusion

This article examined the educational system in Czechoslovakia during the Communist regime (1948-1989) and in present-day Slovakia with a focus on foreign language education. Comparison of these two education systems shows the shift in the preference of the first foreign language taught at schools. During the socialist period, Russian, which was taught as a compulsory subject starting in primary school, enjoyed a position of dominance over other foreign languages, which were offered only as optional subjects. Although secondary schools taught other foreign languages, the dominant position of Russian remained unchallenged. Students were generally more fluent in Russian than in any other foreign language. However, after the fall of socialism and the establishment of the Slovak Republic, the education started to follow western trends and as a result, awareness and availability of learning English improved. Nowadays, in keeping with the recommendations of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, children learn English from an early age, starting in primary school. Moreover, it seems that English has become a part of people’s everyday life not only through the mass media, entertainment or workplace communication,

but English may also come to have influenced Slovak people's perception of their national identity. Needless to say, further research in this area is required.

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