Teaching German in an On-Line Environment Current Challenges

Ján Demčišák and Simona Fraštíková

Abstract—The paper addresses the problem of the missing methodologies and materials in secondary education for teaching German in an on-line environment and the need to create methodological guides for this way of teaching. It presents a project entitled "Practical Guide for On-line German Language Teaching" aimed at supporting the implementation of on-line teaching by creating a methodological guide supplemented by a set of exercises with practical examples and suggestions for didactization. The aim of the paper is to analyze the baseline situation, present the methodology of the project and outline solutions responding to the new needs of practice.

Keywords—German language teaching, on-line teaching, digitalization, key competences, innovation in education, Erasmus+

I. THE INITIAL SITUATION AND PRIORITIES IN THE FIELD OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION

In the context of university education in the field of foreign languages – in our case the German language – we have observed, in recent years, a new situation regarding the language skills and knowledge of prospective students. More and more, we are encountering very low proficiency in German (A1) and less and less proficiency at the required B1+/B2 level. We see 4 reasons for this situation:

- German is an increasingly infrequent first foreign language (in 2009 in Slovakia took leaving examination from the GL 17,452 students, in 2018 only 2,678, [URL 1]; according to survey data from our partners in Lithuania, in 2007 10% of students chose German as their first foreign language, in 2016 only 4,95%, our partners in the Czech Republic describe the situation very similarly),
- The dominance of English in the process of globalization has led to a weakening of the position of languages other than English (LOTE), students grow up in an environment of "English is enough", which leads to a decreasing motivation to learn LOTE),

Ján Demčišák
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius
Slovak Republic

Simona Fraštíková
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius
Slovak Republic

- inconsistent language policy for 2nd foreign languages, which enter the education process relatively late; on the one hand, their reduced hourly quotas and, on the other hand, the wide range of language groups both in and outside schools lead to the phenomenon of "permanent beginners",
- students often come with low educational competence and low level of autonomous learning ability, unable to cope on their own with the gap in the required and actual level of language competence needed to succeed in university studies.

Universities perceive the need to pay more attention to the teaching of the German language already at the secondary level of education, as improving its quality has a direct impact on the quality and outcomes of education at the tertiary level, on students' interest in pursuing German studies, as well as on the successful completion of the first year of studies, where, due to insufficient language competences, we have observed a significant increase in drop-out rates in recent years. In this context, we see not only a need, but also a space and an opportunity to contribute to improving the quality of the learning environment at secondary level of education by innovating ways of learning that would respond to the current status quo and take into account the life experiences of learners.

Already in the Communication from the European Commission of November 20, 2012 on re-assessing the education and investment in skills for better socio-economic outcomes [URL 2], it is stated that digital learning and open educational resources (OER) are enabling fundamental changes in the world of education and expanding its offer beyond traditional forms and boundaries. The use of digital media, collaboration, bottom-up practices, and student or teacher creation of learning content are cited as pathways to new ways of learning. In line with this a commitment of experienced teachers from practice should be employed, their creative potential and experience should be used and combined with the results of the latest academic findings and researches in the field of didactics to develop appropriate tools for school practice, which can change the approach to foreign language teaching in the digital age in an innovative way. In digital tools, we see the potential for new learning opportunities, allowing for greater personalization and

flexibility of learning, as well as for the introduction of new teaching procedures and evaluation practices. These tools can increase access to OER and make education more accessible to some disadvantaged groups. In this sense, however, school education institutions need not only the OER itself, but also appropriate methodological tools for its effective utilization, sustenance or development. In this regard, we therefore consider it necessary to provide education staff with appropriate digital skills and competences that can guarantee adequate and effective utilization of OERs and digital tools. Such skills are essential for all educators and teachers, not excluding foreign language teachers.

The central element of the vision of the European Learning Area is also multilingualism, as underlined by the Council Recommendation of May 22, 2019 on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning. [URL 3] In our view, the idea of Europe's linguistic diversity is also linked to the fact that, apart from the dominance of English, conditions are being created for the adoption of other foreign languages. The German language has a certain tradition not only in Slovakia, but also in other countries, and has also a particular importance in relation to economic activities or mobility in order to study and work. Promoting the German language not only means promoting multilingualism and the development of language competences, but it also provide their users with increased chances in mobility, employability, competitiveness and thus a better standard of living, as well as helping them to understand other cultures and the cultures of neighboring countries, thus contributing to intercultural understanding.

Following the Council's recommendations on a comprehensive approach to language teaching and learning, we want to contribute to this priority of European education in particular by:

- improving cooperation between institutions responsible for initial and further language teacher education (by creating targeted strategic partnership),
- developing research in the field of new pedagogical practices,
- designing and implementing innovative teaching and assessment practices (and, within the context of the horizontal priority, in particular the utilization of digital tools),
- initiating a project that will employ digital tools in a real-world environment,
- in follow-up activities by innovating the initial training of German language teachers.

It is also important that language competence or digital competences are not developed in isolation; we consider it important to mutually develop a number of key competences, as defined in the European Reference Framework for Key Competences.

Based on a survey in the form of narrative interviews, we found out from the contacted grammar schools and secondary schools that the teachers from practice also perceive the same aspects in question described above (low motivation of learners, their "resistance" to German, declining independence in learning, etc.), while at the same time stating that the methods and didactic procedures they know and use are not able to overcome these obstacles. A pleasing finding is that they are actively interested in improving their own educational qualifications and that they see in the proposed solutions (see description of the innovation aspect of the project) a chance to improve the situation and the quality of teaching. In addition to the need to improve their own professional competence, they also mention the need to learn how to work with digital tools. Multiple deficits in digital competence, or the lack of appropriate methodology and the necessary experience in on-line teaching have become acute specifically in the context of the transition to on-line teaching during the Corona-crisis. Most teachers were caught unprepared by this situation - apart from their technical background and their actual mastering of ICT technologies - they found themselves in a situation for which neither their university education nor their further qualification development or practical experience had prepared them. They reacted to it mainly by adapting methods and practices to the on-line environment and often cited its various limitations (lack of interaction with students, impersonality of the environment, inability to use many common methods, etc.). On-line teaching is certainly associated with certain limitations, but these are derived from the desire to transfer conventional practices to the computer screen. This approach is not correct, in that although digital tools do not allow for certain types of activities that are common in conventional learning environments, they do, on the other hand, offer new opportunities and methods that require certain skills and know-how to make use of them.

II. SOLUTION DESIGN - PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Our proposed project entitled *Practical Guide for On-line German Language Teaching* addresses to the above-mentioned premises, and is currently implemented as part of the scheme Erasmus+ under the ref. 2020-1-SK01-KA226-SCH-094410. [URL 4]. The project team consists of three universities (University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia; Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic; Vilnius University, Lithuania) and six grammar schools (Janko Matúška Grammar School in Galanta, Slovakia; Ján Holý Grammar School in Trnava, Slovakia; Grammar and secondary vocational school Dr. V. Smejkal, Ústí nad Labem, Czech Republic; Grammar and Secondary Vocational School Mikulov, Czech Republic; Vilniaus Gabios Gymnazija, Lithuania; Vilniaus jezuiti gymnazija, Lithuania). It aims to contribute to the parallel development of linguistic competence (through the learning of the German language), digital competence (through the adaptation of learning practices to the digital environment), educational competence (the integration of steps leading to autonomous learning into the proposed methodologies) and competence in cultural awareness and expression (with regard to the culture of the German-speaking countries and the cultural particularities of

the countries involved in the project). The aim of the project is therefore to develop and provide German language teachers with a suitable methodological guide, and innovate both learning and evaluation practices in a way that is relevant to the current digital age and the needs of on-line teaching.

However, in our survey teachers expressed some concern about the discrepancy between academic theory and their actual practice. For this reason, we chose to address the problem using a down-top method. This approach also follows from the aforementioned recommendations of the European Commission. Selected teachers from practice will contribute to the project output, and in collaboration with university experts will develop supporting material for the needs of on-line teaching (various tasks, exercises and activities) and based on the experience of its implementation in the real classroom, the university experts will compile a practical methodological guide for use in the real teaching. The composition of the team with its international level will not only contribute to the quality of the project outputs by bringing together international experts and by exchanging best practices and experiences, but will also enable the creation of learning material that is not tied to a single national education system, thus guaranteeing its wide applicability across the EU.

The material output of the project will be a methodological guide for on-line German language teaching, taking into account the use of digital tools and the latest practices in the field of language teaching and building foreign language competences. It will also include a set of practical tasks, activities and exercises that will take the form of an open educational resource. As the project foresees not only the creation but also the ongoing implementation of materials to support on-line learning, the results of the project may be utilized already during its implementation. We expect that the developed material will contribute to improving the quality of the teaching itself, as well as to increasing the language competence of the pupils. In turn, it will contribute to the innovation of educational practices in the context of the digital age.

The implementation of on-line materials should be accompanied by the establishment of international peer groups using social networking and electronic communication. The result will therefore be an increase in motivation to learn a foreign language based on an understanding of its importance as a means of communication. This will also support development of pupils' intercultural competence. Methods leading to the development of learning competence towards autonomous learning will also be implemented. The different phases of the implementation of the teaching materials will be accompanied by a survey of both pupils and teachers, which, as a by-product of the project will provide experts from the university environment with valuable data for further scientific research in the field of methodology and didactics. This data will be an important input from practice for the needs of further scientific studies.

The results of the project are therefore intended to fulfill the needs identified in the introduction of this project, in terms of the project outputs, and will be usable in school practice within a wider European context. Their innovative character is intended to contribute to increasing the language competence of pupils, methodological and digital competence of teachers. They will also contribute to ensuring that on-line and the teaching utilizing OER is not just an emergency alternative in the educational process, but a valuable extension and complement to the existing forms and methods of teaching.

Within the context of the project's key priority, we take into account in particularly the fact that the younger generation is a generation of digital natives. Digital technologies, the Internet, on-line environment and social media are a natural part of their lives; however it is insufficiently and to a limited extent reflected in the educational process, which is by its nature confined to the offline world. Such an environment is deprived of many motivational impulses. The fact that knowledge of English or other languages can also be used in the process of studying German, or that language learning can be linked to the content of other subjects, especially those that are of interest and appeal to students - e.g. in terms of good academic performance or future career choices, etc. - also often remain frequently untapped. It is also the case that digital technologies can be not only the form but also the content of education, including in a foreign language.

The proposed project could follow the experience of the Erasmus+ project 2018-1-SK01-KA201-046316 addressing problem-based learning using Soft CLIL in LOTE languages teaching, with its approach to new content and development of teaching of languages other than English. [URL 5] Several partners of the newly formed strategic partnership were involved in the project. Positive experiences from the implementation of the Soft-CLIL project in practice show that the innovation of educational content is one of the important tools for the development of multiple competences in parallel, as well as for increasing students' motivation to learn by bringing non-traditional topics into the teaching. However, the previous project did not include the development of digital competences (it was more about developing financial literacy and linking foreign language teaching with vocational subjects) and also did not address the practices needed for on-line learning, because it has other priorities. In this respect, our new proposal represents an innovation in line with the priority of creating innovative practices in the digital age. Within our priority, in terms of methodological innovation, there is a room for instrumentalizing digital tools for the delivery of learning content, for the use of OERs, for personalization and differentiation of teaching, taking into account the learners' individual aptitudes and backgrounds, and for flipped classroom methodology, where the learners' individual activity is at the forefront in the preparation phase, thus transforming the classroom from a teaching space into a learning space. In this case, the on-line environment and digitized learning materials can be appropriate accompanying elements. We

consider such approach important, inter alia, because methods leading to autonomous learning are an essential part of teaching practice and building of learning competence. This includes the establishment of learning groups within terms of peer-to-peer learning, in which social networks and the media can also be used in an effective way to increase motivation for learning.

Our analysis of the projects in the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform shows that while there are a number of projects dedicated to the development of foreign language competences (also in the area of teaching German as a foreign language), as well as projects dedicated to the development of digital competences, however only very few of them combine both areas. Examples include the projects "Increasing digital skills, deepening communication skills as well as knowledge of social and emotional learning with regard to the professionalization of teachers and students' personal development" [URL 6], "Kompetenzentwicklung von Fremdsprachenlehrkräften im Netz und mit dem Netz - New Blended Learning und Web 2.0" [URL 7], or "Technology for education" [URL 8], to name but a few. However, these projects focus on different areas and problems, only developing the methodological or digital competence of teachers in the form of educational activities. These are, however, project activities based on top-down processes where teachers are a passive target group. But these projects do not produce intellectual outputs that can be further disseminated; when working with digital technologies, they focus on smartphones, smartboards, tablets, etc., which are more of a tool to be used in traditional classroom teaching. None of the projects address on-line learning and its particularities, nor do they explore open educational resources. Based on the above mentioned reasons, we are confident that our project has an innovative potential and also a capacity for dissemination of its results and further utilization in practice, also due to the fact that in the process of its implementation it combines the down to top and top-down methodology and envisages a significant link between the theoretical and practical levels, the academic environment and the environment of school practice.

The implementation of the project, should the project is submitted centrally, is based on the planned intellectual output, which is the key tool for achieving of the project's objectives, namely to innovate educational practices in the teaching of the German language within the context of the digital age, specifically by using digital tools, open educational resources, on-line environment, social media, etc. The Guide is developed in connection with practical teaching material - specific tasks and activities designed for use in on-line teaching; its theoretical part explains the methodology for working with this material, the theoretical aspects as well as practical recommendations and tips. The development of such teaching material is only possible in close connection with practice, so both teachers from practice and theoreticians from universities will be involved in its development. The output as a whole is planned as an open educational resource - the developed tasks, exercises and activities will be freely available on-line, as well as the planned methodology or its language versions.

The development of the Guide will involve the following sequential, successive steps and tasks:

1. The first step is literature retrieval and specific research on the topic of teaching in the on-line environment. The main task is to establish a theoretical framework and define specific issues relevant to the project output, which in the output will be linked to a practical solution of the problem.
2. The subsequent task, resulting from the previous step, will be a comparison and evaluation of analyses of the tasks and exercises typologies and identification of the basic types of tasks, exercises and on-line activities, which, in line with a precise timetable, should be developed by high school teachers in the next step.
3. In the following step, grammar school teachers will develop specific tasks and exercises and will design on-line activities.
4. Expert reviewers from universities will assess the exercises developed. In doing so, they will take into account the suitability of the exercise with respect to the definition of the task, i.e. the link between theoretical reflection and the practice
5. This is followed by a phase of incorporating the comments from the expert guarantors in line with a precise timetable.
6. The next step is the evaluation of the task by the expert guarantor. At the first step is the theoretical (didactic, methodological, professional) reflection of the practical product.
7. After this step, the prepared tasks and activities are finalized.
8. This is followed by the implementation of tasks and activities in the teaching. Teachers manage the implementation in a specified period of time according to the actual and specific conditions in their schools.
9. An important step is to evaluate of the implementation stage. This will be the evaluation of the quality of the prepared teaching materials based on questionnaires prepared for teachers in advance by assessors and expert guarantors.
10. The implementation will confirm the suitability of the tasks and will identify any shortcomings. Taking into account the reflections resulting from the implementation, teachers will develop further tasks and activities according to the timetable.
11. Following the completion of the implementation, a theoretical contextualization of the problems, and a proposal of the methodology for didactically correct development of on-line tasks and activities.
12. Prior to finalizing the output, two external assessors will assess the quality of handling of the subject with regard to the project objectives.

13. The last task will be the incorporation of comments and finalization of the output.

However, other tools are also needed to meet the project objectives, which should be coordinated in a timely matter, in order to individually complement and accompany the individual steps leading to the final output. For this reason, two educational activities are also included in the project. The first one, which targets both university and high school teachers, leads to the increase and development of the digital competence of both target groups, as it is a competence that is directly related to the development of a given intellectual output, the set priorities and the objectives of the project. Despite the fact that both target groups involved have a certain degree of digital competence, its development will help to increase the quality of the prepared outputs. The development of this competence itself is defined as one of the project objectives, but within the context of the intellectual product, the output of the first learning activity becomes at the same time an impetus for the development and implementation of innovative materials and new learning practices. However, the learning activity is also about acquiring knowledge in the field of modern and recent trends in education, which will likewise contribute to the improvement of the teaching competence of secondary school teachers on the one hand and the extension of knowledge of university teachers, and on the other hand, contribute to further improvement and innovation of the teaching materials prepared from the didactic point of view, which in this way can respond not only to the need education digitization and implementing of on-line tools and methodologies, but also response to other identified problems, such as increasing students' learning motivation, developing learning competence and autonomous learning skills, or the need for personalization and differentiation of the educational content. The second learning activity, in turn, appropriately complements the phase of implementation of new teaching materials and methods in practice, because it responds to possible problems identified in the first stage of implementation and, in the form of a workshop, deepens the methodological competence of field teachers. It also responds to the need of addressing new mechanisms and types of evaluation procedures within the context of digital learning and on-line teaching. Other activities that will help to meet the project's objective have dissemination and multiplication character and they address target groups outside the strategic partnership - preferably teachers of German, but also other teachers of foreign languages or other subjects, as well as groups in the field of language policy and school policy-making, or institutions involved in the preparation of future teachers.

III. Conclusion

The project relies on innovative practices in the digital age. In digital tools we see the potential for new learning opportunities that allow for enhanced personalization and flexibility of learning, as well as the introduction of new teaching methods and evaluation practices. These tools can increase access to open educational resources and make education more accessible to certain disadvantaged groups. However, school education institutions need to use not only open educational resources, but also appropriate methodological tools, in order to use, sustain or develop them effectively. Therefore, in this regard we consider it necessary to provide the school staff with appropriate digital skills and competences that can guarantee adequate and effective use of these resources and digital tools. These skills are essential for all educators and teachers. For foreign language teachers, these skills have added value and can help to increase students' motivation to learn another foreign language besides English. We will be able to better evaluate the specific results and benefits of the project only after the implementation of the developed teaching materials into practice.

References

[URL 1] https://www.forbes.sk/slovaci-neovladaju-nemcinu-firmy-ktore-ju-vyzadovali-sa-jej-v-inzeratoch-vzdavaju/ (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/sk/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0669 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 3] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(02)&rid=7 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 4] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2020-1-SK01-KA226-SCH-094410 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 5] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2018-1-SK01-KA201-046316 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 6] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2020-1-AT01-KA101-077645 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 7] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2014-1-DE02-KA104-000506 (24. 03. 2022).
[URL 8] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2016-1-SE01-KA219-022083 (24. 03. 2022).

About Author (s):

In digital tools we see the potential for new learning opportunities that allow for enhanced personalization and flexibility of learning, as well as the introduction of new teaching methods and evaluation practices.