



*Ružena Čiliaková*

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5176-6768>

Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

## INNOVATIVE TEACHING MATERIALS FOR SLOVAK AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE INTEGRATING CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

**Abstract:** The author deals with the importance of cultural aspects as supporting elements in teaching Slovak as a foreign language. The research focuses on the views and pedagogical practices of Slovak language teachers and volunteers working abroad at various levels of education. The aim was to find out their views, to what extent they consider the cultural environment to be the basis of teaching, and what methods and approaches they use to integrate them into the pedagogical process. The results indicate that the majority of respondents perceive the cultural context as a key factor in motivating students, building their language skills, and deepening intercultural understanding. In this regard, the principles of education for sustainable development play a crucial role in shaping teaching strategies that integrate cultural heritage into language education, fostering long-term linguistic and intercultural competence among Slovaks living abroad. Nevertheless, they also point to certain challenges, such as the lack of appropriate didactic materials or the time-consuming nature of teaching preparation. Author presents the educational material system "Let's play about Slovakia in Slovak" as innovative teaching materials for Slovak as a foreign language (mainly for Slovaks living abroad) as outputs of the project financed by The Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic.

**Keywords:** foreign language teaching, cultural environment, substantive content, teachers' experiences, integration of content, innovation, didactic and methodical materials

## INNOWACYJNE MATERIAŁY DYDAKTYCZNE DO NAUKI JĘZYKA SŁOWACKIEGO JAKO OBCEGO: INTEGRACJA DZIEDZICTWA KULTUROWEGO NA RZECZ ZRÓWNOWAŻONEJ EDUKACJI JĘZYKOWEJ

**Streszczenie (abstrakt):** Autor omawia znaczenie aspektów kulturowych jako elementów wspierających nauczanie języka słowackiego jako języka obcego. Badania koncentrują się na opiniach i praktykach pedagogicznych nauczycieli języka słowackiego oraz wolontariuszy pracujących za granicą na różnych poziomach edukacji. Celem było zbadać ich poglądy, w jakim stopniu uznają kontekst kulturowy za podstawę nauczania oraz jakie metody i podejścia stosują, aby je zintegrować w procesie pedagogicznym. Wyniki wskazują, że większość respondentów postrzega kontekst kulturowy jako kluczowy czynnik motywujący uczniów, rozwijający ich umiejętności językowe i pogłębiający zrozumienie międzykulturowe. W tym kontekście zasady edukacji na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju odgrywają kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu strategii nauczania, które integrują dziedzictwo kulturowe w edukację językową, wspierając długoterminową

kompetencję językową i międzykulturową wśród Słowaków żyjących za granicą. Niemniej jednak wskazują także na pewne wyzwania, takie jak brak odpowiednich materiałów dydaktycznych lub czasochłonność przygotowania do zajęć. Autor przedstawia system materiałów edukacyjnych "Bawimy się po słowacku o Słowacji" (Hráme sa o Slovensku po slovensky) jako innowacyjne materiały dydaktyczne do nauczania języka słowackiego jako języka obcego (głównie dla Słowaków żyjących za granicą) jako wyniki projektu finansowanego przez Ministerstwo Edukacji, Badań, Rozwoju i Młodzieży Słowacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** nauczanie języków obcych, środowisko kulturowe, treści merytoryczne, doświadczenia nauczycieli, integracja treści, innowacyjność, materiał dydaktyczny i metodyczny

Available statistical data indicate that approximately 230,000 Slovaks live in the European Union and overseas, categorized as so-called modern labor emigrants. In addition to traditional European destination countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and France, where Slovaks migrate for work, new destinations include Ireland, England, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Among overseas countries, the main destinations are the USA, Canada, Australia, and, to some extent, New Zealand. An overall overview of the number of Slovaks living abroad in countries over the world is provided by the Office of Slovaks Living Abroad in its summary report for year 2023<sup>1</sup>. Slovak as a foreign language is an important part of language education in countries which include the diaspora of Slovaks. Interest in the Slovak language is growing in connection with migration and strengthening the identity of Slovaks living abroad. According to Erich Mistrík<sup>2</sup>, the term cultural identity is often associated with national pride, patriotism, a sense of belonging to a certain social group, or cooperation within a group. Cultural identity is not only about the community's awareness of itself. It is a much more holistic phenomenon and is the result of much more complex processes. Many educational and cultural organizations operating for several generations of Slovaks in Serbia, Hungary and Romania, in addition to teaching Slovak, have long supported the development of their cultural identity through the organization of festivals, theater performances, literary competitions, and the like. This trend has also been observable in recent years among Slovaks in Western Europe, who emigrated mainly after 1990. In this context, the principles of education for sustainable development emphasize the importance of integrating cultural heritage and environmental awareness into language education, ensuring that Slovak language learning supports both linguistic competence and long-term cultural sustainability among Slovak communities abroad.

Since 2015, the Faculty of Education at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica has been actively participating in the project of The Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic, reference 2016-8774/13472-200A, titled

<sup>1</sup> Úrad pre Slovákov žijúcich v zahraničí, *Správa za rok 2023 o štátnej politike vo vzťahu k Slovákom žijúcim v zahraničí*, s. 5, <https://www.uszz.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Sprava-za-rok-2023-.pdf> [access: 30.03.2025].

<sup>2</sup> E. Mistrík et al., *Kultúra a multikultúrna výchova*, Iris, Bratislava 1999.

"The Impact of Educational and Sociocultural Factors on the Formation of the National Identity of Slovaks Living Abroad". The project primarily focuses on training educators in Slovak community centers abroad and developing as well as testing didactic and methodological tools to support the teaching of Slovak as a second (foreign) language in these centers. As part of this broader initiative, a sub-project titled "Let's play about Slovakia in Slovak" was introduced. Its objective is the development, creation, and evaluation of didactic and methodological tools (materials) for teaching Slovak, primarily targeting children and younger school-age students. As stated above, the methodological materials were primarily designed for children and younger school-age students. At this stage of development, a student's personality is still forming, which affects their willpower and cognitive development, especially in terms of self-control. Children in this age group often struggle with persistence and responsibility, are easily influenced by doubts and fears, and tend to give up on their plans quickly. Therefore, it is essential to include educational situations and employ techniques, methods, and procedures that positively develop the cognitive, character, and volitional traits of students, as well as enhance their knowledge, cognitive abilities, and metacompetencies.

Currently, methodological and didactic system, comprises several components, from small pocket games, workbooks, multimedia platform to a set of four large table games, thematically divided based on Slovak phonology into the following sections: The Land of Vowels and Diphthongs, The Land of Soft Consonants, The Land of Hard Consonants, and The Land of Ambivalent Consonants. The complete system entitled *Let's play about Slovakia in Slovak* (materials published between years 2017 and 2025) is described by authors Zuzana Kováčová Švecová and Alena Doušková<sup>3</sup>, and is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Methodological and didactic material for children and teachers entitled "Let's play about Slovakia in Slovak"

<sup>3</sup> A. Doušková, Z. Kováčová Švecová, *Slovenský jazyk pre malých cudzincov*, Belianum, Banská Bystrica 2022.

This modern educational approach has been enriched with principles of self-correction, collaborative language learning, individualization, and variability in learning, which represent key elements of effective learning. As the latest publication reflecting the need to connect cultural heritage with language teaching to foster national awareness, authors have published methodical publication *Poznávame poklady slovenskej kultúry* (We Discover the Treasures of Slovak Culture) by authors Miroslava Gašparová and Ružena Čiliaková et al.<sup>4</sup>. This publication provides methodological suggestions for learning Slovak and developing the cultural identity of children in younger and older school age by using and applying selected elements of the Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of Slovakia<sup>5</sup> to the educational process.

In 2024, we conducted a survey among teachers and volunteers in Slovak schools and centers abroad. The survey aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on the possibilities of integrating cultural content into Slovak language teaching at various educational levels. The primary objectives of the survey were to determine whether teachers integrate cultural content into their Slovak language education and to identify which elements of Slovak culture are most frequently incorporated into Slovak language lessons based on teaching experience and the level of education.

### Methodology

The research problem is centred around the question: What are the opinions of teachers and volunteers working in Slovak schools and centers abroad on the integration of cultural content into Slovak language education? Which elements of Slovak culture do they most frequently incorporate in this process?

We used a questionnaire created with twelve items. In regard to this paper, we evaluated items: Do you integrate Slovak cultural content into your teaching? What cultural elements do you most often incorporate into teaching Slovak? How do students learn about Slovak culture? What benefits does integration of Slovak culture bring?

A survey includes 53 teachers from 21 different educational institutions. The participants represent Slovak schools or weekend educational centers (44 respondents), elementary school with an optional subject – Slovak language and literature (9 respondents) in Serbia, Croatia, Italy, England. They teach various age groups: 13 respondents work with preschool-aged children (preschool education), 23 with younger school-aged children (primary education), 8 work at the secondary education level, and 9 teach mixed-age groups. The average teaching experience of respondents is 18.5 years. From the perspective of teaching experience, the sample was divided into two groups: up to 15 years and over 15 years. The teachers in centers and schools abroad face challenges,

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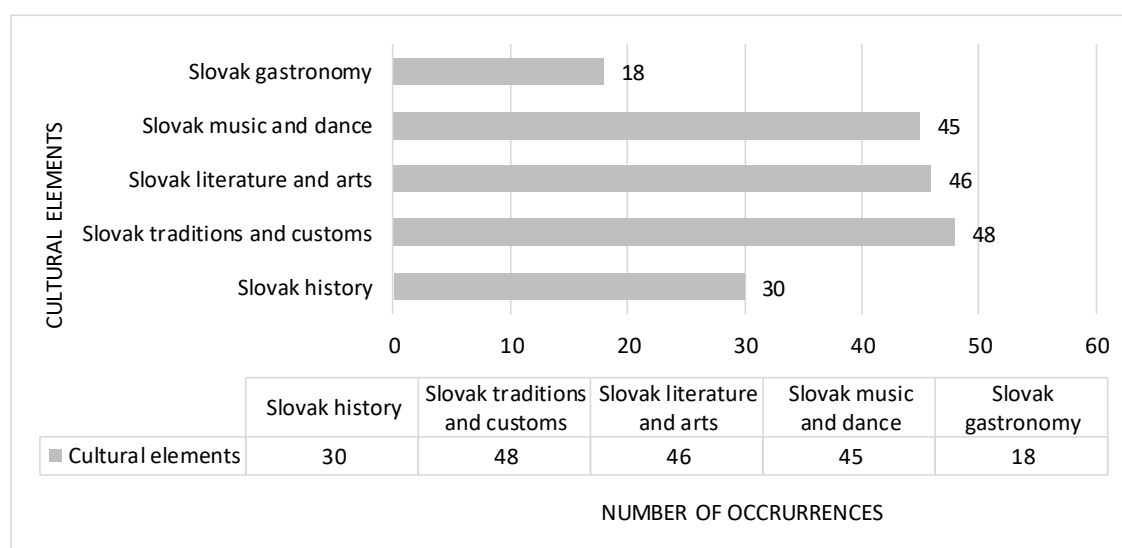
<sup>4</sup> M. Gašparová, R. Čiliaková et. al., *Poznávame poklady slovenskej kultúry: námety integrovaných aktivít na poznávanie nehmotného kultúrneho dedičstva Slovenska*, Belianum, Banská Bystrica 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Centrum pre tradičnú ľudovú kultúru, *Representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of Slovakia*, <https://www.ludovakultura.sk/en/ich-lists-slovakia/representative-list-of-the-intangible-cultural-heritage-of-slovakia/elements-included-in-the-representative-list-of-the-intangible-cultural-heritage-of-slovakia/> [access: 06.04.2025].

such as existential issues, financial issues, which require more time to establish themselves as professionals. The sample selection was available – the respondents were participants of the methodological course titled "Uncover the treasures of the Slovak language and culture".

### Analysis and Results

The basic finding is, that 96% of surveyed teachers or volunteers integrate elements of Slovak culture into their teaching content. The finding also suggests highly motivation to enrich language lessons with cultural elements. Data in Figure 2 shows the frequency of integration of various cultural elements into the Slovak language teaching. The results suggest that Slovak traditions and customs are most frequently incorporated into teaching (48 responses), followed by Slovak literature and art (46 responses) and Slovak music and dance (45 responses). Slovak history appeared in 30 responses, and the least represented element was Slovak gastronomy (18 responses). By integrating cultural elements into language education, teachers create a holistic learning experience that goes beyond grammar and vocabulary, fostering an appreciation for Slovak traditions, values, and heritage.

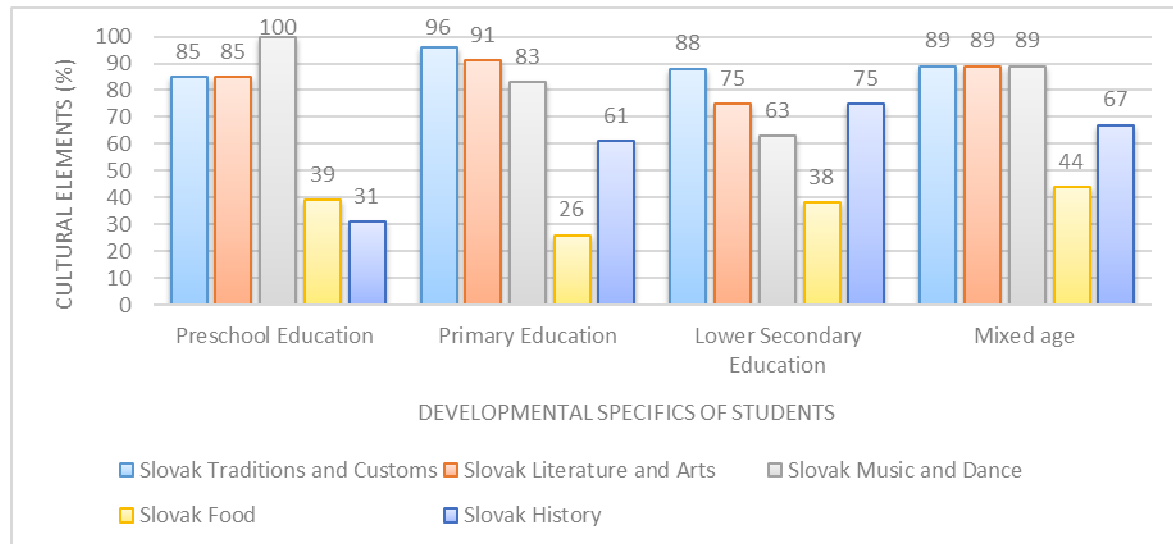


**Figure 2:** Frequency of cultural elements in responses (N = 187)

Cultural components are, on average, most frequently used by respondents teaching Slovak to students of mixed ages (mean = 3,7), while they are least integrated by respondents teaching preschool-age students (mean = 3,38). Respondents with a shorter length of teaching experience marked fewer cultural components on average (mean = 2,96) compared to respondents with a longer length of teaching experience (mean = 3,9).

Respondents working with children in preschool age in the integration of cultural elements into the teaching of the Slovak language place the greatest emphasis on Slovak folk music and dance (100%). The integration of elements of Slovak traditions and customs (85%), Slovak literature and art (85%), allows children to gain basic awareness of

culture in a playful and creative way. Slovak food (39%) and the history of Slovakia (31%) are less often integrated into the teaching of the Slovak language. Figure 3 presents respondents' opinions on the integration of cultural elements in Slovak language education based on the level of education.



**Figure 3:** Integrating cultural elements based on the level of education

The responses of respondents working with younger school-aged students highlight the potential of these elements to enrich language instruction mainly with aesthetic and artistic dimensions. Slovak traditions and customs (96%), Slovak literature and arts (91%) and Slovak music and dance (83%) respondents consider as the most frequently integrated cultural elements. Lower frequency of integration of Slovak historical themes (61%) and gastronomy (26%) suggests that these areas may be less accessible or relevant, given the age group of the students and the nature of the curriculum. Respondents working at the second level of elementary schools emphasize Slovak traditions and customs (88%), Slovak history (75%), literature and art (75%), while music and dance (63%) are slightly less represented, and Slovak food (38%) is the least integrated. Respondents working with mixed ages students consider Slovak food as the least frequently integrated area in their Slovak language education.

Responses to the question, "How do students learn about Slovak culture?" indicate that respondents prefer diverse approaches. These approaches reflect the varied needs of students and the possibilities of the teaching process. The most prevalent method is practical activities (26 responses), which provide experiential learning and enable active student engagement. This approach facilitates the connection between theory and practice, increasing the attractiveness of lessons. Lectures and discussions (22 responses) suggest efforts to develop students' critical thinking and discussion skills while deepening their theoretical knowledge of Slovak culture. Excursions and trips (9 responses) offer authentic contact with cultural and historical settings, helping students better understand the significance of traditions and history in real-life contexts. The use of ICT and the internet

(21 responses) reflects the adaptation of modern technologies in teaching, improving access to diverse materials and enhancing interactivity and student motivation. Leisure activities (21 responses) highlight efforts to integrate education with extracurricular interests, making cultural education a more natural and relaxed part of students' lives.

Teachers perceive the integration of cultural elements into education as particularly beneficial for fostering cultural identity, preserving traditions, and connecting students with their roots. From the teachers' perspective the most frequently mentioned benefits include: Preservation of cultural heritage and language; Exploration of Slovak traditions, customs, and history; Development of identity and a sense of belonging; Education in values and cultural appreciation; Practical and experiential learning, such learning is considered highly effective, as it combines emotional experiences with education; Support for intergenerational connections; History as a foundation for understanding the past and present.

### **Conclusion**

The findings indicate that the extent to which cultural components are incorporated varies based on teaching experience and the educational level of students. Teachers with more experience integrate cultural elements more frequently, and certain components, such as Slovak folk music and traditions, are prioritized in preschool education, while history and gastronomy are less commonly included. The variety of approaches demonstrates that teachers recognize the importance of combining theoretical and practical methods to make Slovak culture engaging and meaningful for students. It also underscores their commitment to accommodating diverse preferences and learning styles. The research has limits. Research focuses on teachers and volunteers in Slovak schools and centers abroad, but the sample may not be sufficiently representative of all countries and types of schools in which Slovak is taught. Teachers' and volunteers' opinions on the integration of cultural content into teaching may be influenced by their personal experiences, attitudes and preferences, which may lead to subjective distortion of the data.

Innovations in education play a key role in preserving and developing Slovak linguistic and cultural identity abroad. Modern methodological and didactic materials, research on the needs of teachers and students, as well as targeted educational programs, enable more effective transmission of linguistic and cultural values to future generations of Slovaks living outside their homeland. A significant step is also the realization of educational seminars and methodological training for teachers and volunteers, either in-person in various countries or through online platforms. Furthermore, other projects are also addressing the issue of language education for children, such as the APVV-22-0450 grant focused on the development of language skills in children with a different native language and the KEGA 008UMB-4/2024 grant, which focuses on the creation of textbooks and methodological materials for the children of Slovaks living abroad. The introduction of the methodological-didactic system "Let's play about Slovakia in Slovak" opens new possibilities in developing communication, social, and self-regulation competencies in children and students. Systemic and innovative approaches in language

education can significantly contribute to the preservation and strengthening of Slovak identity in foreign communities and ensure that the Slovak language becomes a natural part of the lives of young generations of Slovaks worldwide.

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### **Contact details**

Ružena Čiliaková, [ruzena.ciliakova@umb.sk](mailto:ruzena.ciliakova@umb.sk)