Abstract: This article provides readers with an insight into the process of teaching/learning the inflectional West Slavic Czech language at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové. The contribution is elaborated from several points of view, on the background of commonly featured key teaching/learning theories grouped into the following paradigms of behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism and humanism. Description of the learning/teaching process is accompanied by demonstration of basic principles which were stated by Comenius already in the 17th century but which are incredibly eternal, vivid and efficient up to now. Principles and approaches are illustrated in both face2face classes and in work in a virtual learning space in a sophisticatedly designed Czech Language e-course for Foreigners. The course is highly adaptive it can be modified in accordance with a current situation to foster needs and abilities of participants from various cultural backgrounds. The end of contribution brings findings from three-year experience with implementation of the e-course supporting face2face teaching/learning of Czech language and summarizing remarks on learning languages and teaching techniques. Provided analysis demonstrates how educators can use the learning/teaching overviews and sciences together with in here described e-course to design and run more effective formal and informal learning environments.

Key-Words: E-learning, Motivation, Learning management system, Language, Information and communication technologies, Multicultural environment, Teaching/learning theories, Didactic principles

1 Introduction

The paper encompasses two main areas which inherently blend together: didactic area that represents the theoretical level and the practical level covering the real current educational situation in teaching/learning foreign students the Czech language at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Králové (UHK).

Jan Amos Komenský known to the world by Latin name John Amos Comenius was a great scholar, philosopher and educational reformer of the 17th century coming from the present Czech Republic [1].

His thoughts and works brought revolutionary changes into education, his principles or theorems even now sound modern, natural and form fundamentals of didactics disregarding which philosophical paradigm is currently trendy (behaviourism, cognitivism or constructivism) [2]. Masterpiece Didactica Magna which represents one of the main sources for this paper was originally written in Czech language and then translated into Latin.

Komenský’s principles will be gradually highlighted in this text so that they will form a kind of a red thread going through the whole contribution. Couple of examples of key principles is enumerated in this introductory part to open the paper with a didactic tasting from the medieval time:

- Comenius was persuaded that students (boys and girls) shouldn’t be overloaded by the amount of study materials
- Careful explanation is a must whereas it is desirable to proceed from easier issue to more complicated
- Students should not learn empty concepts, understanding the concept is primary then learning words follows [3].

History of teaching/learning Czech language at the faculty started in 2000. All foreign students at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, UHK can study an optional subject Czech language within their programme study. Since that time a great deal of experience in the following areas has been gained relating to cross-cultural differences in the process of education, supportive material for running the subject and aspects of motivation, various approaches were introduced, tested, accepted or abandoned.
2 Foreign university students and approach to teaching/learning Czech language

This article provides readers with an insight into the process of teaching/learning the inflectional West Slavic Czech language at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, UHK. Analysis of teaching/learning paradigms of this language forms the core part of the paper. Before revealing particular approaches and methods in teaching foreign university students the Czech language subject, selected areas like description of the faculty environment, activities, university foreign policy and other necessary prerequisites for running the subject will be described to give the reader chance to create his/her own view and space to perceive the issue.

2.1 University foreign policy

Year 1998/99 is the milestone in foreign policy at universities, especially in students’ mobility, that year the educational initiative called SOCRATES programme was introduced in the Czech Republic. The same year 13 students left their home faculty to spend one semester abroad at partners’ universities. International cooperation was focused especially in maximum involvement into the wide range of European programmes like Tempus, Socrates/Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci as stated in the annual report of that year [4]. As for faculty foreign policy and its international cooperation one decade passed and the goals have not changed, they have widened, Socrates programme still flourishes, more students leave for foreign stays at partners’ universities, last year the number of students increased five times compared to the first year of Socrates programme. Last year the faculty concluded 36 bilateral contracts. Among traditional areas of international cooperation rank eLearning, cooperation in the field of education, mobilities and transfer of European standards. University education gradually expanded to the width but also to the depth, new teaching/learning techniques were introduced or old ones were renewed, primarily due to massive implementation of Information and communication technologies into the process of education [5].

Beside suitable university political background there were several essential prerequisites for getting foreign students to our faculty like preparation of English version of study programmes and consequently acquiring official accreditation. The offer of study programmes which are run in English language now comprises three educational university levels; foreigners can attend bachelor study programme (Applied Informatics and Information Management), magister study programme (Information Management) and also doctorate study programme (Information and Knowledge Management) is accessible in English language. This year over 1800 students study at the Faculty of Informatics, more than one hundred of them are foreign students.

2.2 Teaching/learning of the Czech language

Likewise in other subjects that are attended by foreign students the subject Czech language is taught via English language.

The Department of Applied Languages at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, UHK ensures lessons of Czech language to foreign students. There is a high degree of participation of the department teachers in research on new trends in language teaching; for nearly one decade language teachers have been involved in e-learning, the department organizes every two years an international conference Scientific research and teaching/learning of languages which proves its professional competence and potential.

Teaching of the Czech language subject is fully ensured by the teachers of the ‘home’ faculty language department. In accordance with the reached language competence foreign students can attend relevant level of the six-semester optional subject Czech Language 1-Czech Language 6.

2.2.1 Organization of subject study

The subject is organized as a semester one with two classes weekly. The whole offered course consists of six parts, students get two credits for each odd semester and four credits for an even semester. Because of the fact that most of foreign students come to study at the faculty within Erasmus exchange mobility programme for only one or maximum two semesters, the whole 6 semester course has been completed just by a limited number of students.

Goals of each subject are stated in syllabus containing the set of communication and grammar topics, reference literature, and requirements to get the credit and pass the exam. Communication is the key element of the Czech Language subject in each syllabus, extracts from syllabuses follow in quotes: in the syllabus of the Czech Language I and II, those are subjects for beginners, goals aim at “developing practical communicative skills in everyday situations”, goal of the subject for intermediate level of language competence is following “to develop student’s communicative skills and improve their language knowledge with the focus on vocabulary extension and awareness of Czech grammar system” and finally the goal of the subject for advanced students is “to develop already existing skills of students. To consolidate and expand their language knowledge with the focus on accuracy and correctness of the student’s utterances.”
But a syllabus of any subject is just a frame or outline and it is up to the teacher to create accommodating environment where students can acquire, share and develop their knowledge, learn and discuss values, ideas and views.

Janua Linguarium Reserata - Gate of Tongues Unlocked

Before moving towards the teaching/learning process itself, let’s have a look at a brief insertion on teaching languages according to nearly 400 years old book Janua Linguarium Reserata (Gate of Tongues Unlocked). This is a little textbook written by Comenius on teaching Latin in a “natural” and “nature’s” way [6]. Students should start with learning things and vocabulary and not to focus on grammar. His approach was completely revolutionary in today’s terminology we could say the teaching/learning strategy was ‘cognitive’. Learning language was supposed to go together with learning things and consequently with understanding words which corresponds to brain-based learning and which doesn’t support the image of a passive learner starting as a clean slate and waiting for the stimuli [7], [8].

Janua Linguarium Reserata textbook might be considered as a kind of concise encyclopaedia or dictionary containing list of cognizable things with Latin and Czech version. Revealed topics are ranged into one hundred chapters which encompass nature, sciences, society, dwelling places, crafts, another great topic is a man and his/her physical, spiritual and divine part [2].

Up to now the parallel between the philosophy of the book Gate of Tongues Unlocked and concept of teaching Czech language could be seen in the emphasis on vocabulary and selection of topics close to everyday-life. Another parallel, this time taken from didactic principles from Didactica Magna, is in the Principle to learn things gradually from easier to more difficult one. Topics in the Czech Language subject repeat at various language competence levels, learners move up the spiral, content of the topics gets gradually richer both in vocabulary and grammatical constructions (J.A.C. - Principle of steady and systematic approach and Principle of durability ensured by repetition (J.A.C. - Jan Amos Comenius)).

2.2.2 Face to face classes

A brief characteristics of Czech language from the linguistic view makes the introduction into this section so as that readers could imagine how complicated the language is and why it is so much important to work out study material in both sensitive and sensible way. Czech language ranks among Slavic languages, which are inflectional; they abound with rich morphology. Slavic languages are characterised by enormous morphophonemic alternations in their derivational and inflectional morphology [9]. Moreover, the rules of morphology in Czech language are extremely irregular and many forms have official, colloquial and sometimes semi-official variants. Nouns, adjectives, pronouns and numbers are declined (7 cases, singular and plural, plenty of declension models) and verbs are conjugated; the other parts of speech are not inflected [10].

There is no intention to teach students difficult grammar. Students master just fundamentals of grammar within practising pronunciation, key vocabulary and common phrases with teacher and with one another during the classes. Grammar is presented in a simplified form and always in connection with discussed topic. Here we can see other principles from Comenius didactic list of theorems – Principle of adequacy and Principle of transfer of learning material into practice, Principle of awareness, which means studying and understanding.

It would be really discouraging (J.A.C. - Principle of fun) to focus on declination of nouns or verb conjunction with foreign students who have just arrived and who are supposed to stay just for one semester on Erasmus Programme. Most of written language tasks, especially spelling are checked with great deal of tolerance.

Development of communication skills is of key importance; practical use of language in situations of everyday life forms the backbone of the subject. That is why activities as creation of short sentences using newly learnt words, practising dialogues (listening, repetition, imitation, adaptation, creation) and games with vocabulary and simple grammar structures occupy most of the teaching/learning space (J.A.C. – Principle of learner’s activity).

The above mentioned activities correspond mostly to constructivist model where the learner actively constructs or builds new ideas or concepts but when we try to explore the process of learning languages more deeply we will find out that quite a big deal of learning corresponds to the cognitivist paradigm, as well. In both constructivist and cognitive paradigms learners are considered to be active but as for constructivist view the learner is an information constructor rather than the person striving for acquiring knowledge[11]. In studying languages students have to acquire firstly a big portion of capital and then they can approach to constructions. It is true that it is desirable to instruct learners to construct their own concepts but these ideas and concepts have to be considerably supported by teacher. Anyway, due to the fact that Czech language belongs to rather difficult languages (compared to Spanish or English) it would be tremendously demanding (useless) to make students develop most of the rules and create the structure of the language. Selected language issues on the other side call for constructivist approach: like gender, comparison of adjectives and adverbs, etc. My closest pedagogical approach is humanism, where self motivation, human potential, interest of the learner are main attributes of this paradigm. ‘Humanism’ is an approach which enables teachers and learners to create...
fruitful and supportive environment with self-actualized learners. Czech language is an optional subject, it is no subject fundamental for building their university career; students get intentionally registered into this subject because of their interest and desire to learn, not because the Czech language is a linguistic phenomenon. ‘Affective and cognitive needs’ are in this respect clearly recognizable. Foreign students attend the classes to get the skill of communication in new surroundings, to enlarge possibilities of further learning and to get the language advantage as a gate to further learning and knowledge in the general sense.

3 Creation of the supportive e-course for foreign students

Three years ago there was a significant increase in number of foreign students; these students were and are from various cultural backgrounds with different language competences, from universities from countries of European Union, from Turkey and from Taiwan. Preparation of study materials for such a mixed-ability group was demanding and needed change. It was time to update an approach to this subject. Faculty of Informatics and Management, UHK has acquired reputation in the field of e-learning, with significant success with implementation of information and communication technologies into teaching languages, as well [5]. First language e-courses were already designed and run eight years ago [12]. Research on efficiency of language e-courses for students of both present and distant forms has been made [13]. Language e-courses have become a standard part of the faculty offer of the Institute of Distant Studies and of the Interuniversity study project [14]. So it can be stated that e-learning in teaching/learning languages has established itself firmly. So why not to use this proof technique in finding language solution for foreign students, as well?

3.1 Guide to the e-course Czech language I

An optional subject Czech Language I is designed for complete beginners. The aims of the e-course are the same as the aims expressed in the syllabus of the subject Czech language I. The supportive e-course accompanies traditional face to face lessons which are run two hours a week. The e-course Czech Language for Foreign Students has been run five times. Foreign students are from various cultural environments. Special space is given to this phenomenon within standard lessons as well as outside these lessons that is to say in the e-course, especially in the discussion section, see Fig 1.

For participants of the course it is a highly motivating factor when they are given chance to introduce their country, its customs, habits, history and literature, sport, cuisine, etc. Multicultural issue is not only interesting and enriching but it also demands a portion of sensitivity

3.1.1 Technical aspect and structure of the e-course

E-course Czech Language for Foreign Students is placed in the list of e-courses of the Faculty of Informatics and Management in the learning management system WebCT. The course was created in HTML language, standard XHTML 1.0 TRANSITIONAL. It utilizes CSS styles defined in special files. Validity of entire pages as well as added files with defined style is axiomatic. Due to validity of the code the compatibility with common browsers is granted, e.g. Firefox, Opera. JavaScript is widely used for visualization of active elements. The e-course consists of 8 lessons. It takes from 45 to 90 minutes to cover study material from particular lessons. Beside a compulsory part of study materials there has been developed a supplementary part for hard working students. The supplementary part is for enthusiasts, in case of students’ interest it is discussed with a tutor but it is never tested by a tutor. A simple instructive Guide to the Course was written for students.
main objectives and tasks of that lesson. Key vocabulary of the lesson is always placed at the beginning of the main part. Content of the main part is blend of grammar and communication – the ratio of grammar and communication varies. At least two quizzes or assignments were created to each lesson so as you could test your gained knowledge.

The course was designed as on-line course, students work in the off-line mode when they work out their assignments. When it comes to the virtual space, the on-line course utilizes all tools that are provided by this LMS except for real time communication tool „whiteboard“). If necessary, in case of student’s long-term absence (illness, travelling home) a communication application Skype was used.

3.1.2 Multimedia: design, colors, pictures, links

Graphics of the course follows the standards of web design see more [15] [16]. A graphic concept is based on high contrast of the text and background. The text must be perfectly legible, harmonious pastel shade colours do not disturb the reader. Particular lessons differ in colour and graphic element in the heading, see Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Heading with active links to on-line sources (TV, radio, wikipedia, official webpages of the Czech Republic, grammar, dictionaries)

The text itself is complemented with graphic elements harmoniously corresponding to the content of the page. These graphic elements were designed not to disturb the user from the page content; they nearly blend with the background but are visible enough to help with navigation.

Goals Study time Vocabulary
Tasks for an individual Notes, ideas

Fig.4. Set of images going through the whole course facilitating navigation in it

The text is enriched in images underlining important information or message. They always introduce the same topic. They play an important role in the navigation system. Selection of these images can be seen in Fig. 4. Audio records were added to the course to help students with pronunciation. Recordings were digitally adapted so that all vowels and consonants could be clearly audible. Extra exercise is designed for students who dare to catch main information from three authentic radio recordings. It is up to the teacher to consider whether the students are able to manage this demanding kind of exercise.

3.1.3 Motivation and Feedback

Motivation is for student’s progress essential. A good way how to improve communication is to divide students into pairs or three-member groups. Students cooperate not only when they work out tasks but also during classes where they present assigned tasks. All communication tools are fully utilized except for Whiteboard tool. Participants of the course can communicate via e-mail. They are permanently challenged to make entries into the ‘Discussion´ section. Distinguished motivating discussion topic is „Cross cultural studies“, students are encouraged to place their messages corresponding with the current learning material. Another proven stimulating topic is „What’s up?“.

‘Chat´ as a tool for synchronous communication has its limitations; maximum number for effective on-line communication is three students. It is suitable to use it especially when the student is ill or away. Skype was used for chatting in this course. ‘Assessments’ and ‘Assignments’ are standard means facilitating student’s feedback in the course. Another well proven tool for revision and studying has become introduction of minutes from classes which are regularly placed into a discussion section. These minutes are predominantly taken by a teacher, but in the last run of the e-course the students themselves took the minutes and placed them into the discussion section so as everybody could revise what was on.

3.1.4 Planning of study activities

Study activities are stated in the entry of each lesson. A ‘Calendar’, a ‘Syllabus’ and an ‘Announcement’ are useful navigation and planning tools. In a ‘Syllabus’ students find a brief content of each lesson and requirements to get the credit at the end of the semester. A ‘Calendar’ permanently informs on lesson that is being learnt/taught and on scheduled events. An ‘Announcement’ is a tool of action; it is used to remind students of important events or deadlines, to encourage them to submit assignments etc.

3.2 Findings and assessment of the e-course

The course is highly adaptive. Easy navigation system
and clear transparent design make provided learning material easy to follow and swallow. Study material either vocabulary or grammar is in a systematic and repetitive way incorporated into dialogues, tests, assignments. Pronunciation work is integrated but it is desirable to practise pronunciation especially during traditional classes. Prompt feedback, challenging tasks, supplementary material for study enthusiasts are proven motivating aspects.

*Teachers find positive the possibility to have their own separate on-line language section* and add materials that suit their group either we have in the mind of the level of their students’ language abilities or students’ interests. This way they can enlarge the space and time which is normally limited by two hours weekly in the classroom, they are given chance to create their own ‘micro-world’ and adapt it accordingly.

**Foreign students appreciate another option to communicate with one another.** In comparison with Czech full-time students of English language, foreign students are more open to communication. Another useful device is ‘the minutes’ taken from classes – because the students themselves participate in creation of their own study materials.

Up to now two e-courses supporting two one-semester subjects Czech language I and Czech language II have been designed and run. Four more courses are to be created. Due to the fact that only two subjects Czech language I and II are predominantly demanded and taught there has to be no urgency to create the higher levels. Another reason is that one teacher tutors a group of maximum four students of higher levels of Czech language who study mostly on the basis of an individual plan.

### 4 Conclusion

The article provides readers with wide and deep analyses of teaching/learning Czech language, reveals eternal value of J.A. Comenius principles and brings rather laconic finding: there is no pure teaching technique, no unique approach. Studying languages is specific with its requirements on both teachers and students, generous with its possibilities and uncertain with its outcomes. Analysis demonstrates how educators can use the learning sciences and here described e-course to design more effective formal and informal learning environments.

**References:**


