

## DEBATE AND EDUCATION

## Phonetic problems with Slovak in foreign students studying medicine in Slovakia

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### Abstract

Nowadays more and more foreign students come to Slovakia to study medicine at Slovak universities. Besides specialized subjects studied in English they have to learn Slovak. The authors of this article have focused their attention to the most serious problems, the Slovak language causes to foreign students studying medicine at Jessenius Faculty of Medicine in Martin (Ref. 6) Full Text (Free, PDF) [www.bmj.sk](http://www.bmj.sk).

**Key words:** pronunciation, consonants, vowels, diphthongs.

The codified form of Slovak language has commemorated its 160th anniversary this year. The beginnings of it were very difficult. On the north-eastern edge of Habsburg Monarchy during revolutionary years of the 18th century also a small Slovak nation dared to ask for the right to use its own language at schools and institutions and a new codified version suggested by Ľudovít Štúr was successfully accepted by the Slovak public. At present Slovak is used not only by Slovaks and minorities living in Slovakia but also by resident foreigners. Hundreds of foreign students studying medicine in Slovakia study the language, too. In this article we would like to share our experience in teaching Slovak to foreign students at Jessenius Faculty of Medicine (Comenius University) in Martin.

The language can be acquired in two ways: in a cognitive way (the way we learn our mother tongue) or in a rational way (the way we learn foreign languages). The best way how to learn a foreign language is to live in a country and to study its language at the same time. This is the case of our foreign students. During the first weeks of their stay the rational aspect of acquiring the Slovak language dominates.

One of the first tasks in the class is to make our students acquainted with the Slovak alphabet and phonetic value of Slovak consonants and vowels because in English, which is used to communicate with foreign students, the phonetic value of consonants and vowels does not correspond with the phonetic value of their Slovak equivalents. It usually does not correspond with their native language, either. This causes the students problems in reading and writing. So for example the Norwegians have tendency to pronounce the phoneme *o* as Slovak *u*, e.g. *Dobry den*

[*dubry den*], *študovat'* [š*tu*duvat], *pracovat'* [pr*ac*uvat], *modry* [m*ud*ry], *možny* [m*už*ny], *oči* [u*č*i] and the pronunciation of the Norwegian *u* and *y* corresponds with German umlaut *ü*, e. g. *musim* [m*ü*s*im*], *kedy* [k*e*d*ü*], *vtedy* [t*e*d*ü*], etc. The problem arises if there are two different words whose meaning depends on distinct pronunciation of Slovak *o* and *u* as in *modry* x *múdry*, *možny* x *mužny*, *oči* x *uči*, etc.

Under the influence of mother tongue or other languages the students tend to read Slovak *ch* as [č] or [š], e.g. *chata* [č*at*a/š*at*a], *chlapec* [č*l*apek/š*l*apek], *chlp* [č*l*p/š*l*p], *chrbat* [č*r*bat/š*r*bat], *chvíľa* [č*v*ila/š*v*ila], *chyba* [č*y*ba/š*y*ba], and the Slovak *c* as English [k], or [s] according to the following vowel, e.g. *cukor* [k*u*kor], *noc* [n*o*k], *vec* [v*e*k], *cibuľa* [s*i*bula], *cesnak* [s*e*s*n*ak], *cesta* [s*e*st*a*], etc. Many students have also problems to distinguish the phonetic values of Slovak *h* and *ch*, e.g. *hladny* x *chladny*, *hutny* x *chutny*, *chora* x *hora*, *chorý* x *horí*, *hýbat'* x *chýbat'*, *hodit'* x *chodit'* that leads to meaning misunderstandings. The phonetic mistake, if not removed at the very beginning, often becomes a spelling one later.

Another very important part of phonetic side of Slovak language that requires special attention and training is the pronunciation of the palatalized consonants *d'*, *t'*, *n'*, *l'* and their syllabic

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equivalents *de, te, ne, le, di, ti, ni, li* or combinations with diphthongs *-ia, -ie, -iu* because these consonants are not in the phonetic system of many foreign students. Words such as *daleko, dialka, deti, deň, nedel'a, neviem, telo, viac, cudziu paniu* are often pronounced as hard consonants in West-Slovakian dialect and sound very strange in foreigners. We have to distinguish between native words with palatalized consonants and foreign words, e.g. *dieťa* x *diéta*, (foreign words are always pronounced hard) and opposition between hard and soft consonants that have a meaningful distinguishing role, e.g. *brat* x *brat'*, *byt* x *byť*, *hodí* x *hody*, *ladí* x *lady*, *lán* x *lan* x *laň*, *med* x *meď*, etc. Here we often have to act like speech therapists and teach the students the right position of the tongue and lips.

Similarly we teach our students to pronounce voiced and voiceless consonants, especially if a voiceless preposition precedes a voiced word and vice versa, e.g.: *s babkou* [zbabkou], *s bratom* [zbratom], *z Košíc* [skošíc], *z Trnavy* [strnavy], etc. At this stage of study our students already know that Slovak monosyllabic prepositions are mostly pronounced together with the following noun. In the similar way they practice pronunciation of vocalized prepositions *s, so, k, ku, v, vo, z, zo*.

Sometimes our students put us very difficult questions concerning the Slovak language, for example: Why are there so few native words starting in *f* (*facka, fajka, fazuľa*)? Answer: Because the majority of words starting with *f* are of foreign origin (*fabrika, fachman, fajn, fakt, fakulta*, etc). Why do we read [fčela], [fčas], [fstat'], [fták], and write *včela, včera, včas, vstat', vták*, etc? Answer: Because the rule of consonant assimilation is applied here.

For many foreigners there is a huge problem to distinguish phonetically the difference among *č, š, ž* as in words *žijem* x *šijem, počujem* x *požujem, ťažká* x *taška, uši* x *učí* x *uži*, and they use to pronounce them in the same way like [šijem], [pošujem], [taška], [uši].

Very frequent spelling and pronunciation mistake is omitting the length marks (dĺžne) and palatalization marks (mäkčene) in Slovak words. As far as the communicative purpose of the sentence is not ruined, we do not insist on each mark, e.g. *Dobry deň* [dobry djeň], *velké dievča* [velke djevča]. We try to teach them the distinguishing role of these marks in pairs of short sentences, e.g. *Bolí ma hlava.* x *Včera sme boli v meste. Mám moc kníh.* x *Prineste ranný moč. To je vecná cena.* x *Byť či nebyť, to*

*je vecná otázka. Mám veľký byt.* x *Chcem byť lekárom.* The length marks are often considered by some students to be stress marks. While in English there is a movable stress depending on the word ending, in Slovak stress is on the first syllable. It is not very strong and is independent of the length of vowels, e.g. *,noha, ,nohavice, ,ruka, ,rukavica*, etc. As we have already mentioned, Slovak monosyllabic prepositions are mostly pronounced together with the following words, syllabic prepositions are bearers of stress and the word that follows them is unstressed then, e.g. *,za domom, ,pre teba, ,pred skúškou*, etc.

What surprises foreigners learning Slovak are words formed just from consonants, e.g. *chlp, kľb, krv, krk, krč, prst, stĺp, štvrť, trň, vlk*, etc., and the popular Slovak tongue twister *strč prst skrz krk* is over their language abilities. Many of them consider the word *zmrzlina* the most difficult to pronounce and prefer to say *ľad* instead of it.

## Conclusion

To improve pronunciation and listening comprehension (the two skills that are mutually interconnected), we use a wide scale of types of exercises and teaching aids. Our students are permanently exposed to Slovak language and the final result – how well they understand and speak Slovak – depends also on their efforts to use the offered opportunities.

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Received October 24, 2006.  
Accepted December 12, 2006.