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## Student teaching internships in Russian language classes in an elementary school : research conclusions

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Acta Neophilologica 15/1, 49-60

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2013

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## STUDENT TEACHING INTERNSHIPS IN RUSSIAN LANGUAGE CLASSES IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

**Key words:** pedagogical internships, teacher training, teaching of a second foreign language in an elementary school, Russian language

### Introduction

Professional education of foreign language teachers determines the high quality of language teaching and the achievement of success on the part of students. Many issues have effect on teaching and learning a foreign language. These include teacher's commitment and assistance in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills by students, as well as his/her predispositions, competence, personality and influence on the students' attitude towards learning.

At most universities acquiring formal teaching qualifications is optional. At the University of Białystok (Polish acronym UwB), it is possible to obtain teacher qualifications during the first level (bachelor's) studies. It is achieved through a complex educational program, which includes psycho-pedagogical subjects, detailed didactics, individual teaching internships and supplementary courses, such as ethics and broadly understood culture<sup>1</sup>.

The teaching program is conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of National Education. The formal basis for exercising the profession is obtaining the bachelor's degree (to teach at the elementary school level) or the master's degree (to teach at the secondary school and lower-secondary school levels). At UwB, acquiring professional teaching qualifications is an additional academic specialization. Students undertake it voluntarily.

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<sup>1</sup> Psycho-pedagogical subjects and supplementary subjects are taught in the Interdepartmental Teacher Education Center (Polish acronym CEN). Subject didactics are taught by teachers employed by individual departments, in cooperation with CEN.

Monitoring the process of preparing for the teaching profession through examination of different areas of student's activities is indispensable and allows to eliminate mistakes, as well as to improve the quality of university education. Individual teaching internships are one of such areas to be monitored.

The objective of this article is to present the analysis results concerning the individual evaluation of student internships in Russian language classes in an elementary school.

## **1. Teaching internships**

In parallel with the psycho-pedagogical subjects, which are taught during the second year of the bachelor's degree study program, there are lectures and classes on the methodology of teaching Russian. The former take place during the first semester of the second year of studies. The latter are held at the first and second semesters of the second year and during the first semester of the third year of studies. Within the framework of detailed didactics, i.e. methodology of teaching Russian, students study theoretical material and then participate in interim internships (10 hours) in elementary schools during the second semester of the second year of studies. All the students, together with their methodology consultant, take part in these mid-year internships. Students observe lessons conducted by teachers and then prepare and carry out classes on their own. Every lesson is discussed by the students, the teacher and the methodology consultant. Following the mid-year internship, the students can proceed to a long-term internship in an elementary school.

Individual teaching internships constitute an inherent part of professional training and play an increasingly significant role in the overall teacher education process. Students can select the school in which they want to have their internship. The university methodology consultant is responsible for the supervision, content-related consultations and evaluation of the internship on the basis of such documents as: daily internship records, lesson plans and an opinion, written by a teacher. Every long-term individual internship carried out by students is discussed with the methodology consultant.

The main aim of the internships is to familiarize students with the profession and make them ready for teachers' duties. During the internship, students do not only verify the knowledge and skills already acquired, but also obtain some additional expertise.

## **2. Research procedure**

The objective of the conducted research was to gather opinions on the training of future Russian language teachers for work in elementary schools and to identify the current scope of teaching Russian.

A teacher's opinion on the completed individual student internship constitutes a document. It is on this basis, among others, that university professors grade students. What is more, during job interviews, future employers may and should request to look into these opinions. The questionnaire form, created by the UwB Teacher Education Center, is completed by the teacher at the end of a student's internship program<sup>2</sup>. Points listed in it are in the form of open questions.

Students of Russian Philology at the University of Białystok completed their teaching internships in elementary schools in second foreign language Russian classes. Every student had 50 hours of individual internship<sup>3</sup>. They took place at different times during the school year, which was in advance agreed with the teacher, the school principal and each student. All the students had their internships in Białystok or in other localities in Podlaskie Province.

Ninety-nine opinions were analyzed, forty-four documents from the year 2009 and fifty-five from the year 2010. Opinions regarded one male and ninety-eight female students. Data from the opinions were analyzed quantitatively. The attention was focused on the most often and most sporadically given answers, regarding them as essential responses, supplementing the research results. Data gathered were supplemented with information obtained in informal interviews, carried out with each student during internship evaluation in academic grade books.

While beginning to interpret the obtained results, it is worthwhile to note two issues, which should correspond with the program content in the institution organizing the teaching internship. Firstly, teaching a second foreign language in an elementary school is most often an extracurricular activity. The status of a foreign language entails a didactic activity on the part of a teacher and a pupil. The teacher is not obliged to work within the framework of final examinations, which is often the criteria for the evaluation of his or her work. He/she may, however, create and carry out an innovative and interesting authorial program. Secondly, work with children requires a different approach as comparing to work with the youth. The teacher should take into consideration traits characterizing pupils in a given age group, their intellectual maturity, degree of motivation and language learning abilities. Most often, glottodidactic literature contains texts on teaching foreign languages at an early school age, bilingual teaching, professional language teaching, as well as teaching pupils with special educational needs and educating adults. Teaching children during the second educational stage requires

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<sup>2</sup> A questionnaire form is included in the appendix to the article.

<sup>3</sup> An internship includes observation of classes conducted by the teacher, preliminary work and teaching classes by the student and carrying out additional tasks stemming from the internship program.

a specific organization of the didactic process, formulating educational targets, application of appropriate teaching methods, selection of corresponding tools and teaching materials. It is prudent to present the selected traits which characterize the discussed age range. They are significant to the interpretation of this research.

Children aged ten – eleven years show the need for physical activity, they sing, paint and fantasize. Forth and fifth class pupils are spontaneous, willingly undertake risk and do not fear to speak out. Moreover, they are trustful and emotionally attached to the teacher, who can freely implement various language and educational games, while conducting communication activities. At this age, pupils do not have any precise motivation for studying foreign languages. A good way to develop it is the creation of a nice atmosphere, mutual fondness and understanding, as well as the development of interests. By the end of the second stage of education voluntary memory visibly dominates over the involuntary one. The attention span lengthens and pupils show greater skills in reading comprehension, as well as in writing tasks. At twelve years of age children are more critical, become independent of the teacher, and reckon with the opinions of their peers. Thus, a well organized, “attractive” from the students’ point of view, teaching process has significant influence on the development of their motivation. Non-book educational materials which enliven the teaching process may be helpful. During the second educational stage pupils begin to study a second foreign language and familiarize themselves with elements of a foreign culture. In consequence, the teacher as well as the intern must be especially solicitous in his or her choice of interesting didactic materials, rich in cultural content.

### **3. Discussion of research results**

#### **3.1. Teaching Russian in elementary schools in Podlaskie Province**

Student internships took place in thirty-six localities in Podlaskie Province, including ten towns and twenty-six villages. Most often, the internships took place in the towns of Bielsk Podlaski (15,15%), Białystok – the capital of Podlaskie Province (13,13%) and Sokółka (10,10%). All students who had their internship in Białystok carried it out only in one elementary school. As explained by the students themselves, the reason for this is the lack of a wider educational offer in the town, as far as teaching Russian as a second language in classes IV–VI is concerned. This remains difficult to explain, especially in view of the number of inhabitants, i.e. Białystok – about 300 thousand, Bielsk Podlaski – about 28 thousand, Sokółka – about 19 thousand (Fig. 1).

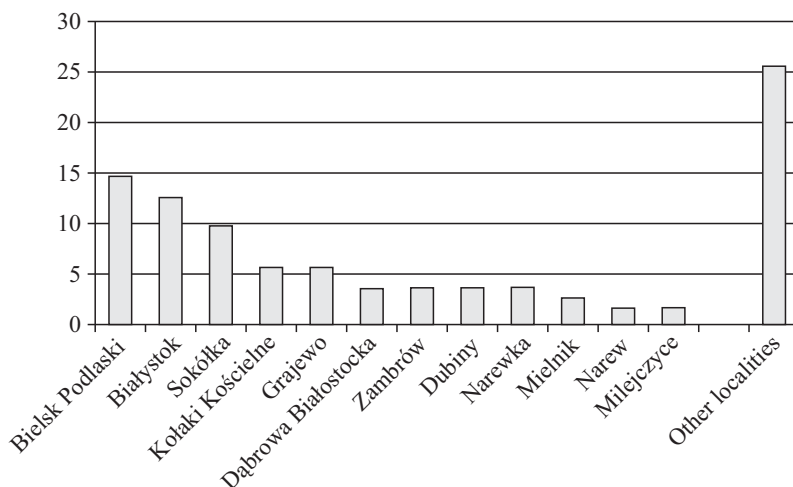


Fig. 1. Number of individual teaching internships in elementary schools in Podlaskie Province. Other localities: Augustów, Lipsk, Michałowo, Wysokie Mazowieckie, Białobrzegi, Białowieża, Bogusze, Czyże, Dobrzyniówka, Grabówek, Jabłonka Kościelna, Janów, Janów Podlaski, Kuźnica, Nurzec Stacja, Orla, Osowiec, Perlejewo, Płaska, Rutki Kossaki, Stara Kamionka, Strabla, Święc Wielki, Topczewo  
Source: own study on the basis of teachers' opinions.

### 3.2. Student activities during internships

All the students visited Russian classes and conducted trial lessons on their own. Observation of the work of teachers, as well as of other employees, is an important stage in acquiring skills and knowledge about work at school. As many as 20% of teachers did not respond to the point of visiting extracurricular lessons. One can suppose that either the interns did not visit the extracurricular lessons or what seems to be the least likely, teachers assumed that this obligation is of little importance and it is not worthy dedicating time to supplement it. Among the remaining responses, the most, i.e. more than 28%, concerned observation of teacher's work in Russian language classes, 16% – observation of another teacher in the afterschool club, 13% – work with underachieving pupils during compensatory lessons. Individual interns observed preparation for occasional assemblies, lessons in the library, work of a speech therapists, drama interest group, art and religion classes, as well as various sport activities, education hour activities, work of the school council and the teachers' self-education team. Only one student visited a Polish language as well as an English language class. In 14 % of the opinions the point relating to other activities undertaken during the internship was not completed. As many as 27% of the interns engaged in the work of the library. Furthermore, according to teachers' responses, 23% of the interns

were on safety duty during class breaks, 22% had conversations with the school pedagogue, 17% actively participated in the afterschool club, 12% observed the co-operation between teachers and parents during parent – teacher meetings. In addition, the interns were engaged in setting-up occasional school ceremonies (song festival, Nativity play, anniversary of the school's patron) and competitions. They also participated in Pedagogical Board sessions and they supervised pupils during field trips. Teachers stated that the interns also familiarized themselves with school documents (25% of students). It was affirmed in 23% of the opinions that the interns analyzed the internal school evaluation system, the school subject grading system, the school by-laws, the school rules of procedure, plans of expected teaching results, the education program and education law regulations.

### **3.3. The profile of an intern's work**

Teachers' comments were widely varied but one could distinguish in them a group of the most common ones. Forty-nine percent of the teachers recognized that the interns skillfully established relations with pupils, created a friendly environment for studying. During classes there was a pleasant atmosphere, which contributed to the openness and engagement in the educational process on the part of the pupils. Thirty-three percent of the teachers described the interns as being kind, cordial, friendly and open.

The students also exhibited the proper approach to internship tasks. They conscientiously (35%) and honestly (11%), carried out their duties. They approached the realization of the internship with immense commitment (12%). They were solidly prepared (10%) to run their classes and conducted them on the basis of properly prepared outlines, both in case of the essential content, as well as in case of methods used (23%). The attractiveness of the lessons was increased with the help of educational tools (22%), prepared individually by the interns. It should also be noted that the students, with attention, accepted all observations and guidelines on part of the teacher-advisors and applied them in subsequent stages of the internship.

The schools' teaching staff declared that the interns were technically and methodologically (40%) well prepared. The future teachers accurately formulated the lesson objectives (22%) and effectively implemented them in the teaching process. Suitably, in accordance to the content as well as the pupils' skills and abilities, they selected proper teaching and learning methods (30%). With the use of activation methods (14%), they mobilized all pupils to work, including the weakest ones. By applying varied forms of work they manifested their own initiative and ingeniousness in preparing and conducting classes (17%). The teacher advisors evaluated the lessons conducted by the interns as eventful, interesting and well-thought-out. According to the teachers' opinions, lesson plans

were properly designed. It is also worthwhile to note that one cannot find here many teachers' comments regarding such observations as the interns' fluency in Russian, individualism in approach to the education process, carrying out lesson topics in planned timeframe, respecting proportions between individual stages of lesson units, as well as the interns' propriety.

As many as 75% of the teachers did not respond to the point concerning the observed shortcomings in the area of content-related and methodical class preparation. The remaining group of teachers (25%) stated that they had not noticed any shortcomings in the aforementioned groundwork.

The next part of the discussed document regarded the interns' organizational skills. In the teachers' opinions, lesson time was optimally used by the students (38%). The interns showed the ability to maintain proportions (17%) between individual lesson elements. Usually with ease, the future teachers established good relations with pupils and were able to gently discipline them. They also showed the skill of activating the whole class.

Almost 75% of the teachers did not specify to which area the university should pay more attention in order to well prepare students for the teaching profession. Only 3% of the teacher-advisors declared that the university prepares well for the job. Although there were few answers, it is worthwhile to emphasize the areas and issues indicated by the teachers which may better prepare students for work at schools. Six percent of the interviewed teachers indicated the need to increase the number of teaching hours during the internships. Two percent of the teachers identified the need for increasing the number of hours dedicated to the methodology of Russian language teaching as well as the significance of activating teaching methods and work with exceptional pupils. The teacher advisors rarely signaled the need to expand in the university curriculum the number of such issues as culture studies, studies on life and institutions, calligraphy, the process of writing lesson plans, differentiating the teaching process in correspondence with a pupil's stage of development, work with disabled pupils, civilization threats, proper education of interns for spontaneous conversation with pupils and a program reform.

There were no other comments in 87% of the opinions. Nevertheless, in some of the opinions additional single (yet essential) comments appeared, informing that "the student possesses predispositions for pedagogical work"; "throughout the entire internship the student proved to be reliable"; "trustworthy, disciplined, creative"; "the intern was characterized by very good personal manners". Emphasizing such characteristics in the opinion can be of added value during a graduate's search of a teaching post.

All teachers evaluated the work of the interns. Three students were evaluated as "excellent" (grade 6.0), which should be recognized as a special award. The work of other students was assessed as very good (grade 5.0).



## Conclusions

During their internships the students showed knowledge of the subject matter as well as of the methodology. Today it may be therefore stated that they have educational skills and psycho-pedagogical abilities, both indispensable in the work with pupils in classes IV–VI. They efficiently and consequently plan and organize class work and are able to formulate and carry out its objectives, properly choose the work techniques. They apply diverse forms of activities, which is an indispensable skill because of the pupils' short attention span. The future teachers carry out the established educational objectives. They use in practice the knowledge of focusing and maintaining pupils' attention, as well as keeping discipline in the classroom. They also make use of the psychological knowledge, which facilitates communication with pupils. The interns show a friendly, warm and sincere attitude towards the pupils, thus creating a friendly environment for learning, an overall feeling of understanding and openness. Teaching aids, prepared by the interns single-handedly, diversify the lessons. One may also say that the interns are aware of the motivation factor, especially significant when it comes to working with pupils in second foreign language classes. Often being extracurricular, these classes need to have a secure atmosphere and express a positive attitude towards language and culture. During conversations with university teachers, who record internship results in the academic grade book, most of the interns state that they prefer to work with secondary school students. They justify this by saying that elementary school pupils, in comparison with secondary school students, require much more teacher's work as far as preparation for classes and conducting them, is concerned. Therefore, the need for greater emphasis on student training for work with pupils at the secondary stage of education is justifiable. This need has to be singled out in future university curriculums.

Russian classes at the elementary school level are mainly conducted in small towns and in villages. Thus, it may be deduced that neither pupils nor parents have the possibility of making a conscious decision regarding foreign language education at the elementary school level in Białystok. Often the absence of Russian as a second foreign language stems from negative stereotypes associated with the people for whom Russian is a native tongue. It is necessary to agree with Władysław Figarski [2003] claiming that when choosing classes of foreign language at schools parents (and often students) are guided more by emotions and "fashion" than by justified decisions.

Few males decide to acquire pedagogical qualifications. This, in consequence, leads to continuous female domination at schools. Factors such as female-teacher stereotypes, decreasing social prestige of work at schools and low wages are surely among the key sources of this situation<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, female students

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<sup>4</sup> More on reasons why students opt out of the teaching profession in: [Derenowski 2009].

often emphasize in oral statements that this is an ideal job for women (a lot of free time on occasion of various public holidays and during summer holidays) who plan a family.

Students do not visit either English or Polish classes. On the basis of oral interviews with the interns it may be concluded that teachers of these subjects somewhat object to cooperation with students engaged in Russian language internships. Obligatory expansion of an internship program to visitation of native language and first foreign language classes could considerably reinforce the interns' education in the area of teaching a second foreign language. It is also worth to encourage the interns to analyze programs and textbooks on teaching Polish and English as far as the educational contents and teaching methodology are concerned.

It seems that teacher-advisors have tried to understand the interns because the latter are just in the process of learning how to use one's knowledge in practice. However, the one-sided opinion of all the teachers on the work of the interns (in total very positive), as well as a large number of "empty spaces" in the questionnaire forms can testify to the superficiality of this appraisal. What follows, it may also indicate the lack of any deeper reflection about their work and preparation for the profession. Such attitude has its consequences. Some interns have already started work at schools. The lack of clear differentiation in the descriptive evaluation in the opinions does not facilitate the process of selecting the most qualified teaching staff.

The analysis of questionnaire forms indicates that the teachers do not perceive any need of using computers during classes at the elementary school level. They also say nothing about working on educational materials based on authentic texts (found, for example, in the Internet) or preparing short multimedia presentations which are indispensable in work with pupils, particularly in discussing cultural issues. It should be remembered that, according to the *Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla szkół podstawowych*<sup>5</sup>, the school should prepare pupils for life in the information society. What is more, one of the most important skills to be acquired by pupils is the skill of using modern information and communication technologies. A teacher should consciously create proper classroom conditions so that the pupils could acquire the skills of finding, arranging and using information from various sources. Children and youth ought to be also educated how to understand the media. The use of a computer and the Internet is a good way for introducing cultural topics which generate the growth of tolerance, frankness, mutual respect and understanding. It allows a deeper glance at one's own culture, tradition, and at oneself as its representative [Dziewanowska 2010]. Research shows that contact of a young child with a foreign language and a culture other than native favorably influences pupils' multicultural awareness [Jaroszewska

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<sup>5</sup> In English: General education program basis for elementary schools. Available [online] <[http://bip.men.gov.pl/men\\_bip/akty\\_prawne/rozporzadzenie\\_20081223\\_zal\\_2.pdf?](http://bip.men.gov.pl/men_bip/akty_prawne/rozporzadzenie_20081223_zal_2.pdf?)>, access: 16.05.2011.

2007], their openness in a situation of encountering new ideas [Chromiec 2004], and the formation of an individual personality. Such approach harmonizes with the fundamental school program which emphasizes the importance of education consistent with the native culture, as well as awakening empathy and the attitude of respect for foreign cultures and traditions.

On the basis of the questionnaire analysis, one can, however, suppose that training for the role of a cultural intermediary is not perceived as an important skill and is not expected from the interns. The same regards the character of teaching Russian as a second foreign language. None of the teacher-advisors have noticed these important aspects of student education, either in the group of positive or negative characteristics.

It is worthwhile to consider a modification of the questionnaire form by supplementing it with yes/no questions. Such measures would eliminate repetition of the same comments on the part of the teachers and the opinion about the conducted internship would be more readable and clear.

The research which has been carried out does not exhaust the subject of a student education for the teaching profession and the teaching of a second foreign language in elementary schools. In the framework of the research objective, it is recommendable to carry out research comprising all the provinces, extending it by written questionnaires and oral interviews conducted among the interns. The obtained data may significantly contribute to the discussion on this issue, as well as on the broadly understood teaching of a second foreign language in elementary schools.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire form

School seal

Opinion

Mr./Ms .....  
a student of the University in Bialystok, majoring in .....  
has fulfilled content-related and methodological internship, from .....  
to ..... in .....

#### I. During the internship student's activities included:

1. Visiting lessons in class.....
2. Conducting trial lessons in class .....
3. Visiting extracurricular lessons (which ones?) .....
4. Other activities (specify) .....

#### II. A student's work profile:

1. Attitude towards pupils and internship objectives .....
2. Positive aspects of an intern's content-related and methodological training .....
3. Shortcomings noticed in content-related and methodological training .....
4. Student's organizational skills (how were they manifested?) .....
5. What should the university emphasize in content-related and methodological student training in teacher education? .....
6. Other comments .....
7. Final grade for the internship .....

.....  
(teacher-advisor's signature)

.....  
(date)

.....  
(school principal's signature and seal)

.....  
(date)

### **Summary**

#### **Student Teaching Internships in Russian Language Classes in an Elementary School. Research Conclusions**

The article presents the analysis results concerning the individual evaluation of student internships in Russian language classes in an elementary school. Ninety-nine teachers' opinions on the completed individual student internships were analyzed. The research has proved that according to these opinions students are prepared to work at school. The analysis has also revealed that some aspects of preparation for the teaching profession require improvement. These are, among others, such issues as the use of new technologies in the classroom, the development of students' intercultural competence, the character of teaching second foreign language. The author concludes that the questionnaire form should be modified.