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## THE FRANCOPHONE EDUCATIONAL NETWORK IN SLOVAKIA. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF FRENCH LANGUAGE ASSISTANTS?

Thomas Laurent - Mária Rošteková\*

Being an official or co-official language approximately in 30 countries, the French language remains the second world language in the plan of political importance. Although French is not the mother language of all citizens in most of the countries concerned (just like English), it maintains its strategic position by being the language of administration, army, justice, media, commerce or business, etc. It raises its importance by being the language of instruction. Non-francophone students learning French represent a fundamental aspect in the concept of Francophonie (Gura, 2011). It is taught everywhere around the world at all levels: at preliminary, primary, secondary and university one.

French language assistants are often considered core players in the field of the linguistic, cultural and educational cooperation within the Francophone community as they promote French language and culture in foreign institutions. If there is a universal player in the field of French teaching as a foreign language with a multiple professional identity today, most probably it is a French language assistant who embodies this idea the best (Bruchet, 2012): *“This is the person students or even teachers primarily turn to when they have a doubt, a question, or want to satisfy their curiosity about language and culture. [...] Their job is not only about language teaching, they are, or should be also ambassadors of the French culture and key cooperation players at the same time. The scope of their mission is, or could be, very wide and likely to be integrated into a much larger network, in order to reinforce the impact of its local presence”*.

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This importance of French language assistant was also stressed during the meeting of French language assistants in Slovakia taking place on September 12 and 13, 2019, within the premises of Alliance Française in Banská Bystrica. In his closing speech, his Excellency, Mr. **Christophe Léonzi**, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to the Slovak Republic, stated that the presence of French language assistants in our country is part of a strategy for the future: *“For the very first time in the years 2019-2020, French language assistants will propose seminars for teachers in their own regions through partnerships with methodological and educational centres<sup>1</sup> and the national MPC coordination centre, in order to create networking opportunities, share their best practices and offer lifelong education. [...]. This kind of a project covers the entire Slovakia as the French language assistants are present in all Slovak regions. The network totally comprises 16 assistants, 6 of them being involved in university education, other 10 of them in secondary grammar education including 4 main coordinators of preparatory courses for Slovak secondary school-leaving exams (maturita) at the bilingual French-Slovak sections”* (The closing speech, 2019).

The network coordinated both at global and local level seems to be a relevant project for the new challenges related to globalisation: *“You know it better than me that the French language and Francophone community provide a space for culture and shared values from the Age of Enlightenment. Our globalised world threatened by a clash of political or economic powers aspiring for hegemony, needs more than ever the greatest influence of the Francophone culture of freedom, critical thinking, democracy and diversity. We have great responsibilities here in Central Europe”*, declared his Excellency in the presence of representatives of several cultural and educational institutions of the country (The closing speech, 2019).

Indeed, the network of Francophone "actors" in Slovakia is very rich. It is often coordinated by the French Institute in Slovakia (IFS) established in 1990 to promote French language and culture, and the best practices and innovation in Slovakia as well as at the strengthened cooperation between the two countries. Apart from its cultural interests, the IFS also aims to support the French presence in public debates, share French best practises in the field of science and research, educate future generations and make France more attractive for students, state administration employees, tourists or artists, as well

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<sup>1</sup> Metodicko-pedagogické centrum, MPC

as for businesses and investors. Promoting the French language in relation to public policy orientations in Slovakia is also an important objective of IFS and is carried out by the team of **Thibaut Triqueneaux**, Attaché for educational and linguistic cooperation.

The idea of a mutual information exchange and networking between the stakeholders with the aim to create a large network was brought in 2011, the year when the IFS initiated the establishment of the Slovak-French University Institute (IUFS) at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. The important goal of the latter is, inter alia, supporting the existing Francophone study programmes in Slovakia, creating of conditions for the emergence of new programmes of this kind, aligning theory and practise by means of relations between member universities and French and multinational companies, where the IUFS often acts as an intermediary. No less is important the issue of primary and secondary education. The partnership between the IUFS and secondary and primary schools represents an important aspect for the successful employment of French-speaking graduates of Slovak universities in real life.

## **Privileged Partnership with Alliance Française**

The reinforcement of the cooperation between secondary and university education teams, as an instrument to face the current challenges of the Francophone educational community in Slovakia, is the major focus of the IFS and IUFS. In this context, we must underline the role of Alliance Française, which created privileged ties with many Slovak and French institutions, and which gather, around its activities, many expatriate natives, not only official French language assistants.

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, celebrities like **Louis Pasteur** or **Jules Verne** contributed to its creation in Paris. Alliance Française is being based there till the present day. Founded for non-profit purposes, its aim was to spread French language, Francophone culture in France and especially abroad. Currently there are two Alliance Française branches in Slovakia, one being based in Košice and the other in Banská Bystrica. Before then they existed even in Žilina, Lučenec and Poprad. The network of six branches has been established in the neighbouring Czech Republic.

French Embassy and French Institute in Bratislava are closely related to the Alliance Française branches. They are granted some funds to cover a part of their expenses including rent, organisation and various cultural events.

The scope of their collaboration is wide and particularly affects the organisation of internationally accepted exams: the French-language studies diploma *DELF* (*diplôme d'études en langue française*) and the advanced French-language diploma *DALF* (*diplôme approfondi de langue française*).

Let's go deeper into the functioning of Alliance Française de Banská Bystrica (AFBB) which organised, in its premises, the above-mentioned French language assistants meeting in 2019, and its implication in the pedagogical policy around the French conducted by the institutional actors in the country.

It was established in 1990 as an association governed by local law, with various French language teachers being around, including current president of the association **Tomáš Márton**. One of the main goals of the Alliance are French courses taking place in the afternoon or in the evening. Subscription fees are a source of living of this institution. Subscriptions take place at the beginning of each semester (each language course lasting for 14 weeks). Anyone is eligible for the courses, for example age limit is not restricted. The courses cover the whole range of language levels - from very beginners to proficiency (C2).

Alliance teachers teach elsewhere too, generally in secondary grammar schools or at the Matej Bel University. The director of the Alliance himself is involved in educational process as well. Especially the courses taking place twice a week are taught in a teachers' tandem, including French native speaker and Slovak teacher at the same time. This "marriage" aims to teach students two different approaches to language learning and exists also thanks to the national teachers' network in Slovakia. There are currently two French language teachers at Alliance preparing students for DELF-DALF exams at the same time.

Cultural events organised by Alliance have an impact on pedagogical guidelines. However, it is difficult to say what represents French culture in foreign countries. Given the current complicated international situation, it is even harder to estimate the way it is perceived. For many years, Alliance Française in Banská Bystrica organizes cultural events of all genres relying on the vital forces of the region - on the young generation for various reasons. The first being the financial matter - it is hard to make Zaz or Louane come to perform in Banská Bystrica. The next one is of strategic nature - to attract more potential clients. This is more of a virtuous cycle.

Bilingual section at the Tajovského Secondary Grammar School is one of the partners of the Alliance with its students quite often being the main participants

in their events, not counting their schoolmates, friends and parents. Apart from young talented singers, some actors-students may be also found in the crowd. At the beginning of every summer, a theatre performance in French with Slovak subtitles takes place. There are also efforts to organise some exhibitions.

The collaboration of this kind is important not only for cultural purposes, but also because the young generation may take courses *DELFB2* or *DALFC1* offered by Alliance (sometimes even those at C2 level).

Cooking workshops have become even more popular among primary school and secondary grammar school pupils and their aim is to show the French language in a friendly and "greedy" way. In fact, it is very important to show a positive image of the French language to the young generation and somehow compensate them for the difficulty of this language. During the cooking workshops, active involvement is more than welcome. Rich in vocabulary, thanks to these activities the teachers may use the recipes as an educational material. Additional activities include selling of the final products (pancakes, gaufres, etc.).

Francophone song contests have been organised for more than 30 years. Thanks to an active collaboration with the French Institute and Alliance Française in Košice, they are being organised both at the national (with a growing number of subscriptions and spectators) and international level (contest finale organised within Visegrad 4 countries, including Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary). French pronunciation is one of the crucial criteria for evaluation, and so the contestants have to master it. That's how they improve their French or just simply discover French language thanks to this event. And again, the attendees may become the potential French courses students.

The language policy around French in Slovakia involves many actors and institutions. To be as efficient as possible, it is essential to always strengthen the multiple collaborations at all levels.

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The closing speech by H.E. Christopher Léonzi, the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic in Slovakia, at the meeting of French language assistants in Slovakia which took place on September 12 and 13, 2019 in Banská Bystrica.