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## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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# Assessment as a Motivational Tool in Teaching Slovak to Learners with a Different Mother Tongue

Monika Brozmanová<sup>1</sup>, Ružena Čiliaková<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Matej Bel University, Slovakia

## Abstract

*In recent years, there has been a growing number of learners with a different mother tongue attending in Slovak schools. For these pupils, the Slovak language is not only a school subject but also a key means of socialization, relationship-building, and acquiring knowledge across the curriculum. This paper explores the potential of increasing the motivation of learners with a different mother tongue (particularly Roma pupils) in Slovak language and literature classes through a shift in teachers' assessment approaches. Assessment plays a critical role in the educational process. The aim of the study was to examine how the implementation of formative verbal assessment, combined with the use of innovative teaching methods, affects students' motivation to learn, self-confidence, and attitudes toward their own education. The change in assessment approach was carried out through an intervention program designed for teaching Slovak language and literature in the second grade of primary school. Pupils worked on differentiated project-based tasks and were assessed individually, with emphasis placed on their progress and personal development. The study followed an action research methodology. Pre-test and post-test phases employed a combination of a didactic test, semi-structured interview, and unstructured observation. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The use of triangulation subsequently enabled a comparison of perspectives on student assessment in Slovak language and literature across three stakeholder groups – students, parents, and the teacher. The findings suggest that positive feedback and an emphasis on individual progress enhance pupils' sense of competence and confidence. Reducing the stress associated with assessment positively influences pupils' willingness to engage in classroom activities and communicate in Slovak. Parents observed a shift in their children's attitudes towards learning, particularly a reduction in fear of failure. The teacher reported improvements in interaction with pupils and in their ability to work both independently and collaboratively. The pilot-tested procedures will be part of a more extensive research study in this field. It highlights the importance of parent collaboration in heterogeneous classrooms and emphasizes formative assessment as a key tool in inclusive education.*

**Keywords:** learner with a different mother tongue, formative assessment, intervention program, innovative teaching methods, qualitative research, inclusive education

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Children with a Different Mother Tongue in Primary Education

An individual's mother tongue originates within the family. A child grows up in a particular community and, from the earliest age, listens to the way in which parents and close relatives communicate with one another. The mother tongue constitutes the first and most fundamental form of human communication [1]. In recent years, the Slovak school environment has been marked by increasing diversity, largely as a consequence of globalisation, migration and the growing mobility of the population. These societal phenomena are shaped by a range of underlying determinants. Migration, for example, is frequently driven by the pursuit of better employment prospects and more dignified living conditions, particularly when the country of origin is affected by military conflict. [2]. Schools are seeing a steady increase in children whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction. As Průcha [3] points out, the citizens of every country tend to hold prejudices towards those of other nations. A child with a different mother tongue is one whose home or family language background does not correspond to the language used in school. This category encompasses a variety of situations: children of immigrants, members of linguistic minorities, and community groups whose mother tongue is not the language of institutional education. The language abilities of such children must be understood in the context of their family repertoire and the sociocultural environment in which they live. In addition to children coming from abroad, Slovak schools also include Roma children. These children are also considered learners with a different mother tongue, as they enter school from environments where Slovak is generally not used as the means of communication within the family. The integration of a Roma child into the school system

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cannot take place without the parallel integration of the Roma family and community into the majority society. This makes the process highly demanding. It is often observed that Roma children miss classes, have frequent absences, fall behind in lessons, and fail to achieve the expected educational and behavioural outcomes. The main barriers to their integration can be summarised as follows: the language barrier in both instruction and assessment, socio-economic disadvantage combined with irregular school attendance, insufficient teacher preparation for work in multicultural and multilingual classrooms, and long-term systemic segregation resulting from inadequate policy decisions. Prejudices towards Roma children, which are present even in primary classrooms, are often based on negative experiences and reinforced by the belief that efforts to educate and support them are futile. At the same time, Roma children in schools are frequently marginalised, isolated, subjected to more frequent punishment, unfairly assessed, and excluded from various, particularly public, school activities. Such treatment suppresses their potential for growth and development. The solution lies in effective cooperation between the family and the school, together with other actors, and in their shared effort to motivate children towards positive thinking and behaviour. Roma children are often more impulsive, temperamental, and deeply emotional, sometimes struggling to regulate their feelings. A significant step forward has been the introduction of compulsory pre-primary education, which can substantially reduce one of the key barriers to learning—insufficient proficiency in the Slovak language. The school, and especially the teacher, can contribute greatly to the child's personal development through thoughtful, purposeful, and above all humanly oriented pedagogical work. However, the same influence can, regrettably, also produce negative and harmful effects [3].

### **1.2 Learner Motivation in Primary Education and Its Connection with Assessment**

One of the factors that significantly influences a child's academic success and overall attitude towards learning is motivation. For learners with a different mother tongue, motivation may be particularly weakened if they are exposed to traditional forms of assessment. These often emphasise performance measured against standardised criteria, without taking into account linguistic and cultural differences. Motivation is a key factor in successful learning, especially in primary education, when fundamental attitudes towards learning are formed and each child develops a long-term relationship with school. During this period of intensive socialisation and personal development, children are highly sensitive to external stimuli such as assessment and feedback, which can strongly influence their self-concept and willingness to learn [4,12].

In educational psychology, two fundamental types of motivation are distinguished: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation arises from the child's own interest in learning and the pleasure derived from mastering tasks. A motivated learner is curious, eager to explore, and driven to discover new things. In primary education, intrinsic motivation is fostered through meaningful, experiential teaching methods and activities that give learning clear relevance within the context of everyday life [5].

Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, is based more on rewards and punishments. In children, it is often associated with praise, grades, symbolic rewards, or recognition from teachers, parents, and peers. Both types of motivation interact within the school environment; however, the long-term goal of education is to cultivate intrinsic motivation, as it ensures a sustained interest in learning and supports self-regulation, personal growth, and progress. When active learning methods are employed, learners become engaged participants in the educational process, which strengthens their responsibility and interest in outcomes. Such methods include discussion and problem-based learning, which foster critical thinking; project-based learning, which connects educational content to real-life situations; cooperative learning, which develops collaboration and social skills; and also, educational games and gamification, which enhance intrinsic motivation and the joy of learning [6].

Zelina [7] described the most commonly used techniques and methods for motivating through assessment. These include creating an appropriate pedagogical context for positive evaluation, focusing on essential aspects, minimising criticism, and emphasising praise and rewards grounded in reality. The teacher should seek out and recognise the positive aspects of a learner's performance before directing attention to errors that need correction. In assessment, the teacher should also create a space in which the learner can develop independently and actively engage in the evaluation process [7,8].

Already the School Act 245/2008 Coll., Section 55 [9], established that a learner may be assessed within the educational process in three possible ways: through verbal assessment, grading, or a combination of the two. However, traditional grading has long prevailed in Slovak schools, meaning that summative assessment dominates over verbal or formative assessment. Slovak teachers predominantly apply traditional assessment methods, such as oral testing and written tests, to determine the level of a learner's knowledge. Traditional assessment primarily serves to compare student performance, even in relation to the achievement of standards set out in the national curriculum. Grading is almost exclusively in the hands of the teacher and is largely a one-off act—testing the learner and assigning a grade—rather than an ongoing process [10,11]. It focuses on the past, that is, on what the learner has

memorised or acquired over a given period. It does not fulfil the characteristics of humanistically oriented assessment, which include: an individualised approach, comprehensive evaluation, a positive focus, encouragement of self-assessment, transparency, variability, and continuity in assessment methods [12].

Verbal assessment represents a key element of formative evaluation, providing learners with specific feedback and creating opportunities for self-regulation of their learning. From the perspective of holistic personality development, it can be regarded as developmental assessment, as it is conducted with the active participation of the learner, who becomes more a subject than an object of assessment [11,12]. When combined with active teaching methods, verbal assessment becomes an integral part of the learning process—the teacher not only evaluates outcomes but also guides the learner to understand their own strategies, identify errors, and plan subsequent steps. The metacognitive processes fostered in this way are a central aim of the newly implemented national curriculum for primary education. The objectives focus on developing key competencies, emphasising assessment and self-regulation of learning, which is also reflected in the differentiation of learning tasks [13,14].

It is in the subject of Slovak Language and Literature, which has a high time allocation, that learners with a different mother tongue are most at risk of losing motivation, as the curriculum requires proficiency in Slovak. This involves learning about the Slovak language itself—its phonetics, morphology, and the development of reading skills—which essentially form the foundational basis for further learning.

## 2. Methods

Many authors emphasise the motivational function of assessment [4, 5,11,12,15]. In Slovakia, formative assessment, as a means of enhancing learner motivation, is used less frequently than in other countries. The new curricular reform (2023) places significant emphasis on changing teachers' approaches to assessment [10]. For learners with a different mother tongue, this issue is even more pressing, as they often lack proficiency in Slovak upon entering primary education. These considerations led us to the formulation of the research problem.

The aim of the conducted survey was to determine the impact of changing the form of assessment in Slovak Language and Literature from summative (grading) to formative (verbal) assessment on learners' motivation to learn, and to examine how learners' self-assessment develops.

A qualitative research approach was chosen, employing data triangulation through:

- Learners' responses – to explore their subjective feelings, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the change in assessment;
- Parents' responses – to complement the view on motivation and attitudes towards learning with information shared by learners within the family environment;
- Analysis of teachers' records – ongoing notes and observations regarding learners' reactions during lessons and their progress.

The presented survey was a preliminary study for a planned larger research project focused on children with a different mother tongue (DMT). It was conducted in the 2nd grade of primary education with learners with different mother language—specifically, Roma children. Based on their behaviour, performance, and self-assessment, the learners were divided into three groups:

1st group (Learner 1 – Learner 7): learners with excellent results who are highly motivated. Their self-assessment closely aligns with the teacher's evaluation, although they are less willing to acknowledge their own weaknesses.

2nd group (Learner 8 – Learner 11): learners with good (average) results, exhibiting lower proficiency in Slovak, with a limited vocabulary and expressive skills. In their self-assessment, they were honest and able to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

3rd group (Learner 12 – Learner 15): learners with irregular school attendance, very low proficiency in Slovak, and extremely limited vocabulary and expressive skills. They were unable to perform self-assessment prior to the implementation of the project.

To obtain responses from both learners and parents, a semi-structured interview was used in the pre-test and post-test. The responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis [16].

After the pre-test was conducted, a pre-planned school-based intervention project titled *Winterland* was implemented. The project involved fifteen elves (each elf representing one learner in the class) who embarked on a long journey to rescue their friend, the Winter Princess Flocca, after she was captured by the evil Winter King, who had transformed the entire land into a realm of ice and snow. For children, winter is associated with a 'magical season,' full of joy from snow, winter games, and Christmas festivities, which take on a fairy-tale character. They understand that a new season follows autumn, bringing many changes. Just as the landscape changes outside, the method of assessment in the classroom also changed during this period, specifically in Slovak language lessons over the following months. Learners were no longer assessed with grades, as had been the case previously, but through verbal assessment. They advanced their elf figures incrementally based on the teacher's verbal

feedback—following specific verbal assessment criteria and reflecting progress in the quality of their self-assessment in Slovak Language and Literature lessons. The project also incorporated interdisciplinary connections with mathematics and visual arts [17].

Following the implementation of the intervention programme, the action research was concluded with a post-test. Using qualitative content analysis, we systematically evaluated the information obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted before the intervention (first measurement) and after the intervention (second measurement). The unit of content analysis was defined as codes (assigned to the data), and the relationships between these codes were determined by organising them into appropriate categories of words and phrases.

**Table 1.** Codes and Categories in Qualitative Content Analysis

Code Names in Content Analysis	Code Categories in Content Analysis
Motivation to Learn	Motivation to learn: teacher – peers – parent Motivation to learn: Intervention Programme <i>Winterland</i> (teacher) – activities Learner's motivation to engage only for part of the lesson Learner's motivation to engage throughout the entire lesson
Assessment	Assessment through grades Verbal assessment through the <i>Winterland</i> project
Motivational function of assessment	Positive and negative feelings of learners towards teacher assessment through grades Positive and negative feelings of learners towards teacher verbal assessment
Activating methods	Activating methods were used during the lesson No activating methods were used during the lesson Positive learner attitude towards the subject: verbal assessment or assessment through grades Negative learner attitude towards the subject: verbal assessment or assessment through grades
Learner self-assessment	Learner self-assessment in Slovak Language and Literature lessons is absent Learner self-assessment is present in every Slovak Language and Literature lesson

### 3. Results

The results were organised into tables according to the individual categories in both the pre-test and the post-test.

**Table 2.** Motivation to Learn

The Group of Respondents	Pretest – Results	Posttest – Results
Parents 1-7	These children are consistently motivated throughout the entire lesson. At the same time, they achieve above-average results and demonstrate sustained engagement during class.	The children were continuously motivated throughout the entire lesson, including the introduction, main activities, and conclusion. The motivational effect of assessment (through the <i>Winterland</i> project) was not influenced by whether the results were positive or negative.
Parents 8-15	Learners' motivation is highest at the beginning of the lesson (they have sufficient energy and anticipate new stimuli). During the lesson, motivation gradually declines.	Through the learners' statements, it was perceived that their motivation remained stable throughout the lesson, particularly due to the use of interactive and experiential elements.
Learners 1-2	They demonstrated multifactorial motivation—striving to achieve good results for the sake of their parents, peers, and the teacher.	They emphasised the importance of intrinsic motivation, supported by play ( <i>Winterland</i> ). Competitiveness among peers also emerged, which strengthened their performance motivation.
Learners 3-9	External motivation from parents (praise, rewards, recognition at home) predominated. The social aspect of motivation was also significant in interactions with peers.	In addition to parental support, the dominant motivating factors were the teacher's verbal feedback and self-assessment within the <i>Winterland</i> project.
Learners 10-15	Motivation was primarily oriented towards the teacher as an authority figure—learners valued praise, the opportunity to improve a poor grade, and small rewards (stickers, stamps).	The strongest motivation was associated with the teacher's verbal feedback and the experiential assessment activity ( <i>Winterland</i> ). The teacher acted as a key motivational stimulus.

**Table 3.** The Motivational Function of Changing the Form of Learner Assessment

The Group of Respondents	Pretest – Results	Posttest – Results
Parents 1-7	They report that children respond positively to good grades, experiencing satisfaction and joy from success. Negative emotions, such as shame and frustration, prevail in response to poor grades, often accompanied by stress, demotivation, and school avoidance.	They noticed a change—children looked forward to Slovak language lessons and experienced no stress from assessment. Verbal assessment supported intrinsic motivation and removed the fear of school.
Parents 8-15	A good grade elicited feelings of satisfaction, whereas a poor grade triggered strong negative emotions, such as crying, stress, and school avoidance. Parents had to address the situation at home through discussion.	The change in assessment elicited a positive response—children were calmer and perceived assessment as supportive. Parents appreciated the reduction of stress and pressure associated with grading.
Learners 1-15	A good grade was associated with joy, willingness to learn, and a desire to please parents or the teacher. A poor grade elicited sadness, embarrassment in front of the teacher, peers, and parents, demotivation, and reluctance to prepare for lessons.	Verbal assessment was perceived positively—each learner received at least one piece of encouraging feedback. The assessment had a motivational effect, reduced stress, and fostered enjoyment of learning. A new element was self-assessment, which engaged learners and developed their self-regulatory skills.

**Table 4.** Use of Activating Methods in the Project / Popularity of the Subject Slovak Language and Literature

The Group of Respondents	Pretest – Results	Posttest – Results
Parents 1-15	P1–P7: motivation through grades and educational games (memory cards, flashcards, puzzles, crosswords). P8, P12: worksheets and presentations with images, videos, and games. P13–P15: they were unable to identify motivational methods. Most popular subject: Physical Education (6 parents), with only two parents mentioning Slovak language.	P1, P4–P9: Slovak Language and Literature as a favourite subject, with appreciation for games, exercises, and verbal assessment. P2–P3: They mentioned specific activities (punctuation exercises, matching images with labels). P10–P15: Overall satisfaction with activities beyond the textbook. The majority of parents (10) reported Slovak language as their children's favourite subject.
Learners 1-15	Favourite subjects: Physical Education (5 children), Integrated Science and Social Studies (4 children), Slovak Language (3 children), Visual Arts (2 children), Mathematics (1 child). - L1–L7: They were motivated by games such as Memory and 'Guess Who?'. - L8–L13: They were motivated by presentations and worksheets (crosswords, colouring activities). - L14–L15: They did not specify particular activities, but mentioned the subjects of Physical Education and Visual Arts.	Favourite subjects: Slovak Language and Literature (11 children), Physical Education (4 children). For 8 children, verbal assessment within the <i>Winterland</i> project was the most motivating factor in changing their opinion about their favourite subject. Specific activities included: 'Guess What I'm Missing' (L1, L3), Memory and picture-matching games (L2, L4, L7), word search puzzles (L5, L6), presentations (L8, L9, L11), colouring activities (L12, L14). Some learners (L13, L15) were unable to specify the activity precisely and associated it only with the subject of Slovak language.

**Table 5.** Learner Self-Assessment

The Group of Respondents	Pretest – Results	Posttest – Results
Parents 1-15	Parents 1–6: the child had the opportunity for self-assessment only once or twice, mostly in other subjects (Mathematics, Visual Arts). Parents 7–12: could not specify whether the child had opportunities for self-assessment in Slovak language. Parents 13–15: reported no self-assessment in Slovak Language and Literature ('the teacher always assesses them').	All parents (P1–P15) reported that their child had the opportunity for self-assessment in Slovak Language and Literature (e.g., the 'elves' activity). They evaluated this change positively, noting that it contributed to a more natural form of assessment, increased self-confidence, and the ability to acknowledge mistakes.
Learners 1-15	Learners 1–9: experienced self-assessment once or twice in other subjects (Mathematics, Visual Arts). Learners 10–13: do not recall ever having participated in self-assessment. Learners 14–15: have not encountered self-assessment and do not know what it entails.	All learners (L1–L15) had the opportunity for self-assessment in Slovak language within the <i>Winterland</i> project. They were able to describe the process in detail (e.g., reflecting on their own performance, moving their elf towards Princess Flocca). They perceived self-assessment as fair and motivating ('I tried to learn so that I could move my elf').

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings indicate that learners' originally predominantly external motivation (parental control, teacher authority, rewards and punishments) shifted to a more stable and consistent motivation throughout the lesson following the introduction of verbal assessment. The *Winterland* project proved to be an effective means of supporting intrinsic motivation, self-assessment, and self-regulation of learning. The results also confirm that the teacher's role as a facilitator of motivation, along with the use of activating and experiential elements, significantly contributes to maintaining learners' interest and engagement [4, 18, 19]. These findings demonstrate that a suitably chosen form of assessment can positively impact the maintenance of learners' motivation throughout the lesson.

The pre-test revealed that both parents and learners were primarily accustomed to traditional grading, which often had a demotivating effect, particularly in cases of failure. In the pre-test, learners were divided into groups — while one group reported being able to identify mistakes and subsequently improve their grades, the second and especially the third group struggled to understand the teacher's feedback. The post-test showed a significant shift in the attitudes of both parents and learners. All respondents emphasised positive experiences with verbal assessment, which enabled them to better understand the subject matter, reflect on their own progress, and experience a sense of achievement. This shift can be interpreted in line with self-determination theory, according to which verbal assessment supports intrinsic motivation by providing meaningful feedback [4]. At the same time, it can be noted that verbal assessment contributes to satisfying the need for recognition and self-actualisation, in accordance with Maslow's hierarchy of needs [18,20].

Slovak Language and Literature was initially perceived as a peripheral subject, with Physical Education and Visual Arts remaining the preferred subjects. This trend confirms that traditional teaching methods without activating elements are insufficient to adequately support learners' intrinsic motivation. However, the post-test revealed a significant shift—Slovak Language became the favourite subject for the majority of learners. This change was driven by the implementation of activating methods (games, word searches, Memory, presentations) and verbal assessment within the *Winterland* project. Importantly, these activities integrated both cognitive and emotional aspects of learning, which aligns with Viau's model of school motivation, suggesting that engaging and interactive teaching strengthens learners' interest and performance motivation [21]. A crucial finding is that the change in assessment alone would likely not have been sufficient—the key factor was the combination of verbal assessment and activating methods, creating an environment that supported intrinsic motivation, self-assessment, and a positive attitude towards learning. Pre-test results and the analysis of responses from parents and learners indicated that self-assessment in Slovak Language and Literature was minimally present prior to the changes. Following the implementation of new forms of assessment, the post-test confirmed that all respondents engaged in self-assessment. Parents perceived it as a means of enhancing self-confidence, responsibility, and the child's ability to reflect on their own mistakes. Learners described specific self-assessment activities, which became a natural part of lessons and supported their intrinsic motivation.

A comparison of the pre-test and post-test indicates that the introduction of verbal assessment, activating methods, and self-assessment led to:

- a positive change in parents' and learners' attitudes towards assessment,
- a shift from external to intrinsic motivation,
- an increase in the popularity of Slovak Language and Literature,
- the development of learners' self-reflection and self-confidence.

Regarding work with learners with a different mother tongue (Roma learners), practical recommendations for educational practice include implementing a mother-tongue screening upon school entry and using translanguaging strategies during lessons (allowing children to explain concepts in the Romani language). Support measures in this step also include the presence of Roma teaching assistants in schools. The development of bilingual teaching materials and visual aids, the implementation of activating methods, and the visualisation of assessment systems can further enhance learners' motivation and understanding of feedback. Successful implementation of verbal assessment requires thorough preparation of current and future teachers, parental involvement, and systematic support from state institutions responsible for education development in Slovakia. The results suggest that changing the approach to assessment can be a key factor in promoting more effective inclusive education in a multicultural school environment [22, 23].

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