
Experiences in Teaching Rhetoric as an Elective Course in Primary School

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Looking back

How it all began

In 1999, a handful of primary schools in Slovenia started to adopt the new nine-year primary school programme, one of them being the Polzela Primary School where I teach. The Basic School Act stipulates that primary schools are required to provide pupils with a compulsory elective course in rhetoric in the ninth grade.¹ In the 2001–2002 school year, when the first generation of pupils enrolled under the new programme were finishing their schooling, 21 pupils opted for this elective course at our school and 23 next year. This is how my continuing teaching of this elective course began and this is now my 16th year. The course was not held only during two school years because not enough pupils had applied. Throughout this period, the number of ninth-grade pupils opting for this elective course varied: from 7 to 25. A 25-pupil group is, of course, too large, which is why it was difficult to achieve the goals of rhetoric at the time. Typically, about 12 pupils (out of an average of 70 ninth-grade pupils) apply for this course, which is actually the ideal number of participants. I do not have the data on how many schools provide this elective course in a continual way; however, according to the Ministry of Education, rhetoric was taught in 19 primary schools in the 2015–2016, 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years consecutively. Back in the 2001–2002 school year, Polzela Primary School was the only one that provided this

¹ See *Basic School Act, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia*, No. 12/96 of 29 February 1996, Article 17.

elective course. During the last 16 years of teaching rhetoric, I have come a long way as a teacher and have learned a lot. The goal of this article is to present what I have learned and to describe the benefits of this elective. Because looking at the past only makes sense if it provides us with useful experience and a starting point for the future, I will also present how I see the course in the future and how the rhetoric teacher can be helpful in the school process for each primary school.

Getting started

Although Slovenian schools have a rich tradition of elective activities, from which elective courses have often developed, the compulsory elective course in rhetoric was something new in the nine-year primary school programme. Because Slovenian teachers had no experience in teaching this course, it is safe to say that we were not acquainted with the goals of this compulsory elective course and were not properly qualified for its teaching. The content of the course was not included in the formal education of teachers, nor was special didactics for teaching rhetoric. With the new Basic School Act, published in the Official Gazette on 29 February 1996, rhetoric has become a compulsory elective course, which means that all the schools in Slovenia are required to offer it in the ninth grade. It has thus become a challenge for all Slovenian schools. If a teacher has not been trained in a particular course, they may have different ideas about what rhetoric is and what they should teach in that course. The absence of a tradition of rhetorical pedagogy means that the general idea about rhetoric is very diverse in Slovenian society — both for teachers and others — and often represents the basis on which pupils choose the course or ask their parents to help them out.

In the period after independence, various public speaking courses began to appear on the Slovenian market and public speaking skills have begun to gain recognition in the society. In the first seminars I attended as a young teacher wanting to teach rhetoric, I mainly received information about public performance skills. We mainly practiced oratory performance and non-verbal communication, and learned that Cicero said that performance was “the master of public speaking” (Ciceron, 2002, p. 299), so we focused primarily on that. We also analysed the performance of our speeches, as well as observed and analysed the performance of the speeches of others. Many of us thus adopted the idea that rhetoric is the practice of speaking skills and the acquisition of knowledge and skills for a persuasive oratory performance. It was only after reviewing the syllabus for rhetoric (Žagar et al., 1999) and attending a seminar organized by the Ljubljana Educational Research Institute that I realized that performance was

only one of the speaker's tasks – a very important task, actually – and that before their performance, the speaker had to undergo a certain path and complete a complex mental process, which was not mentioned during previous seminars. It was as if we had only covered the framework at the previous seminars and that the image this frame was supposed to frame remained almost completely ignored. For the most part, we discussed how to present the content, but not what should be presented. I realised that

we always achieve the final version of a speech with a completely elaborate idea of what we are going to say, and that we have to build this idea gradually, with careful planning and intensive study of both the content/topic of the speech and the proper use of rhetorical principles (Žagar, Ž. et al., 2018, p. 38).

I also realized that rhetoric is indeed an ancient art. However, because of the lack of continuity in the school curriculum, there is no broad idea in Slovenian schools what rhetoric is all about. This, of course, is connected to the teacher's knowledge. Since we have not been trained in the formal education process to teach this course, it is crucial to acquire knowledge and develop skills for teaching pupils.

At the Educational Research Institute, I received basic knowledge that opened my eyes as to what rhetoric is all about. The seminar, which took place twice and lasted for three days, introduced me to the basics and gave me a real idea of what rhetoric actually is. But this knowledge was far from enough for quality classroom teaching. We received quality information at this seminar, practiced public speaking and received good feedback on our performance: in a way, we have undergone the process that pupils have to go through. Nevertheless, we lacked a lot of knowledge: for example, how to pass all this knowledge to 14-year-olds that we, as teachers and as adult learners, have acquired, what to evaluate and by what criteria. Therefore the didactics of teaching rhetoric was needed. This is where the establishment of new grounds began. Teachers of rhetoric are/were not connected, we were unable to exchange experiences, share good practices and discuss how to successfully achieve the goals in the classroom, which goals are more difficult for pupils to adopt and such. Rhetoric teachers were thus left to self-inquiry and their own motivation to upgrade and complete their working methods.

I teach the Slovenian language, a subject in which we also teach public speaking, where speaking is one of the communication activities and developing speaking skills is one of the important activities. In teaching rhetoric, I thus helped myself with the experience gained from Slovenian language courses and vice versa. Many of the things I learned from

the seminars on rhetoric and public speaking were used in my teaching of the Slovenian language and in developing my ability to speak and public speaking. In rhetoric, I learned along with pupils each year, tried different didactic approaches, trained in teaching argumentation and speech structure and studied with the help of a textbook for rhetoric as an elective ninth-grade course: *Retorika: uvod v govorniško veščino* ('Rhetoric: Introduction to the Art of speaking', Zidar et al., 2006). At first, I studied the course content myself and looked for methods and forms of how to transfer this knowledge to the pupils, while also making sure that I systematically developed their abilities and imparted knowledge in a way that kept the pupils as active as possible (i.e. transactionally). This is because the teachers were left on their own after completing the seminar and thus passed the knowledge into practice according to the syllabus and the pupils to the best of their own abilities.

Establishing new grounds

The first obstacle I had to overcome was tackling the syllabus. I had too little knowledge to understand all the professional terms. Even when I managed to explain them with the help of a textbook for the elective course, I did not know how to present them to the pupils and in a way that would make sense. At the introduction of the nine-year primary school education, we emphasized that knowledge should be useful in everyday life and that teachers should connect it with the experiential perspective of children's lives. When teaching electives, we should also start from their goals and aspirations. The questions that came to mind at the time were:

- How can we link the desire of children to perform with very complex educational goals and professional terms such as *syllogism* or *enthymeme*?
- How do I align syllabus goals that require more complex mental processes with the different abilities of children who come to the course of rhetoric in 6th and 7th period (or 7th and 8th period) and are already tired mentally and crave easier content and activities that do not require complex mental processes?
- How should I teach rhetoric to pupils who experience reading and writing difficulties in Slovenian or about who I have already found have difficulty understanding the text and speaking? How will these pupils deal with the ranking and the wording?
- How can I translate the syllabus into the annual plan so that I still follow the objectives stated in the syllabus, but approach the pupils at the same time?

I tried and persisted every year to improve my notes, teaching style and working methods. In this regard, functional objectives set out in the beginning of the syllabus for the course were very helpful (Žagar et al., 1999, p. 7). These eight functional objectives (two of which are optional) presented a baseline; I understood them and can say that we implemented them successfully. In contrast, the detailed operational objectives were often too difficult for both myself and for the pupils (ibid. p. 7–14). In all these years, I somehow steered a middle course between a professionally demanding syllabus, my skills gaps and pupils' interests. This is how a revised annual lesson plan was developed each year anew. I tried at least one new method every year and responded to a new group of pupils. Each group had special characteristics and it seemed to me, as a teacher, that the most important thing is to adapt to the pupils, their capabilities and interests, all in connection with the syllabus. As is done in Slovenian language course, where 20% of the objectives are chosen by the teacher according to the group of pupils, it appeared appropriate to do the same in rhetoric course. For example, if the group was composed of pupils with high cognitive and well-developed communication abilities, I mentioned *digression* and *topoi* during oral presentations. The second challenge of the annual lesson plan was to arrange the objectives into 32 hours of one school year. Which content should I begin with and which should I continue with? I tried to find an optimal way every year and I believe that after 15 years I have found the most appropriate distribution of objectives and the best way of achieving them.

The second major obstacle was the didactic approach, mainly in terms of teaching argumentation. I struggled with how to explain argumentation and transfer the knowledge about an argument and conclusion to the pupil's preparation for the oral presentation. This turned out to be the main obstacle over and over again. When teaching individual examples of an argument and conclusion, the pupils partially understand them, but it depends on the examples and the pupils' capabilities. However, the problems occur when they have to form all of the above themselves and keep it in mind during their oral presentation. While they are used to talking about a particular topic and presenting their knowledge (e.g. about World War II, the state, insects and natural phenomena), they are not familiar with persuading, making statements and supporting them in the presentation. They always found the set of relevant topics interesting (e.g. It is healthy and beneficial to have a pet, Teenagers need to have pocket money, Vegetarianism is healthy, Drug use in athletics spoils fair competition). They were happy to choose the topic that appealed most to them, searched for literature, but putting their thoughts into words usually fell through.

This is how I realised that rhetoric develops the capabilities, which means they have to undergo a process of development, also with the teacher's help in the school setting. Furthermore, it turned out that it is important for the pupils to go through the five speaker tasks during the lessons at school so that I can help and guide them. My aim was to develop didactic approaches, particularly in teaching argumentation and its use in speech, as the understanding and the use of argumentation are certainly the two major objectives for each school year.

During the teaching process, I kept in mind that the transactional approach should prevail when working with pupils. This means that the teacher is there not only to transfer the knowledge, but so that the pupils learn to present findings, formulate rules with the teacher's help, and apply them in new circumstances in the learning process by observing persuasion techniques, elements of the persuasion process and factors of successful persuasion.

The third major obstacle was completely practical. The rhetoric course was held every 14 days for two consecutive lessons and, for some pupils, these were their 6th and 7th periods, and for some even their 7th and 8th periods. It is therefore completely normal and expected that the pupils are tired and unable to complete long and challenging mental activities. For this reason I planned the two lessons in such a way that the demanding content was discussed at the beginning of the first lesson and followed by various activities and exercises of putting knowledge into practice. I had to make sure the activities changed regularly (listening, exercises, speaking, exercises, working in groups and so on).

Of course there were *several small obstacles*, one of them being the assessment of knowledge. The syllabus recommends that pupils receive two grades for the completed oral presentations and one for an analysis (Žagar et al., 1999, p. 16), but I had to decide what to evaluate and in which part of the school year so that the requirements of the rules were met, and I also had to develop criteria and assessment descriptors.

Teachers certainly improve their teaching skills every year when working with pupils, but they also need professional feedback to know whether they are on the right path, a connection with other teachers, as well as the possibility to exchange good practice experiences and attend additional professional training. Until 2008, this process was more or less successful as the Educational Research Institute still organised professional seminars for rhetoric teachers. Because I participated in those seminars as a teacher with first-hand experiences, I was able to speak about my experiences and received feedback. However, since 2008 this seminar is

no longer being organised and no meetings are being held with the other teachers and the two experts Igor Ž. Žagar and Janja Žmavc.

The obstacles have already been mentioned; however it is important to address which benefits of this elective course did I notice and why I find it essential and useful in primary school.

Why is a rhetoric course essential?

As already discussed, the following objectives were listed in the nine-grade primary schooling curricula, such as:

- In the Slovenian language syllabus: “They evaluate texts and justify their opinion /.../ they evaluate the interesting aspects, truthfulness, clarity and usefulness of the text and justify their opinion /.../ they evaluate the interesting aspects, vividness and clarity of the text, propose corrections/improvements and justify their opinion” (Poznanovič Jezeršek et al., 2018, pp. 7–8).
- In the History syllabus: “/.../ the pupil justifies the importance of Enlightenment ideas on the formation of the United States /.../ justifies characteristics and changes” (Kunaver et al., 2011, p. 34).
- In the Geography syllabus: “/.../ the pupil justifies the development and importance of traffic, draws logical conclusions, looks for findings and justifies them.” (Kolnik et al., 2011, p. 15, 20).

All the randomly selected examples above show that modern curricula require pupils to express their opinions and justify them. But where do pupils learn to justify? Who trained the teachers for such an approach? I believe it is up to the enthusiasm and personal professional development of the teacher to gain this knowledge. I am aware that the National Education Institute Slovenia organises seminars that focus on the development of the teachers’ communication competences and partly touch on rhetoric and argumentation, but the approach is not comprehensive and systematic. Furthermore, the same Institute published a book written by Alenka Kompare and Tanja Rupnik Vec titled *Kako spodbujati razvoj mišljenja: Od temeljnih miselnih procesov do argumentiranja* (‘How to encourage the development of thinking: From basic thinking processes to argumentation’, 2016). Primary school teachers certainly need this kind of material, which is useful, but this is not a comprehensive approach or a set of actions that would systematically be suitable for all primary schools. I therefore believe that only the rhetoric teacher can convey the knowledge of argumentation to other teachers as he or she can help them unify their knowledge and, together as a team, they can all progress and thus help pupils develop more complex thinking processes.

Pupils perform oral presentations from 1st grade onwards. Although the Slovenian syllabus outlines the topics and steps in the preparation of the oral presentation, it is up to the teacher to set the criteria and descriptors. Teachers of rhetoric can therefore help other teachers at school as they guide the pupils through the preparations for oral presentation. This way, the pupils are aware of the five speaker tasks and really learn to use them, work together to set the criteria for oral presentations that increase the complexity in accordance with the pupils (and not in accordance with the teacher) and to make sure the criteria for oral presentations are harmonised vertically in all courses. Teachers of rhetoric can organize seminars for other teachers of the teaching staff and share the knowledge about the basic tasks of the speaker, speech structure, performance, verbal and non-verbal communication as well as a flexible (i.e. verbal and non-verbal) control of the speech situation and argumentation skills.

How to move forward?

The elective course in rhetoric has numerous benefits. A rhetoric course actually puts into practice exactly what curriculum designers want to bring to primary school, i.e. for the pupils to carefully read different types of texts or listen to them, read between the lines and use reason based on facts. Rhetoric can help pupils acquire the skills for preparing an oral presentation with arguments and, at the same time, train their public speaking skills, which is a competence they develop from 1st grade onwards. It would therefore be worth considering whether it would be suitable to offer courses in rhetoric as early as in the 8th grade (i.e. to both the eighth- and ninth-grade pupils) as the gained knowledge would benefit them in various subjects in the 9th grade and it would also mean that the rhetoric teacher could be more interdisciplinary interconnected.

It would also be appropriate as well as necessary to organize professional seminars for the teachers of rhetoric, who nowadays have to extend their knowledge on their own. The seminars would not only provide them with expertise they did not acquire during their formal education, but could also offer some training in didactics they urgently need, that is, how to transfer this expertise to the ninth-grade pupils, how to distribute the objectives within one school year, how to upgrade and differentiate them, what to assess and how, and how to interact and connect with teachers vertically.

Teachers grow and develop professionally at peer-to-peer meetings, where teaching and assessment experiences can be exchanged, where discussions on what achieving the objectives looks like, where recorded oral presentations can be evaluated, and in this way unify assessment criteria.

It would be a good idea to create a network of teachers of rhetoric and provide professional guidance in order to achieve that.

It should be added that new literature is always welcome. The textbook published in 2006 and has proved to be a textbook suitable for teachers of rhetoric, but not that useful for pupils. We certainly need a didactic manual for teaching rhetoric and perhaps some other materials that will help teachers teach argumentation in primary school along with public speaking exercises.

Many years of experience show that pupils are eager to progress as speakers and are often encouraged by their parents who were unable to receive such education. Pupils (mostly unsystematically) develop their speaking abilities in other subjects. This is why it is the task of rhetoric and teachers of rhetoric to vertically connect the teachers at the school in the development of this competence. And when pupils reach the 9th grade, they can develop more complex mental processes and learn to speak with strong arguments.

Long-term experience of teaching rhetoric and working with other teachers allows me to say with certainty that rhetoric has a bright future as an elective course in primary school.

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