
Teaching Czech through Theatre

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Foreign students taking part in the theatre class at the Institute for Language and Preparatory Studies's (ILPS) Albertov centre, gathered on June 5, 2010 to share the results of their semester-long efforts. Students from Japan, Russia, Germany, the United States and Belarus chose to learn Czech in a special course, in which the language is not being taught in classrooms the regular way, but instead uses theatre.

The performance had been rehearsed under the guidance of the institute's instructor, Ms. Marie Kestřánková.



Can you introduce the so-called theatre course to our readers?

Czech for foreigners can be taught in many ways, not only in the classrooms, but also using theatre and other cultural activities. The Albertov centre specializes in courses like this, and therefore we run a literature club, a film club, walks through the culture of Prague etc. Our theatre club started in the summer semester of 2008 and we do a short theatre performance at the end of each semester.

Who attends these courses?

I've worked with all kinds of nationalities. Each nationality has its own specifics, and you have to be sensitive to cultural differences and customs. Thinking back, I've never worked with students from Arabic countries. On the other hand, I teach Russians and Americans quite often.

How did you choose the play for this year's performance?

I usually don't go for finished plays. I rely on improvisation techniques devised by the Czech Improvisation League. Using these procedures, I learn to know my students quite fast. I keep noticing which roles they spontaneously adopt, which roles they are powerful in, what is difficult for them etc. After I've learnt this, I start looking for a subject matter that the whole group could find interesting. Based on methods from drama and education theory, we come up with the structure of the story. That's also how this year's play evolved.



As for the script, I'm observing which language functions the students need to use, what the style of their utterances is, and so on. Then I write the script. I believe that in the end, it is the teacher who has to write the script, because he or she takes care of the grammar and also of the progression of the language training of particular students. We have to use sentences that the students themselves are trying to construct, but tend to fail at them. The purpose of the training is to eliminate these deficiencies by automatizing the grammatically correct text from the script. I think it makes no sense to include sentences that the student can handle well, because then we are forgetting the ultimate goal, which is improving foreign language skills.

Who takes care of directing and costumes?

In a way, I'm the director. I'm saying "in a way", because many of my students offer very good feedback and make a significant contribution to my work.

As for costumes, that's a funny question. In this respect, I've gone a long way. The first time I performed theatre with foreigners was in 2006 and during the first performances, we had lots and lots of costumes, props and set pieces. It took a lot of effort, and looking back, I see it as ineffective, and even counterproductive. These days, I try to be as minimalist as possible. I find pantomimic representation of reality much more interesting, and students find it more fun. As for costumes, I like it better when the actors wear casual clothes, maybe with some sort of functional prop. That's enough. The Saturday performance doesn't even include props and the students wear dark trousers and white or solid colour T-shirts.

How do students approach this non-traditional form of teaching?

This course is optional, e.g. only the students who are truly interested sign up. I'm grateful that the centre decided this way, because this way I only work with students who prefer theatre or those who are curious how it works. Taking and finishing the course is each student's personal decision. On the other hand, any one can drop the course without suffering any kind of penalty – this can mean a certain amount of risk for the final product.

I have my own internal rule while teaching this course. Each student has the right to decide whether he will take part in the final phase of the rehearsals or not. Each semester, we get at least one student who chooses not to perform. There may be many reasons behind this decision, but it's very useful for the group to know who can be counted on, and who cannot. That's why I appreciate both positive and negative decisions, even though they can make my work more difficult. Once, I had 15 people on the course, and finished with four. This year, it's quite the opposite – twelve out of fourteen stayed till the end.

What's the most difficult thing for the participants?

What I find most difficult is the fact that each student is on a different level. It is hard for lower level students to endure among the more advanced. For the advanced students, the most complicated phase is the final one, during which language precision is being trained. That's when the never ending troubles with pronunciation and automatization of grammatical structures come into play.

Do students take the course repeatedly?

Our centre focuses on language training and preparatory courses for students who are going to selected universities. This means that most of them either leave or enroll at a university after the end of the semester. This year I was lucky and three students from the winter semester continued in the summer, but that's quite an exception.

(Lucie Kettnerová)