



AN OVERVIEW OF PHONETIC-PHONOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN TEACHING SERBIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Nina Lj. Sudimac Jović, Aleksandar M. Novaković

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy,
Department of Serbian Language and Literature, Niš, Serbia

ORCID iDs: Nina Lj. Sudimac Jović
Aleksandar M. Novaković

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2084-9258>
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7620-5964>

Abstract. *This paper explores the issue of phonetic-phonological units in the teaching of Serbian as a foreign language from an analytical-synthetic perspective. Given the limited number of studies that examine the role, significance, and function of phonetics, phonology, and prosody in Serbian language instruction for non-native speakers, the research aims to provide a clearer understanding of key topics addressed to date, with the goal of enhancing teaching practices. The study employs descriptive and theoretical analysis methods, utilizing content analysis as a technique. The research material comprises works cited in three bibliographies on the methodology of teaching Serbian as a foreign language (Krajišnik 1992, Nikolić 2020, Novaković 2023). The corpus analysis reveals a need for more experimental research in future studies, which could yield valuable insights for theoretical discussions and suggest innovative proposals and models for use in classroom instruction.*

Key words: *foreign language, teaching practices, phonetics, phonology, prosody*

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the economic, social, and political circumstances both domestically and globally, interest in learning Serbian as a foreign language has grown. Foreign students, business professionals, homemakers, journalists, and diplomats (Vukadinović 1984, 61) sought to rapidly acquire the language in a "Western, efficient manner" (Novaković 2022, 17). Đorđe Otašević (2014, 21) observes that this shift occurred in the latter half of the 20th century, as prior to this, the study of Serbian as a foreign language "was limited in scope because our language was never one of the world's major languages." After World War II,

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Corresponding author: Nina Lj. Sudimac Jović

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš. Ćirila i Metodija 2, 18101 Niš, Serbia

E-mail: nina.sudimac.jovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Yugoslavia's foreign policy shifted outward, leading to the signing of numerous agreements in the fields of economics, business, tourism, culture, and education: "The Republic of Serbia, as part of the federal state, began to sign agreements to send lecturers abroad to foreign universities, as well as to accept foreign language lecturers at our universities" (Krajišnik 2016, 8). "The Serbo-Croatian language held a strong position in left-wing departments, and there is clear evidence that in many departments it was second only to Russian, which rightly held the top spot" (Brborić 2018, 22). In addition to Slavic departments, Serbian was taught in institutes, faculties, language learning centers, and at national and workers' universities (Dešić 1990, 234). "With the rise in the number of foreigners learning the language, there was also an increase in the number of Serbian (Croatian) language teachers involved in teaching" (Novaković 2023, 182). As the teaching methodology of Serbian as a foreign language established itself as a scientific discipline, all necessary conditions for the systematic research and study of teaching theory and practice were fulfilled.

The early contributors to Serbian scholarship, including university professors, researchers, and teaching methodologists, played a crucial role in the establishment and development of the methodology for teaching Serbian as a foreign language. They focused their efforts on exploring essential linguistic and pedagogical issues. The origins of their research are closely linked to the activities of the Institute for Foreign Languages, beginning in 1949, as well as the establishment of the Department of Experimental Phonetics within the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Novaković 2024, 19). By 1953, this department had evolved into the Institute for Experimental Phonetics, Speech Pathology, and Foreign Language Studies (Kostić et al. 1982, 215; Ćupić, Tanasić 2007, 13). Professor Đorđe Kostić, who was appointed as its director, dedicated himself to the study of foreign language teaching methodology. At that time, the teaching of Serbian (Croatian) as a foreign language was structured and delivered according to the principles of the grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and direct methods, reflecting the prevailing methodological thinking. A significant focus was placed on phonetic principles and the phonetic-phonological achievements of Serbian science, leading to the opening of the first language laboratory in 1954. This laboratory quickly evolved from an experimental phonetics facility into a teaching phonetics laboratory. There, "texts were developed, tape exercises were refined, recordings were produced, and efforts were made to edit and record the prepared materials" (Žigić 1989, 85). The solid foundations laid by the pioneers were built upon by successive generations of scholars in Serbian language teaching methodology, ensuring continuity and progressive enhancement over the decades.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Subject and Aim of the Research

In their efforts to help students advance in learning Serbian as a foreign language, Serbian language teachers have consistently shown a desire to stay informed about scientific developments and knowledge over the decades. However, despite the close connection between the development of the teaching methodology for Serbian as a foreign language and phonetic-phonological studies, the scientific literature indicates that there is still a lack of studies addressing the role, significance, and function of phonetics, phonology, and prosody in this type of instruction. Professor Milorad Dešić (1986, 106) observes that "little attention is paid to these topics, both in textbooks and in teaching." He

attributes this situation to teachers addressing accentuation only when it is scheduled in the curriculum, as well as to unresolved issues regarding the education and training of teachers who instruct foreigners in the Serbian language (Novaković 2024, 60). Given the importance of phonetic, phonological, and prosodic knowledge in teaching Serbian as a foreign language, teachers are expected to continually develop their expertise in these areas. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to analyze existing phonetic-phonological and prosodic research, with the aim of providing a clearer understanding of the key issues explored so far, which are crucial for improving teaching practices.

Research Tasks

Aligned with the identified subject and objective of the research, we have outlined the following research tasks:

1. Identify the authors who have explored the role and significance of phonetics, phonology, and prosody in the teaching of Serbian as a foreign language in their research.
2. Highlight and categorize the most frequent phonetic-phonological and prosodic topics that researchers have addressed in their studies.

Methods, Techniques, and Research Instruments

In line with the specific subject, objectives, and tasks of the research, we employed the descriptive method and theoretical analysis, utilizing content analysis as the primary technique. The research material comprised works referenced in three bibliographies related to the methodology of teaching Serbian as a foreign language: Krajišnik 1992, Nikolić 2020, and Novaković 2023. The study was conducted in mid-May 2024, and all findings are explained descriptively.

ANALYSIS OF PHONETIC-PHONOLOGICAL AND PROSODIC RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF TEACHING SERBIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Since the 1970s, the role and significance of grammar in foreign language teaching has been shaped primarily by the needs of learners. Influenced by cognitive linguistics, speech act theory, and the situational approach in language teaching methodology, a new direction in applied linguistics emerged, rejecting the various restrictions typical of certain language learning methods. This approach, known as the communicative or functional approach in foreign language teaching theory, is based on the principles of cognitive psychology. Unlike formal approaches, functional approaches emphasize communication as one of the most important functions of language in society. Developing communicative competence involves acquiring linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence (Marinković 2016, 35). In linguistics, the following competences are distinguished and described: lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, and orthographic competence (Babić 2011, 162–163).

An analysis of the descriptors for teaching Serbian as a foreign language at the Center for Serbian as a Foreign Language in Belgrade shows that phonetics and phonology are taught across all (sub)levels, from A1 to C2. At the A1 level, for instance, students are expected to: recognize all 30 phonemes of standard Serbian and represent them as graphemes; understand phonological distinctions, such as how a phoneme can serve as a distinctive feature with a

semantic role (e.g., sad/ugly); and differentiate between affricates and fricatives (ć/c, č/č, z/ž, s/š). At level A2, in addition to the skills required at A1, students are expected to be able to recognize and mark the sound "j" and identify certain morpho-phonological alternations in examples like "student/students," "strong/stronger," "young/younger," and similar pairs. At level B1, students should be able to "write the graphemes 'j' and 'h' in all word positions (e.g., studio/study, radio/radio, read, cheap...), distinguish Serbian sounds both auditorily and articulatorily, and correctly apply phonological changes within words (such as sound changes)." At level B2, students are introduced to two phonological concepts: first, they should understand and apply morphonological alternations correctly, and second, they should recognize the optional vowel at the end of words. At levels C1 and C2, students are expected to fully master the phonological system of modern Serbian, including both the Ekavian and Ijekavian pronunciation variants. Regarding prosody, additional details can be found in the section titled "Reading Aloud," which outlines learning outcomes related to intonation and accentuation. At levels A1 and A2, students should be able to read printed text at a slow pace, regardless of the alphabet, and correctly apply sentence intonation—whether interrogative, exclamatory, or informative. At levels B1 and B2, students should know the correct literary accent placement for familiar words, maintain clear and understandable pronunciation, respect accent placement, and use appropriate intonation and accent length. At higher proficiency levels (C1 and C2), students are expected to "focus on correct word accentuation and sentence intonation when reading texts."

The historical development of the teaching methodology for Serbian as a foreign language has demonstrated that, in line with prevailing methodological ideas, Serbian language instructors and lecturers of Serbian as a foreign language have paid attention to using appropriate methods within the areas of phonetics, phonology, and prosody. Ema Leskovar and Krunoslav Pranjić placed particular emphasis on the effectiveness of the global-structural audio-visual method, which focuses on spoken language and dialogue. This approach advocates learning the language in its spoken form through texts that naturally present real-life situations, accompanied by sound recordings that combine images with audio. "Tonically recorded pronunciation units, each representing a meaningful and rhythmic segment integrated into sentence intonation, have a strong impact on the brain," creating natural conditions for language acquisition (Leskovar, Pranjić 1962, 124).

Vesna Požgaj-Hadžić addressed the challenge of correcting speech errors in students learning Serbian as a foreign language in her paper "On Some Methods of Correcting Speech Errors" (1986). She emphasized that it is "neither effective nor pedagogically sound to interrupt and correct students' mistakes while they are speaking." She outlines two categories of methods: 1. methods that do not require recording speaking exercises, and 2. methods that involve recording. The first set of methods involves the teacher, or both the teacher and students, noting and analyzing errors (1. Both the teacher and students record mistakes, followed by a group analysis after the speaking exercise; 2. The teacher individually records each student's errors). The second set engages all students in actively participating, as they listen, identify, and correct errors, either independently or with teacher assistance (3. Students listen, identify, and correct errors; 4. The teacher explains errors to the group; 5. The teacher individually explains errors to each student; 6. Students explain the errors themselves)¹.

¹ In recent years, researchers have focused on analyzing the mistakes made by non-native learners of Serbian. Most studies concentrate on errors at the morphosyntactic and lexical levels, while fewer

Since mastering the phonetic-phonological system of Serbian poses significant challenges for foreign learners, Časlav Stojanović, in his work "Problems in Presenting the Phonological System of the Serbo-Croatian Language to Foreign Students" (1986), first reviews the phonological system of Serbian (Croatian), including its prosodic elements, and then explores effective teaching approaches. He emphasizes the value of using an empirical method and understanding the phonological system of the student's native language. This approach allows teachers to better explain similarities and differences between the languages, helping to mitigate negative language transfer. Stojanović highlights that mastering the suprasegmental features of Serbo-Croatian vowels (such as the long-short distinction and pitch variation) is particularly difficult for foreign learners, and understanding accentual differences often presents "an almost insurmountable challenge" for them (Stojanović 1986, 101). When it comes to consonants, Professor Časlav Stojanović suggests applying the auditory approach and describing their articulation. As an effective procedure, he singles out the processing of consonants starting from the manner of articulation: plosives, affricates, nasals, laterals and semi-vowels.

Professor Milorad Dešić paid special attention to the issues of the phonetic-phonological and prosodic system in his scientific opus: "Among the basic tasks of teaching both native and foreign languages is the effort for students, i.e. listeners, to acquire orthoepic (pronunciation), grammatical, lexical, stylistic and the orthographic (spelling) norm" (Dešić 2001, 71). Placing the orthoepic norm in the first place and realizing the importance of the aforementioned system in mastering (Serbian as) a foreign language and developing language skills (productive and reproductive), in several works he dealt with issues of orthographic/spelling norm, as well as the place and quality of individual units of the textbook set. As an important starting point in the teaching of Serbian as a foreign language, Professor Milorad Dešić (2001, 72; 2016, 125) singles out the need for foreign listeners to "realize as soon as possible that, unlike the spelling of many languages, Serbian spelling is phonetic". What further complicates learning Serbian as a foreign language is the existence of two pronunciations - Ekavian and Ijekavian (Dešić 2003b, 63; Dešić 2011, 189). He is of the opinion that listeners from other language areas should have a complete command of one pronunciation, but also know the other to some extent (Dešić 2003a; Dešić 2003b; Dešić 2007, 268). In examining teaching practices, he observes that prosodic elements "receive little attention, both in textbooks and in the teaching of Serbo-Croatian itself" (Dešić 1986, 106). Typically, topics such as word accents, length, logical stress, and intonation are addressed only when scheduled, and are often not integrated with other phonetic aspects or with morphology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics, and stylistics. For this reason, drawing on the principles of functional grammar, Professor Dešić emphasizes the need for a close connection between phonetics, spelling, and other grammatical areas: "For example, a good understanding of syntax and prosody is essential for correct comma usage" (Dešić 2001, 76).²

works address the description and explanation of errors at the phonetic-phonological level (Arsić Perišić 2016; Sudimac 2019, 2020; Novaković, Jović 2022). This suggests that less attention has been given to the phonetic, phonological, and prosodic aspects of Serbian as a foreign language. Following the principle of brevity, this paper will not delve into the analysis of the aforementioned works, leaving that for future research.

² "In our orthographies, several chapters cover material that primarily belongs to phonetics, but is traditionally included in orthographic handbooks: Ekavian and Ijekavian pronunciation, the consonants h, č and ć, dž and đ, as well as consonant assimilation by voicing" (Dešić 2016, 125).

As a vital component of developing listening and speaking skills, Professor Dešić highlights the use of audio textbooks.³ These consist of "core textbooks, audio cassettes, and compact discs (audio recordings)" (Dešić 2003a, 199). He argues that audio textbooks are a valuable tool, enabling students to work independently and become proficient in a foreign language more quickly. However, he stresses the importance of having the texts read or interpreted by top announcers and actors,⁴ whose voices—pleasant and varied in terms of gender and vocal qualities (such as intensity, pitch, tempo, and timbre)—are crucial for effective learning. Through their interpretations, along with various articulatory, morphological, syntactic, lexical-semantic, and stylistic exercises, students are expected to develop a refined and polished speech expression.⁵ According to Professor Dešić (2001, 73; 2003a, 201; 2003b, 64), "certain elements of phonetics (including phonology and morphonology) pose significant challenges for many students." These difficulties include the articulation of specific sounds, such as vocalic "r" (both long and short), "đ," "ć," "lj," and "nj," as well as consonant articulation in different word positions (initial, medial, and final). Students often struggle with distinguishing between "č" and "ć," "ž" and "đ," correctly writing the sounds "h" and "j," and mastering numerous phoneme alternations (previously referred to as sound changes)⁶, the pronunciation of the four standard literary accents (which play a distinctive role in the Serbian language),⁷ the differentiation between unaccented words (clitics) and accented words.⁸

Regarding accents, he emphasizes the need for foreigners to learn the accents of the Serbian literary language, referring to experience that suggests foreigners are capable of learning them.⁹ He outlines the following proven method: "We introduce foreigners to the standard accent by gently correcting them from the very beginning, as they pronounce

³ Svetlana Goljak, in her work titled "Thematic Audio Dictionary in Teaching Serbian as a Foreign Language" (2007), presents a project for the development of a thematic Serbian-Russian and Russian-Serbian audio dictionary, whose primary function is to increase the level of student autonomy and facilitate the acquisition, correction, and improvement of pronunciation for students in teaching Serbian as a foreign language.

⁴ As a special segment of the audio textbook, Professor Milorad Dešić singles out the recorded speech of famous people - artists, scientists, athletes (Ivo Andrić, Desanka Maksimović, Branko Ćopić, Dobrica Ćosić, Milorad Pavić, Aleksandra Belić) (Dešić 2003, 203).

⁵ Professor Milorad Dešić (2003, 203) highlights the significant role that sound illustrations play in achieving this objective. By sound illustrations, he refers to noises produced by natural events, sounds from various objects and devices, animal vocalizations, paralinguistic elements, and other sound-related components such as voice and musical accompaniments.

⁶ "Without diminishing the significance of Vuk Karadžić's language and orthographic reform, we must point out some deviations from phonetic principles. First and foremost, these principles do not apply to groups of words where phonetic changes occur" (Dešić 2001, 72).

⁷ "The following question is raised: should foreigners even be taught the Serbian literary accents, knowing that many of our educated people, including teachers, struggle to master them?" (Dešić 2003a, 202).

⁸ Professor Milorad Dešić addresses the challenges students face when learning Serbian as a foreign language in his work "Orthography and Orthoepey in Serbian as a Foreign Language" (2016). He outlines the most common mistakes made by students at the Center for Serbian as a Foreign Language, located at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade.

⁹ "Many difficulties in mastering the prosodic system of the Serbian language are caused by the very nature of our accents. It is not at all simple to master the quantity and quality of the accent, learn the exact place of the accent, adopt doublets, and similar elements." (Spasić 2016, 98).

individual words or shorter, simpler sentences, gradually leading them, in later stages, to the basic rules of accentuation" (Dešić 2011, 190). He believes that "accentuation should be learned from the very start, alongside the understanding of meaning and the initial pronunciation of the word, while observing its morphological features and gaining a basic understanding of its usage in a sentence." This process takes place in three phases: identifying the location of the accent, distinguishing between long and short accents, and recognizing the difference between rising and falling intonation (Dešić 1986, 106).¹⁰

In relation to this, Nataša Spasić, in her paper "Learning the Accent System of the Serbian Language by Native and Non-Native Speakers in Theory and Practice" (2016), points out that the prosodic sphere is extremely suitable for presentation through engaging and useful exercises that students will easily remember. The author particularly emphasizes the importance of mastering speaking skills for both native and non-native speakers of the Serbian language, presenting a functional learning model with tasks and exercises. According to Ana Batas in her work "Accent Paradigms and Alternations in the Teaching of Serbian as a Foreign Language" (2020), difficulties stem from the existence of eight different verb accent paradigms in contemporary Serbian. The author attempts to present the simplest variant of accent paradigms by basing the classification on accent alternations that occur in the infinitive – 1st person singular of the present tense – 3rd person plural of the present tense – imperative. The results of the aforementioned research show that the most common type involves the alternation of short-rising and short-falling accents in one place, followed by an alternation of long-rising and long-falling accents in the same position.

Developing speaking skills represents a very important step and element in learning any foreign language, and it is necessary to create a good environment that encourages meaningful and adequate communication. Recently, in the teaching of phonetics, phonology, and prosody, there has been increasing discussion about the need to use podcasts¹¹ and video clips, whose advantage lies in providing opportunities to practice listening, pronunciation, and learning new words (Novaković 2022, 48). Therefore, in her textbook *Is Your Class a Silent Film?* (2023), Jelena Redli offers students very useful theoretical knowledge, as well as practical exercises to apply what they have learned (Redli 2023, 3).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the collected corpus, comprising scientific papers and monographs, revealed that scholars have addressed a wide range of topics related to the presentation of the phonetic-phonological and prosodic systems in teaching Serbian as a foreign language. Across all works, it was demonstrated that the complexity of material presentation is closely tied to the inherent complexity of the Serbian language itself. This includes the two pronunciation variants (Ekavian and Ijekavian), the intricate consonant and vowel systems, and the accentual system, which consists of six prosodic features. Systematic research in

¹⁰ In his work "Prosodic Elements in Teaching Serbo-Croatian as a Foreign Language" (1986), Professor Milorad Dešić particularly insists on differentiating content according to the level of language proficiency, emphasizing the importance of addressing accentual doublets, the pronunciation of foreign names, logical stress, and intonation.

¹¹ "A podcast is a digital file that contains an audio or audio-video recording distributed via the internet, intended for listening or viewing on a computer, digital player, television, or mobile phone" (Novaković 2022, 51).

phonetics, phonology, and prosody for teaching Serbian as a foreign language began with the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts' Department of Experimental Phonetics, whose foundational work paved the way for future studies. Given that these areas are taught at all proficiency levels, researchers have focused on identifying the most effective methods and approaches to simplify learning and minimize common errors made by non-native speakers. A significant contribution to this field came from Professor Milorad Dešić, who not only highlighted the complexity of the Serbian phonetic-phonological system but also proposed strategies for improving the teaching process. These strategies included the selection of appropriate methods and ongoing training for instructors. Other researchers primarily focused on examining the effectiveness of various types of exercises aimed at correcting mispronunciations and facilitating the proper acquisition of accents, as well as their practical application in everyday speech.

From the literature reviewed and analyzed, it is clear that significant progress has been made in phonetic-phonological and prosodic research. However, due to the inherent complexity of these areas, further efforts are needed in scientific research to enhance the practical application of Serbian as a foreign language. Thus, we suggest that future studies should prioritize experimental research that explores the (inter)relationship between the phonetic and prosodic systems of L1 and L2 languages. Specific examples from these studies could be used as targeted teaching tools in Serbian language classes for foreign learners. Additionally, it would be beneficial for researchers to produce more practical publications that offer teachers guidance on how to approach specific teaching units.

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PREGLED FONETSKO-FONOLOŠKIH ISTRAŽIVANJA U NASTAVI SRPSKOG KAO STRANOG JEZIKA

U radu se sa analitičko-sintetičkog aspekta sagledavaju radovi koji se bave pitanjem fonetsko-fonoloških jedinica u nastavi srpskog kao stranog jezika. S obzirom na činjenicu da se pregledom naučne literature uočava da nema mnogo istraživanja u kojima su se autori bavili pitanjem mesta, važnosti i funkcije fonetike, fonologije i prozodije u nastavi srpskog kao stranog jezika, cilj istraživanja je stvaranje jasnije slike o do sada obrađenim pitanjima važnih za unapređenje nastavne prakse. U radu je korišćena deskriptivna metoda i metoda teorijske analize sa tehnikom analize sadržaja. Građu za ovo istraživanje činili su radovi popisani u trima bibliografijama iz oblasti metodike nastave srpskog kao stranog jezika (Krajišnik 1992, Nikolić 2020, Novaković 2023). Analizom korpusa uočeno je da bi istraživači u budućim radovima trebalo više pažnje da usmere na konkretna eksperimentalna istraživanja, koja bi donela zanimljive podatke važne za teorijska promišljanja i donošenje zanimljivih predloga i modela koje bi nastavnici mogli da koriste na svojim časovima.

Ključne reči: *srpski kao strani jezik, nastavna praksa, fonetika, fonologija, prozodija*