

---

## **Quo vadis foreign language teaching in Polish public secondary schools? Is the public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century effective enough and technologically sufficient?**

---

The education system in Poland is undergoing some structural reforms once again.<sup>1</sup> Highly dependent on politics, education is prone to both structural changes and philosophical concepts, officially, to strengthen the general quality and to address the raising demands of the labour market. Consequently, there is no surprise that English has been playing a significant role in our schools for some time. Rajathurai Nishanthi puts English in historical contexts: ‘English was initially the language of England, but over the historical efforts of the British Empire, it has developed the

---

1 A major reform in the school education system has been underway since the school year 2017/2018 and will be completed in 2022/2023: ‘The pre-reform system comprised 6-year primary schools (ISCED 1), 3-year lower secondary schools (ISCED 2), 3-year (upper secondary) basic vocational schools, 3-year general upper secondary schools and 4-year technical upper secondary schools (ISCED 3), and 1- to 2.5-year post-secondary schools (ISCED 4). The reform has transformed the ‘6+3+3 years’ education model into an ‘8+4 (or +5) years’ one, with 8-year single-structure education (ISCED 1 and 2) in the primary school followed by a 4- or 5-year education cycle in a secondary school, and a 1- to 2.5-year cycle in a post-secondary school. Pupils enrolled in pre-reform schools follow programmes based on transitional arrangements. Structural changes in the system are combined with a curricular reform, and new arrangements have been put in place for pre-primary education and vocational education and training’ (Kolanowska, 2021, p. 12).

primary or secondary language of numerous former British colonies such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Sri Lanka, and India etc. Currently, English is the primary language not only of countries actively touched by British imperialism, but also many business and cultural spheres dominated by those countries' (2018). Nowadays, the words referring to language of business become quite apparent as to why English is so popular among the youth.<sup>2</sup> Particularly, since Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and the common market became open for employment, the ability to communicate in the English language started to be seen as an asset and a crucial competence. The EU recognises its linguistic diversity as significant and calls it a fundamental value.<sup>3</sup> Meenu and Prabhat Pandey state that 'in the international commercial sphere English has become lingua-franca of the business world irrespective of geographical, social, political or religious differences. It is being recognized as one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Earlier people used to get a job if they possessed expertise in their respective fields but in the current era the specific skills should be complemented with communication skills. The need for giving emphasis on the English communication development is of utmost importance in the present scenario with an objective to make the job aspirants gainfully employed' (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). Polish foreign language education seems to head in this particular direction where English is the most popular foreign language, where between 68.5% and 96.7% of students in different parts of Poland choose to take it at their matriculation exam.<sup>4</sup>

In the world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English Skills of 2022 (English Proficiency Index<sup>5</sup>) Poland was placed in 13<sup>th</sup> place. The question remains

- 
- 2 'English is the most widely spread foreign language taught in European schools. In the previous issue of Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2008, it was stated that English dominates in Europe as it is used in 14 countries. In countries where it was not stated which language should be chosen, English also is the most popular language' (Górowska-Fells, 2012) [author's translation from Polish].
  - 3 In an EU based on the motto 'United in diversity', languages are the most direct expression of our culture. Linguistic diversity is a reality, the observance of which is a fundamental value of the EU. Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states that the Union 'shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity'. Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) emphasises that 'Union action shall be aimed at developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States', while fully respecting cultural and linguistic diversity (Article 165(1) TFEU). For further reading see: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy>.
  - 4 See: Universality of teaching foreign languages. <https://www.ore.edu.pl/2015/03/raporty-2/>
  - 5 **The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI)** attempts to rank countries and regions by the equity of English language skills amongst those adults who participated and took

how did we achieve such great result? The very first association is public education which is, according to the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland, to be both free and mandatory until the age of 18.<sup>6</sup> The system of education comprises of early childhood education and care (crèches and kids clubs) for 0 to 3-year-old children, pre-primary education in form of a nursery school, a preschool class, a preschool unit or preschool centre for children aged 3 to 6 years. Compulsory education is divided into one-year compulsory pre-primary education for 6-year-old children and primary school for 7–15-year-old children and teens. For young people aged 15–18/20 there are various types of schools available, they can choose between 4-year general secondary schools, 5-year technical secondary schools, or 3-year stage I sectoral vocational schools (Kolanowska, 2021, pp. 14–15). In those types of schools English classes as a second language are conducted with lower and higher intensity. Primary school education is divided into two stages where from grades 1–3 for integrated education (Polish, Mathematics, Social Education, Natural Sciences, Technology, ICT Education, Art Education, Music Education, Modern Foreign Language, and Physical Education) there are cumulatively 20 hours weekly, where certain hours are distributed among the individual types of classes by the teacher conducting lessons (Kolanowska, 2021, p. 41). However, the allocation of hours dedicated to first modern foreign language is specified clearly; that is, three hours weekly throughout grades 4–8, which in total give 108 hours (approximately 3 hours weekly x 36 weeks per school year) of foreign language education and 540 hours during the 5-year cycle (Kolanowska, 2021, p. 42). When it comes to secondary schools, both in 4-year general secondary school (3 hours x 4 years) and 5-year technical secondary school (2 hours x 3 years and

---

the language test available for free over the internet. The index was first published in 2011 and based on test data from 1.7 million test takers. The 2022 edition was based on test data from more than 2.1 million participants. However, the test seems to be biased towards respondents who are interested in pursuing language study, and the sample was roughly balanced between male (59%) and female (41%) representatives from a broad range of ages (87% of those respondents were under the age of 35, and 97% were under the age of 60). Retrieved from: <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/about-epi/#faq-about-epi>

- 6 **The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland** guarantees the right to education for all, provides for free access to education in public schools, and stipulates that education is compulsory until the age of 18. Article 70 section 1: ‘Everyone shall have the right to education. Education to 18 years of age shall be compulsory. The manner of fulfilment of schooling obligations shall be specified by statute’. Article 70 section 2: ‘Education in public schools shall be without payment. Statutes may allow for payments for certain services provided by public institutions of higher education’. Retrieved from: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland\\_1997.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland_1997.pdf)

3 hours x 2 years), there are 432 hours (12 hours x 36 weeks) of foreign language education during the whole cycle, that is, 4 and 5 years respectively. Altogether, throughout the entire public education, students are exposed to approximately 600 hours of English as a Foreign Language over the course of 12–13 years of studying. Public schools, of course, cannot and should not take all the credit for foreign language education and students' progress, as there are other motives behind foreign language acquisition. Zhu Quan clarifies that '[...] motivation, as far as its notion is concerned, is a kind of strong stimulus which comes from a certain learner's perspective of his/her own social milieu and drives this learner to study hard and smart (e.g., use appropriate learning strategies) and finally acquire the proficiency of the target language in a quick and effective way. It could come either from the learner's inner desire to become integrated with the target language speaking community or external pressure which requires the learner to have a good command of the language to cope with daily life or both' (Quan, 2014). Therefore, it seems that school serves as this external source of motivation, where students are provided with a constant input of information, divided by skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking, along with language components such as grammar and vocabulary, expand students' language abilities. Along with pupils' inner desires such as: the possibility of playing your favourite game (when one has to speak English to communicate with a member of one's team around the globe), listening to and understanding music, watching movies, traveling and finding employment abroad, all serve as good reasons behind language learning.

However, schools today are not doing so great; the educational process faces both difficulties and challenges. Even though pupils are exposed constantly to English through different means of educational tools over many years, they seem to constantly forget basic vocabulary, as a piece memorised once is not going to be retained indefinitely in a student's memory. Rusudan Gogokhia explains that each pupil is different in terms of memory types. 'It is known from observations that some make it easier to remember visual material, some acoustic, and some motor. This is also shown how each given material is studied orally: some prefer silent reading (optical type), some prefer when they are read, [...] it depends on the methodological teaching methods' (Gogokhia, 2020). Consequently, with numerous classes, it is impossible to anticipate whether students will retain the presented material or not. Additionally, Blake Richards and Paul Frankland cast a new light on memorising, claiming that despite each individual best efforts, storing information in chaotic and quickly changing environments proves difficult. Knowledge that is not perceived as crucial is simply forgotten and should not be seen as failure, but more in the context of strategy (optimal mnemonic strategy) (Richards & Frankland, 2017). In this context both educators and learners should

be constantly reminded of the fact that their success behind language learning depends on their ability to remember. Undoubtedly, one may claim that nowadays we do not have to retain vast chunks of information, as such knowledge is widely accessible through the internet. This conviction implemented too early is very damaging, especially when your neural system and synapses are still developing, which is particularly true at primary school. This goes along with the fact that more and more students have and use their smart phones in schools. Of course, such situation is both positive and negative at the same time, and fine lines should be drawn on how and when to use phones for educational purposes. In addition, we should make sure that students are able to disconnect themselves from the virtual world. What would be the point of students being in a classroom if they were not able to concentrate on the topic of a lesson? Most importantly, we should not confuse basic cognition which allows us to grow up when we are young with selecting what is useful and not when we are fully grown human beings. As it was argued by William R. Klemm, '[...] the ultimate goal should be to teach people how to think, solve problems – and to create. Central to these capabilities, however, is the ability to remember things. The more one knows (remembers), the more intellectual competencies one has to draw upon for thinking, problem solving, and even creativity. [...]. Knowledge and skills are acquired through memory. Even our ability to think depends on memory' (Klemm, 2007, pp. 61–73). For this reason, we should not let students go away with the simple explanation that they do not possess language ability, as is often justified on the account of poor class performance. We should start treating poor memory as impairment and work towards helping students. Educators must teach pupils to learn how to memorise pieces of information – not by learning things by heart but rather by associating pieces of vocabulary to things students already know (Susanto, 2017). Students in primary schools ought to be prepared for further education at secondary school, but also for the final years of primary school. During students' initial years in primary school, learners should comprehend how to gather, retain, and store information for the upcoming 7 to 8 years of more conscious education when they are constantly exposed to new information.

It seems that by secondary school, when a student is around 15 years old, it is almost impossible to change a pupil's minds about foreign language learning. Either one likes it or one cannot stand it at this point. For this reason, it is very important, as early as it is possible, to create a positive enforcement in association to foreign language learning. It must not be trivialised and the significance of foreign language should not be ignored. Education, at this stage, should be demanding as far as teaching is concerned, as it resonates on later education. It seems that we have reached a situation when we have to redesign education,

as it is not respected and both students and their parents ignore its purpose and significance. No longer are students required to memorise and therefore produce parts of material, they are rather required to recognise content. Consequently, they know language passively and are unable to produce it – to speak it. The contents of the core curricula used in primary and secondary schools should be differentiated.<sup>7</sup> The same topics should not overlap, as it does not help in making the process of learning easier, as it is not interesting, and in fact it becomes quite predictable. In addition, testing should gradually change as we are progressing; no longer should closed-type exercises where answers are predetermined be present, but more open exercises created to stimulate thinking and creativity should be designed. Nowadays, the resources that foreign language teachers can use are inexhaustible, providing that each school has access to the internet and that a computer is present in every classroom, more often accompanied by over-head projectors and less often by interactive whiteboards. Teachers might easily prepare interesting, though provoking, well-structured classes. Foreign language teaching should, as it is postulated for long time, be concentrated on communication, where students are not afraid of speaking.

Taking everything into consideration, teaching is not as easy a process as most people think; the complexity and importance of some classes are not apparent at

---

7 1) human (e.g., personal data, periods of life, appearance, character traits, personal belongings, feelings and emotions, skills and interests); 2) place of residence (e.g., house and its surroundings, rooms and equipment home, housework); 3) education (e.g., school and its premises, subjects, learning, school supplies, school grades, school life, extracurricular activities); 4) work (e.g., popular professions and related activities and duties, place of work, choice of profession); 5) private life (e.g., family, acquaintances and friends, activities of daily living, determining time, forms of spending free time, holidays and celebrations, lifestyle, conflicts and problems); 6) nutrition (e.g., groceries, meals and their preparation, eating habits, dining establishments); 7) purchases and services (e.g., types of stores, goods and their features, selling and buying, means of payment, exchange and return of goods, promotions, use from services); 8) traveling and tourism (e.g., means of transport and their use, orientation in the field, accommodation, trips, sightseeing); 9) culture (e.g., fields of culture, artists and their works, participation in culture, traditions and customs, media); 10) sports (e.g., sports disciplines, sports equipment, sports facilities, events sports, playing sports); 11) health (e.g., lifestyle, well-being, diseases, their symptoms and treatment); 12) science and technology (e.g., scientific discoveries, inventions, use of basic technical devices and information and communication technologies); 13) the natural world (e.g. weather, seasons, plants and animals, landscape, threats and environmental protection); 14) social life (e.g., social events and phenomena). For further information see: <https://www.ore.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/jezyk-obcy-nowozytny.-pp-z-komentarzem.-szkola-podstawowa-1.pdf>

first, or never for certain individuals. Nevertheless, whatever is taught is always carefully planned to make the learning process easy and efficient. One might think that upon graduation from either a 3-year or 5-year-long study one has finally completed one's educational journey to finally become a teacher; however, one is mistaken. The process during which an educator needs to learn how to teach effectively and how not to be blamed for your students' mistakes has just begun. Additionally, constant education is advised if one wishes to keep up with general knowledge, trends, culture (film and music industry), and most importantly with a foreign language. Otherwise, soon enough, thanks to the internet, students will become linguistically sufficient, or so they will think, once educators stop providing them with the answers they need. Learning, on the other hand, is also a complex and demanding process, for which any student needs to be prepared, in the form of note making, the ability to be concentrated for the duration of classes, and readiness for constant revision throughout the learning process. Teachers make the learning process more understandable and bearable, but they will not study and do everything for you.

There is no doubt that educators are aware of problems associated with teaching, and they have been expressing their discontent on numerous occasions.<sup>8</sup> However, as more commonly more members of general public express their strong opinions on the system of education and teachers in particular, it seems that a proper debate should be initiated. It ought to be reminded once and for all that education is a common good which should be treasured and not dismantled if we are not happy with the assessments of each individual. It does not need constant change of its basic principles. It must not be modified on the assumption that one year it should be easy to pass the matriculation exam and the next more difficult to do so. One time a student passes with 51%, another time 30%, and the next time they even fail one subject and still be granted a pass. Universal public education allows members of society to achieve their desirable goals despite their backgrounds; one can become virtually anybody thanks to education, as it is free even at the university level. However, it will not be achieved by constantly undermining those who create it and discussing it with parties who are not prepared for a constructive exchange of ideas towards better education. Sadly, what school is lacking is its previously high status and the situation in which highly driven professionals will be willing to work in schools to teach the next generation of pupils. Unsurprisingly, it seems that qualified and highly driven graduates are not willing to become teachers, not necessarily because of the complexity of the teaching process, but because of the uncertainty, the frequently changed concept of teaching, and the

---

8 For further reading see: <https://www.wprost.pl/tematy/10211537/strajk-nauczycieli-2019.html>

low social status of teachers and wages. Who, then, is going to teach the next generations of students? It is almost certain that not pensioned individuals, who love what they do, but rather those who behind teaching see holiday breaks and fewer responsibilities, as according to them teachers don't do much!

As far as foreign language education is concerned, the majority of students understand that English is important for their education and that it creates employment opportunities along with additional perks such as access to American films, music, and gaming industries. To reach such awareness you need proper education. As it was stated in the English Proficiency Index, those willing to study achieve great results, and the 13<sup>th</sup> place that Poland scored proves this. However, there are still those who do not see any advantages in foreign language education. 'Although it has been almost 17 years since Poland's accession to the European Union and the significant opening of Polish business to foreign markets, our knowledge of foreign languages is not the best. It turns out that there are almost the same number of those who know a foreign language at an advanced level (15.9%) and those who do not know it at all (14.7%). The rest of the surveyed representative group are people who know a foreign language at a basic level (38.5%) and an intermediate level, i.e., one that enables communication (36.3%). The survey shows that we do not have many language specialists on the market. There are hardly any people with advanced knowledge of a foreign language in Poland [...]. The data collected by the Eurostat over the last few years indicate that the share of people who decide to take courses at an advanced level is increasing year by year, but it is still a small percentage'.<sup>9</sup> The long process of language learning still proves to be overwhelming for many. It seems that for both educators and learners it might bring some difficulties. In the context of language acquisition, we should use time efficiently, we ought to teach students how to learn quickly when they are still very young and willing to do so, as usually with time and more demanding content they might easily get discouraged. Foreign language teaching should not be used in a political context as leverage against patriotism – a threat used by populists. On the contrary, foreign language education should be viewed as crucial in serving as a means of bringing new ideas on various topics such as: sustainability, environmental protection, equality, law, and immigration, just to name a few. Lyudmila Levina, Olga Lukmanova, Lidiya Romanovskaya, and Tatyana Shutova argue that: 'There are at least two reasons why we should consider teaching cultural skills as part of language teaching: 1) the international role of the English language, which has evolved into a 'code' of communication in various

---

9 For further reading see: <https://www.prawo.pl/kadry/dlaczego-polacy-nie-ucza-sie-jezykow-obcych-skoro-ich-znajomosc,506024.html>



spheres, and 2) globalization, which has opened many new ways for nations to come closer to one another and requires more and more people to move from one cultural environment to another. [...] In order to avoid this cultural and political disintegration, and foster empathy and understanding, teachers should present students with a true picture or representation of another culture and language' (Levina et al., 2016, pp. 277–282). Consequently, it is better to handle topics when we are equipped with the proper tools, which in most cases that refers to language that allows us to gather the necessary information from different sources in most cases in English. In order to understand today's world, especially in the era of miscommunication and fake news, we are obliged to get our information from various sources, ideally foreign and domestic.

Schools, like universities, should stay open for different concepts and ideas; we do not have to agree on everything, but we should definitely talk about issues that prove to be important in our lives. Schools must become a safe space. We still have a long way to go to change individual teachers' opinions and ideas of us as a collective. However, we must not allow the situation when individual educators' progressive opinions are silenced as we are not ready to tackle certain topics. Consequently, we may face situations in the future when school boards will censor what should and what should not be a part of core curriculum on the previously basic and widely accepted concepts of nudity presented in art, when pupils are not allowed to see famous Michelangelo's sculpture of David due to its nudity that leads to the school's principle being fired.<sup>10</sup> Each such case tells teachers that they had better be carefully analysing what they are presenting and saying to students, as they may lose their jobs. This is a very dangerous precedent that might be used on different occasions when school authorities, parents, or students themselves are discontented with what they are faced with.

### Bibliography:

- Gogokhia, R. (2020). 'Memory types in Foreign Language Learning', *WEST-EAST*, 3.
- Górowska-Fells, M. (2012). 'Kluczowe dane o nauczaniu języków obcych w szkołach w Europie 2012', *Journal for teachers. Języki: obce w szkole*, 4.
- Klemm, W. R. (2007). 'What Good Is Learning If You Don't Remember It?', *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, 1.
- Kolanowska, E. (2021). *The System of Education in Poland 2020*, *Foundation for the Development of the Education System*, Foundation for the Development, Warsaw.

---

10 For further reading see: <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/27/1166079167/tallahassee-classical-michelangelo-david-principal-fired>

- Leśniak, G. J. (2021). *Znajomość języków gwarantuje wyższe zarobki, ale większość nie uczy się*: Available at: <https://www.prawo.pl/kadry/dlaczego-polacy-nie-uczasia-jezykow-obcych-skoro-ich-znajomosc,506024.html>.
- Levina, L., Lukmanova, O., Romanovskaya, L., & Shutova, T. (2016). 'Teaching tolerance in the English language classroom', *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 236.
- Nishanthi, R. (2018). 'The importance of Learning English in Today World', *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 3.
- Pandey, M., & Pandey, P. (2014). 'Better English for Better Employment Opportunities', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Approach and Studies*, 4.
- Quan, Z. (2014). 'Motivation for a Second or Foreign Language Learning', *SHS Web of Conferences*, 6.
- Richards, B., & Frankland, P. (2017). 'The Persistence and Transience of Memory', *Neuron*, 94.
- Susanto, A. (2017). 'The teaching of vocabulary: a perspective', *KATA*, 2.

### Websites:

- <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/about-epi/#faq-about-epi>
- <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/27/1166079167/tallahassee-classical-michelangelo-david-principal-fired>
- <https://www.ore.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/jezyk-obcy-nowozytny.-ppz-komentarzem.-szkola-podstawowa-1.pdf>
- [www.wprost.pl/tematy/10211537/strajk-nauczycieli-2019.html](http://www.wprost.pl/tematy/10211537/strajk-nauczycieli-2019.html)
- <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/multilingualism/about-multilingualism-policy>
- <https://www.ore.edu.pl/2015/03/raporty-2>
- [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland\\_1997.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Poland_1997.pdf)

### Abstract

School faces many challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which become quite visible as they accumulate in secondary school. From one side we have students, parents, education authorities that try to shape education in their individual way; and on the other, we have teachers trying to navigate between those expectations. This article tries to present those sometimes-contradicting ideas in relation to curriculum and technological advancement used while conducting classes. Additionally, it enumerates some difficulties behind foreign language acquisition and ideas of what language education should be.

**Keywords:** foreign language education, English as a foreign language, education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, challenges.