

NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS – THE EUROPEAN LEARNING SPACE NATIONAL REPORT – POLAND

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1. General Introduction.

Foreign languages have in the long last become an important part in the study programmes of schools at all levels in Poland, including colleges of higher education and universities. The political, social and economic changes have made a significant contribution to the emergence of New Learning Environments both in the sense of

1. new needs and opportunities (trade, international contacts, travel, exchange of students), and
2. the availability of (not to be confused with accessibility to) IC technology.

While travel to West European countries was relatively easy for Poles, compared with other E. European countries (cost being the main obstacle), the introduction of market economy has opened new opportunities and has given a new dimension to language learning and teaching. Learning a foreign language was no longer a leisure activity, suitable for those who could afford to travel abroad. Trade contacts, registration of foreign businesses in Poland and a range of European programmes aiming at bringing western know-how into the country, have created a great demand for professionals with a good knowledge of English and other major West European languages, as well as for teachers of these languages. At the same time sharp decline of interest in Russian, the “first” foreign language taught earlier, could be observed.

Shortage of teachers of English and a sudden surplus of teachers of Russian prompted the Ministry of Education an of retraining unemployed teachers of Russian as teachers of English. The programme, designed as a three-year project, had disastrous consequences. Since it included mainly mature teachers (at least half way through their teaching careers), the three –year period turned out too be insufficient. As a result, the trainees either did not get their diplomas, or did with a very poor pass, joining the already large group of teachers with insufficient, or no qualifications. This in turn contributed to a considerable increase of private tuition, which in the opinion of young, ambitious learners, guaranteed high quality, effective teaching, and was the only way to acquire sufficient competence in a foreign language to compete for places at universities, as well as for jobs requiring good knowledge of a foreign language.

Confidence in “official” language teaching in educational institutions was gradually restored with the political and economic changes. Continuing demand for foreign language teachers was met by inviting native speakers – young graduates of western universities, who found jobs at universities,

colleges of higher education and in the rapidly growing number of private schools and colleges of all levels. At the same time, Poland being one of the candidate countries aspiring to join European Union, became eligible for a range of European programmes allowing exchange of students and scholars, which alongside with other factors, contributed to the demand for and genuine interest in foreign language learning.

Despite financial restrictions aiming at improving the country's economy, schools of all levels made the effort to modernise their IC technology resources. At the same time, the number of privately owned computers with access to the internet has grown rapidly, as well as the number of homes connected to satellite or cable television. A survey performed at one University (English Department) showed that while only 30% of first year students had their own computers, the number of privately owned PCs with access to the internet was as high as 80% among students in the fourth and fifth (final) years. Those who did not, were mainly students who did not live in the town where they studied.

The report is based on a study of the foreign language teaching/learning opportunities at 45 Polish colleges and universities.

2. The role of New Learning Environments in Language Teaching and Learning

Native speakers.

Emergence of new opportunities such as exchange of students and staff, inviting native speakers, training programmes within the country and abroad are the main manifestations of the New Learning Environments. All of the 45 colleges and universities (both state-run and private), contacted for the purposes of this report, employed at least one foreign, native speaker for each language taught, the average number being two native speakers per department/institute.

Exchange of students.

Although present at most universities, exchange with foreign universities includes a highly insignificant number of students. While language barrier has stopped being the main obstacle, it is the incompatibility of the systems of education and evaluation which prevents exchange from being a normal part of the teaching programme. The system of credits has only recently begun to catch the attention of Polish universities, with selected departments of the University of Warsaw (e.g. the Institute of English Philology) being one of the first to establish clear criteria for credits, which make exchange or transfer to West European universities a realistic possibility. In most cases study visits are either short (two-three weeks) or are available to very few individuals, usually one (the best) student from a particular year.

IC Technology

Sadly, the availability of IC technology at colleges of higher education and universities has not affected language teaching programmes in a significant way. In most schools contacted, language courses were “traditional”, with one tape recorder being the only “technology” available. This was true even if the school (college, university) had a well equipped computer room, reserved for “more important tasks”, more directly related to the main subjects taught at a particular department. Of all schools contacted, one private college (Akademia Polonijna – Częstochowa) had a language teaching programme (English) designed to make use of the impressive multimedia facilities, purchased specifically to facilitate language learning/teaching. With three language labs and a large computer room for private study, Akademia Polonijna provided the best access to IC technology for its students studying foreign languages. The school’s teaching programme included an obligatory visit to a foreign country for all language students.

Promoting multilingualism and cultural diversity

For an average Pole, Poland is a monolingual nation. The presence of minority groups, limited geographically to specific areas, escapes the attention of people living in large cities and in areas away from the borders. Yet it is the eastern, southern and south-west borders along which minority Lithuanian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak or German groups can be found. Following both bi- and multilateral international agreements, schools were established in relevant areas, in which all subjects are taught in the language of the minority. At the same time courses of these languages for Polish speaking members of these communities were added to the list of language courses available in the area.

A number of programmes and initiatives were introduced or encouraged by the Ministry of Education, as part of the European Year of Languages.

- All bodies responsible for developing and implementing foreign language teaching programmes were issued with the “Guidelines for teaching and learning foreign languages” published by the Council of Europe.
- Heavy emphasis on the importance of the idea of multilingualism among the young generation was put as part of the programme called “Youth”. The programme was addressed at organisations, youth-clubs, schools as well as individual young Poles.
- Foreign language competitions organised throughout Poland with the help of educational authorities and local governments
- Festivals of foreign language amateur theatres. Special encouragement was given to theatre groups performing in minority languages.
- “Languages of our neighbours” – international seminars for organisations of minority groups, local communities and guests from neighbouring countries

- Foreign language courses (e.g. German, English) for joint groups of young people of Polish origin from different countries – Belarus, Lithuania, Hungary, Latvia, Ukraine.

Teaching programmes of all schools of higher education, colleges and universities include at least one obligatory course of a foreign language. Students of foreign philologies are under the obligation of studying one additional European language.

The following European language courses were reported as available at schools listed below. Group A – foreign philologies. Group B – language courses for non-philology students.

University of Poznań:

A:

Catalan, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Provançal, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Ukrainian.

B:

Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Ukrainian.

University of Warsaw

A:

English studies, French studies, German studies, Hungarian studies, Iberian studies, Italian Philology, (all accessible to students with special needs)

B:

English, German, French, Italian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Spanish

Jagiellonian University (Kraków)

A:

English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Swedish, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Romanian,

B:

English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Russian, Slovak, Romanian, Hungarian

University of Gdańsk

A:

English, French, German, Scandinavian languages

B:

English, French, German, Scandinavian languages, Russian

University of Silesia

A &B:

Major Slavonic languages, English, French, German

University of Wrocław:

A:

English, French, German

B:

English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, major Slavonic Languages,

Catholic University of Lublin:

A:

English, German, French, Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Bulgarian

B:

English, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish (as a foreign language)

Mme Curie University (Lublin)

A:

English, German, French, Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Bulgarian

B:

English, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish (as a foreign language)

Akademia Polonijna (Częstochowa)

A:

English, French, Italian, Spanish, German

B:

All major European languages – depending on interest.

Smaller schools of higher education, schools NOT specialising in foreign languages (e.g. Medical Academies, Technical Universities and Teacher Training colleges usually offered two – three languages : English, German and French.

3. *The role of New Learning Environments in training programmes for language and related professions*

The emergence of New Learning Environment has had an important effect on training programmes related to language learning, although its existence (NLE) is not always realised. No programmes were found which would consciously approach and make use of the concept of New Learning Environment. However, the new situation and new opportunities seem to have triggered an intuitive reaction, which in practical terms amounts to recognition of New Learning Environments, as it was defined in 1. (General introduction) above.

Although new technology (ICT) is rapidly finding its way to schools, colleges and universities, its use as an important tool in language learning//teaching is still limited. Priorities go to research and academic work in the area of 'main' subjects, be it physics, chemistry etc.. The following tendencies were observed regarding the use of and access to ICT and language labs in foreign language courses:

- new, private colleges and schools of higher education were generally better equipped than well established state schools. Many used "access to technology" as one of the incentives which were to encourage new candidates and increase intake
- where language labs were available, priority in accessing them was given to foreign philology departments. Where a foreign language was not the main subject, access was either limited or not granted at all.
- none of the state universities approached had a multimedia language lab
- access to traditional (audio only) and to multimedia language labs was either limited or denied outside course hours
- in private establishments students were usually charged for using language labs outside course hours
- a growing number of businesses (large companies) organise language courses for their employees "on premises", with well equipped multimedia language labs. Main problem – inadequate choice of materials adapted for the use of Polish learners.
- most, if not all colleges, universities and schools of higher education employ at least one native speaker of the 'main' languages taught.
- Vocational colleges, individual faculties and departments, medical academies, engineering colleges etc. make it their policy to introduce specialised language courses suitable for their students and consistent with their professional interests (specialisation)
- professional training (practise) abroad is becoming visibly present as part of the teaching programmes. Visits are arranged either through European projects or as exchange visits following partnership agreements between schools and universities. The proportion of students who participate in such programmes is low. One serious obstacle is the incompatibility of evaluation procedures and absence of "credit" systems in many schools and colleges in Poland. This, however, is beginning to change, and with

more and more colleges expressing interest in switching to a credit system, the number of students participating in an international exchange programme should grow.

5. *The role of New Environments in continuing education programmes or courses*

This is difficult to assess. The idea of life-long learning is not yet generally accepted (or realised). Where it does take place, it is often treated as a response to an immediate need (re-training, additional training) rather than a conscious strategy.

6. *How to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for promoting European Co-operation?*

ICT has become the most efficient means of communication. With its main advantages:

- speed
- equal access to information regardless of the location
- cost effectiveness

ICT has become an important research tool, as well as an effective tool for teaching and learning.

Observing the way it is used by students and researchers, it is clear that the full potential of ICT is yet to be discovered. Most of the work/research performed with the help of ICT is done as 'individual' work – searching for and studying relevant web pages.

One-to-one contacts (e-mail correspondence) constitute the most common pattern of communication and co-operation on an international level.

Discussion groups offer one way of increasing the use of ICT for promoting European co-operation. To be effective, however, and long-lasting, discussion groups require 'a leader' who will stimulate the exchange of ideas. Without some kind of a mentor, many discussion groups tend to die an early death or continue an erratic life.

On-line bulletins allowing subscribers make their own contributions offer are a form of effective discussion groups. A short entry containing information of potential interest to all subscribers (workshop, conference announcement, call for papers, query regarding a particular issue) is enough to keep the group alive and to encourage co-operation. The ELTEC group and EENAT Digest (East European Network for Access Technology) are examples of groups which have successfully worked for several years.

On-line journals offer an effective way of exchanging ideas and results of one's own research.

There is a need for developing training programmes for teachers of foreign languages, encouraging them to use IC technology. An on-line journal "Teaching English with technology" <http://www.iatefl.org.pl/sig/call/callnl.htm> currently published in Poland is a good example of one way to promote IC technology, which may result in greater confidence in using it, and, as a consequence, easier and more effective use of the resources available on the internet throughout Europe.

7 Needs in the area of New Learning Environments

The presence of students with disabilities in a foreign language classroom constitutes a particular kind of a New Learning Environment. While at the level of primary and secondary schools such terms as "students with a visual or hearing impairment", 'multiply disabled student" have long been replaced with "students with special educational needs (SEN) – a term focusing on the educational potential of the students rather than their disability – Polish universities and colleges do not, on the whole, seem to have developed a policy regarding such students. The general tendency is to classify them as "students with disabilities", disregarding the fact that each group, and often each of the students, requires an individual approach to the possible solution of problems related to education.

A foreign language classroom offers a particularly interesting and challenging "New Learning Environment" regarding students with disabilities. One does not have to be a specialist to realise that while the problems that some of these students have to overcome have to do solely with architectural barriers, there are students who require special adaptations of language learning materials, and who can only be taught effectively by language teachers with additional, specialist qualifications, or who have "support" teachers or assistants to prepare specialist adaptations and assist the language teacher and the student in the classroom.

The two groups which require such adaptations and teachers with additional, specialist training are

- students who are blind or visually impaired
- students who are deaf

Even a superficial analysis of the situation in the area of foreign language teaching to blind and to deaf students in Poland suggests that there is an urgent need to address the issue on a decision making level. Of all the universities and colleges consulted only three have special programmes addressed at students with a visual impairment, with just two of them addressing the issue of foreign language teaching seriously and effectively. As far as deaf students are concerned, not even one university has a programme for teaching foreign languages, with just one university involved in preparations for such a programme.

Specific needs in the area of teaching foreign languages to students with a visual impairment.

Adaptation of materials.

While with the new technology “translating” ordinary text into Braille constitutes no major problem, an adaptation of a language course book for a totally blind student is not as straightforward. With highly visual content of modern language teaching/learning materials, where photographs and other illustrations convey important information, there is a need to make that information accessible to blind students through other media. At least three solutions are possible:

- tactile graphics
- verbal description
- audio (sound effects)

Tactile graphics can relatively easily be produced on so called “swell paper”, allowing the designer to place raised lines and textures on special paper, with the help of a computer, ordinary printer and a “swelling device”. The main problem with tactile graphics is that of simplification, and often of the need to completely re-design original illustrations, to ensure that they make sense to someone whose understanding of visual concepts and spatial relations differs dramatically from that of sighted people. The additional problem is that only one university in Poland, which has a programme for foreign language teaching too students with a visual impairment has the necessary equipment and staff with specialist training.

Verbal (written) description – is probably the easiest way to replace illustrations. The drawback here is, however, that at an elementary level illustrations have to be described in the student’s native language.

Audio (sound) effects – some illustrations can be replaced by “audio pictures”. These, combined with some simple verbal clues can successfully be used as an alternative to graphics even at an elementary level.

Information technology offers one of the most effective tools in the hands of a student with a visual impairment, or one who is totally blind. Specialist software and equipment can allow these student access all of the information which is accessible to sighted students, and can allow visually impaired students engage in the same activities as those accessible through ICT to sighted students.

- Speech synthesisers or sound cards give voice output to any text entered
- Screen readers combined with voice output allow blind students access all Window applications
- Refreshable Braille displays allow blind students to read in Braille the text displayed on the monitor, as well as elements of menus and commands

- Electronic Braille note takers allow blind students to take notes in Braille, which can later be printed as Braille or ordinary text
- Magnification software and CCTV make ICT accessible to partially sighted students

While the specialist technology listed above is relatively easy to obtain through various programmes addressing the needs of people with a visual impairment, technology alone does not solve the problem of access to foreign languages for students with a visual impairment. A successful language teaching programme for students with a visual impairment requires giving foreign language teachers additional, specialist training in the equipment and adaptations of language teaching/learning materials. Only one university in Poland offers such training to language teachers. Foreign languages taught to totally blind students at the university include:

- English (elementary, intermediate advanced)
- Latin (elementary, intermediate)
- Welsh (elementary)

Arrangements are being made for teaching German to totally blind students on an elementary and intermediate levels.

Specific needs in the area of teaching foreign languages to students with a severe hearing impairment

The lack of understanding of special educational needs in the area of foreign language learning of students who are deaf or suffer from a severe hearing impairment probably even greater than with students who are totally blind. While the latter can, and do “manage” in a foreign language classroom even when no specialist provision is made (even if they have to produce their own adaptations of course books), deaf students have a choice of either relying on “teach yourself” courses or of attending a language class, the content of which will be completely inaccessible most of the time.

For an average person sign language is the main medium through which deaf people communicate with other deaf people and with members of their families. The knowledge of sign language among hearing people is virtually non-existent. Fortunately, when it comes to foreign language teaching, this does not constitute a problem since

- there is no resemblance of sign language to the “national” language and
- there are at least two or three different sign languages used in any one country

What follows from the above is that teaching a foreign language to deaf students need not, and in fact cannot involve teaching a sign language used in a particular country. All that such an attempt would amount to, would be

teaching a deaf person how to communicate with a deaf person in some other country, and NOT the language spoken in that country.

Relying on written texts only, is not the optimal solution either, since it does not offer the deaf student a chance to communicate verbally in that language.

Verbal communication between deaf and hearing people is possible through “cued speech” – a relatively simple system of signs enhancing the perception of sounds accessed through lip reading and residual hearing. The latter can be significantly additionally enhanced by installing a system of “inductive loops” in the classroom, where the message (information) spoken by the teacher through a microphone is sent directly as a radio wave to the student’s hearing aid.

Only one university in Poland has a language teacher (of English) with specialist training and knowledge of cued speech signs. A highly successful experiment performed with one deaf student suggests that even totally deaf students can learn a foreign language. Having learnt one, they can benefit from ICT technology for communicating with the “hearing world” both in Poland and in other countries. The present academic year is the first year during which the experiment will be extended to a larger group of deaf students studying at the same university.

7. Measures to be taken to meet the needs identified.

The point will be elaborated only in the area of accessibility of foreign language courses to students with a visual or hearing impairment.

- training programmes for teachers of foreign languages and for students of teacher training colleges/foreign philology departments,, specialising in teaching foreign languages
- developing and disseminating materials which raise the awareness of the problems related to the education of students with disabilities, of the needs and of the possible solutions
- setting up units (resource centres) which would co-ordinate efforts aiming at introducing effective language teaching programmes for students with a visual or hearing impairment, and for supporting teachers working with such students
- co-ordinating the efforts aiming at producing and exchange of adaptations of materials for teaching foreign languages to students with a visual or hearing impairment
- ensuring that the needs of students with disabilities, especially those requiring adaptations of language learning/teaching materials, as well as the needs of teachers working with such students are included in all major international initiatives related to foreign language teaching and learning.