

Lessons of English in Polish schools: a third-grade lower secondary school perspective

AGATA GAJEWSKA-DYSZKIEWICZ, KATARZYNA KUTYŁOWSKA, FILIP KULON,
KATARZYNA PACZUSKA, LUDMIŁA RYCIELSKA, MAGDALENA SZPOTOWICZ

Educational Research Institute*

Results from the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) show that regular exposure to a foreign language for many Polish pupils is limited to language classes at school. In this light, the authors of this article took a closer look at the Polish ESLC findings. With a discussion on current theoretical approaches, good practice in foreign language teaching and national core curriculum requirements, the paper presents an analysis of student responses to a questionnaire about English lessons at lower secondary school. It also aims to describe how the school language class, as students describe it, achieves its basic goal in language education – communication in a foreign language.

KEYWORDS: foreign language teaching, communicative approach, European Survey on Language Competences, EFL classroom.

A lesson is like a mirror reflecting the teaching and learning process. Student opinions about lessons and estimation of frequency of tasks or activities provide an important, although only partial, source of information on language teaching in Polish schools. Questionnaire data obtained from the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) provide an unprecedented opportunity for quantity analysis of language class activities.

Drawing from the results of ESLC (Gajewska-Dyszkiewicz et al., 2013), we may assume that a foreign language lesson is the main or only source of regular contact with foreign language for the majority of Polish students and so learning outcomes are mostly dependent on class work and their motivation to learn.

The question arises: what image of the lesson, or more precisely: of the teaching and learning processes, emerges from the way Polish lower secondary school students responded?

Communication – the main aim of foreign language learning

The basic aim of language education at school is to develop the ability to communicate in a foreign language. Both the previous core curriculum of 2002 and the current one indicate this (MEN, 2009a; MENiS,

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* Address: ul. Górczewska 8, 01-180 Warszawa, Poland.
E-mail: a.gajewska@ibe.edu.pl

2002b). Efficient communication in a foreign language is considered to be the main aim of language education in both documents. Students taking part in the study were selected from learners in the last year taught according to the previous version of the core curriculum. Therefore, it is worth briefly summarising what both documents say about the foreign language teaching.

The regulation of the Ministry for National Education and Sport of 26 February 2002, in the section relating to foreign language in a lower secondary school, defined the first educational goal as: “to achieve a level of mastery in a foreign language to allow for relatively efficient communication” (MENiS, 2002b, p. 3623). There is a similar statement in the new core curriculum: the main goals of language education are written and spoken communication skills (MEN, 2009a, p. 61).

Development of communication skills has been emphasised in the core curricula for more than a decade, certainly influenced by the communicative approach to foreign language teaching which gained popularity in the late 1980s. The eclectic approach combines features and techniques from various teaching methods (Komorowska, 2009). It is the most frequent approach applied to foreign language teaching and has been adopted into the Polish system from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2003). The framework strengthens the case for emphasising communicative language competence and its influence is clear in the assumptions and structure of the new core curriculum (MEN, 2009a).

Before discussion of the characteristics of the communicative approach, the evolution of definitions for language skills and competence seems appropriate to mention. The term “communicative competence” was first used by Hymes (1972), a sociolinguist interested in the social and cultural dimensions of language. In his understanding, language is not only knowledge of a language but also

ability to use it for communication. This definition has become the basis for further work on the model of communicative language competence (Canale, 1983; Canale and Swain, 1980). In the 1980s and 1990s the European Council worked on the functional and situational foreign language teaching curriculum, intended to satisfy language needs demanded for professional mobility within Europe. Not only activities regarding theory (searching for a model) but also practical (searching for a relevant teaching programme conducive to the effective development of communicative foreign language skills) have contributed to the popularisation of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. Despite the evolution from the communicative competence model (Canale and Swain, 1980) to the Bachman’s (1990) model of communicative language ability (CLA), this construct is formed from four basic elements in each case: linguistic and pragmatic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and language fluency (Hedge, 2000).

The framework of language ability recently proposed by Bachman and Palmer (2010, p. 43) maintains the same definition of language ability as proposed by (Bachman, 1990, p. 81) and describes it as “the ability to use language communicatively”. The authors differentiate its two components: language knowledge and strategic competence, attending to the fact that language use is influenced by the personal attributes of the user, such as personality, knowledge of the discussed topic, emotional profile or cognitive strategies.

Methods in teaching language for communication

The communicative approach is currently the most commonly applied foreign language teaching method. Under this umbrella term, Richards and Rodgers (2001) enumerate several related approaches and methods, which have one common communicative goal: the Communicative Language

Teaching (CLT), the Natural Approach, Co-operative Language Learning, Content-based Instruction and Task-based Language Teaching. Despite the fact that the discussed term has evolved since the 1970s and assumed different names, its two characteristic and permanent goals can be identified: (a) development of communicative competence as the main goal of language education and (b) development of procedures for teaching four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), which take into account the relationship between language and communication (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 155). The communicative approach is usually identified with the main trend represented by Communicative Language Teaching.

Brown (2007, p. 241) drew attention to the main assumptions of CLT, which govern the methods for work during language lessons:

- Teaching goals focus on components of communicative competence and are not limited to the exclusive development of grammatical or linguistic competence.
- Techniques for working on language applied during the lesson are planned so that students are involved with practical, authentic and functional language use in situations which are relevant to them, and for which they would actually need language for communication.
- Language fluency and accuracy are perceived as complementary in forming a basis for communicative techniques. Sometimes fluency is more important than accuracy as it gives students a chance for real involvement in tasks which involve language.
- During a lesson using the communicative approach there must be a moment when students use language spontaneously, without preparation, both in reception and production.

In discussion of aspects of language lessons one element in particular of the communicative approach should be mentioned.

Well-constructed tasks are most helpful in stimulating partially spontaneous communication in groups with lower levels of language ability (Task-based Language Teaching). The role of the task and its construction to involve students in language use, became the main discussion topic relevant to supporting effective communication, at the turn of the 21st century (c.f. Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). A task is defined as “an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2001, p. 11). The authenticity of the *task* and its adequacy to the real life situation provide students with an opportunity to transform their role from learner to “a real user of a language”. This is often juxtaposed with the artificiality and mechanical role of the language *exercises*, which students perform in order to master a structure or phrase. After Ellis (2003), we may add that the task provides a working plan for the student, in which they focus on conveying meaning, trying to transfer or obtain information, while placing less attention on form. The task should provide a stimulus for communication, usually by presenting an “information gap” to be completed by a student. The situation should also imitate everyday life, reconstructing ordinary experience, such as explanation for being late, completion of a form, in addition to engaging thought processes, such as selection or ordering information.

Errors in English language teaching

The communicative approach has inspired a great deal of practical and theoretical work on effective teaching (Gower, Philips and Walters, 2005; Harmer, 2001; Hedge, 2000; Lynch, 1996; Scrivener, 2005; Ur, 1996). Despite preparation for this in teacher training and development in school practice, several repeated errors hinder the work of teachers and decrease the effectiveness of language learning. Martin (2009) discusses mistakes

which are made at the lesson planning stage. A teacher, while preparing a lesson, frequently focuses on planning their own actions and appropriate materials and ignores planning for learning outcomes and activities for students. In this way student participation is reduced to listening, copying contents from the board or responding with very short answers. Another frequent error (Harmer, 2001; Martin, 2009; Scrivener, 2005) is the distorted proportion of Teacher Talking Time vs. Student Talking Time. This occurs in situations when teachers do not control their own participation. They do not limit themselves to instructing students, but spend excessive time repeating and paraphrasing their own and students' utterances, digressing and interrupting students when they speak or make mistakes. Another major error is with unjustified use of mother tongue during lessons; usually unnecessary remarks or instructions which could be conveyed in a target language. Such activity significantly decreases the value of lessons, as students do not engage their full language potential which would be better obtained by a contact with the teacher speaking a foreign language. According to Tomaszewska (2009), the fact that teachers do not exclusively or mainly use a foreign language during lessons is one explanation for why students are reluctant to use a foreign language and are reluctant to speak.

Another frequent teaching error is the lack of communicative activities based on information gap. Shortage of tasks which require interaction to obtain information, express opinions, take risks and experiment with a foreign language result from a teacher's failure to include appropriate preparation in the lesson plan, or use of inappropriate teaching materials (Martin, 2009).

From the human development point of view, lower secondary school is the stage at which students develop the ability for abstract thinking (Piaget, 2006), problem solving and to participate in social activities (Wygotski, 1971). A language lesson at this

stage should cohere with the development of thinking based on the involvement of students in tasks which require problem solving with simultaneous exercise of their ability to use a foreign language. Tomaszewska (2009) draws attention to the fact that while planning lessons for teenagers, teachers should encourage students to make their own decisions, form their own judgments and take responsible and independent actions. In her opinion, tasks performed in pairs or groups provide the best opportunity for this. It should be added that problem-solving, opinion surveys and drama based techniques are also helpful.

Methodology

The data analysed was obtained as part of the first ESLC cycle. The study was carried out in Poland and 13 other European countries in March 2011. The main aim was to measure student language proficiency at lower secondary schools in the two most frequently taught foreign languages in a given country, selected from: English, French, Spanish, German and Italian. Apart from tests of language competence which checked three language skills: listening, reading comprehension and writing, a contextual part was included in the research design – surveys on students, foreign language teachers and headmasters (European Commission, 2012).

The study covered students in their last year of lower secondary school (ISCED-2)¹ and learning a foreign language for at least one year before the date of implementation of the study. The following were excluded from the target population: students at special schools, schools for adults, students sufficiently physically or mentally disabled to prevent them from participation, students who could not use the official language to

¹ In countries where foreign language learning starts in upper secondary schools, the study covered students in the second grade of upper secondary schools (ISCED-3).

permit understanding of survey questions and students with diagnosed dyslexia. In Poland, the study was conducted on a representative sample of students in the third-grade at lower secondary schools who were learning English or German.

The sampling procedure was conducted in two stages – selection of schools and then students. In each country a separate representative sample for each of the two examined languages was drawn. The size of the Polish sample for ESLC was 3865 students. The response rate was at 86%² ($n = 3324$). In the analysis discussed below, only the data obtained from students learning English were used ($n = 1764$).

The student questionnaire contained 67 questions in 13 research subject areas such as: number of language classes, initial age on starting to learn the language, number and order of learnt languages, informal language learning, information and communications technology (ICT) use in foreign language teaching and learning and self-assessment (European Commission, 2012).

All statements and analyses presented in this article are based on student responses, and apart from the questions related to self-assessment were not verified by additional measurement.

As in other studies of this type (PISA, TIMSS), the applied methodology assumed the use of replicate weights to achieve unbiased estimation of standard errors. In order to ensure representativity, probabilistic weights were used to account for the sampling design and missing data. The analyses were conducted using R software with the “survey” library.

Contact with a language inside and outside school

The results of the ESLC study showed that despite increase in contact with foreign languages in informal situations (via the internet, during trips abroad), language lessons remain the main source of contact with the language for Polish students. In the ESLC survey, students were asked about both “passive” contact with the language (understood as a situation in which a student is not forced to produce language) and active use of English out of the school context. To the question: “Do you, yourself, come into contact with English outside school in the following ways?”, students could respond with “yes” or “no” to seven items representing typical circumstances for informal contact with a foreign language (Figure 1). Only in two circumstances: speaking English during holidays and via the internet, did more than 50% declare contact. Contact could be rare or one-off and these data may prove to be insignificant as out-of-school language exposure.

To the analogous question regarding active use of English, students could respond more precisely by indicating the intensity of contact on a scale from “never” to “a few times a week” (Table 1). Students affirming use of English at least several times a month did not exceed 20% in most circumstances. The exception was internet communication (33% of students reported this several times a week or several times a month).

School English lessons vs. private lessons

Foreign language lessons at school have a special position, not only compared to the possibility of contact with language in informal situations, but also to other forms of language tutoring or language courses. Students were asked about private language classes at successive educational stages. Students in this category did not generally exceed 30% (Figure 2). Every tenth student in third grade attended language courses, while one student in six received tutoring

² Reasons for non-participation and concomitant decreased representativeness of the study are the following: absence (5.2%), student refusal (0.2%), lack of parental consent (7.2%), withdrawal from language classes (0.1%), change of school (0.4%), other – including exclusions (0.9%).

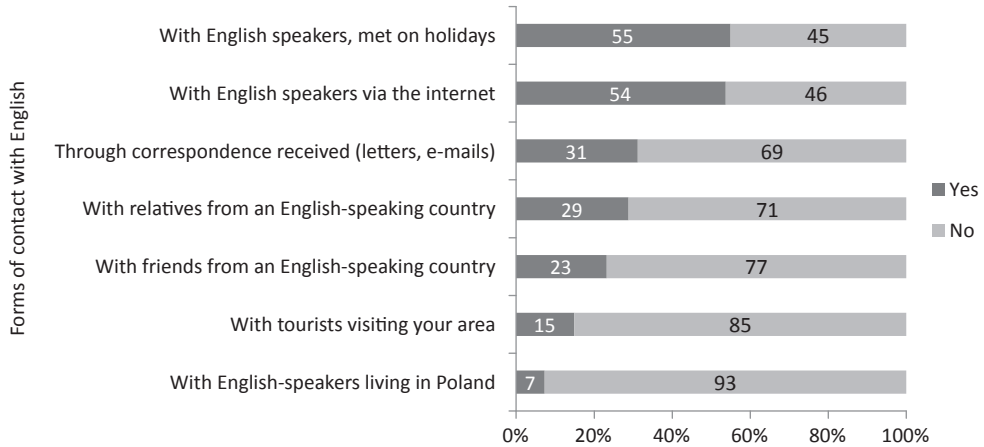


Figure 1. Distribution of responses to: “Do you, yourself, come into contact with English outside school in the following ways?” (in %).

Table 1

Responses to: “How often do you use English outside school in the following ways?” (in %)

How often do you use English:	A few times per week	A few times per month	About once per month	A few times per year	Never
Talking with people via the internet e.g. when playing online games	20	13	11	18	38
Talking with friends	9	11	11	25	44
Writing to friends (e-mails, letters, messages through internet communicator)	9	11	9	23	46
Talking with relatives	3	6	8	25	58
Talking with people living in your place of residence	2	5	6	14	73
Talking with tourists	1	2	5	42	50

(17%). For almost two thirds of Polish students, lessons at school are their only regular, planned foreign language learning.

Attitudes to English lessons

The significance of school foreign language lessons is even more visible from the positive attitude shown by third-grade students towards English, compared with other lessons. ESLC shows that English is one of the most popular subjects at school (below

physical education and art but above Polish and mathematics in the hierarchy)³. To the question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your English lessons?”, the majority of students agreed or partially agreed with the positive statements on lessons (Table 2). The majority of students agreed partially or

³ Ranking created by ordering summed percentage shares of responses: “like a lot” and “quite like it”.

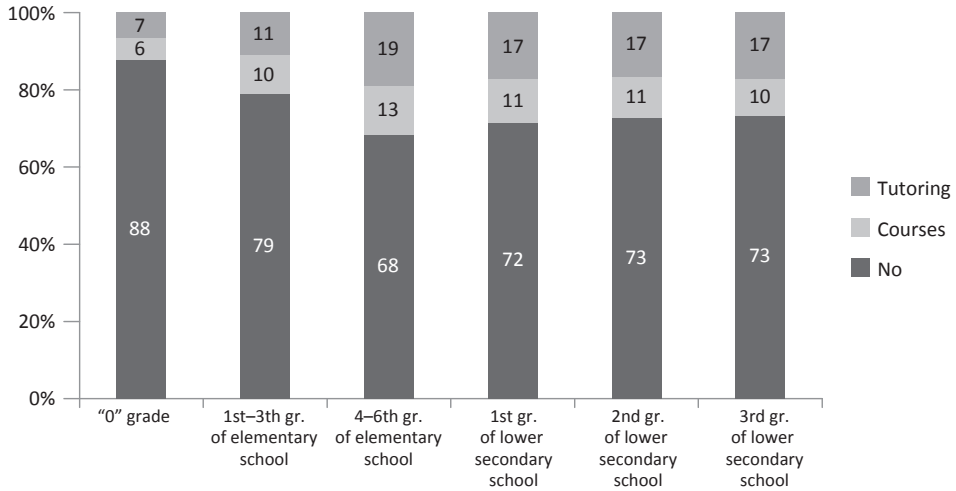


Figure 2. Distributions of responses to: "Have you attended any extra English classes out of school?" (in %).

Table 2

Responses to: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your English lessons?" (in %)

My English lessons are:	Agree	Slightly agree	Slightly disagree	Disagree
Easy	51	26	13	9
Good	38	36	16	10
Interesting	24	38	22	16
Enjoyable	21	36	25	18
Boring	16	22	30	32
A waste of time	10	26	43	20

completely with the statement "My English lessons are good" (74%). The lowest number agreed with the statement: "My English lessons are enjoyable" (57% of indications for the category "agree" and "slightly agree").

Development of language skills and language subsystems

The core curriculum for lower secondary school recommends that a balance should be maintained between the development of four basic language skills (listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking and writing) in the foreign language teaching process. This featured in both

the core curriculum applicable before 2009 and the current one (MEN, 2008; MENiS, 2002b). Despite differences in the descriptions of requirements in both documents, the same weight is attached to these skills. In the core curriculum of 2002 the skills were described as achievement in the areas of: listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, while the core curriculum of 2008 describes them as receptive and productive skills in the oral and written forms. Further, as mentioned above, effective oral and written communication in a foreign language was a priority for teaching. Language accuracy, although important, did not constitute the main educational goal (MEN, 2009a, p. 61). Student

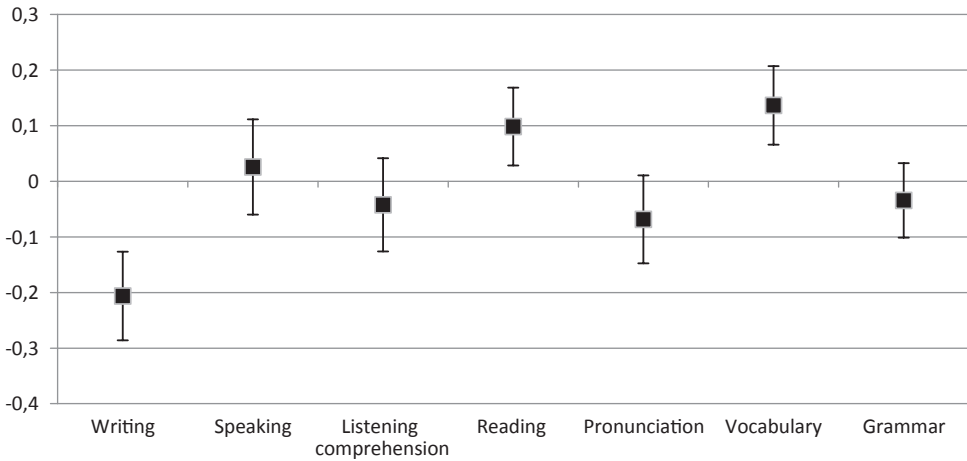


Figure 3. Student reported focus on teaching of particular language skills and language subsystems. Means for the index of relative frequency of teaching with confidence intervals.

responses indicated that teachers maintained a balance in the development of language subsystems (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) and language skills. Regardless of language skill or subsystem, most students declared that their teacher delivered each aspect during (almost) every lesson. In the opinion of almost half, vocabulary (51%), reading (48%) and speaking (47%) occurred with equal frequency and approximately 40% declared that almost every lesson included learning to write (39%), listening comprehension (39%), grammar (39%) and pronunciation (42%). Otherwise, the students who indicated “never” or “almost never”, varied from 4% for learning to speak the language, listening, grammar and vocabulary to 8% for learning to write.

To highlight the differences in focus on development of particular language skills and subsystems, an index of perceived relative teaching frequency was created. Responses concerning particular language skills and subsystems were standardized, forcing the mean of all elements of the question to 0 and the standard deviation to 1. The means of the standardised answers for particular language skills and subsystems were calculated to reveal relative frequency

of teaching compared to average frequency reported by the participants (which applies to the category “a few times a month”). The obtained means together with 95% confidence intervals are presented in Figure 3.

From the data in Figure 3, it can be observed that in students’ opinion, activities supporting speaking, reading and vocabulary development in English are more frequent during lessons than activities aimed at writing and listening development, learning pronunciation and grammar. As far as language skills are concerned, no significant statistical differences between focus on speaking, listening or reading English were observed. According to students, learning to write English is a significantly less frequent activity than learning the other three skills. As regards language subsystems, students were much more often engaged with vocabulary development activities than those oriented at learning pronunciation and grammar structures. In general, the least attention was paid to writing in the teaching of language skills and subsystems, while teaching vocabulary was a more frequent activity than writing, pronunciation or grammar. Focus on the development of particular language skills and language subsystems is balanced, with

exception of writing, which takes a lower priority than other skills and vocabulary, which attract more attention than pronunciation and grammar.

Communication in English during lessons

Although classroom communication is not normal, natural communication, teachers can create similar conditions – communicative situations (Komorowska, 2009; Szpotowicz, 2012). Whether and to what extent students speak the language they are learning depends mainly on teachers.

Opinions about frequency of English use during classes showed limited communication in the target language during lessons. Most students in the study reported that they sometimes spoke English when they addressed the teacher or the whole class but very rarely when working in groups and talking to each other. Table 3 shows how students reported target language communication during classes.

Students used English during lessons less frequently than their teachers. The indices (means of the answers) created from the responses to all items concerning frequency of English spoken during lessons show that on a scale from zero (“never”) to four (“always”) the mean frequency of English use

during lessons was 1.572 ($SE = 0.064$), while the teacher score was 2.283 ($SE = 0.061$). The exception was communication between teacher and student, irrespective of role in the exchange. The distributions of student to teacher and teacher to student utterance frequencies are similar and without significant difference.

One student in four seldom used English during English lessons. Moreover, every tenth student attended lessons during which the teacher hardly spoke English. A sizeable group of lower secondary school students, 24%, responded “never” or “hardly ever” to all items about frequency of student English use during lessons (i.e. when students talk to the teacher, work in groups, talk to each other and when they talk to the whole class). The analogous responses about use of the target language by teachers showed that, according to 11% of the research participants, teachers “never” or “hardly ever” spoke English, either while addressing one or two students or the whole class. At the same time, 6% of the respondents to all items addressed by the two questions discussed above, answered, “never” or “hardly ever”, so they declared that regardless of who, teachers or students, they seldom spoke English during lessons.

The scale of the trend is best discussed referring to the numbers of students. ESLC research, due to the representative sampling,

Table 3

Responses to: “How often does your teacher of English speak English when doing the following?” and “How often do students speak English when doing the following in an English lesson?” (in %)

Situation	Always	Usually	Every now and then	Hardly ever	Never
Teacher actions:					
Teacher speaks to the whole class.	14	42	30	10	4
Teacher talks to one or two students.	8	27	37	18	10
Student actions:					
Students speak in front of the whole class.	10	18	27	25	19
Students speak to the teacher.	6	21	35	23	15
Students work in groups or speak together.	3	10	24	32	31

allows extrapolation to the whole population of lower secondary school students learning English, so the 6% mentioned represent almost 19 000 lower secondary school students ($n = 18\ 891$, $SE \pm 2551$). Relatively regular communication in the target language (student–teacher, teacher–student, teacher–students, student–student, student–students interaction) only took place during the lessons of a quarter of all Polish lower secondary school students. Twenty four percent of students responded with a different answer to “never” or “hardly ever” for all items addressed by the two questions discussed, so they determined the frequency of communication in English by choosing answers: “every now and then”, “usually” and “always”. The data from ESLC show that lower secondary school English lessons do not afford all students a real possibility of communicating in the target language.

English spoken by students and teachers

Ordinal regression analysis was performed to show any relationship between English usage frequency between teachers and students, checking the relationship between use of English by teachers in communication with individual students or the whole class and use of English by students talking to the teacher or other students (when working in groups or speaking in front of the whole class). Each model tested showed a positive effect of frequency of English spoken by the teacher, both to the whole class, as well as to students individually, on the frequency of student spoken English in all communication situations (all models were statistically significant at $p = 0.05$). Tables 4 and 5 show the odds ratios⁴ of transition to a higher

category of the dependent variable for each category of the independent variable where the reference group is the category “every now and then”. Higher values of the odds ratio for the category “always” are found than for “usually” and lower for a category “never” than for “hardly ever” – this indicates that the more the teacher talks to the students, the more students use English. The strongest positive relationship exists between English spoken by the teacher to the whole class and to individual students and students talking to the teacher in English, and further – when the students talk to the whole class, and slightly weaker – when they work in pairs and talk to each other. In the situation when the teacher talks to the whole class, only the confidence intervals for coefficients in the categories “never” and “hardly ever”, when the students work in groups and talk to each other, are not mutually exclusive. In the situation when the teacher talks to one or two students, there is no significant difference between the coefficients in the categories “never” and “hardly ever”. However, this does not have any bearing on conclusions from the analysis. There is also no such difference for the category “usually” and “always” when the students work in groups. There are no statistically significant differences between analogous situations when the teacher speaks to the whole class or to one or two students.

Types of activities used in lessons

The principles of the communicative approach have important implications for choice of activities used in the classroom. If the key to mastery of a foreign language is the use of this language for the purpose of communication (Dakowska, 2005), then teachers should create as many situations as possible for students to allow interaction in communicative situations. Of course, teacher input is very important, as it is often the main source of exposure to the target

⁴ The odds ratio shows how many times higher are odds of a situation in one group compared to the second group. The odds are the ratio of occurrence of an event to its non-occurrence ($p/1-p$).

Table 4

Influence of teacher English use, when whole class addressed, on English use by students – odds ratio (reference category: “every now and then”)

Situation	Never	Hardly ever	Usually	Always
Students speak to the teacher.	0.15	0.44	2.11	10.37
Students speak in front of the whole class.	0.32	0.66	2.33	7.33
Students work in groups and speak together.	0.32	0.61	1.58	4.05

Table 5

Influence of teacher English use, when one or two students addressed, on English use by students – odds ratio (reference category: “every now and then”)

Situation	Never	Hardly ever	Usually	Always
Students speak to a teacher.	0.28	0.37	2.81	9.29
Students speak in front of the whole class.	0.41	0.50	2.03	5.80
Students work in groups and speak together.	0.55	0.39	1.65	3.32

Table 6

Student responses to: “How often does the following happen during your English lessons?” (in %)

Situation	Most of the time	Usually	Every now and then	Hardly ever	Never
Teacher speaks to the whole class.	71	19	6	2	2
Students work individually.	39	44	11	4	2
One student speaks in front of the whole class.	13	23	29	22	12
Teacher speaks with one or two students.	12	21	41	19	7
A group of students speaks in front of the whole class.	3	9	28	35	25
Students work in groups.	2	7	44	33	14

language, but working in pairs/groups engages students in authentic communication and language production, which significantly supports their language acquisition (Ortega, 2007). Student–student interaction, aiming to achieve specific communication objectives, permits both contact with the language and speaking in the language taught (Brown, 2001). Therefore, types of activities used in the classroom should be as varied as possible (Table 6) to engage students in different

patterns of interaction – both those in which the teacher is directly involved and those in which they only monitor students.

Student responses suggested that a frontal instruction was the most commonly adopted to English classes where the teacher assumed the dominant role. Nine out of ten lower secondary school students reported that the teacher spoke to the whole class “most of the time” or “usually”. Students worked individually with almost the same frequency.

The following types of activities were also quite frequent: one student speaking in front of the whole class and one or two students' in conversation with the teacher, however, with regard to these types of activities much greater diversity of student responses can be observed. The most popular types of activities involved: no interaction (individual work), student/teacher–class interaction or teacher–student interaction.

In the eyes of lower secondary school students, the least frequently used activities involved group learning, permitting students to communicate directly with each other. As many as 60% of Polish lower secondary school students reported that groups of students “hardly ever” or “never” spoke in front of the whole class and almost half (47%) declared that they had the chance to work in groups at a similar order of frequency.

Numbers of students in a language class

The organisation of compulsory foreign language classes into groups of up to 24 has been in force since 2002 (MENiS, 2002a). The new core curriculum specifies this – groups should include 10–24 students (in lower secondary schools which do not have more than two units – the group should not have fewer than seven students), taking into account students' target language proficiency.

The data of the ESLC research show, that learning a language in a lower secondary school takes place in quite various conditions in terms of class size. The largest percentage of the research participants (31%) indicated that the group in which they learnt English included 16–20 students. Every fourth respondent reported 11–15 students in a group and every fifth many more: 21–25 students. Quite a high percentage of students – 10% declared that they learnt English in groups of 26–30 people. Owing to the relatively large range of responses, it is worth considering whether the size of the group affects organisation of work – the frequency of English spoken by students, teachers and

the frequency of use of particular types of activities in the classroom.

Group size and frequency of speaking English.

Analysis of relationship between the class size and frequency of English spoken by students and teachers did not demonstrate that the size of the group, determined whether and how often the students and teachers spoke English. The influence of the number of students during a lesson in any of the five regression models including: (a) the use of English by the students in front of the whole class, (b) working in groups, or (c) talking to the teacher, (d) use of the target language by the teacher, when they talk to the class and (e) to individual students, was not statistically significant at $p = 0.05$.

Group size and types of activities. The relationship between class size and the type of interaction during English lessons has not proved to be statistically significant at $p = 0.05$ in any of the six regression models including: (a) group work, (b) individual work of students, (c) group of students speaking in front of the whole class, (d) individual students speaking in front of the whole class, (e) the teacher speaking to the whole class, and (f) teacher's conversation with one or two students.

The analyses show that the actions taken by the teacher related to types of activities and the use of English (by students and teachers) are not determined by the number of students in the classroom. Thus, the reasons for the lack of variety for activities and the rare use of English during lessons should be found elsewhere.

Teaching aids and resources

Similarly to the case of the types of activities, maximum diversity is recommended also in terms of teaching aids and resources. A textbook should allow students to develop

all language skills, and supplementary materials have two other very important functions – to motivate and compensate (Komorowska, 2009). In addition, efforts should be made to use a wide range of teaching aids, because an increase in the diversity of language and cultural communication allows for individualisation of learning, and therefore supports the autonomy of the student (Gajek, 2008).

In particular, teaching aids and resources using ICT enable autonomous work on language (Gajek, 2008). The use of modern technology in teaching has also been emphasised in the new core curriculum. Lower and upper secondary schools are intended to prepare students for life in the information society. Therefore, teachers should create conditions for students to acquire the skills to search, organise and use information from various sources, using ICT, in classes of different subjects (MEN, 2009a). Despite this fact, the results of this study indicate the dominant role of the textbook – nine out of ten students

declared that the textbook was used during (almost) every lesson (Table 7).

Teaching materials used during English lessons are often supplemented by cassettes or CDs. Almost half the students listened to these in nearly every lesson. Materials prepared by teachers were also popular – one quarter of students used them as often as audio materials. Teachers rarely used authentic materials such as newspapers, magazines, comics or song lyrics – almost one student in three reported that they were used during classes a few times a year, and twice as many declared very rarely or not at all. Books written in English for extensive reading were even less popular. More than 6 out of 10 students had almost no contact with English books during lessons. Teachers also did not often use audio-visual materials (video tapes, DVDs, short videos from YouTube).

Teaching aids involving ICT were placed at the end of the list of teaching materials used. Only 3% of students used the internet and computer programs in almost every

Table 7

Student responses to: "How often are the following resources used in your English lessons?" (in %)

Aids and resources used during English lessons	(Almost) every lesson	A few times per month	About once per month	A few times per year	Never or hardly ever
Textbook	89	4	3	3	2
Audio materials (cassettes, CDs, etc.)	47	35	9	6	4
Materials prepared by the teacher (hand-outs, reading texts)	25	30	19	14	13
Books written in English for extensive reading	9	6	7	15	63
Audio-visual materials (video cassettes, DVDs, YouTube video clips, etc.)	4	11	11	22	51
Internet	3	5	7	14	71
Computer programs	3	5	8	14	71
Newspapers, magazines, comics or song lyrics	3	10	18	34	35
Language laboratory (student PCs with foreign language teaching software)	2	3	3	10	82

lesson. More than seven out of ten students did not use the internet or computer programs for learning English. Only language laboratories were less popular.

Conclusions

The article presents a picture of English lessons reflected by questionnaire data collected from students participating in the ESLC study. The analysis of responses indicates that:

- For almost three quarters of the lower secondary students in the final grade, school classes are the only form of regular contact with the English language.
- More than half evaluated their English lessons positively. English was also perceived as the most useful subject taught in lower secondary school.
- From the answers it also follows that, although the four language skills are practiced in a balanced manner, writing is the least frequently practiced skill. Teaching vocabulary takes priority over other language skills and language subsystems, and features more prominently than grammar, pronunciation and writing.
- Target language (English) communication in lessons is limited. The more the teacher speaks English during the lesson, the more likely the students will do the same.
- Teacher-centred instruction in the language classroom prevails, with the teacher in the dominant role with little interaction between students in group work.
- Textbooks are the teaching materials used during almost every lesson, rather than authentic materials, which are used very rarely. The use of ICT is even rarer.

The study demonstrated that positive student attitudes towards English lessons prevail. This is of clear importance, since favourable attitudes afford the conditions for effective teaching. This is a constructive starting point

for the changes suggested by the remaining findings.

Unvaried tasks and rare use of English in the classroom suggest that school time spent on language learning is not effectively used to develop communication skills. Although this goal is explicitly fostered by the core curriculum, the results suggest that it is rarely achieved. Strong attachment to the textbook by teachers and emphasis on text based work, as opposed to teaching communication, may imply a common but mistaken belief in the role of the textbook as key to successful implementation of the curriculum in preparing students for the final lower secondary school examination. Practice of oral or written production during lessons is not encouraged by the present basic level examination, which does not test writing. Perhaps even more pertinent, oral communication remains unassessed by the examination. The previous examination shared the same weaknesses. It is likely that the limited 3 hours per week – for many students the only opportunity for contact with a foreign language – forces teachers to choose between teaching communication skills and preparing a class for examination. Important further questions remain about foreign language instruction in the Polish context. For a more thorough understanding, future studies should be developed to extend beyond large surveys to include lesson observation.

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