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The Popularization of English Language Learning in Primary Schools in Poland

Abstract: Accession of Poland to the European Union induced a variety of changes in different areas of life, including education. A second language was introduced as a compulsory subject in kindergarten and primary school and two compulsory foreign languages in general lower and upper secondary schools. English is the most popular of all languages in all types of schools, regardless of the level of education they represent. Globalization of the English language, the process which can be observed nowadays, has a significant impact on actions taken by schools to popularize learning this language. Therefore, the research was performed with a view to achieving a better understanding of the popularization of English language learning in primary schools in the larger context of a variety of factors. Basing on the analysis of research results, the conclusions reflecting real needs of learners as far as the more effective English language learning is concerned have been drawn. Sharing the research findings with the primary schools which participated in the research will contribute to their practical application.

Keywords: student, primary school, popularization of English language learning, motivation to learn.

Introduction

The accession of Poland to the European Union brought about a number of changes which have taken place over the last decade. As a member of the European Union, Poland "(...) has been obliged to undertake many reforms aiming at getting the country closer to EU-15, reforms both in the field of law or economics, as well as the proper means, which are necessary to equalise the standard of living; Poland and other member countries which joined European Union in 2004, received financial support – European funds" (Wenerski, 2013, p. 9).

Giving the membership of Poland in the European Union, the changes within the last decade involve not only an increase of economic indicators, the modernization of the country or the restructuring of the Polish economy. The reforms have also affected the area of education and social culture. This refers to e.g. the rise in the sense of stability and security, or the awareness of "Polish euro-enthusiasm" among Polish people (Ananicz, 2014, p. 17). Another important benefit of the accession is the ease of crossing borders of member countries within the Schengen zone. It enables economic migration, simple leisure or educational travel.

However, the European Union did not clearly define its position on the issue of language. There have been multiple suggestions to create a unified all-European language, which could be Latin or Esperanto; nevertheless, this solution has proven to be too difficult, expensive and time-consuming (Skulimowska, 2013, p. 6). "There are 24 official languages, about 60 regional and minority languages and over 175 immigrant languages" in the European Union (Skulimowska, 2013, p.6). Moreover, the European Union constantly realizes the idea of multilingualism so that member countries can preserve their language and culture diversity as well as regional characteristics. The fundamental principle of the European Union is "the equal formal and legal status of official languages of all member countries, which are at the same time official languages of the EU" (Kutyłowska, 2013, p. 53). Although languages of all member countries are of the same importance, it should be noted that English, German and French are the most popular and widely used languages in the European Union (Kutyłowska, 2013, p. 82).

It appears to be the case that the most popular languages in Poland are the same foreign languages as in the whole EU. Starting from the school year 2008/2009, Poland joined the large number of EU members which ensure their students have an “early start” in terms of foreign language learning. Students are obliged to learn a second language from the first grade of primary school. Moreover, a third language is introduced as a compulsory school subject from the first grade of lower secondary school; when students continue learning in upper secondary school or technical upper secondary school, this period extends for another three or four years. The described changes stem from the fact that Poland favours and introduces all European tendencies in the teaching of foreign languages or even wants to go beyond them (Kutyłowska, 2013).

Over the period 2005–2011, English was the most popular foreign language and a compulsory subject in Polish schools. German was placed second, while Russian and French took the third place (Kutyłowska, 2013; Skulimowska, 2013). Thus, the popularization of English language teaching and learning on any level of education can be observed in Poland, starting from the pre-school stage.

Taking into account the geographical location of Poland and its border contacts, it should be presumed that the most popular languages would be German and Russian. However, it appears that English is the predominant foreign language and this preponderance is related to many closely interwoven factors, e.g. Polish access to the EU, historical determinants, the position of the United States in the world, digital media and both private and commercial electronic communication (Kutyłowska, 2013; Skulimowska, 2013). As David Crystal writes, English is nowadays not only the language of popular culture but, firstly, “the language of global communication” (Crystal, 2013, p. 2).

The popularization of the English language in Poland involves many benefits at the professional and private level. Speaking English provides countless opportunities for many people to find a job abroad. Moreover, many prestigious companies in Poland employ people who are fluent in this foreign language. It is related to the necessity of using English in doing business and cooperating with foreigners, during employee training and

business trips abroad. It should be noticed that many words and expressions used on an everyday basis at work are loanwords from the English language, and some of them are loan translations (Skulimowska, 2013).

Another significant advantage of the popularization of English among young people is the opportunity to study abroad. Within the last decade, thousands of students have been given a chance to study abroad, to have a better insight into other cultures and, in particular, to improve their language skills. The statistical data from the Erasmus Programme are the best confirmation of the above-mentioned statements. Until 2014, the Erasmus Programme enabled over 120,000 Polish students to study or train in other EU countries, and 37,000 lecturers taught at the universities of these countries or attended training courses there (Ananicz, 2014, p. 15–17).

The additional benefits of a good command of English are: the ability to understand people from other cultures, the possibility of meeting them and getting to know them, a better opportunity to use the Internet in a more effective way, personal satisfaction and the strengthened sense of belonging to the European Union (Kutyłowska, 2013, p. 15).

English language is omnipresent and constantly promoted by the mass media, which can be seen in all sorts of advertisements and slogans. The continuing globalization of the language can be observed, which can be simply called a trend for loanwords in various areas of life, e.g. in business, economics, IT, music, sports, politics, nutrition, healthcare, beauty industry, fashion and youth cultures (Witaszek-Samborska, 1993).

Attention should be drawn to the fact that there are also some opponents of such a strong globalization and popularization of English in Poland. One of them is the famous professor, Andrzej Markowski, the head of the Polish Language Institute at the University of Warsaw. He says: "Obviously, the fact that we can use English language all over the world is very important and valuable. Nevertheless, we must make sure that globalization has not gone too far, in order to prevent the homogenization and Americanization of cultures. We need to notice and respect the role of national languages, which are the main distinguishing feature of cultural distinctiveness, a basis for national identity, and the preserver of tradition, etc." (Winiarska, 2006, p. 3).

With regard to the selected contexts of the popularization of English in Poland mentioned above, the research was performed in order to contribute to a better understanding of the popularization of this language in selected primary schools.

Methodology of research

The research was conducted in 2016 in selected urban and rural primary schools in Lublin Province in Poland.

Purpose

The research was undertaken in order to identify the methods of the popularization of English language learning in primary schools. Consequently, the specific objectives of the study were:

1. to learn about various forms of the popularization of English language learning in primary schools;
2. to get an insight into the most preferred forms of the popularization of English language learning;
3. to identify students' motivation for learning and their self-assessment of language skills;
4. to observe the differences between primary schools in urban and rural areas as far as the popularization of the English language is concerned.

The analysed research findings were shared with the primary schools participating in the research. They will be helpful for teachers and parents in determining and specifying further actions regarding the popularization of the English language which should be taken by schools.

Participants

The research was conducted in four primary schools in Biała Podlaska District, located in Lublin Province, in November 2016. It included 205 students from the third grade. The list of schools, cities, villages, the number of students and their gender is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Students included in the research.

Location	Name of school	N	Girls	%	Boys	%
Biała Podlaska city	Szkoła Podstawowa Nr 3 im. M. Konopnickiej	54	28	51.85	26	48.15
Biała Podlaska city	Szkoła Podstawowa Nr 9 im. Królowej Jadwigi	52	27	51.92	25	48.08
Konstantynów village	Szkoła Podstawowa im. A. Mickiewicza	48	25	52.08	23	47.92
Janów Podlaski village	Szkoła Podstawowa im. Cz. Tańskiego	51	26	50.98	25	49.02
Total		205	106	51.70	99	48.30

N – number of students

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondents were girls. However, the girls outnumbered the boys only by a few per cent. Similarly, there was a small difference between the number of the respondents attending rural and urban schools, with the preponderance of students from urban areas. All of the students included in the research were 9–10 years old.

Instruments and Procedures

Qualitative methods were used in the research, since they are characterized by ‘flexible’ instruments adaptable to various conditions and situations which cannot be always predicted before the beginning of the research (Łobocki, 2006). It should be noted that the actions taken by schools in order to popularize English language learning are difficult to measure or they are even not measurable. Furthermore, the major advantage of qualitative research methods is that they make it possible to develop an in-depth understanding of a context which cannot be measured objectively. Thus, the choice of qualitative approach with the research method of an unstructured interview was governed by the subject and the objectives of the research. In Polish methodological literature concerning pedagogical research various types of interviews can be found. However, the most popular ones are structured and unstructured interviews. The interview questionnaire was developed for the purpose

of this research; the list of questions was formulated to gain information on the following topics: students' preferences concerning learning foreign languages, different forms of the popularization of foreign language learning in schools, students' motivation to study and self-assessment of English skills by students.

The schools enumerated in Table 1 agreed to participate in the research. The students taking part in the research were informed about the objectives of the research and were ensured that their answers would remain anonymous, which enhanced the quality of the research.

Results of the Research

Students' answers to the question on the popularity of foreign languages in their schools are presented in Table 2; numerical data were converted into percentages.

Table 2. Popularity of foreign languages in selected primary schools.

Popularity of the given language	Szkoła Podst. Nr 3 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Nr 9 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Konstantynów %	Szkoła Podst. Janów Podlaski %
English	78.00	81.00	76.00	68.00
German	11.00	12.00	8.00	9.00
Russian	4.00	3.00	16.00	21.00
Italian	4.00	2.00	0.00	1.00
French	2.00	1.00	0.00	0.00
Other	1.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

The data presented in Table 2 show that English is the most popular foreign language among the primary school students participating in the research, both in urban and rural areas. Such a considerable popularity of this language among the students may be attributed to its general popularization in Poland and the awareness that speaking English makes everyday life easier and creates better opportunities for further education.

The differences between schools as far as the second foreign language is concerned were observed. German is the preferred language in urban schools, whereas in rural areas it is Russian which took second place. Such preferences can be seen as a result of the geographical location of these areas in proximity to the border with Belarus and contacts with Belarusian people. The least popular foreign languages among the students were: French, Italian and, occasionally mentioned, Swahili.

In order to confirm the statistically important dependencies between students in urban and rural areas, Pearson's chi-squared test was used for qualitative questions. In all of the analysed cases, a statistical significance $p=0.05$ was assumed. The analysis was conducted using the STATISTICA ver. 10 programme. On the basis of the calculated values of Pearson's chi-squared test with $\chi^2=13.58$ and $p=0.0185$, it should be stated that the differences in popularity of foreign languages between students from urban and rural schools are statistically significant.

English is the most popular foreign language in urban schools (79.3%), followed by German (11.3%), Russian (3.8%), Italian (2.8%) and French (1.9%). On the other hand, in rural schools the most popular languages are: English (71.7%) and Russian (18.2%). These data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Popularity of foreign languages depending on school location.

No.	Foreign language	Students %	
		Urban schools	Rural schools
1.	English	79.30	71.70
2.	German	11.30	8.20
3.	Russian	3.80	18.20
4.	Italian	2.80	0.50
5.	French	1.90	0.00
6.	Other	0.90	1.40
	Total	100.00	100.00

The results of the research on the popularity of English among students show a positive attitude to learning the language and a strong

motivation. The vast majority of students in all schools, namely over 80%, claimed to learn English with pleasure, whereas 20% of students learned the language reluctantly. When asked about the sources of motivation in language learning, the respondents gave multiple answers, therefore making it impossible to present the percentages. The following factors motivate students to study:

- a) learning English after completing primary school;
- b) listening to music, watching films, reading books in original;
- c) developing hobbies and interests;
- d) travelling;
- e) meeting new people from foreign countries;
- f) finding a good job in the future.

Another issue concerned different forms of the popularization of English language learning in primary schools. The students were to indicate different forms of popularization in which they participated. The answers were listed in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' participation in given forms of the popularization of English language learning.

Forms of popularization of English language learning	Szkoła Podst. Nr 3 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Nr 9 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Konstantynów %	Szkoła Podst. Janów Podlaski %
Language events at school, e.g. European Language Day	58.00	48.00	46.00	38.00
Language contests	11.00	12.00	8.00	9.00
Extracurricular activities at school, so called "English appreciation group"	45.00	43.00	36.00	31.00
Song contests	24.00	22.00	10.00	9.00
Declamation contests	28.00	31.00	0.00	0.00
Language programmes in which school participates	81.00	78.00	51.00	45.00
Other	20.00	15.00	5.00	8.00

Percentages do not make 100 %, because students indicated more than one answer.

The analysis of the data presented in Table 4 shows various forms of the popularization of English offered by schools. The percentages indicate that most students, both in urban and rural areas, participate in language programmes organized by schools and financed by the European Union. It is possible for schools to employ English-teaching experts or purchase interesting teaching aids, books and CDs for such extra-curricular activities thanks to this additional funding. The least popular form of the popularization of English is a language contest, which may be attributed to the fact that only the best students are able to participate in it. All in all, the results show that schools offer a wide range of activities popularizing English language learning which are accepted and attended by students.

In order to state the statistically significant dependencies between students from urban and rural areas, Pearson's chi-squared test was applied. In all of the analysed cases, a statistical significance $p=0.05$ was defined. The analysis indicated statistically significant differences in the following cases: song contests ($p=0.0083$) which were more popular in urban areas (22.6%), declamation contests ($p<0.0001$), which were not held in rural schools, language exchange programmes ($p<0.0001$) which were more popular in urban areas (79.3%) and other forms ($p=0.0095$) which were indicated more often in urban schools as well. Despite no statistically significant differences in the case of other answers, it should be noticed that the students from urban schools participated more often in language events or contests. The data are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Students' participation in various forms of the popularization of English language learning, taking into account school location.

No.	Forms of popularization of English language learning	Students %		χ^2	p
		Urban schools	Rural schools		
1.	Language events at school, e.g. European Language Day	52.80	41.40	2.68	0.1019
2.	Language contests	11.30	8.10	0.61	0.4347
3.	Extracurricular activities at school, so called "English appreciation group"	44.30	33.30	2.61	0.1065

4.	Song contests	22.60	9.10	6.96	0.0083*
5.	Declamation contests	29.30	0.00	34.11	0.0001*
6.	Language programmes in which school participates	79.30	47.50	22.39	0.0001*
7.	Other	17.90	6.10	6.73	0.0095*

* a significant difference if $p < 0,05$; χ^2 - Pearson's chi-squared test

The next part of this research involved determining how the respondents assess their own command of English. The collected data were based on self-assessment performed by the students, and the results transformed into percentages are shown in Table 6.

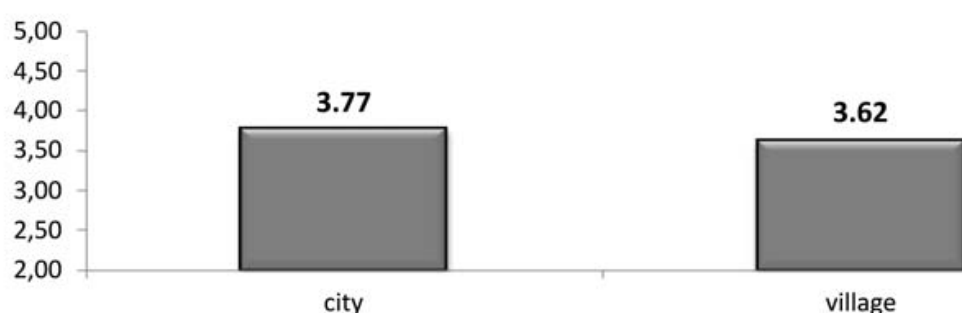
Table 6. Students' self-assessment of the English language skills.

Knowledge of the English language	Szkoła Podst. Nr 3 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Nr 9 Biała Podlaska %	Szkoła Podst. Konstantynów %	Szkoła Podst. Janów Podlaski %
Very good	16.7	18.00	12.00	13.00
Good	53.3	52.00	48.00	49.00
Satisfactory	25.00	23.00	30.00	27.00
Rather poor	5.00	12.00	10.00	11.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Based on the results presented in Table 6, it can be stated that most students in all schools evaluated their knowledge of English as good; however, the percentages in rural schools were lower than in urban ones. Students are aware of their language skill level, therefore only 12% to 18 % of them considered their knowledge of English to be very good.

In order to state the statistical dependencies between the students from urban and rural schools in terms of their self-assessment of English skills, the Mann-Whitney U test was applied. Thus, a numerical value was assigned to each answer on a scale ranging from 2 (rather poor) to 5 (very good).

The results indicate that students generally defined their English level as average: 3.70 ± 0.84 . The students attending urban schools self-assessed their knowledge of English at 3.77 ± 0.83 level, whereas students from rural areas at 3.62 ± 0.84 level. Although the self-assessment of language skills in urban schools was higher than in rural ones, the difference between the evaluations proved to be statistically insignificant ($p=0.1675$). The collected data are presented in Figure 1.



Value of the Mann-Whitney U test: $Z=1.38$; $p=0.1675$

Figure 1. Students' self-assessment of their English language skills, taking into account school location.

The last stage of the research was designed to determine a variety of factors which are of crucial importance for learning English and have a significant impact on its effectiveness. It is a well-known fact that the educational process is affected by a number of factors, including personality traits and intelligence. Students were asked to identify various factors which they considered to be important in the process of learning English. The following list enumerates factors which were indicated most often:

1. attending extracurricular English activities, more than twice a week;
2. systematicness;
3. teaching methods introduced by teachers;
4. abilities and eagerness to learn.

Discussion and Implications

Speaking foreign languages is one of key competences of modern man. The research results definitely prove that primary school students are aware of the need to learn foreign languages. English proves to be the most popular foreign language, both in urban and rural schools, regardless of their geographical location. Primary schools meet the expectations of their students and offer attractive forms of English language learning. Over 70% of students took part in such events and activities organized by schools, which proves that this is an interesting offer. Furthermore, such a vast offer makes it possible to choose the activities students like most.

Among Polish research reports on English language learning in primary schools, there is the report made by the Educational Research Institute in Warsaw, entitled: "English in primary schools – the process and learning outcomes", in which the results of effectiveness of teaching the language were presented. The research was conducted on 5,000 students. The collected data indicate that the prevailing majority of students at the end of their primary school education have a good mastery of basic listening skills and reading comprehension of very short texts. However, 50% of students have difficulties with combining the information from two texts consisting of a few sentences. The report also presented the weak points of English language teaching during typical classes, namely lessons are monotonous, and teachers over-rely on textbooks.

The research findings presented in this paper fit into the broader context of research on the effectiveness of education in primary schools conducted in some European countries. Such research was published e.g. in 2012 by Esra Ucak and Hüseyin Bag, Turkey (Ucak, Bag, 2012). As the research results show, primary schools offer a variety of interesting and attractive forms of the popularization of English language learning, which encourages students to take an active part in them. New trends in foreign language teaching in Poland, such as on-line learning and teaching via Skype, should be mentioned at this point. Such methods are widely appreciated by students.

As far as the sources of the financing of English language learning are concerned, it should be stated that Polish schools, located both in urban and rural areas, seized the chance given by the EU and joined English language teaching and learning programmes funded by the European Social Fund. However, there is no information available on how much money was allocated to primary schools.

It can be concluded that primary schools in Poland are effective in English language teaching and are looking to the future of young people.

Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the research results, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1. Primary schools in Poland meet students' expectations in terms of foreign language teaching. Definitely, English is the most popular foreign language. Apart from traditional lessons, schools organize various forms of English language popularization, which are present both in urban and rural areas.
2. The vast majority of students are eager to participate in events and activities related to teaching English offered by their schools. Various forms of language popularization encourage students to learn and enhance their language skills. However, there is a statistically significant difference in popularity of foreign languages and participation in English language events between rural and urban students.
3. The majority of respondents are satisfied with the English language teaching in their schools, which is reflected in a high opinion they hold of their command of English and high motivation to study.

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