

Teaching English at Polish secondary schools.

by

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Publication date: December 2010

Abstract

The aims of this paper are to determine: 1. if Polish secondary school learners are studying English so that they can obtain jobs in the UK and Ireland and 2. whether they prefer to learn how to speak English from a native speaker teacher than from a non-native instructor. Eighteen students, who study at ZESPOL SZKOL MECHANICZNYCH NR 2 in Cracow, Poland were surveyed, and the authors found that most learners (56%) are not studying English in order to secure employment in the UK and Ireland and that 82% of the students prefer to be taught English by a native speaker. The theoretical framework for this article is provided by the general idea of the school as an organization and social institution.

Introduction

Poles are committed to the notion of compulsory education and public (state) schooling. Poles start school at age seven and can leave at eighteen.

There are guarantees in Poland for private schools and special education.

Foreign languages have been part of the Polish school curriculum for some time. Starting in the late 1940's, the Russian language was adopted as the primary foreign language to be instructed to all students from the age of 11 and upwards, regardless of the kind of institution (Janowski, 1992, 43). A "West European language" was offered as a "second foreign language" only to pupils attending full secondary school, in other words, institutions leading to a school leaving certificate (Janowski, 1992, 43). From the 1989-90 academic year onward the learning of Russian ceased to be compulsory, and, at about the same time, the Polish government began to encourage the widespread teaching of West European languages in schools (Janowski, 1992, 50).

Fifty-five new teacher training colleges have been opened throughout Poland in support of the government's policy (Janowski, 1992, 51) and by 1992 two foreign organizations had endorsed this new training initiative by sending volunteers to Poland: 1) Solidarity Eastern Europe, a Canadian company and 2) the American Peace Corps. Dr. Butler has first-hand knowledge about the activities of these organizations. In 1991, he was recruited by Solidarity Eastern Europe to teach English at Rzeszow University of Technology, and while he was there had the pleasure to interface academically with a Peace Corps worker.

Research questions

1. Are Polish secondary school students studying English so that they can obtain work in the UK and Ireland? The predicted answer was "yes" because it is relatively easy for Poles to be employed there.

2. Do Polish secondary school learners prefer to learn how to speak English from a native speaker teacher than from a non-native instructor? The predicted answer was "yes" because it is not normal for Poles to speak to one another in English.

Motivation and conceptual framework for this study

The motivation for this work is Ireland and Great Britain's current "open door" policies towards Polish workers. Citizens of Poland have the same right to be employed in these countries as Irish and British nationals.¹ Therefore, it is now more important than ever for Polish students to learn English.

The theoretical framework for this article is supplied by the general notion of the school as an organization and social institution.

Student answers and results

On 6 November 2008 eighteen students, who study at ZESPOL SZKOL MECHANICZNYCH NR 2 in Cracow, were asked to answer the two research questions on a sheet of paper. The results are as follows: 1. 56 % (no) and 44 % (yes), for the first question and 2. 18% (no) and 82% (yes) , for the second question. Therefore, the predicted answer to only the second question was confirmed..

Concluding remarks

Our findings have implications for English language teaching at Polish secondary schools. Nevertheless, it is recommended that more research be carried out, in the future, involving additional institutions.

Note

1. According to the Irish Examiner, thirty three thousand Polish workers have arrived in Ireland since Poland's accession to the EU in May, 2004

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1. Irish Examiner, Abuse of Polish workers widespread, says embassy. <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/Norman%20Butler/Moje%20dokumenty/story130329102.asp.htm>, Retrieved: 12 November, 2006

2. Janowski A. (1992), Polish Education: Changes and Prospects. Oxford Studies in Comparative Education 2 (1), 41-55.