

POLISH GLOTTODIDACTICS VS THE CRISIS IN HUMANITIES. DIAGNOSES AND PROGNOSSES

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The paper explores the issue of the condition of Polish glottodidactics in the context of the present crisis of the humanities. The current state of the humanities has been widely discussed by academia, as well as by the media and the public, nevertheless certain disciplines, such as glottodidactics, appear to be unaffected. Hence, it is essential to not only analyse and evaluate the system of teaching Polish as a foreign language in a Slavic ethnocultural area, but also to gauge the current level of interest in learning Polish as a second language. These analyses provide required data to diagnose the condition of contemporary Polish glottodidactics as well as to forecast discipline's future development.

Key words: Intercomprehension, Polish glottodidactics

I. Introduction

The socio-economic transformations after 1989, along with the intensive economic development of Poland and the entire region of the Eastern Europe led to visible changes in the field of interest in humanistic sciences. After a peak caused by increasing social aspirations of the baby-boom generation of the early 1980s, decreasing prestige and the accompanying decline in the number of candidates for such university courses can be observed. It was also associated with a consistent and cost-effective promotion of technical, mathematical and environmental courses supported by a generous scholarship scheme within a project of ordered specialities¹. However, despite (to a certain degree) the unfavourable

¹ The Project of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland supporting the development of highly-specialized personnel for the strategic areas of the Polish economy was implemented within the framework of Sub-activity 4.1.2 “Increasing the number of graduates from faculties of key importance for a knowledge-based economy”, which constitutes a part of the Operational Programme “Human Capital”, whereas the very pilot programme “Ordering technical, mathematical and environmental

conditions, it is possible to indicate sub-disciplines, which are developing very dynamically. They include, among others, Polish glottodidactics, which is a science devoted to a widely understood process of teaching and promoting the Polish linguaculture (Miodunka 2016).

It is worth to consider teaching Polish as a foreign language primarily in the context of the real interest in Polish as a foreign language. Apart from a constant – although still proportionally minor – interest in the Polish language in the West, we can also observe a systematic increase in the interest in Polish in the Far East. Though the statistical data (Hofmański 2018: 177 – 179) still indicate that the key area of “expansion” for the contemporary Polish language is the native ethnocultural domain, the Slavdom. It is mainly the Slavic language speaking students, who apply for a certificate confirming the knowledge of Polish as a foreign language. Furthermore, their countries of origin have the most language courses sponsored by the Polish authorities, and no other language group can boast of such statistics.

For this reason, as well as thanks to the practical glottodidactic experience (primarily in relation to the group of the Western and the Eastern Slavdom), the presentation shall be devoted to the strategy and propositions in terms of optimizing such a glottodidactic process. The basic issues will circulate such questions as:

- (1) Who do we teach?
- (2) What are the characteristics of a Slavic student?
- (3) What are the greatest challenges for lecturers in the course of group and individual work with a Slavic student?
- (4) What strategies can a lecturer adopt in order to increase the effectiveness of such a course?
- (5) In what way do systemic solutions answer the actual needs for coordinated teaching of Polish as a foreign language and promoting the Polish linguaculture from the perspective of the native ethnocultural space?

university majors” commenced on 1 October 2008, based on the resolution of the Minister of Science and Higher Education. More about the activities within the programme can be read on the official website of the Polish Industrial Development Agency – http://www.pi.gov.pl/PARP/chapter_86197.asp?soid=B909DA34CDFB45EA800AF7350D17BC91 (30.10.2018).

II. Analysis of the teaching JPJO (Polish as a foreign language) to Slavs

1. Who do we teach?

Students of Slavic origin are a relatively homogeneous group, with its common denominator being the Slavic interlingual communicativeness, which is a local variant of intercomprehension, which is recently a quite popular phenomenon in contemporary linguistics. This is the reason why Slavs are an exceptional group with an extraordinary abilities and educational needs (Hofmański 2014: 45). The Eastern Slavs are the dominant group among Slavs learning Polish as a foreign language. Students of Ukrainian origin are in the majority, but the position of Russian in the Ukraine or Belarus also must be noted (Lewaszkiwicz 2014: 38). The Western Slavs are the second sub-group in terms of holders of a certificate for Polish as a foreign language. Unfortunately, a steady decline in the interest in Polish philology studies in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is noticeable. Currently, the entry exams are held in the Czech Republic by only one academic centre, where Polish philology is not even an individual major. This is associated, among others, with a relatively low prestige of Poland in the region of Central Europe and the lack of an efficient promotional policy. It can be assumed that a better economic situation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia increases the availability of certified exams relative to Southern Slavs, who also look towards the offer of Polish philology studies. At the same time, experience from the Polish philology studies in the Czech Republic shows that the people interested in the Polish language studies are relatively often of Polish origin, not necessarily using Polish as an inherited language and sometimes demonstrating deformative-defective and interfered characteristics (Dubisz 2007 a, b).

Domestic glottodidactics seems, at least to a certain degree, to reflect the proportions resulting from the number and location of Polish philology courses abroad in Slavic countries. The sole fact of up to 900 thousand Ukrainian citizens permanently residing in the Republic of Poland (Chmielowska, Dobroczek, Panuciak 2018²) also translates to the number

² Such thorough data are periodically developed on behalf of the Polish National Bank. The previous report (for 2015) informed about a two-times smaller number of Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland. Such a significant growth shall be deemed a confirmation of a steady trend also directly applying to Polish glottodidactics, already at the school level (see Chmielowska, Dobroczek, Panuciak 2018: 4); report available online:

of Ukrainians studying in Poland. At the same time the position of Polish universities in the ranking is not appealing to the representatives of Central Europe – many Slovak students studying abroad much more frequently select the Czech Republic, which provided them with a number of preferential rights up until recently (usually still being recognized).

2. What are the characteristics of a Slavic student?

Students of Slavic origin exhibit a number of common features, resulting both from the convergent influence of another Slavic linguaculture on Polish and its teaching process, as well as from the joint catalogue of so-called difficult spots, which they encounter along the way.

2.1. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is particularly important in research on interference (Hofmański 2014: 90 – 125). It often will give the first impressions of language skills. In terms of pronunciation, particularly characteristic are the issues associated with the implementation of the [i] : [y] phonological opposition by native speakers of the Czech and Slovak languages. Both groups initially pronounce the intermediate sound closer to the Polish [i]. This articulation characteristic is stronger among the Czechs. The Eastern Slavs strongly round the [o] and [u] vowels, which also enables native users of Polish to identify their place of origin really fast. An apparent catalog of discrepancies in articulation problems, however, neutralizes the disappearance of Polish so-called nasal vowels. For Slavs this one unexpectedly turns out to be an easily overcome difficulty. It is only noticeable at the beginning, during the learning reading skills, when students are hyper-correct. Generally it is not seem to be a major problem for both the Western and the Eastern Slavs. Observations based on my own research (Hofmański 2014: 118) show that this type of problems – present in the field of national orthophony – fades, at most, within several months since the beginning of systematic learning of Polish as a foreign language.

Even more interesting conclusions can be drawn from the observation of the manner of articulating fricatives and alveopalatal consonants. Native users of the Czech and Slovak languages exhibit interference-motivated tendencies to harden Polish soft sounds. The issue particularly applies to [ś] and [ć], which are implemented as alveolar softened [š'] and [č'] – similar to [š] and [č], while Czech speakers tend to

<https://www.nbp.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci_2018/obywatele-Ukrainy-pracujacy-w-Polsce-raport.pdf> (30.10.2018).

soften the Polish fricatives longer, and Slovak speakers tend to harden the soft sounds for a longer time. This difference results, as it seems, from a different implementation of sounds considered by both groups to be indirect in relation to the expected Polish articulations. Users of East Slavic languages are, however, susceptible to incorrect articulations of Polish [ś] and [ć] mainly as softened dental [s'] and [c']. Due to the positive transfer [š] is not an issue in this case, while the softened dental [č'] relatively frequently replaces the expected Polish hard equivalent. The exception is the users of the Belarusian language, because in Belarus more popular is Russian language conditioning this type of interference.

2.2. Inflexion

Common Slavic difficulties in the field of inflexion are particularly emphasized by the Polish declension system – primarily due to the phenomenon of the so-called apparent inflexion equivalence, initially researched by Teresa Zofia Orłoś (2004). Convergent catalogues of inflexion suffixes, as well as their different repartition rules make the students of Polish originating from the Eastern and the Western Slavic countries exhibit the same difficulties in mastering the genitive and dative singular masculine noun forms. At the same time, an additional difficulty for them is the nominative plural form, due to the masculine category not present in their languages.

The vocative form can also be deemed a problematic Polish case. Issues associated with its application unexpectedly concern also the originally Czech-speaking users of Polish, who can exhibit a tendency to abuse the vocative forms in informal situations. Besides the vocative, the accusative generates difficulties for the representatives of the Eastern and the Western Slavdom. This results from omitting the genitive rection of negated verbs (the Western Slavs), as well as the strict distinction between animate and inanimate accusative forms in the Russian and Ukrainian languages. In Polish, forms of animate nouns are equal to the genitive, and inanimate forms equal to the nominative, however, there are possible exceptions to this rule, both in informal (e.g. *wypić browara* 'drink a beer', *palić skreeta* 'smoke a fag'), as well as formal speech (e.g. *strzelić gola* 'make a touchdown'). These exceptions could be problematic for students and their difficulties are well known to teachers of Polish as foreign language (Krawczuk 2005: 495).

2.3. Syntax

The convergent difficulties of the Slavs with the Polish syntax are particularly evident at the linear level of a sentence³. The relatively free sentence arrangement (though understood in a different way) of Slavic languages causes interfering modifications disturbing the natural sequence of the components of Polish phrases. These well-recognized problems (Hofmański 2014: 157 – 168, Nowakowska 2004: 211 – 214, 2005: 506 – 510) primarily concern the reflexive pronoun *się* (located “fixed” in the second syntactic position by primary users of the Czech and Slovak languages and the non-stressed position behind the verb in the case of the Eastern-Slavic language users) and the classifying modifier (prepositions or hyper-abuse of this category).

2.4. Communicativeness

During the first few weeks of learning Polish language, students of Slavic origin break the habits of their own phonological hearing in the field of delimitation functions of sounds, which allows them to make full use of morphological and lexical analogies. Relatively quickly they gain the ability of non-normative, but communicative communication of the intention of expression. These two correlated skills are the main feature of their specificity that goes beyond the division into the Eastern, the Western and the Southern Slavs (Hofmański 2014: 83 – 90).

3. Challenges for lecturers

Challenges encountered by a lecturer working with Slavs can be divided into several different categories. The difficulties associated with:

1. A native ethnocultural space;
2. Teaching linguistically homogeneous Slavic groups outside of Poland
3. Teaching Slavic groups in Poland
4. Challenges associated with individual work.

3.1. Lecturer's work with the native ethnocultural space

Apart from the teaching of Polish as a foreign language in the East, in the teaching and training of teachers and lecturers of Polish as foreign language, a clear deficit lies in the preparation of selected aspects of

³ The referred studies (Hofmański 2014: 157 – 168) took into account only this type of syntactic interference due to their regularity. Discussion of other syntactic interference requires further research.

psycho-sociolinguistic related to the communicative phenomenon of intercomprehension. The clash between the hard skills of a lecturer, what is for example metalinguistic knowledge of the Polish system, with a new linguistic reality, which requires soft skills regarding the approach towards intercomprehension, is a problem translating directly to an effective selection of materials and methods. A full understating of the specifics of teaching Polish as a foreign language within a native ethnocultural space, at least besides elementary interest in the target linguaculture, will help the teachers to, most of all, avoid exposing the course participants to the motivational trap when they achieve intermediate level of language proficiency like B+.

3.2. Teaching Slavic groups outside of Poland

An obvious support for a teacher in terms of effective work in linguistically homogeneous Slavic groups outside Poland is the knowledge (at least the specifics) of the native language of the students, which translates to the awareness of schematic and repeated difficulties and interference. However, this type of requirement seems to be unachievable aside from the congressional Russian language, which is generally better known. The lack of a centralized teaching material base and work “on own account” do not facilitate the exchange of teaching experience. A huge difficulty in the case of Polish philologies abroad is also the lack or invalidity of profiled textbooks for teaching Polish as a foreign language. The notion of creating a material background compatible with the needs of new centres with strongly varying curriculum would be a utopian concept, since it requires not only time, but above all, substantial financial resources. Significant difficulties associated with the external diversification of student groups add to the known systemic issues, which mostly applies to open courses conducted by general academic lecturers. This results not only from a fully different motivation of the students, often translating to a varying starting level and a diverse quality of own work, but also from the lack of possibilities (time-related, organizational, financial, etc.) to divide such diversified groups. Notions in this regard are contained in chapter five of this analysis.

3.3. Teaching Slavic groups in Poland

The idea of teaching Slavic groups in Poland is being revived after a break caused by the reluctance of course organizers, which was associated with a fear of being suspected of unjustified participant segregation. Recognizing – together with the evolution of post-culturalistic linguistics –

the role of individual predispositions of the students results in rebuilding the faith in the legitimacy of such activities. The existence of the intercomprehension and the increasingly advanced associated research is the best possible justification. However, the basic difficulty in this case is also the noticeable reluctance of some Slavic students to such activities of language course organizers. Overcoming such resistance is a challenging and multi-faceted task, although, as it seems, a necessary one.

3.4. Challenges of individual work

Individual work is one of the least predictable elements within the glottodidactic process. It is, of course, the consequence of unique experience, competence and individual predispositions of the people deciding to begin their adventure with a foreign language. Similar to Slavic-speaking groups, in this case the greatest challenge seems to be “the B+ level crisis”, which should be linked with a decline in the level of language competence growth rate, resulting from the need to step up individual work, which is increasingly noticed by the students. A relatively high ease of overcoming previous obstacles creates a false impression of burning out and may result in the lack of faith in the effectiveness of a teacher’s attempts. The “B+ level crisis” should be deemed as the biggest methodical issue regarding the effective teaching of Polish as a foreign language to Slavs.

4. Lecturer's strategies

An efficient way to increase the effectiveness of working with Slavs is, among others, conscious rotation of the teaching material levels. This means that, mainly for the fast development of lexical skills in beginner groups, it is possible to relatively quickly introduce texts at the level B1 or B1+ and accordingly more difficult (e.g. press releases, popular science papers) in pre-intermediate groups. For obvious reasons, particularly good results are achieved through individual work. The application of this strategy together with a cognitive teaching method, consistently using positive transfer also in the case of grammatical structures, also promotes the neutralization of communication blocks, as well as reduces the impact of the motivational crisis associated with exceeding level of language proficiency B. Slavic students introduced to a higher language level (as it is defined in the textbook), easily overcome in this way by the difficulties associated with motivating to work on the stylistic diversity of contemporary Polish. It is because of earlier partial familiarization with more advanced structures while working on the development of passive skills.

III. Conclusions

1. System solutions and actual needs for teaching Polish as a foreign language

At least two opposite poles should be indicated in the context of systemic solutions associated with teaching Polish as a foreign language to Slavic students. The first one is associated with an effective complementation of a system gap. The second one covers the field of gaps, which still today provides an unused potential to promote Polish linguaculture.

Already during the VI International Conference on Glottodidactics in Warsaw, Danuta Puklas-Palimąka highlighted the need to pay particular attention to the C1 level, which was not covered by the State Certification Exams for Polish as a Foreign Language commenced in 2004. This level was interpreted primarily as a specific range of humanistic competence, “addressed to people wanting to freely use Polish within the cultural domain at a level of an educated Polish person” (Puklas-Palimąka 2005: 60). Middle- and Central-European proximity of historical, cultural and even environmental realities makes this interpretation, at least partially, cover the “Slavic” nature of this competence level. My own experience in teaching Polish as a foreign language shows that even a short (although intensive) learning of Polish as a foreign language enables students to relatively easily accomplish the B2 certificate, while the C2 level was still beyond their reach. Therefore, supplemented gaps in the certification system seem a perfect response to the statistics on the places of origin of tested people.

At the same time, teaching Polish is one of the cheapest and most efficient ways to promote Poland abroad. Costly media image campaigns often do not bring such a good effect as whisper marketing thanks to people who learn the language and the Polish culture. An example of which is ineffective promotional activities in the Czech Republic. Investing in “Polish ambassadors” thanks to the intensive cooperation of diplomats with schools conducting Polish studies and foreign language courses should result in increasing the attractiveness of these educational programs. Financing should include not only, as it is today, study trips for journalists or bloggers, but all student/lecture groups. One of the best solutions could be the scholarships, contests with prizes to get to know the greatest attractions of Poland, or simply the facilities guaranteeing an increase in the effectiveness of teaching. It is an obvious and necessary direction of marketing activities, which nowadays has not been used in a proper way or even noticed. Coordinating the activities of the resorts responsible for teaching Polish as a foreign language and promoting Polish culture abroad seems to be the biggest system challenge in the coming years.

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