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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 北海道言語研究会 公開日: 2013-11-29 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): foreign languages in Poland, motivation to learn English, attitudes towards learning foreign languages 作成者: グレイブ, M. エバ メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10258/2681

Foreign Languages in Poland

- a Shift in Perspectives and Motivations

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要旨 :

As a result of the fall of communism, opening to the West and the recent inauguration to the European Union, Polish people's perspectives and consequently motivations to learn foreign languages have changed.

After World War II, because of Soviet superintendence, Russian dominated as the primary second language in Poland. Learners had little or no say in their choices of language education. Now, two decades later, the situation is quite different. The following is a brief report on the current state of foreign languages in Poland, with a focus on the rise of a new first foreign language: English.

キーワード : foreign languages in Poland, motivation to learn English, attitudes towards learning foreign languages

1. Introduction

Among foreign languages taught in public schools in Poland these days, the most prevalent are English and German. In the year 2004/2005, they were studied by 65.3 % and 34.2 % of elementary and secondary school children in Poland, respectively. The remaining modern foreign languages offered within compulsory education, were: Russian (studied by 6.7 % of children), French (3.4 %), Italian (0.2 %), and Spanish (0.2 %). The situation looked quite different a few decades ago, when after World War II, Russian was the only foreign language in primary schools and the only required foreign language in secondary schools.

2. History

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, Latin became the language of the Church and a lingua franca of European scholars. For Poland, as for other countries in Europe. Latin remained an official language until the end of the XVIIIth century.

Before the sixteenth century, Polish literature was written exclusively in Latin. With the advent of the Renaissance in Poland, Polish was finally accepted on an equal footing with Latin. It was up to Renaissance writers, such as, Jan Kochanowski and Mikołaj Rej, to lay the foundation for Polish literary language and modern Polish grammar. Mikołaj Rej, one of the best-known Polish writers of

the Renaissance, was also an author of a popular quote:

*"We'll have it that all and sundry nations be aware [that]
Poles are no geese, they have a language that they share."*

These words were, at that time, a humorous manifestation of Polish language superseding Latin in the sixteenth century. Down the path of history, during partitions of Poland in the 1700's, and subsequent Russification and Germanization, these words comforted Poles who were forbidden to use their native language in public.

Through the seventeenth century, Latin and then French were the primary non-native languages in Poland (Kielar, 1972). The first handbook for studying English was published in 1780 and English-instruction followed. In the late eighteenth century, the partitioning of Poland by Prussia, Austria, and Russia, meant installment of German and Russian as state languages to be taught at school for the next one hundred years. In the period between World War I and World War II, Poland regained its independence and French, German and, for the first time, English appeared at schools as foreign languages. In the 1920's, an American Methodist mission established the first English language schools in major Polish cities.

Isolated from the West for several decades due to the communist regime, postwar Poland didn't provide a favorable atmosphere for learning foreign languages. In 1948, Russian was established as the only foreign language in primary schools and the only required foreign language in secondary schools. In theory, each Polish child studied Russian in elementary school, and in secondary schools, besides compulsory Russian, there came some western languages – English, German, or French. At the same time, for ideological and political reasons, the communist government severely reduced access to English instruction and closed all but two university English Departments (Fisiak, 1994). Old-fashioned teaching methods and an insufficiency of well-educated teaching personnel led to generations of high-school graduates using textbook versions of Russian, German and English, which had little to do with a living, pragmatic language used by native speakers of those languages.

Because the Russian language symbolized the control that Russia had over Poland, Poles approached learning it with defiance. From a socio-cultural perspective, it was difficult to learn the language from textbooks brimming with communist propaganda. An image of Vladimir Lenin handing out presents in a Soviet orphanage accompanied a reading excerpt on December holidays, a juxtaposition to St. Nicholas and his present giving – a strong Christian tradition in Poland. Learning Russian had little to do with communication, but a lot more to do with learning about communist Russian ways.

3. Opening to the West

After the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, Poland opened up to the world. However, most of its citizens found themselves unable to enter it, because to communicate with their neighbors in the west or south they needed to know their languages at least on a basic level.

Changes in attitudes of Poles towards foreign languages came fast. The nation was taking its first breath of freedom after being cloistered against its will away from the world and its affairs. Everyone could finally leave the country – thousands left for business, others for study or travel; knowledge of languages became a necessity.

Some politicians can be given credit for a fortunate turn of events when they decided in the early 1990's to set Poland on a voyage towards membership in the European Union. The pro-European course of Polish politics was to young Poles a promise that when Poland joined the EU, there would be opportunities to work in the member countries. Certainly, knowledge of languages would be essential.

4. Late Beginnings and a Lack of Choices

Poland is one of the European Union countries where compulsory foreign language education starts relatively late; in the fourth grade of elementary school. The situation is similar in Portugal, Slovakia, and Iceland. Other countries, like Finland, Sweden and Estonia, begin foreign language instruction in the first grade, and Germany and France in the second grade.

According to the Superior Chamber of Control (NIK), Poland's supreme supervisory body, in most schools, 77.8 % of children still don't have a choice of foreign language course; schools offer only one foreign language: English or German (2005). The importance of having a choice of foreign language courses at this early stage of education lies in the fact that this choice will set the course of a foreign language study for the future. That is to say, having no choice but English, a child will continue to learn English and nothing else for the rest of their elementary school days. Furthermore, it's been found that students of vocational schools, two- or three-year institutions gearing students for a specific profession, such as, a confectioner or a hairdresser, have been disadvantaged by still having Russian as the only foreign language (67.9 % of vocational schools). Lack of knowledge of any of the languages spoken in countries of the European Union would seriously limit one's possibilities of finding employment in a common job market. NIK points out that language instruction of youth is a public objective, and its quality of implementation will determine future participation of the public school graduates in the economic and social life of Poland, Europe and the World. In this aspect, the conditions of foreign language education in public schools need to be viewed as socially and economically important.



Map 1. Poland

Source: <http://www.map-of-poland.co.uk>

5. Language Business

No one had to wait long for the domestic effects of Polish endeavors to enter the EU. Fortunately to the people who wanted to learn foreign languages quickly, a new kind of business has flourished – already in the first half of the 1990's, in larger cities; there was a boom firstly in private language schools. Since Poland entered the EU, in 2004, the demand for language schools has been growing even more. The most sought after languages remain English, German, French, and Spanish. Language schools also offer courses in Swedish, Czech, Dutch, Danish and Hungarian.

Language schools in Poland will continue to be popular because, according to observers, Poles view learning foreign languages as an investment and pay steep lesson fees. This phenomenon can be observed also in other countries of Eastern Europe, which have now joined the EU (Reichelt, 2005).

To facilitate foreign language learning in public schools, in 2005 NIK (Supreme Chamber of Control) advised the minister of education to consider introduction of first foreign language learning in

the first year of elementary education and second foreign language instruction during the latter stages of elementary education.

6. Best-known Foreign Language

Although Polish learners of foreign languages tend to be praised for their high motivation (Reichelt, 2005, Lekki, 2003), the actual knowledge of a foreign language is disputable. According to OBOP (2000), the most experienced research agency in Poland, 57% of Poles declare to know a foreign language. Russian appears to be most common – about 44% of Poles claim to be familiar with it. Nearly 50 years of compulsory Russian in Polish schools left a lingering print. Every fourth person in Poland says they can communicate in German (26%) or English (25%). Only a small group of people knows other languages: French (6%), Italian (2%), and Spanish (1%). Declared knowledge of the language, however, is limited to being familiar with basic rules of a language and some common phrases, by admission of the survey's subjects themselves; 83% of people claim to “know” French, 80% claim to “know” German, 76% claim to “know” Russian, and 60% claim to “know” English. Since it is impossible to call a knowledge of some customary expressions an actual communicative knowledge of the language, it seems then, that in Poland, the communicative knowledge of English, more so than any other foreign language, is most advanced – among people who declare to “know” English, 8% say they know it proficiently and 32% well (OBOP, 2000). Thus, although Russian remains the most common, the most understood and utilized foreign language in Poland appears to be English.

7. Conclusion

In Poland, English is perceived as the language of professional and financial success and is also valued as a means of personal contact with people outside of the country. English does not have the negative historical and political associations that German and Russian may have, and for young people, it is esteemed because of its use in music and film. In a 2003 survey focusing on Polish youth aged 15-24, 48% said they would like to learn (or learn further) the English language (in the same survey, 33% said they would like to learn German, 27% said French, and 21% said Italian) (Eurobarometer 2003.1, 2003).

Answers on a questionnaire are not always truthful; people can overestimate their abilities, or say they “know” a foreign language but really are not able to speak it. They might give untruthful answers out of shame, because not knowing a foreign language has become a handicap, which is positive news. However, pro-western attitudes, membership in the European Union and growing tourism and business will incline the nation to learn English as well as other foreign languages.

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