

# POLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: NEW CONTEXT, REGULATIONS AND PROSPECTS

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## Abstract

*The article provides an overview of the developments in Poland after the collapse of communism in 1989 from the point of view of foreign language teaching, including a swift reorientation and transition from a public school system with Russian as the main foreign language, to a diversified language teaching market focused on teaching English and other languages. A particular stress is placed on a relatively new phenomenon, being an increased demand and new opportunities for teaching Polish as a foreign language to be further promoted as a result of anticipated amendments to legal regulations governing the status and certification of the Polish language.*

**Key words:** foreign language teaching in Poland, language certificates, Polish as a foreign language.

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In 2014, Poland, together with the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, celebrated anniversaries of events which had marked milestones in the country's transition from a former Soviet satellite into a liberal market democracy. These included the 25th anniversary of the partly free Polish parliamentary elections and the formation of the first non-communist government since the end of World War II, which triggered subsequent events of 1989 in the region, the 15th anniversary of NATO enlargement in 1999, and the 10th anniversary of the EU membership. The main focus of the media was on the political events and their economic consequences, but the changes which these events precipitated have affected all areas of both public life and individual lives of the Poles, and may be analyzed from different perspectives. The article explores the developments in Poland over the past quarter of a century from the point of view of foreign language teaching, with a particular stress on a relatively new phenomenon, being an increased demand and new opportunities for teaching Polish as a foreign language.

The linguistic aspect of the radical change in Poland from a communist mono-party system to a liberal market democracy may be described as a transition from a monolingual to a multilingual society. This transition is still an ongoing process which progresses in two directions: on the one hand the number of Poles who declare that they are able to communicate in at least one foreign language, has been growing steadily over the past years, while, on the other, there has been an increase in the number of foreigners interested in learning Polish. According to a survey published by the Centrum

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Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS) polling center in November 2012, 51% of adult Poles can communicate in at least one foreign language, compared to 46% in 2009, 45% in 2006, 44% in 2004, 42% in 2001, and 37% in 1997 [CBOS, 2012]. In this context, it should be noted that the year 2004 was not only the year of Poland's accession to the European Union, but also the year of the first official exams in Polish as a foreign language carried out by the State Commission for the Certification of Proficiency in Polish as a Foreign Language, which had only been established on July 3, 2003.

The magnitude of the linguistic change in Poland since the collapse of communism is best demonstrated when the current situation is contrasted with that in the late 1980s. Additionally, since the main purpose of the article is to outline the new context, regulations, and prospects for teaching Polish as a foreign language, it is also interesting to outline the main developments in teaching other foreign languages Poland over the last twenty years or so, to the extent that this new experience may be used to enhance the teaching of Polish to foreigners.

### 1. Foreign Language Teaching in Poland in the Late 1980s

Similar to other aspects of life in Poland under the communist system, foreign language teaching operated at two separate and quite distinct levels: the official level comprising the public education system and courses organized by educational institutions, companies (for their employees) and associations, and an unofficial system of private tutors and teachers who moonlighted giving classes on a one-to-one basis or in small groups in private homes. In public schools children started learning the first foreign language (Russian, taught as a compulsory foreign language) in elementary school and continued to study the language in high school (for a total of seven to nine years, depending on the type of school). Additionally, students learned another, "Western" foreign language in high schools which most often offered German, followed by English and French (Italian and Spanish were taught in a handful of schools either as a second or as an optional third foreign language). The secondary school examinations (*matura*, organized at the national level but graded by the individual schools themselves) included an exam in a foreign language, and the students could choose any of the languages which they had been studying. Unsurprisingly a vast majority chose Russian. College and university students were also required to take a foreign language course offered at a particular school or university.

Formal language courses outside the educational system were relatively few, and students who wanted to sign up for programs with established reputation, such as the French language courses at the *Institut Français* in Warsaw or the *Alliance Française* in Cracow, or the courses at the English Language College run by the Methodist Church in Warsaw, had to wait in long lines and still were not always able to secure admission. The shortage of supply created a huge informal market for more or less professional private teachers.

The level of foreign language instruction, in the public schools, officially registered courses and on the informal market, varied significantly depending on the teachers' language skills, teaching competence and dedication. The selection of teaching materials was poor, and even the relatively few books on offer were in short supply.

It took a lot of effort and persistence for a Pole living in Poland to become proficient in English, and very few students found sufficient motivation to acquire a skill which they were unlikely to use anyway. Passport and visa restrictions combined with a non-convertible currency made travelling abroad a sought after and rare privilege. Poland under communism attracted few foreign visitors, and their contacts with the local population were limited. Censorship restricted access to anything printed abroad, banned private ownership of satellite television dishes, and even controlled photocopiers.

If Poles had relatively little incentive to learn foreign languages, the teaching of Polish as a foreign language was almost nonexistent, with the exception of the government scholarship scheme provided for left-wing oriented students from developing countries to study in Poland. Since the courses were offered in Polish, a special School of Polish Language for Foreign Students was established at the University of Łódź in 1952, which offered a one-year program preparing the students for enrolment in their respective universities. The Jagiellonian University in Cracow started to run a similar program in 1969, and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 1985. A more relaxed policy towards the West in the 1970s enabled yet another program to be launched at the University of Wrocław and at the Catholic University of Lublin in the mid-1970s. The latter catered particularly to expatriate Poles who wanted their children and grandchildren to learn the Polish language and culture, but were reluctant to send them to courses organized by state-owned universities.

## **2. Foreign Language Teaching in Poland After 1989**

### **2.1. Poles learn foreign languages**

The collapse of communism almost instantaneously opened Poland to communication with the West. Satellite dishes mushroomed all over the country, foreign publications became readily available, and Poles were keen to travel abroad as tourists or guest workers. Polish companies started to do business with foreign partners, and inflow of foreign investment created new jobs and career opportunities for those who could communicate in foreign languages, mainly English, German, and French.

Foreign language teachers in Poland remember the 1990s as the Golden Age, owing to the unique situation when several generations of Poles wanted to learn a new language, most often English, right away. First private and independent schools were opened which offered English language classes from first grade or even kindergarten, primary and secondary schools replaced Russian with English in their programs as soon as they could find enough teachers to do so, and adults enrolled in language courses offered by a quickly growing number of language schools.

A qualitative progress soon followed the quantitative growth in foreign language learning. Leading publishers started to see Poland as an important market in which they sought to establish a strong position with state-of-the-art teaching materials. At the same time, an increasing number of Poles signed up for international examinations in order to obtain certificates attesting to their foreign language skills. Funds made available for language courses under various assistance projects implemented within the framework of European integration provided an additional stimulus for Poles to learn foreign languages.

However, even after more than twenty years of super intensive foreign language teaching, the situation still leaves a lot to be desired. Although English has long been the most popular foreign language taught in Polish schools, the First European Survey on Language Competences recently carried out by the European Commission showed that as many as 24% of Polish students in the final year of junior high school (ninth grade), who had been learning English for at least several hundred hours over three years or more, were still at pre-A1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, thereby ranking the second worst among the fifteen countries participating in the survey (before France with 31%), compared to 1% in Sweden which ranked number one (followed by Malta and the Netherlands, with 2% each) [First European Survey on Language Competences, 2012, p. 94]. At the other end of the scale, B2 and B1 levels were reached by, respectively, 5% and 9% of students in Poland, 7% and 15% in France, and as many as 57% and 25% in Sweden [First European Survey on Language Competences, 2012, p. 94].

The figures were even worse for German, which is the second most popular foreign

language taught in Poland, with 44% of students at pre-A1 level, 4% at B1 level, and 2% at B2 level [First European Survey on Language Competences, 2012, p. 95].

Some allowances may be made for a poorer performance of Polish high-school students in English or German due to a relatively greater difficulty in learning these languages as compared to native speakers of other Germanic languages (e.g. the Swedish or the Dutch), but these would not explain the much better results obtained by students from Slovenia, Croatia, or Bulgaria [Foreign Service Institute, n.d.].

The methodology and the scope of the European Commission's study were quite different from the earlier mentioned poll by the CBOS. The Commission actually tested three foreign language skills (listening, reading and writing), while the CBOS asked its respondents for self-assessment of their language skills. The surveyed groups were also different: the target group of the Commission's study were fifteen-year olds, while the CBOS polled adults (the youngest age group of respondents being between 18 and 24). Nonetheless, the discrepancy between the results of the study and those of the poll (58% of tested students at pre-A1 or A1 level in English, compared to as little as 15% of those who admit not being able to communicate in a foreign language among the 18-24 age group in the opinion poll. CBOS [2012, p. 14] indicates that Poles tend to overestimate their language skills [First European Survey on Language Competences, 2012, p. 94].

This suggests that the main focus in foreign language teaching in Poland should now be placed on enhancing the teaching efficiency rather than expanding the scope of foreign language instruction. A lot of work has yet to be done before Poland can reach the foreign language competence standards comparable to those of the leading EU countries, especially since the percentage of Poles able to communicate in Russian or German has actually declined since 2005, as shown in a recent poll by the European [Europeans and Their Languages, 2012].

## **2.2 Foreigners start learning Polish**

### **2.2.1 New context**

A growing interest in learning Polish as a foreign language has been mainly a result of population movements (both global and within Europe), and various economic and political processes brought about by globalization and European integration. On the one hand, the number of foreign nationals living, studying, or working in Poland for extended periods of time has increased exponentially over the past decades, and, on the other, an increasing number of foreigners abroad choose to study the language and culture of Poland as the sixth largest member state of the European Union. Polish expatriate workers want their children (even if they are born and bred abroad) to learn the language not only for sentimental reasons, but also because their lives are increasingly transnational. The number of foreign students in Polish universities and colleges has been growing rapidly, reaching nearly 30,000 in the academic year 2012/2013. An increase by more than a fourfold compared to 2000/2001 according to figures published by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education [Projekt ustawy o zmianie ustawy o języku polskim, 2013]. On top of that, many companies operating in Poland require their expatriate employees, irrespective of the position held, to be able to communicate in Polish.

There are also official language requirements, as a foreigner must document his or her Polish language proficiency, for example, if the person wants to apply for Polish citizenship, work in Poland as a nurse (or in other health care related professions), work in a Polish government office or agency, become a licensed real estate dealer, enroll in a Polish college or university without attending a one-year preparatory course, etc. Other laws provide for Polish language proficiency requirements which may be waived by the competent authorities in specific cases, but this is likely to change, as for instance, an

amendment to be proposed to the Banking Law by the Ministry of Finance is expected to introduce an obligatory requirement for all management board members of banks registered in Poland to document their Polish language proficiency. At the moment, in five out of nine leading banks in Poland the Management Board meetings are held in English [Wilkowicz, 2014].

Since Polish is the native language of 8% of the population of the European Union, it is likely that other Europeans, especially those working in EU institutions or the national administration of EU member states, may also be interested in learning Polish and obtaining certificates to document their language proficiency.

The phrase "documented Polish language proficiency" implies that the persons concerned must obtain officially recognized Polish language certificates. At the moment, such certificates are issued solely by the already mentioned State Commission for the Certification of Proficiency in Polish as a Foreign Language established in 2003 under the Polish Language Act of 1999, as amended [Ustawa o języku polskim. Dziennik Ustaw, 2011]. The Commission organizes exams and certifies language proficiency at three levels according to the CEF standards (B1, B2, and C2). According to information published on the Commission's official website (at [www.certyfikatpolski.pl](http://www.certyfikatpolski.pl)), from 2004 until 2012 the Commission organized 130 examinations in 31 locations. These included seven locations in Poland: Warsaw (31 exams), Cracow (21 exams), Poznań (7 exams), Wrocław (5 exams), Łódź (3 exams), Cieszyn and Lublin (1 exam each); as well as numerous locations abroad, including the United States, Germany, France, Russia, and even Beijing. Despite the impressive geography of exam venues, the number of people taking the exam during that period was relatively small (a total of 3,999), and the largest group among them were Ukrainians (853), followed by Americans (504), and Germans (445).

These numbers hardly compare with the anticipated demand for Polish language examinations based on the number of foreigners applying for Polish residency, work permits or to Polish colleges and universities.

### **2.2.2 New regulations**

New regulations are being introduced or expected not only by way of establishing adequate Polish language requirements for foreigners in Poland, but also to make it possible for the foreigners to satisfy these requirements, as well as to promote the teaching of Polish as a foreign language and Polish language certificates. In April 2013 the Ministry of Science and Higher Education drafted outlines for an amendment to be proposed to the Polish Language Act, whereby the State Commission would no longer have monopoly on certifying Polish language proficiency. In fact, the Commission itself would be dissolved, exams would be prepared at the central level, but they could be held by any number of approved examination centers, such as colleges and universities, both in Poland and abroad, language schools, etc., in order to increase the frequency and accessibility of the exams. The Ministry also proposes for exams to be offered at all the CEF proficiency levels for adults and additionally at the three initial levels (A1, A2, and B1) for young learners.

The Ministry's proposal was endorsed in its entirety by the Council of Ministers in December 2013, and work on the new bill is currently underway. When drafting the specific provisions, the Ministry is drawing from the experience of other European countries (including Germany, the UK, Sweden, and Italy). It is difficult to predict when the new legislation will be proposed to the parliament, or when it will be adopted and in what exact form. Nevertheless, one may expect the new regulations to follow the general direction set by the government.

### **2.2.3 New prospects**

Most of the long established Polish language programs for foreigners are offered

by schools affiliated with Faculties of Polish Language and Literature of the leading universities. However, language teaching in general and second/foreign language teaching and acquisition in particular are not in the center of their research interests. This fact bears heavily on the teaching approaches and methods prevailing in Polish language teaching both in Poland and abroad. If the teaching and certification experience gained by foreign language teachers in Poland over the last two decades could be incorporated into the teaching of Polish as a foreign language, this would greatly contribute to the enhancement and promotion of Polish language teaching to foreigners.

The introduction of Polish language proficiency certificates at all the CEF levels would not only establish similar standards to those existing for other languages, but also create an additional incentive for new groups of students to learn Polish (e.g., short-term exchange students), and a market niche for language courses catered to their specific needs and circumstances.

The development of teaching materials is another area in which the experience gained by Polish teachers of other languages could be used both to enhance and to promote the teaching of Polish as a foreign language, as many of the relatively new Polish language books for foreigners still seem to follow the grammar-translation method (e.g., the same book is published in several versions for native speakers of different languages).

It would be unrealistic to expect Polish to become as popular as a foreign language as Spanish, German or French, or even Russian or Chinese, let alone English. Nevertheless, a fresh, more up-to-date approach to teaching and certification of proficiency in Polish as a foreign language would help for the language to be no longer seen as exotic and impossible for learn for foreigners.

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