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***How to teach English in a secondary school in a small town? –
learners' classroom activity and motivation.***

Praca dyplomowa napisana pod kierunkiem
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w ramach Podyplomowego
Trzysemestralnego Studium
dla Nauczycieli Języka Angielskiego
w Instytucie Filologii Angielskiej
Uniwersytetu Adama Mickiewicza
Poznań, 2004

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Introduction.

After graduating from Łódź University in 1994, I started a job as an English teacher in Secondary School in Międzychód. So, in a few months' time, by September 2004, I will have worked at school for ten years. In this period of time I have taken part in various forms of professional development – courses, seminars, trainings. They have helped me to enrich my field of activity and follow the new trends and methods of teaching.

I change the coursebook I use every few years. I do it not to fall into a rut, to teach from a book with current contents and to meet all the requirements determined by the educational reform in our country and connected with the New Matura exam. I also run extracurricular activities in our school, such as preparing students for language competitions, preparing plays in English, editing a school magazine and, finally, creating a webpage in English. The last activity mentioned has been a source of real satisfaction both for me and my students: we were the prizewinners in two consecutive Polish editions of the Pupilpower Competition organized by the British Council, taking third place in the year 2002 and second place in 2003.

Unfortunately, only a small group of students takes part in the extracurricular classes despite the fact that they are a chance to improve the language as well as to get a better grade. Such a possibility is a result of using a point system of assessment instead of the traditional one. In this system additional points can be also gained for active participation in lessons. However, very few students take advantage of it. Then it happens more than once that students need 2 or 3 points to have a better grade at the end of the school years, which might have been obtained by active participation in the lessons or taking part in various extracurricular activities. Sometimes a few points can determine the fact of being promoted to a higher class or not.

It's just students' passivity during the English classes that keeps me awake at nights. In spite of the above mentioned projects undertaken by me, nearly half of the students do not participate actively in the lessons. It sounds strange at the moment when Poland is joining the European Community but the possible reason of it maybe low students' motivation to learn English or even absolute lack of motivation. Hence a topic of my work.

1. Motivation in the Foreign Language Classroom.

Many English language teachers from different countries have similar problems in their work. It is shown in many articles published in *English Teaching Forum*.

Ignacio Lopez Corria who teaches English as a foreign language in the School of Nursing in Holguin, Cuba, notices that "... motivation is one of the most important factors in language learning (...) unfortunately many students dislike learning English; and although they attend lessons, they are not interested in speaking properly – they only want to pass the compulsory exams"(1999: 17).

Felicien Baloto, a teacher trainer at the Ecole Normale Superieure of the University of Brazaville, Congo, maintains that "... if motivation is present, learning can be facilitated, but without it, effective learning becomes difficult"(1996: 31).

A foreign language learner's motivation can be influenced by many factors: social, psychological, educational, to name a few. Although Janet S. Niederhauser, a Professor of English at Honan University in Kwangju, South Korea, draws "examples from the South Korean context it is assumed that the problem described and the solutions proposed can be applied to context worldwide"(1997: 8).

Taking part in many various courses and seminars I encountered the theory of "a strong link between motivation and autonomy" which in details describes Leslie Dickinson from King Mongkut's Institute of Technology in

Bangkok, Thailand. According to this theory "... autonomous learners become more highly motivated and the autonomy leads to better, more effective work"(1995: 165) M.S Knowles' claim is illustrative: "...there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (promotive learners) learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)...they enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation"(1995: 165)

2. The study

2.1. The aim of the study

In order to compare the above mentioned theory with my experience in foreign language teaching I decided to do a survey among the students of my classes where I teach English.

2.2. Subjects and settings.

The research concerned 70 students from three different classes:

- Class IA – a linguistic one, is divided into two groups: 15 beginners who are being prepared for the Basic Level Matura Exam, 2006 and 11 who are supposed to continue their language education and are being prepared for the Advanced Level Matura Exam, 2006
- Class IIA – also a linguistic one, English is the second language they are taught and they are being prepared for the Basic Level Matura Exam, 2005 – 25 students
- Class IVD – maths profile, 19 students who are still working in the old system of education and are being prepared for the Oral Matura Exam, 2004.

2.3. Data collecting techniques.

To collect data necessary for the research I asked the students to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix). The questionnaire was anonymous and contained the following questions - some of them open, some of them closed:

1. Do you consider yourself to be an active or passive student during the English classes?
2. What stops you from taking an active part in the language classes?
3. What forms of classwork encourage you to be active during the classes?
4. What do you like in your English classes?
5. What don't you like in your English classes?
6. What don't you like in your English teacher's behaviour?
7. Do you regularly learn English and why (not)?

3. The results of the study.

[Question 1 - Do you consider yourself to be an active or passive student during the English classes?](#)

More than a half of the students tested think they are active (37 out of 70 – 53%) during the classes, the rest (33 – 47%) – passive. The highest percentage of active students is in the advanced group in class 1A – 73% (8 of 11), the lowest in the beginners group in the same class – 40% (6 out of 15).

[Question 2 - What stops you from taking an active part in the language classes?](#)

The most common answer to this question is the fear to make mistakes (44 out of 70 – 63%). This answer was underlined by predominate

majority of “passive students” (26 out of 33 – 78%), but also by every other of the “active students” (18 out of 37 – 50%).

Among 33 “passive students” 21 (64%) want to say something but they don’t know how, 17 (52%) are afraid to speak in front of the class, 14 (42%) need more time to think the answer over and 8 (24%) often don’t understand the asked questions. 2 of them (6%) are not willing to speak and the same number think that lessons are boring.

Among 37 “active students” 13 people (35%) need more time to answer and 8 (22%) want to say something but don’t know how. In this group, however, other constraints to be active appear. 9 people (24%) are not willing to speak and 6 (16%) think that lessons are boring.

[Question 3 - What forms of classwork encourage you to be active during the classes?](#)

Although majority of the students (39 out of 70 – 68%) think that class discussion is stimulating, at the same time 47% (33) think it is the group work, 46% (32) – asking questions to the whole class and 40% (28) – pair work. Among the “active students” the most interesting forms are the discussion (28 out of 37 – 86%) and asking questions to the whole class (24 out of 37 – 65%), whereas among the “passive ones” – group work (21 out of 33 – 64%) and pair work (19 out of 33 – 58%).

[Question 4 - What do you like in your English classes?](#)

Some students like presenting short plays (14 out of 70 – 20%), others dialogues (12 out of 70 - 17%) or songs (10 out of 70 – 14%), pair work (11 out of 70 – 16%) or group work (8 out of 70 – 11%) and brainstorming sessions (6 out of 70 – 9%). The lesson organization, checking homework or a lot of new vocabulary introduced are also mentioned. The other answers are: distinguishing the freedom of speech during discussions (13 out of 70 – 19%), interesting topics (although 6 out of 70 – 9% students in question 2 stated that the lessons are boring, three

times as many students 18 out of 70 – 26% think the opposite) and nice atmosphere during the classes (21 out of 70 – 30%).

Question 5 - [What don't you like in your English classes?](#)

The students generally don't like being asked (13 – 19%) , short tests (15 – 21%) and tests (9 – 13%). They also complain about the difficulty of tests (6 – 9%), a lot of homework (14 – 20%) and the things to learn(6 – 9%). 3 students (4%) are not satisfied with the pace of the lesson, which according to them is too fast. One person doesn't like the monotony of the lessons being conducted according to the scheme: asking questions – checking homework – new lesson introduced. Another one complains that the teacher speaks only English during the classes.

Question 6 - [What don't you like in your English teacher's behaviour?](#)

In answers to this question the problem of short tests and the teacher's firmness to do them reappears, as well as the too quick pace of the lessons. Generally, however, there are no reservations about the teacher performing the classes.

Question 7 - [Do you regularly learn English and why?](#)

Among 70 students 13 (19%) confess that they do not to learn English regularly and none of them isn't from the "active students". 85% of them (11 out of 13) stated they are lazy, don't like learning in general and prefer other forms of spending time. Additionally 3 students (23%) prefer other subjects, not languages and 2 students (15%) prefer other languages. 8 students mention that English might be useful for their studies or future job.

And here are the reasons, for which students learn English regularly:

- 86% (49 out of 57) consider that English is useful for their future job,
- 81% (46 out of 57) consider that English is useful for studies,
- 77% (44 out of 57) like learning English – there are almost all "active students" in this group (35 out of 37 – 95%),

- 60% (34 out of 57) think that English is useful for travelling abroad,
- 56% (32 out of 57) prepare for the Matura exam,
- 35% (20 out of 57) consider that the language is useful for using computers,
- 32% (18 out of 57) consider that it is useful for watching TV and listening to the radio,
- 21% (12 out of 57) like learning in general,
- 18% (10 out of 57) care about good marks,
- 9% (5 out of 57) are interested in culture of English speaking countries.

4. Discussion.

Comparing the results with my own assessment of the class activity, they are nearly the same. The surprisingly similar results let me optimistically assume that the students treated the questionnaire seriously and it shows their real opinions. The answers given by students also confirmed, that nearly half of the students do not participate in the classes. It doesn't apply only to the advanced group of class 1A, where the work is very pleasant and almost all the students willingly take part in lessons.

In the "passive group" the basic source of such attitude during the classes is relatively weak knowledge of English which limits students' activity. Among the "active students" the problem of believing in their own abilities is not so valid but is important too. It is certainly not an opinion a teacher is waiting for but there is quite a substantial number of students, who are not willing to speak or think that lessons are boring.

Answers to the third question let me assume that the variety of forms of classwork is conducive to active participation in the lesson. Students who are afraid of making mistakes and expressing their opinions in front of the whole class can show activity in group work. Class discussion enables the students who need more time to think their answers over to take the floor. Pair work makes the students who are unwilling to speak participate

actively. Asking questions to the whole class in connection with nominating the person who is supposed to give the answer, makes all the students alert, even the ones not interested in the English language or the subject of the lesson.

The above mentioned thesis can be backed up by the diverse answers to the next question. Some students have a gift for singing or drawing, the other ones are talented in acting or writing poems. Another students like participating in games and competitions. Quite a large number of students who appreciate the freedom of speech during discussions and nice atmosphere during the classes is a very optimistic information for the teacher.

Answers to the fifth and sixth questions are mainly a result of students' general aversion to learn (work) at home and there seem not to be a direct connection with the class activity or passivity. But they seem to be connected with a problem brought up in the next question.

Majority of the students who do not like doing their homework, writing tests and learning at home confess they do not regularly learn English. Two questions come to my mind:

- Why are so many students lazy and do not show the will to learn despite the fact they are aware of usefulness of knowledge of English in future studies, work and life?
- Why are so many students from linguistic classes relatively weakly motivated to English language learning?

To answer the above mentioned questions I must briefly describe the situation of young people who graduate from junior high school in Międzychód. Only a few of them decide to continue their studies in big cities like Poznań. A part of them choose vocational school or Agricultural Technical College. There are only two possibilities for the rest: Economical School and Secondary School. More than once accidental factors decide about the final choice – parents graduating from this school, friends learning here in the past or now. Sometimes parents make a decision because they

recognize that their child must attend this school due to prestigious reasons. On the other hand every school cares deeply about each student. Recruitment criteria are such that 95% of the willing are accepted by the school. When a young person makes a decision and chooses the Secondary School where I teach, they must decide which class to attend. There are three possibilities: maths profile, biological profile and the linguistic one. If they don't like maths or biology the only possibility is to study in the linguistic profile class. And this is why, in one linguistic class, there are students I may put in the following groups:

- students who choose that profile because they like learning foreign languages and perfectly know that languages will be useful for their studies and in their future job,
- students who choose this profile accidentally but know that languages will be useful in their future life and it is enough to motivate them to language learning,
- students who choose this profile accidentally and although know that languages will be useful in the future, due to different causes, also intellectual, are not able to be up to learn in secondary school,
- students who, although decide to learn in secondary school, are lazy and don't like and don't have intentions to learn, languages as well.

Using Knowles terminology only students from the first and partially the second groups are "proactive learners", the rest are undoubtedly "reactive learners" so in a small town environment the theory of autonomous learners cannot be applied.

5. Conclusion.

The survey conducted seems to be very useful. It confirms me in my belief that to encourage students to be more active during the classes, varied forms and methods of work must be used but on the other hand, I shouldn't forget about a regular check of students' knowledge acquired

during the lesson and enlarged or revised at home thanks to students' own work. Such attitude towards teaching is a kind of compromise – it creates opportunities to improve English for learners who are interested in learning for their own sake and, at the same time, forces the lazy students to work and makes their knowledge of English better.

Teaching a foreign language is a long and complex process. In spite of the above mentioned, complicated situation, I can still do a lot to motivate my students by being observant, understanding, tactful and friendly. By reflecting on the ten years of English language teaching experience, observing my students' behaviour and reading foreign language teaching literature I came to realize that to motivate my students I must try to find new strategies and new motivating techniques all the time.

I shouldn't forget about creating the proper climate to learn English. It means not only making posters, bulletin boards, pictures, drawings and photos which are posted on the walls in the classroom and surround the students but, first of all, I must do everything in my power to secure students nice atmosphere to learn. I must focus on encouraging students all the time, trying to achieve as much as possible with the teenagers we have in a small town community.

I hope that majority of my students will be able to be up in challenges, which are in front of young people in the days when the Poles are becoming rightful citizens of the European Community.

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Appendix.

ANKIETA

Bardzo proszę o wypełnienie anonimowej ankiety dla uczących się języka angielskiego.

1. Czy uważasz się za raczej **aktywnego** czy **biernego** ucznia na lekcjach języka angielskiego?(właściwe podkreśl)
2. Co najczęściej powstrzymuje Cię od aktywnego udziału w zajęciach językowych? (właściwe podkreśl)
 - a) Nie interesuje mnie szkoła w ogóle.
 - b) Nie interesuję się językiem angielskim.
 - c) Tematyka lekcji jest nudna.
 - d) Często nie rozumiem zadawanych pytań.
 - e) Boję się mówić przed całą grupą.
 - f) Moje myśli mogą nie być ciekawe dla innych.
 - g) Boję się robienia błędów.
 - h) Nie chce mi się mówić.
 - i) Koledzy/koleżanki mogą się ze mnie śmiać.
 - j) Chcę coś powiedzieć, ale nie wiem jak.
 - k) Potrzebuję więcej czasu, by przemyśleć, co chcę powiedzieć.
 - l) Moje wypowiedzi są często krytykowane przez nauczyciela.
 - m) Czuję się mniej inteligentny od innych.
 - n) Inne:
 -
3. Jakie formy pracy na lekcji sprzyjają Twojemu aktywnemu udziałowi na zajęciach?(właściwe podkreśl)
 - a) Dyskusja klasowa.
 - b) Praca w parach.
 - c) Praca w grupach.
 - d) Zadawanie przez nauczyciela pytań całej klasie.
4. Co podoba Ci się na Twoich lekcjach języka angielskiego?
.....
.....
.....

5. Czego nie lubisz na lekcjach języka angielskiego?

.....
.....
.....

6. Co nie podoba Ci się w zachowaniu nauczyciela języka angielskiego?

.....
.....
.....

7. Czy w miarę regularnie uczysz się języka angielskiego i dlaczego? (zaznacz właściwą odpowiedź i podkreśl właściwe powody)

TAK

NIE

- | | |
|--|---|
| a) lubię się uczyć | a) nie lubię się uczyć |
| b) lubię się uczyć języka angielskiego | b) nie lubię się uczyć języka angielskiego |
| c) przygotowuję się do matury z języka angielskiego | c) wolę inne języki |
| d) może być przydatny w czasie studiów | d) wolę inne przedmioty (nie języki obce) |
| e) może być przydatny w przyszłej pracy | e) nie lubię/ nie podobają mi się lekcje języka angielskiego |
| f) może być przydatny podczas podróżowania | f) nie mam czasu na język angielski (zbyt dużo innych przedmiotów do nauki) |
| g) może być przydatny przy obsłudze komputerów | g) wolę inne formy spędzania czasu (nie naukę) |
| h) może być przydatny w czasie oglądania TV lub słuchania radia | h) jestem leniwa/y i nie chce mi się |
| i) interesuję się kulturą krajów angielskiego obszaru językowego | i) inne:
.....
.....
..... |
| j) zależy mi na dobrych wynikach w nauce (dobrej średniej ocen) |
.....
..... |
| k) inne:
.....
.....
..... | |

UWAGA: Gdy zaznaczasz kilka możliwości, proszę o uszeregowanie według ważności (1- najważniejsza, itd.)