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Teaching Polish as a Foreign Language in Early Childhood Education: The Case of Ukrainian Refugee Pupils

Nauczanie języka polskiego jako obcego w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej na przykładzie uczniów uchodźców z Ukrainy – zarys problematyki

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Polish as a foreign language, second language, language of school education, early childhood education, pupils with migration experience, refugees from Ukraine

The purpose of the article is to introduce issues related to the education of refugee students from Ukraine in early childhood education in Poland. The context is the teaching of Polish as a foreign language, which is something new for teachers of lower elementary school grades. The article is theoretical in nature, but it uses the latest overt statistical data on students with experience of migration as a result of the war in Ukraine, which illustrate the scope of the issue at hand. An important part of the article is the identification of glottodidactic competencies that should characterize those who teach Polish as a foreign/second language to students in grades one through three. I attempt to describe the didactic and content-related skills that, when properly used by the teacher, will be able to support the student in achieving the linguistic proficiency needed not only for peer interaction, but also for learning in Polish at the first and subsequent stages of education. Competencies for teaching Polish as a non-primary language code were examined on the basis of two sources of information: as a result of training sessions attended by early childhood teachers working with students with migrant experience, and my personal teaching experience.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

język polski
jako język obcy,
język drugi,
język edukacji
szkolnej, edukacja
wczesnoszkolna,
uczeń
z doświadczeniem
migracji, uchodźcy
z Ukrainy

Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie zagadnień związanych z kształceniem uczniów uchodźców z Ukrainy w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej w Polsce. Kontekstem rozważań jest nauczanie języka polskiego jako obcego, co w przypadku nauczycieli klas młodszych szkoły podstawowej jest czymś nowym. Tekst ma charakter teoretyczny, ale wykorzystuje najnowsze otwarte dane statystyczne dotyczące uczniów z doświadczeniem migracji będącej wynikiem wojny na Ukrainie, ukazujące zakres podejmowanej problematyki. Istotną częścią artykułu jest wskazanie polonistycznych kompetencji glottodydaktycznych, którymi powinni dysponować pedagodzy nauczający języka polskiego jako obcego/ drugiego uczniów w klasach I–III. Jest to próba opisanie umiejętności dydaktycznych i merytorycznych, które, odpowiednio wykorzystane przez nauczyciela, będą mogły wspomóc ucznia w osiągnięciu biegłości językowej, potrzebnej mu nie tylko do kontaktów rówieśniczych, ale także do nauki w języku polskim w pierwszym oraz w kolejnych etapach edukacji. Kompetencje w zakresie nauczania polszczyzny jako nieprymarnego kodu językowego zostały opracowane na podstawie dwóch źródeł informacji: w wyniku szkoleń, w których uczestniczyli nauczyciele wczesnoszkolni pracujący z uczniami z doświadczeniem migracji oraz osobistych doświadczeń dydaktycznych autorki artykułu.

Introduction

The issue of teaching kindergartners and students with migrant experience (migrant students) is not a new topic in Polish pedagogy, speech therapy, psychology, psycholinguistics and linguistics. It was already in 2001 that the Ministry of National Education (MEN) introduced the first legal regulations on the teaching process for this group of students (Regulation..., 2001),¹ and the issue of foreign minors studying in Polish educational institutions was flagged not only by researchers, but also by teachers themselves (Gębal & Majcher-Legawiec, 2017; Jędryka, 2015d; Krasuska-Betiuk & Kotarba, 2017; Pamuła-Behrens & Szymańska 2018a; Szybura, 2016). Despite this, school authorities and teachers, including those responsible for organizing class instruction, treated it marginally.

With growing labor emigration to Poland, especially by residents of Eastern Europe and some Asian countries, such as Vietnam and China, the topic keeps resurfacing. However, it gained more publicity after the release of a report by the Supreme

¹ The first legal mention of migrant pupils and students was made in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of September 8, 1993 on the conditions and procedures for the admission of persons who are not Polish citizens to public schools and institutions, and the principles of payment for education and care in public schools and institutions (Regulation..., 1993).

Chamber of Control on the state of education of students with migration experience and students returning from emigration in the Polish educational system (NIK, 2020). The document revealed shortcomings in the teaching practices and psychological and pedagogical support of migrant students, yet apart from general recommendations, it did not propose systemic solutions or tools for their support, which should be introduced in schools where foreign children with poor Polish skills are taught. The report prompted some researchers to take a deeper look at the situation of migrant students in school, and to investigate it from the perspective of the student and parent, rather than that of a teacher or school administrator (e.g., Jędryka, 2021).

The topic of migrant students education resurfaced with Russia's aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, when Ukrainian students who were unfamiliar with the Polish language and the realities of Polish education began appearing in schools overnight in large numbers (Jędryka, 2022). Logistically, the schools were not prepared to accommodate the additional students. Most teachers were lacking adequate competences in teaching Polish as a Foreign Language (PAFL), not to mention materials for classroom use. Authorities and school principals were inundated with questions about who should work with the new students and with what methods, especially in the preparatory departments that began to spring up across the country. Teachers' concerns need to be considered justified, as the regulations on PAFL teacher qualifications are flawed. According to the Ministry of Education's 2020 regulation, such teachers are not required to have a degree – graduate or postgraduate – in Polish language glottodidactics. Polish language classes in grades one through three can be taught by early childhood education teachers and Polish language teachers. In grades four to eight and in high schools, such classes are conducted by Polish language teachers (Regulation..., 2020). Teachers of foreign languages and other subjects also found themselves in a difficult situation. Educational regulations do not require any of them to have the skills to teach PAFL, which is essential when working with migrant students at any stage of education.

Currently, migrant students studying in Polish schools are predominantly war refugees from Ukraine. Their structure in terms of numbers is changing. As of April 4, 2022, there were 13% more of such children (Jędryka, 2022). According to the latest data released by the Ministry of Education and Science (MEiN), on February 13, 2023, there were 187,973 students of Ukrainian origin who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022 (MEiN, 2023). Regarding Ukrainian-born students, in 2020 there were 30,777 of them attending educational institutions in Poland (NIK, 2020), which accounted for 16% of the current number. It should be kept in mind that there are also Ukrainian migrant students in the Polish educational system who do not have refugee status, as well as students representing other nationalities, who have been mentioned less often recently.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the scale of education of children refugees from Ukraine in grades one through three, and to try to identify the glottodidactic competence of early childhood education teachers who work with students of non-Polish origin with different levels of Polish language proficiency. While working on this essay, I considered educators already teaching migrant students both in preparatory departments and during standard classes in SEN granted to students by the Regulation of the Ministry of Education of March 21, 2022 (Regulation..., 2022). This issue, which, in my opinion, is not easy to address, should be discussed, primarily because of the needs signaled by the teachers themselves at numerous training courses and community forums on migrant students and the teaching of the Polish language to foreigners.

It should be noted that university training in Polish language glottodidactics is designed mainly for those who plan their future as PAFL teachers of adults. Polish language didactics in school classes requires different methodological approaches owing to the different ages of students and the goal of learning a new linguistic code, which will not only be used for communication – general language skills – but primarily for learning. This variant of Polish is called the language of school education (LSE). Relatively recently there have emerged offers for Polish language teachers or neophilologists who work or will work with school-age students at the second or third educational stage. Unfortunately, there are no such glottodidactic courses for teachers of the first educational stage. The introduction of intercultural topics in education studies that train future teachers of preschool education and early childhood education should also be considered insufficient. Currently, there is mainly discussion of developing intercultural competence of teachers, but we forget about teaching methodology, without which it is impossible to be a good teacher (cf. Majcher-Legawiec, 2021).

Ukrainian students with migration experience in grades one through three

Every child between the ages of 7 and 18 who resides in Poland must receive compulsory schooling. This applies not only to children with Polish citizenship, but also to those who do not have Polish ancestry and legally reside in the territory of the Republic of Poland under a temporary or permanent residence card. The same law concerns students with refugee status.

For over a year now, Polish education has been facing the challenge of educating Ukrainian students who come to all types of schools across the country, both public and non-public. Currently, children in early childhood education account for 21% (40,313) of all Ukrainian refugee students (MEiN, 2023). Upon close analysis of

the data, it is apparent that the number of migrant students in grades one through three is fluctuating. Three MEiN reports were used for the purpose of this study, which show the number of such students as of June 27, 2022, June 26, 2022 and February 13, 2023. These dates were chosen intentionally, as they can be considered representative due to the school year schedule. The first can be considered binding, as it shows how many Ukrainian students attended Polish schools in the second semester of 2022. The second date shows the number of students who started school in the first semester of the 2022/2023 school year, while the third date shows the number of students in grades one through three who completed classes in that semester.

In the new school year 2022/2023, more than 5% more refugee students from Ukraine started school than in June 2022 (Table 1). In February 2023, their number dropped slightly. This is likely to be related to the migration of children and their guardians to other countries or their return to Ukraine.

Table 1. Number of refugee students from Ukraine attending grades 1 through 3 in 2022 and 2023.

Date	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	Total
27 June 2022	13 104	12 181	13 080	38 365
26 September 2022	12 941	13 254	14 233	40 428
13 February 2023	13 530	12 824	13 959	40 313

The largest number of students in the first, second and third grade is found in five provinces: the Mazovian (6893 = 17%), Silesian (4559 = 11%), Greater Poland (4260 = 10.5%), Lower Silesian (4212 = 10%) and Lesser Poland province (3610 = 9%). The least of migrant children – 596 – are studying in the Świętokrzyskie province. The data as of February 13, 2023 is close to the June 2022 figures. This distribution of students should not come as a surprise, as these are the areas with the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, who choose places with better access to the labor market and more opportunities to get quick help from local governments and NGOs.

Students who are not Polish citizens have the right to learn PAFL. However, it should be noted that there are different legislative solutions for different migrants regarding, for example, the weekly number of hours of PAFL and compensatory hours. For Ukrainian refugee students, a minimum of 6 hours of PAFL is stipulated as well as more than 5 hours of compensatory classes (Law..., 2022), while for other migrant students the number of additional classes in both PAFL and compensatory classes cannot be higher than 5 hours per week (Regulation..., 2017). As of the 2022/2023

school year, all migrant students who have no or insufficient knowledge of Polish may receive additional free language classes for no longer than 24 months.²

Early childhood education teachers and PAFL didactics

PAFL teacher training has been the subject of a number of publications (e.g., Dubisz & Jędryka 2013; Gębal, 2008, 2013, 2018), but authors have focused more on foreign language teachers than on teachers working in the Polish education system who conduct the language classes included in the curriculum for students in each grade. Based on observation, research and my own teaching experience, I believe that a foreign language teacher and a school teacher are two separate professions, requiring different pedagogical and glottodidactic training, which Przemysław Gębal does not mention in his works on teacher studies. He does not distinguish between these two types of teachers, whereas this is necessary in the current glottodidactic reality since learners learn new languages for different purposes. This is probably related to the fact that the first learners of PAFL were adults. The teaching methods of Polish for children and adolescents originally applied to its users outside our country, where Polish was taught as an inherited language. On the other hand, with the appearance of children of labor migrants in Polish kindergartens and schools, more attention was being paid to PAFL, though neither the methodology was being improved, nor the teaching materials were being designed and evaluated. For most glottodidacticians this was and still is the norm (Miodunka, 2016). It was not until the Russian–Ukrainian war and the influx of refugee students into Polish schools that people began to notice how little had been done so far in terms of teaching PAFL in schools, a problem that had been signaled more than a decade before (e.g., Jędryka, 2006).

Early childhood education teachers who started teaching Polish to refugees from Ukraine found themselves in a difficult situation, as they lacked knowledge about PAFL instruction, curricula and materials designed to teach this age group. The available methodological guidelines were prepared primarily for teaching Polish to adults (Seretny & Lipińska, 2005; Lipińska & Seretny, 2013; Seretny, 2015; Janowska et al, 2016; Gebal & Miodunka, 2020; Lipińska, 2023). The only compact methodological publication written with early childhood education in mind was *Metodyka nauczania języka edukacji szkolnej uczniów z doświadczeniem migracji. Metoda JES-PL. Matematyka* [Methodology of Teaching the Language of School Education to Students

² From the point of view of psycholinguistics and Polish language glottodidactics, during the period referred to in the Law of June 8, 2022 (Law..., 2022), it is impossible for even a Slavic-speaking student to master Polish in such a period of time as a basic tool for acquiring knowledge – the language of school education. Of course, intercomprehension is helpful here, but it cannot be relied upon (Jędryka, 2022).

with Migration Experience. LSE-PL Method. Mathematics], by Małgorzata Pamuła-Behrens and Marta Szymańska (2018b). Teachers could also make use of *Metodyka nauczania języka polskiego jako obcego/drugiego dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym* [Methodology for Teaching Polish as a Foreign/Second Language to Preschool Children] (Beata K. Jędryka, 2015c), which was further expanded with the teaching program *Ja i mój świat* [I and My World], worksheets and lesson plans (Jędryka 2015a, 2015b; Jędryka & Stawikowska, 2020). Unfortunately, to date, no PAFL textbooks, workbooks or worksheets for students in grades one through three have been prepared, although Polish is ultimately supposed to be the first medium in education. Of course, materials developed for non-Polish schools were used, but they did not quite work in the reality of schools in Poland.

During the workshops for teachers run since March 2022, the participants clearly identified their teaching needs in the area of their job responsibilities. Their statements and observations show that they lack specific Polish glottodidactic competencies related to planning and teaching PAFL. First of all, they do not know how to correctly construct a syllabus that would be consistent with the elementary education curriculum. They have problems selecting educational content within the different subsystems of the language and arranging the materials in the right order so that migrant students can achieve academic success, which is usually harder for them on account of their low linguistic competence. These difficulties are due to the fact that migrant students learners in the second and third grades must master not only Polish vocabulary corresponding to the monolingual child's level of language development, but also catch up on curriculum gaps. Teachers lack the ability to choose glottodidactic basics. Educators also have trouble with purely methodological issues such as mainly the teaching of Polish grammar, which must be done subliminally at this stage of education.

First language interactions – outline of a didactic proposal

The organization of PAFL instruction of students from grades one to three, especially at the stage of first language exposure, should follow the pattern that works for students in higher grades (Jędryka, 2022). However, it must be stressed that migrant students in the second and third grades must learn the Polish alphabet. The process should involve high-frequency vocabulary of both the general language and the specialized languages included in the LSE. Students starting first grade will go through this process simultaneously with their Polish peers. Language classes for first graders should be based mainly on verbal memory. It is important to remember that language learning enables migrant students to master the LSE, so its elements should be one of the components of the educational content from the very start and of equal importance to grammar, vocabulary and real-life issues.

During the meetings, teachers signaled that it is difficult for them to prepare a “starter” package of language skills that the migrant students should have. This stage of learning can be called language implementation, which should be characterized by high communicative usefulness in peer and educational interactions. While peer interactions require mastery of the basics of general language, school situations require language items related to classroom activities. Therefore, it is an important step to identify narrow thematic ranges in both varieties of Polish, which should be filled with appropriate vocabulary appropriate to the age and linguistic needs of the student in specific communicative situations. The catalog for older students, which has already been developed, can be used here.

Language implementation should last 40 classroom hours. From a didactic point of view, this is possible only at this stage, since students who speak a Slavic language (Ukrainian or Russian) may unconsciously use intercompetence in decoding Polish. The job is more difficult at later stages, which is why it is necessary to use the teaching methods of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), i.e. the learning of subject content and the learning of the foreign language the subject is taught. PAFL instruction in first- to third-grade classes should follow this format, as students then learn LSE. Therefore, it is necessary to develop lists of words specific to Polish, mathematics, civics, science, art, technology, computer science, music and physical education. Next, it is essential to analyze the instructional content of these areas in terms of grammar structures and arrange them not only by frequency, but also by subsystem of the language. This will make it possible to draw up a preliminary curriculum for migrant students education in Polish.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that two training models should be developed for PAFL didactics in early childhood education. The first has to do with the professional training of teachers who are entrusted with teaching PAFL at this stage of education, while the second model should be a detailed plan for teaching the language to students in grades one through three. Future teachers should participate not only in classes on intercultural issues, but also in blocks of classes on PAFL and LSE teaching methodology. It would be easier for universities that train educators to design new curricula if PAFL teaching issues were singled out in the core curriculum, or if a separate document was drafted to clearly identify the teaching content and skills of each PAFL subsystem for each stage of education. Of course, it should take into account the conditions of teaching Polish, which is ultimately intended as a tool for acquiring knowledge. This document could be the framework for PAFL curricula in a school

setting for early childhood education, which is characterized by integrated educational content. It should be borne in mind that these curricula should not be mere catalogs of individual linguistic elements, as is the case with PAFL for adults (cf. Janowska et al., 2016). Instead, they should be detailed descriptions with a suggested sequence of specific grammatical, lexical and cultural content, accounting for specialized varieties of language specific to LSE. Early childhood education teachers and Polish language teachers who teach PAFL in first- to third-grade classes should get a clear message about what Polish language in terms of its specialized varieties is to be taught in their classes for school purposes.

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