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## Language and Adaptation Barriers of Polish 1.5 Generation in Ireland

### Abstract

The decision about emigration for economic reasons, including emigration to Ireland, after Poland joining the European Union, has been the object of research interests of a number of fields of knowledge. Sometimes, a tempting vision of improving Polish people's own economic status makes them decide to leave the homeland without any knowledge about the culture of the adopted society. The article is focused on the analysis of the language competence of Polish grammar school students in Ireland. There are presented weaknesses and strategies for surviving in the new environment without language skills and its influence on adaptation to school and life in Ireland. The article is supported by the research conducted in Irish grammar schools and Polish weekend schools in Ireland (2010–2011).

**Keywords:** *emigration to Ireland, adaptation, language competence, Ireland*

### Introduction

Polish membership of the EU has led, among other things, to the massive emigration of Poles to the countries such as Ireland or Great Britain as a result of opening up of new earning possibilities there. The hallmark of this emigration is settling in, especially in Ireland, by whole Polish families (Grabowska-Lusińska, 2007, pp. 6–7). Therefore, apart from the influx of manpower, a group of Polish children at the school age has appeared, obliged to fulfil the school duty in this country. These children have been labelled as 1.5 generation. They are children born in the country of their parents, brought up there and having lived there for so

long that they had mastered the basics of their native language as well as cultural models, and, simultaneously, emigrating together with their parents to another country so early that they are able to master the new language relatively easily, which determines the integration with the adopted country's society. Therefore, 1.5 generation immigrants are young people in the period of adolescence, who are usually bicultural and bilingual, moving efficiently between two different, by definition, environments, and who can constitute an almost perfect model of "citizens of the world" (Kasinitz).

## **Methodology**

The emigration of Polish youth in the years 2004–2009 was quite often connected with the spontaneity of decisions made, and, in the best case, a mere linguistic and cultural preparation, mainly resulting from the lack of time for the preparation for the existing conditions in the new country. This has represented a strong encouragement to undertake a great number of studies, involving a broadly understood subject matter of 1.5 generation's life settled in Ireland. This article, as a result of this kind of studies, constitutes an attempt to present the image of Polish grammar school student living in Ireland, learning in so called Secondary school (1<sup>st</sup> stage – Junior Cycle). The author focuses on the analysis of Polish students' language difficulties in Ireland and the problems of adaptation to the new environment. Those young people came to Ireland during the period of the most massive wave of emigration from Poland. Ordinarily, they did not know the language of the adopted country, its history, traditions or customs. Accordingly, their adaptation was usually impeded, mostly by the basic barrier – the language one.

The information included in the article was obtained by doing quality ethnographic research, together with the group interview technique among Polish grammar school students learning in schools in the Republic of Ireland.

## **Results**

### **The essence of communication**

*Each world has got its own mystery and the access to it is only by getting to know the language. Without it, this world is impenetrable and inconceivable, even if we spend all the years inside* (Kapuściński 2008, p. 28).

Communication is one of the most important aspects of human life. It is a process which connects people and helps perform a task, build relationships or achieve aims. Communication is indispensable for understanding, creating, comprehending and maintaining culture, for handing down from one generation to another. The most essential aspect of communication is language. The language constitutes the main element of cultural identity. It is a key to understanding culture, the world of human values (Zajączkowska 2003, pp.3–5). Inside and via the language culture is created, and all the possible interpretations of phenomena and human behaviour that surround us are expressed. The language, although it belongs to the living culture, is at the same time a crucial part of many artifacts and an indispensable element of social culture. The language system is a basic tool which enables people to think and express their views (Grucza 1992, p.9). Understanding culture without the command of the language, which is the culture's constituent element, is imperfect, if not impossible. What is more, the structure of the language consists of elements such as norms, hierarchy and social relations as well as issues connected with gender. That is why, each language describes reality in a different way and in order to understand the language the cultural context is essential. Similarly, in the language there are a number of terms which determine the way of comprehending social reality (Sapir, 1978, p.88). Therefore, getting to know culture is connected with learning the language and the other way round. The world of communication embraces also non-verbal elements, apart from the verbal ones. They provide feedback from the hearer to the speaker and aid interaction by indicating that the participants should have their say, listen or interrupt. The differences between cultures concerning the patterns of non-verbal behaviour are important sources of difficulties in international communication. Gestures and their meanings are diverse in many cultures and can be interpreted in different ways.

The statement that the language is the most important cultural tool as well as the way of communication between people is irrefutable. It is also the main medium of cultural communication. During the process of learning an individual absorbs the dictionary he or she hears from "the outside", i.e., from the surrounding world. Later on, a person creates his or her own, internal dictionary, which is adapted to his or her own way of thinking and behaviour. Therefore, the command of the language enables an individual not only to identify with society, but also to participate in the surrounding culture. During exchanging information in the process of communication an individual is able to modify his or her own cultural values, as well as influence and create new ones (Wygotski 2005, pp. 32–35).

### **The command of language and the adaptation to education and living conditions in Ireland**

In the case of hasty decisions on emigration, inadequate linguistic preparation or lack of it, and finally the unfamiliarity with the culture and the cultural context of the language, as in the case of emigrants to Ireland, difficulties with adaptation come out. Even the satisfactory command of the language and ability to communicate on a basic level do not protect from the linguistic barrier that makes it impossible to fully adapt to the new environment. This is the first and the main difficulty encountered by Polish youth in Ireland. The respondents' utterances show that: *"At the beginning, it was difficult with the language. I had learnt English in Poland for 7 years, from primary school on, but it was something different. Different pronunciation and everything (...) When I didn't know the English words, when I wanted to talk to somebody or ask a question I thought to myself: 'What am I doing here? I shouldn't be here.' And I still think that I won't stay in Ireland forever. First of all because I don't feel this is my place"* (Interview 14). Another person said: *"Even though I had studied in Poland I had a problem with the language when I came here, most often in shops or other public places. At school I'm often unable to talk. I don't know what to tell my teacher..."* (Interview 14). The students' utterances point out the connection between the command of language of the adopted country and the feeling of belonging to the new Irish social group. Incapacity to communicate with the environment causes frustration as well as a desire to go back to the homeland due to the lack of the sense of belonging to the group and understanding the phenomena surrounding the individual. The inability to name their needs causes the situation where the individual is powerless, because the unfamiliarity with the language makes it impossible for him or her to have contact with the peers as well as to learn the Irish way of thinking and feeling emotions. The command of the language which is spoken among a given society not only gives a chance for expanding the knowledge about this society, but also it is an instrument which activates the ability to go into detail when it comes to their way of thinking and feeling emotions. When communicating with the members of a given society the individual is able to get to know its system of values as well as realise the differences and similarities between a given culture and his or her own culture. The better we get to know the new culture and the wider knowledge of this culture we have, the more open we are to maintain a dialogue and participate actively. The statements of Polish youth point out this fact: *"...Because if you don't know the language well there is always a difference. At school I talk to these and those, sometimes, during the breaks, also with the Irish, but not every day..."* (Interview 4). It follows that only the command of the language makes it possible to initiate contacts with Others/

Foreigners, to overcome barriers, as well as to initiate a mutual interaction, which affects further education. While striving for getting to know the culture, which is originally foreign, the danger of being a foreigner gradually disappears. Together with the improvement of relations with the outside world, the understanding and tolerance towards cultural differences as well as the tolerance towards members of the same society are getting greater and greater. However, it is essential that learning a language is not only acquiring its vocabulary and linguistic structures, but also facing this language, i.e., facing the culture of the society using this language. This is a stage which is a link between the first encounter with the language, i.e., the picture developed in the process of socialisation, and the final stage, i.e., the actual contact between the individual and the other culture (Burszta, 2010, p.19). What is familiar does not raise fear and makes it possible to explore the new reality more fully.

Unfamiliarity with the basics of communication in a given language is the main factor of stress for young people moving to Irish schools. The inability to express oneself is very frustrating as well as resulting in low self-esteem. “(...) *sometimes I want to say something in English, but I’m so stressed out that I cannot do it well because I know more words in Polish and it is different*” (Interview 2). It causes the feeling of being helpless because of the lack of the ability to express your own thoughts or needs due to the poor command of the language, poor vocabulary or articulation. “...*I get irritated when I want to tell somebody something and I don’t know how, so I try to do it in different ways, so that somebody can guess. So that somebody can guess what I try to say.*” “*This is hard when you have to...when you want to say something and... (...) Or when you want to write something in a nice way, but you don’t know enough words to do it well*” (Interview 5). These and other similar utterances show that Polish youth do not feel comfortable while communicating in a foreign language, whose command is so insufficient that sending a very simple message requires long lasting translation with the use of a dictionary. This kind of situation often oversimplifies relations between peers because it is limited to simple utterances with no possibility of exchanging views or sharing opinions and experiences. Only a good command of the language makes it possible to adapt to the new circumstances (...) *When you already know English it is not so hard. I can make myself understood and I already feel more confident. When I couldn’t make myself understood I wanted to go back home because I did not feel good here*” (Interview 8). As the utterance shows, unfamiliarity with the language is often the main cause of the desire to go back to the homeland where you are understood and able to exchange views with people from the nearest school environment. It has to be mentioned that the period of early adolescence is a period when human

development is shaped mainly by interpersonal relations with peers. In this period the desire to be accepted is more important than ever before. That is why, the group of peers becomes one of the most crucial factors of socialisation. After the period of strong educational influence of the family home, teenagers' dependence on their parents decreases and the dominant position is taken by the peer group, who, at this time, determines personal safety, represents similar attitudes, values and desires (Turner&Helms, 1999, p. 366). Peers are the main source of the teenager's high self-esteem and his or her confidence in the world in this period of life. However, when there is no possibility of interacting with peers because of unfamiliarity with the language, the sense of belonging, safety, and acceptance of the group is disturbed. The command of language makes it more possible to express oneself and thanks to this a young person is more successful.

A very frequent phenomenon which could be noticed among the respondents was a "vicious circle", when the teenagers with a poor command of the language felt discomfort and a barrier to communication, which made it impossible to get to know the language and the cultural code connected with it, and thus break down the language barrier that was getting bigger and bigger. Those students often thought that they could not say anything valuable in the group and preferred saying nothing to being ridiculed. (...) *To say something, for example in a classroom or to them, no way! I won't say anything because I'm afraid that they will laugh, or simply say "I don't care what you are saying" or something like that*" (Interview 3). The result of this was only a slight improvement of linguistic skills and, accordingly, alienation, a lack of integration as well as withdrawal from the group.

The Polish youth pointed out the problem of inadequate linguistic preparation in Poland as the reason for their language problems. "(...) *studying English in Poland is learning the same things every year, moreover it doesn't prepare for having conversation, it doesn't prepare for it at all*" (Interview 1). A lot of them had learned English for a few years and they claimed they were helpless when it came to using the skills acquired at school in practice. *"I like it, because here it is easier, after one year and a half you are able to make yourself understood, and in Poland... I learned English for five years and had extra lessons, and when I came here I knew nothing (...) but the thing is that Irish people in fact have a different accent and it is difficult to understand them even if you learn English (...). But what I mean is that I couldn't say anything at all"* (Interview 3). Polish students in Ireland quite often consider foreign language teaching methods in Poland as ineffective. Their experience shows that even many-year-long language learning, very often marked positively by Polish teachers, did not teach the skill to communicate in this language, which considerably obstructs adaptation to the new foreign environment. This might be a clue for

foreign language teachers about changing their past language teaching method, which develops communication competence and conversational techniques in the foreign language insufficiently. On the other hand, in teachers' defence, it ought to be mentioned that the Irish, due to their native Irish language peculiarity, articulate and stress a lot of words in a different way. That is why, at the beginning of the stay, it is hard to understand their native language even with good command of English. Only getting used to and listening to the language make it possible to communicate with the Irish community. The Irish, living in the areas where the Irish language is still used, significantly deform English, since the dominant sound in their articulation is a /f/ sound, which deforms words uttered and the language becomes incomprehensible for the foreigner, such as the word *water* is pronounced /'wɔ:tə/ in England and /'wɔ: fə/ in Ireland. Apart from this, a number of words in this country are of Irish origin and are different from those we learn at schools or the Americans and the British use. The popular word *pen* could be an example. In Ireland this word is replaced by the Irish word *bajrow*. Other characteristic Irish words are *bold* – which means *rude* whereas in English *bold* means *brave*, *courageous*, or *craig* which stands for *good fun*, as well as *dingen* – very good (from Gaelic *daingean* – decent) or *gas* – happy.

Comprehending an Irish person might be very difficult especially at the beginning, however, according to the respondents, the argument against foreign language learning in Poland is that it is not effective and that they are not able to say a few sentences, for instance about themselves "(...) *I didn't understand anybody, because in Poland I learned English for two years and I learned nothing*" (Interview 4).

Due to the lack of or poor command of language "(...) *I'd never learned English in Poland before I came here, so when I came I knew nothing at all*" (Interview 4), teenagers try to cope with the new situation in different ways. The first, quite popular pattern of behaviour, is withdrawing from Polish-Irish integration and making friends with the representative of the native country. "(...) *Oh Jesus! I was bawling, I didn't understand anything, when somebody was talking to me I was nodding only and I met her (she points to her friend) and that's all who I was talking to*" (Interview 4). At schools in which there are few Polish peers young people are, in a sense, forced to learn the language because they do not have contact with the native language, thanks to which they make new international acquaintances quite quickly. "(...) *because two years ago, when I was the only Polish girl in the whole school, it was a nightmare. Now it's easier because the language and all of it is totally different. I've got girlfriends and I can talk to them*" (Interview 1). As a matter of fact, thanks to, in a sense, exceptional and special circumstances, learning the language progresses very quickly, as the respondents say: "*You will learn English*



*more quickly when you don't have a choice, then you have to learn it. (...) That's why I learned English quickly. What's more, my brother had an Irish girlfriend, so she was helping me at home. There were a lot of people at school who helped me, too, so actually I learned English quickly. Yes, I could and understood, but I was afraid of saying something. Only when this problem was over, after half a year, I started to talk but I had been afraid of saying something wrong before (Interview 5).* There are schools with a great number of Poles, such as Galway Community College, in which there are: *"(...) about 30% of Polish youth, where the dominant language, not only during the breaks but also during the lessons, is Polish. There are too many Poles and too much Polish and too little English because of which they suffer. Students from Lithuania, Latvia or African countries are doing better than Polish ones because they have to speak English and there is one or two people from their countries and they get on with other students (...)" (Interview 20 – Teacher).* The school's students have the same opinion: *"(...) Unfortunately, there are too many Poles. This is my opinion, because we study, I mean we don't study well. I can say something but it gets on my nerves when we are speaking Polish all the time. We are three girls in the class. (...) But for example a year ago there was nobody. (...) A lot of new Polish students came this year, really. Fifteen people, yeah. But earlier there were very few of them. Some students left school, but still, it gets on my nerves. Polish and Polish all the time. Everyone together, during the breaks, all the time. There are the stairs, everyone sits there, twenty people, everyone speaks Polish. The Irish and the Polish separately. (...) we are simply separated into groups. The Poles sit together with the Poles and the Irish with the Irish (Interview 15).* A large group of students from the native country hinders young people's adaptation to a new environment and, thereby, acquiring linguistic and cultural knowledge. When most of the school time, which is the basic environment of language study, norms and rules in the new society, a student stays with the representatives of his or her own culture, he or she has no possibility of learning either the language or the patterns of behaviour of the new culture. They do not maintain contact with Irish peers, which is implied by the utterance above. Both groups separate from each other, only reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice against each other. In the circumstances, Irish teachers feel helpless and point out many school problems, which are the result of the isolation *"some of them have already been here for two or three years, they don't know English, come to the class, speak Polish and don't want to or pretend that they don't understand anything. There is a problem, because they don't pass tests (...) and we cannot do much" (Interview 20 – Teacher).*

Therefore, the lack of compatriots at school is a hindrance on the one hand, since during the first contact there is nobody who can help understand the basic



utterance as well as support a newcomer, but on the other hand, under the circumstances, immigrants learn the language more quickly and integrate with their classmates. Thanks to this they are a part of the class and they are not excluded. However, those who stay in their own cultural and linguistic society are very often isolated from the group. Teachers also treat the students who make progress in learning the language better. The lack of the command of the language makes it impossible to learn individual subjects as well as to work with this sort of student, who also does not have any motivation to learn. It causes discouragement and, as a result, paying less attention to this student. "(...) *I have Polish friends who don't want to learn English, they are always together, of course, they don't talk to the Irish, and teachers don't tell them to learn as much, because they know that they don't know English and simply they don't have to take tests or other things...*" (Interview 12).

From the respondents' accounts, it follows that the command of the language changed their position in the class and their relations with peers. "(...) *well, generally I had the same situation, in the beginning when my English wasn't so good, they could gossip, because I didn't understand, but later when I was getting to know English a little bit I understood and they stopped*" (Interview 4).

Using English names and terms in Polish utterances is indicative of young people's adaptation to the English language. Language and its context are indispensable to learn and understand the culture, as well as to adapt to the new environment. Unfamiliarity with the basics of communication in a given language prevents getting to know or learning this culture. The research shows that teenagers (under the favourable conditions mentioned) acquire skills to communicate in English very quickly, using phrases used by their Irish peers. The example could be the word "yep" repeated many times in Polish interviews.

## **Conclusion**

Under the circumstances when the immigrants change the environment of their life, they are obliged to learn the language, adapt to new traditions, customs, or patterns of behaviour, which makes it possible to build lasting interpersonal relations. The lack of adaptation leads to alienation and anomie. The research conducted on Polish 1.5 generation in Ireland shows that the teenagers with school and family support, and who are willing and open to the new, acquire linguistic knowledge quickly, but only thanks to interpersonal contacts with the representatives of the adopted country. Those who are isolated from Irish peers generally learn the language more slowly and do not adapt to the new culture, among which they

live, so easily. A group of researchers from Trinity College in Dublin, conducting research on intercultural relations among children in Ireland, came to a similar conclusion. When it comes to the interviews with children and teenagers (not only from Poland), it follows that the isolation of immigrants due to unfamiliarity with the language considerably impoverishes their contacts with peers as well as making progress in studying in Irish school. Irish children also contribute to the isolation of those who they cannot communicate with since conversation with them is boring and unproductive, because “you have to explain a lot to them and they still do not understand” (Gilligan 2011, p.68).

The important conclusion for Poles from the research carried out by the author is pointing to the ineffective language teaching methods in Polish schools, which, in the students’ opinion based on their experience, do not prepare for communication in English speaking countries. Thus, the linguistic knowledge acquired in Poland does not refer to using the language in a new environment. Hence, it is necessary to take this into account when it comes to education in Polish schools.

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Interview 1 – School Meán Scoil Mhuire

Interview 2 – Polish weekend school in Dublin

Interview 3 and 4 – Polish weekend school in Cork

Interview 5 and 8 – Polish weekend school in Waterford

Interview 12, 13 and 14 – Calasanctius College

Interview 15 – Galway Community College

Interview 20 – Teacher from Galway Community College