

English Language Teachers' Attitudes to the Polish 1998 Educational Reform.

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'You cannot repair a house and live in it comfortably'
(Lech Wałęsa)

Abstract

This paper presents the statistical results of a recent academic investigation into the attitudes primary and secondary school English language teachers have towards the Polish educational reform introduced in 1998. It provides some recommendations which could make management of change of the reformed ELT curriculum more effective for individuals or organisations involved in reform facilitation: certain reform management changes need to be made immediately, and others should be implemented over a longer period of time.

Introduction

The 1998 education reform (Nowa Szkoła) was one of a whole programme of radical reforms the Polish government embarked on mainly to prepare Poland for full membership in the European Union. Reform of the Polish education system started in 1998 and *should* end in 2005. The main function of the reform was to decentralise the over-centralised pre-reformed schooling system in Poland. The main changes to affect teachers comprised: a new Core Curriculum (Podstawy Programowe); the creation of Ministry-of-Education approved syllabuses; the introduction of reform-related teacher training; the new Teacher Employment Act (Karta Nauczyciela); the new school structure; the 2002 externally graded examinations (these examinations are presently non-compulsory); the Personal and Social Education Programme or PSE (Program Wychowawczy); integrating PSE cross-curricular blocks into an ELT syllabus (mainly referred to in Polish as ścieżki edukacyjne) ; interdisciplinary integration (integracja międzyprzedmiotowa); computer technology in ELT. Detailed descriptions and analyses of these terms can be found in the works of Dereń (eds) et al (1999); Gajek (2001); Knafel and Żłobecki, eds (1999); Komorowska (1999/2000); MEN (1998/1999); Szpotowicz (1999); Szyszkowiak (1998)

An overview of the research undertaken.

A questionnaire was used to get an overview of perception, and a structured interview to follow up in depth the issues raised in the questionnaire. A questionnaire was sent to English language teachers working in 18 state primary and secondary schools in Poznań and areas surrounding Poznań. Structured interviews were carried out with experienced English language teachers/teacher trainers.

Providing teachers with information that can be easily understood on the reform is probably the most important initial step in any education reform. I looked at whether teachers felt they had had access to enough explicit reform related information. Another salient research question was to identify whether teachers had negative attitudes/felt high concern to particular reform innovations. I also thought that it was important to

find out whether teachers believed the reform programme would improve learning or whether they felt the reform changes had been introduced too quickly. The quality of teacher training is extremely relevant to successful reform implementation. I analysed whether teachers felt satisfied with the teacher training they had received and also determined whether they believed the teacher training they had received helped to improve pupils' abilities in English. I also elicited data from teachers and teacher trainers regarding what reform issues should receive teacher training priority.

The investigation

This section comprises: (1) a classification of the research findings; (2) a comparison of aspects of the research data; (3) an interpretation of the findings.

(1) A classification of the research findings

I elicited data concerning teachers' attitudes to change in the ELT curriculum; the main findings were as follows:

- lack of information on the reform or negative attitudes to the reform may partly explain why only 4% of teachers started teaching in accordance with the reform from the beginning;
- between 73% and 84% of English language teachers were concerned about PSE, the Core Curriculum, the new approach to assessment, external examinations, pupil self-assessment, interdisciplinary integration, PSE cross curricular blocks, the New Teacher Employment Act;
- all English language teachers at stage-two secondary school (liceum) level felt high concern about the 2002 'matura' examination;
- 9 out of 10 unqualified teachers were anxious about co-working with other English language teachers. One possible explanation could be that they may not like sharing their problems with other English language teachers because this might be interpreted as a lack of teaching competence. Only 30% of English language teachers working had an English language qualification at higher education. I hold that further research is required to find out whether English language teachers understand the specialist ELT meta-language found in many ELT publications. The data I elicited regarding qualifications is presented in the table below

Type of qualification	Percentage of teachers with this qualification
A Polish 'magister' in English philology	About 24 %
A Polish 'licencjat' in English	About 6.5 %
Respondents who gave no information	About 28 %
Respondents who had studied non-ELT related disciplines at institutions of higher education.	About 24 %
Teachers with FCE or CAE	About 15 %
No qualifications	About 2 %

I then elicited data relating to preparation for the English language teaching reform. The main findings were as follows:

- 98% of teachers were dissatisfied with the amount of preparation they had had for the reform;
- 75% of teachers could in my opinion be grouped into one of the following categories: (a) those that have no time to study the curriculum; (b) those that have limited access to information on the curriculum; (c) other reasons (e.g. those that do not want to study the curriculum);
- The fact that 70% of teachers neither supported nor opposed the reform suggested that teachers were ‘open-minded’ about the reform, but had had no concrete evidence that reform changes improved pupils’ English language abilities;
- up to 42% of teachers may not be interested in MEN-approved syllabuses;
- 64% of teachers were dissatisfied with their initial training at college/university. Many newly qualified English philology graduates may therefore have difficulties working in the reformed ELT curriculum;
- 80% of teachers were dissatisfied with the way their schools encouraged and supported them.
- 83% of teachers felt that in-service teacher training was not very effective. This feeling could be attributed to the fact that most in-service training is not supportive over a long period of time.

I finally elicited data regarding teacher training priorities. Teachers chose from a list of 11 reform-related issues. The data I elicited from teachers is presented in the table below. I did not interpret the high priority response rates as a serious weakness of the questionnaire.

Reform-related issues	% of teachers that indicated high priority
Interdisciplinary integration	92%
Integrating PSE cross-curricular blocks into ELT	87.5%
External examinations	86%
Internal assessment methods	93%
Incorporating PSE requirements into lessons	85%
How to choose and use a MEN-approved syllabus	82%
How to write your own syllabus	82%
How to choose and use a MEN-approved textbook	70%
Working in a team with ELT colleagues	86%
Using multimedia technology in ELT	86%
Teaching pupils to be more open to other cultures. Inter-cultural competence	100%

(2) A comparison of aspects of the research data

In this section I refined my findings by presenting the results of a comparison of follow-up structured interview data with questionnaire data. Four issues are discussed: (a) the New Teacher Employment Act; (b) lack of information; (c) the best things in the reform; (d) the teaching practicability of some reform issues.

(a) the New Teacher Employment Act (Karta Nauczyciela).

A comparison of the interview responses I recorded with the questionnaire data I elicited suggested that the New Teacher Employment Act could be the main reason why: negative attitudes to the reform were felt at all ages; 37% of teachers were not sure about staying in the profession and 7% of teachers wanted to leave the profession; unqualified teachers and under-qualified teachers are under pressure to gain a qualification in ELT. 81% of the teachers that said they were not sure about staying in the profession were unqualified or under-qualified.

(b) lack of information.

In the main, teachers complained that there was not enough information on the reform, whereas teacher trainers argued there was too much. I believe there is a lot of literature available on the reform, it is not clear however whether unqualified teachers actually understand the reform literature meta-language. Another problem with reform-related literature is, some of it is relatively expensive to buy for teachers. MEN Internet pages are also another source of information, though Polish Internet is very slow and unusually expensive (4-5 times more expensive than in the UK). Some teachers also may not want to read reform-related information. Three reasons could possibly explain teacher apathy: (1) teachers may feel that it is the school's responsibility to provide them with 'comprehensible' information; (2) a feeling of frustration: teachers have to do a lot more work with practically no increase in pay; (3) a feeling of fear: some teachers may prefer to 'bury their heads in the sand', i.e. many teachers could feel threatened by the reform changes.

(c) the best things in the reform.

My research data indicated that the issues teacher trainers felt were the best caused the most problems for English language teachers. For instance, I believe team work could be problematic for teachers because my research data indicated that: 9 out of 10 unqualified teachers were concerned about relating what they were doing to other language teachers; 73% of teachers were concerned about interdisciplinary integration, and 92% of teachers indicated that they needed teacher training in this area; 86% of teachers stated that they needed help with regard to team work.

External examinations were a cause of high concern for 76% of teachers and 100% of 'matura'-teachers working in stage-two secondary schools (liceum). Yet grading pupils externally is in my opinion a less biased system, and therefore better for the pupil, though many English language teachers were clearly worried about the new 'matura' examination. Some of the worries pertain to lack of information and to lack of time to prepare pupils for the examination. Many teachers may be worried and frustrated about having to prepare pupils for the writing component of the 'matura'. The 'matura' examination forces teachers to teach and mark writing, though probably very few

teachers relish the prospect of reading and correcting hundreds of additional homework assignments for no extra money. Some teachers may be highly concerned about how the results of external examinations will be used; poor results may affect a teacher's career prospects.

(d) the teaching practicability of some reform issues.

In section (1) I noted that: 93% of teachers indicated they needed teacher training regarding internal assessment methods i.e. the teacher highlights what pupils can do, and not what they cannot do); 100% of teachers stated that they required help concerning teaching pupils to be more open to other cultures i.e. intercultural competence; 92% of teachers claimed that they should receive training with regard to interdisciplinary integration; 87.5% of teachers stated that integrating PSE cross-curricular blocks into ELT would be problematic without training.

With regard to the new internal assessment methods, the visionary idea of not demoralising less able pupils by 'highlighting' what they can do, in principle seems sound, but in practice implementing this method may be problematic. This approach could encourage teachers to lull examination candidates into a false sense of security; I therefore hold that internal assessment needs to be clearly explained to teachers. Intercultural competence in my opinion is not a very well defined concept and the Core Curriculum certainly does not expound the term; teachers need a more detailed definition of the term. Interdisciplinary integration and integrating PSE cross-curricular blocks on paper may be a good idea, in reality these innovations may be too complex and time consuming for most schools in Poland. White et al. (1999, 183) notes that the more complex an innovation is perceived to be, the less likely it is to be taken up. The Core Curriculum does not state 'how much' interdisciplinary integration or integration of cross-curricular PSE blocks should take place and whether parents and pupils would be happy about not spending valuable lesson time on preparation for external examinations.

(3) An interpretation of the findings.

I subdivide this section into two subsections. First, reform issues that need immediate attention, second, reform issues that need long term attention.

Immediate changes.

I hold that a number of reform changes need immediate attention:

- (1) the New Teacher Employment Act (Karta Nauczyciela) may have to be amended. The cumbersome process of obtaining documents necessary for promotion takes a verification panel several days to read; bureaucracy has to be reduced. I would question the effectiveness of teacher training in an education system that offers very little regular teacher training over an extended period of time, but requires teachers to obtain certificates of teacher training attendance; there is after all the possibility that some teachers only attend teacher training workshops to get a certificate of attendance. The idea that teacher training should be carried out over an extended period is a common theme in the literature on management of change, for instance

in Fullan 1985; Guskey, 1985; Huberman, and Miles, 1984; Kennedy 1988; Palmer 1993;

- (2) as there are a lot of ELT unqualified/under-qualified teachers, the 2006 deadline for gaining an ELT related qualification at higher education level may not be realistic, it should be extended. Institutions of higher education should respond by offering more specialist 'fast-track' ELT qualifications for non-ELT qualified graduates and unqualified experienced teachers of English.
- (3) if it can be shown that understanding ELT meta-language is problematic, reform related information should be presented in simplified, non-specialist language; it should also be free and widely available in all primary and secondary schools.
- (4) more information on the English language 'matura' is required. As English language teachers preparing pupils for the 'matura' have much more work than teachers working at lower school levels, they should either be paid more or receive a fixed sum of money for every pupil that passes the 'matura' examination. With regard to the latter suggestion, many private language schools in Poznań successfully motivate their FCE/CAE teachers in this way.
- (5) I noted that some teachers may not read leaflets/pamphlets on the reform, more specialist workshops/seminars are necessary to help teachers fully understand the reform.
- (6) more time and training is needed to convince teachers, particularly unqualified teachers, of the advantages of teamwork.
- (7) teacher training should be free and teachers should not have to incur any expenses associated with teacher training.
- (8) teacher trainers should have their teacher-training related expenses covered, and there should be more specialist English language teacher trainers.
- (9) teachers need evidence that the reform improves learning, for instance what evidence is there that interdisciplinary integration or integrating PSE cross curricular blocks into the ELT syllabus will improve learning?
- (10) the Core Curriculum should provide :(a) a clearer definition of how an English language teacher should highlight what a pupil can do rather than what a pupil cannot do; (b) a clearer explanation of why integrating PSE cross curricular blocks into ELT is important and how a teacher can do this; (c) a clearer description explaining how much interdisciplinary integration or integration of PSE cross-curricular blocks should take place; (d) an explanation of what intercultural competence is and how an English language teacher can teach it. With regard to this last point, Poland, as is the case with many other ex-communist countries, still has relatively few foreigners. Teaching school pupils to be more open to foreign cultures is extremely important considering Poland wants to become a full member of the European Union.
- (11) as my research data indicated many teachers were under-qualified or unqualified to teach English, I believe that it may not be wise to allow all English language teachers to choose or write a syllabus.

In my opinion, all of the above recommendations with the exception of financial incentives for stage-two secondary school 'matura' teachers and more money for teacher training do not require significant investment.

Long term changes.

I maintain that the following changes should be introduced in the long term:

- (1) all ELT institutions of higher education should prepare their graduates for work in the reformed Polish primary and secondary school system. New graduates should fully understand all the intricacies of the 1998 educational reform;
- (2) as 98% of teachers were dissatisfied with the preparation they had had for the reform, teacher training has to be implemented over a long period of time i.e. teachers must be given more time to implement, adapt, or experiment with, change gradually.
- (3) interdisciplinary integration should only be introduced when teachers can fully appreciate the advantages of teamwork;
- (4) teachers' salaries should be systematically increased;
- (5) there should be a reduction in the number MEN-approved syllabuses and textbooks. Too much choice is in some ways as bad as too little choice.
- (6) English should be tested externally at lower school levels as well.
- (7) there should be economic and professional rewards for teachers involved in change, because if working on a new project is not part of a teacher's official workload, teachers will quickly become disillusioned with putting a lot of time into something that may be regarded as 'too much extra work'.
- (8) Teacher training should only be carried out by MEN-approved experts.

Conclusion

Even though there are a number of problem areas in the reform that need 'repairing', I believe there is a hopeful sign; when teachers were asked to comment on whether they thought the reform would improve language learning, most were open-minded about the reform but possibly had had no concrete evidence of improvement as a result of the changes brought about by the reform. The key now is to show teachers or (better still) to encourage them to find out for themselves, that these ambitious educational innovations may improve learning and that they may also help Polish youth to be more open to other cultures thereby preparing them for life in a united European state.

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