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EU LANGUAGE POLICY OBJECTIVES AND POLAND'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Abstract. Languages play a crucial role in shaping the European landscape. At the supranational level, the European Union (EU) establishes objectives aimed at developing quality-driven language education and promotes strategies to equip Europeans with essential multilingual skills. However, the ultimate authority over each national educational system resides with the Member states, which take into account their specific contextual realities. In light of the European Union's political priorities for higher education, this study examines how Poland approaches language education in the academic context. On the one hand, the analysis indicates Poland's latest outcomes and the nation's commitment to boosting linguistic potential through its higher education institutions by leveraging various European recommendations, and on the other, it underscores the importance of certain European initiatives that should merit greater consideration as they hold the potential to enrich language education in the Polish academic context.

Keywords: multilingualism; EU language policy; higher education; language teaching; Polish higher education; European Union

CELE POLITYKI JĘZYKOWEJ UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ A PODEJŚCIE POLSKI DO KSZTAŁCENIA JĘZYKOWEGO W SZKOLNICTWIE WYŻSZYM

Abstrakt. Języki odgrywają integralną rolę w kształtowaniu europejskiego krajobrazu. Na poziomie ponadnarodowym Unia Europejska wyznacza cele i promuje działania wspierające kształcenie językowe oparte na jakości prowadzące do rozwijania wielojęzyczności wśród Europejczyków. Jednakże ostateczna władza decyzyjna dotycząca każdego krajowego systemu edukacyjnego spoczywa w rękach państw członkowskich, które uwzględniają swoją unikalną specyfikę i możliwości do wdrożenia stosownych rozwiązań. Na tle politycznych priorytetów Unii Europejskiej, niniejszy artykuł wskazuje działania Polski mające na celu poprawę edukacji językowej na poziomie

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wyższym. Z jednej strony analiza dowodzi, że Polska osiągnęła ostatnio pewne znaczące sukcesy i nadal aktywnie dąży do zwiększenia potencjału językowego swojego szkolnictwa wyższego, czerpiąc inspiracje z różnorodnych rekomendacji europejskich, a z drugiej strony podkreśla znaczenie niektórych europejskich inicjatyw zasługujących na szerszą uwagę, ponieważ mają potencjał wzbogacenia edukacji językowej w polskim kontekście akademickim.

Słowa kluczowe: wielojęzyczność; polityka językowa UE; szkolnictwo wyższe; nauka języków; polskie szkolnictwo wyższe; Unia Europejska

1. LANGUAGE POLICY OBJECTIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Actions taken by the European Union (EU) as part of its language policy encompass both legally binding and non-binding frameworks. A significant legal foundation for these actions is found in Article 165(2) of the Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2012), which mandates that the EU's initiatives should focus on enhancing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and promotion of languages spoken within its Member States. Hence, various EU bodies have been endorsing the objective that European citizens should be able to communicate in at least two languages besides their mother tongue (cf. e.g. European Commission, 1995; European Council, 2002; Council of the European Union, 2019), promoting proficiency in national or regional languages, the less widely used languages, and other European languages (e.g. European Commission, 2003; Council of the European Union, 2008).

Such undertakings are rooted in the EU's commitment to multilingualism, broadly defined as "the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (Commission of the European Communities, 2007, p. 6). The goal of expanding Europeans' linguistic repertoire, recognized as their multilingual competence, is to improve their capacity

to use different languages appropriately and effectively for communication[,] ... to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts according to one's wants or needs (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 8).

Moreover, multilingual competence has been acknowledged as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning and is seen as forming a prominent part of literacy (Council of the European Union, 2018; European Commission,

2019). Fostering multilingualism within the perspective of lifelong language learning has direct implications for higher education institutions across Europe (Council of the European Union, 2008).

1.1 PROMOTING MULTILINGUALISM THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

More than 10 years back, the European Commission's (2013) *Communication on European Higher Education in the World* underlined the importance of incorporating multilingualism throughout the entire higher education curriculum, and in 2022 the Council of the European Union (2022) maintained that multilingualism should be respected when higher education institutions define the languages of learning and teaching.

The necessity for exploring and implementing innovative, inclusive, and multilingual teaching methods, such as intercomprehension (European Commission, 2012; Candelier et al., 2012) was highlighted in the *Recommendation on a Comprehensive Approach to the Teaching and Learning of Languages* (Council of the European Union, 2019). The rationale for leveraging students' previously acquired languages in academic instruction is based on the mutual facilitative roles that languages can play in developing an individual's multilingual repertoire (Jessner, 2008). By recognizing the interrelated nature of languages and capitalizing on this richer learning environment, educators can help learners create strategies to enable them to co-construct meaning from various clues derived from diverse sources (European Commission, 2012, p. 9–10) and develop effective communication skills to be applied in different contexts (Hufeisen, 2018; Cenoz, 2013; De Angelis, 2007). Conceptualizing languages as interconnected resources rather than separate entities led to the “multilingual turn” in education (Melo-Pfeifer, 2018; Kubota, 2016; Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014), contesting the traditional monolingual approach.

Although stakeholders theoretically acknowledge the need for innovative multilingual didactics, such pedagogical practices are often absent in classroom settings (Bonnet & Siemund, 2018). In fact, despite the potential benefits of a holistic approach to multilingualism, language education often prioritizes the teaching of individual languages, frequently overlooking or undervaluing learners' pre-existing language skills (Piccardo & Galante, 2018; CEFR Expert Group, 2023). The findings from the Eurobarometer report titled *Europeans and Their Languages* (European Commission, 2024a) indicate that only a small percentage of students utilize their existing linguistic resources

for language learning. Specifically, only 17% of students reported using their mother tongue for studying languages, 11% reported using their first additional language, and 10% indicated using both their second and third additional languages to expand their linguistic repertoire. Moreover, the *6th Global Survey Report*, prepared by the International Association of Universities (Marinoni Siro & Pina Cardona, 2024), further evidences that monolingualism remains prevalent in academic language instruction, while instances of bilingualism or trilingualism in curricula typically involve only the use of a country's official languages for educating students. Therefore, continuous promotion of multilingual didactics is necessary for both language educators and students.

Fostering multilingualism by supporting advancements in language learning and teaching is among the specific actions towards meeting the strategic objective of improving quality, equity, inclusion, and success in education and training as specified in the Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training Towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021–2030) (Council of the European Union, 2021). The same resolution, among its key priorities, places the enhancement of mobility opportunities for learners, educators, teacher trainers, and university staff, which is seen not only as an essential component of collaboration within the EU but also as a means to improve and diversify language development of the EU citizens.

A study-abroad experience is widely recognized as one of the most effective methods for acquiring a foreign language or enhancing one's language proficiency (e.g. Barron, 2006; Diaz-Campos, 2004; Isabelli, 2004). This immersive experience offers a multitude of advantages; particularly, it has a great potential to foster autonomy in foreign language learning (Amuzie & Winke, 2009), to improve communication skills in the local language (Asoodar et al., 2017), or yet to boost one's professional outlook, since students who engage in mobility programs tend to have superior foreign language skills, making them more appealing candidates for companies operating on an international scale (Bryła, 2015, p. 638). Therefore, the European Parliament and Council of the European Union (2021) in a resolution establishing Erasmus+ set a clear goal, namely that "the Programme should enhance the learning of languages,... it is important that multilingualism be a key principle in the implementation of the Programme" (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021, p. 7).

1.2 INTERNATIONALIZATION

In the context of increasing globalization in education, languages serve various important roles. Apart from being a medium of instruction, they also act as vehicles for academic exchange or communication across cultures. This lays down the common ground for the goals of EU language policy and the internationalization of higher education, which is defined as “integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). It has been advanced by the Bologna process and the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by way of promoting greater comparability, compatibility, and coherence of systems within European higher education, as well as language learning, with active participation from the EU in these initiatives (European Commission, 2018).

Internationalization has profoundly impacted higher education language policies, highlighting English as “the primary lingua franca in the academic world” (Lasagabaster, 2015, p. 257; cf. also Marinoni & Pina Cardona, 2024, p. 41). Consequently, many institutions have adopted English as their main medium of instruction, even in countries where it is not recognized as the official language. Although this shift can enhance an institution’s international profile and attract global staff and students, it also poses risks to other languages and may draw criticism from educational stakeholders (Burton & Gatti, 2022; Airey et al., 2017, p. 567).

In *Rome Ministerial Communiqué* (2020), the Ministers of Education recognized the need for continuous development of an interconnected EHEA through cooperation and mobility that fosters bonds between institutions and, notably, enhances the acquisition of intercultural and linguistic competencies. The aforementioned *Communiqué* emphasized the importance of achieving at least 20% of graduates in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) having experienced a study or training period abroad. This goal is to be supported through internationalized curricula and participation in worldwide environments.

2. POLAND'S APPROACH TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN ACADEMIA

The *Integrated Skills Strategy 2030* (Ministry of Education and Science, 2020), which encompasses the higher education sector, emphasizes the expansion

and use of basic, transversal and professional skills as key in Poland's economic prosperity and social cohesion. The "basic skills" set includes multilingual competence, which corresponds to the Council of the European Union's (2018) and the European Commission's (2019) *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* reference framework.

Poland's educational policies also support the life-long learning strategy and the "two languages plus one" rule through mandating foreign language courses in schools and setting specific foreign language proficiency requirements for higher education graduates: a minimum B2 proficiency for Bachelor's graduates and a B2+ for Master's graduates (Regulation of 14 November 2018; Act of 22 December 2015). As it turns out, the policy approach to supporting individuals' linguistic growth as part of their study programs seems to significantly contribute to their actual multilingual skills both quantitatively (in terms of the number of languages they speak) and qualitatively (in terms of their proficiency levels). In 2022 (Statistics Poland, 2024b), 40% of higher education graduates were able to communicate in more than one foreign language. This figure represents a substantial difference when compared to individuals with basic vocational education, where only 9.1% demonstrated similar multilingual communication skills. Over three-quarters of higher education graduates capable of speaking two or more foreign languages reported being able to use at least one of those languages at an intermediate or advanced level. Still, irrespective of the required foreign language proficiency to be attained at the academic level, 6.2% of people with higher education claimed to have been unable to speak any language apart from their mother tongue. This, however, contrasts sharply with individuals possessing lower educational qualifications: 53.9% of those with basic vocational education and 49.7% of those with lower-secondary school, primary school, or no formal education declared an inability to speak any foreign language (Statistics Poland, 2024b).

As the effectiveness of language education is significantly influenced by the quality of instruction, the teaching profession in Poland is governed by educational standards. Notably, in the 2019 Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education (Regulation of 25 July 2019), pre-primary and primary teacher education programs included provisions for foreign language teaching, qualifying graduates to teach a foreign language up to grade three of primary school (for further discussion see Brzosko-Barratt et al., 2024). Nevertheless, while the prescribed knowledge for future teachers of pre-school and grades 1–3 in primary schools concerning foreign language teaching methods included specific references to Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) or

Gattegno's The Silent Way (Announcement of 9 February 2024; Regulation of 25 July 2019), there was no mention of any multilingual teaching approaches or pluralistic didactic approaches to languages and cultures, such as Awakening to Languages, which could serve as an excellent way to introduce children to linguistic diversity (Candelier et al., 2012, p. 7). This oversight implies that future early language teachers may not be adequately equipped with diverse strategies necessary to effectively address the needs of multilingual classrooms. Although regulatory gaps persist, it is encouraging to see that some higher education institutions have proactively incorporated such courses as Integrated Language Didactics or Plurilingual and Pluricultural Education into their language teacher training curricula (cf. Sielanko-Byford & Zielińska, 2024).

2.1 LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH INTERNATIONALIZATION AND MOBILITY

As of the 2024/2025 academic year, there were 352 higher education institutions functioning in Poland, indicating a slight decrease from the 354 institutions present in the 2023/2024 academic year (Statistics Poland, 2025, 2024a). Interestingly, Poland has managed to attract international students who choose not only English but also Polish as the language of instruction. *Cudzoziemcy na uczelniach w Polsce – Raport 2023* (Ośrodek Przetwarzania Informacji Państwowy Instytut Badawczy, 2025) evidences that international students enrolled in first- and second-cycle studies as well as uniform master's degree programs in Poland in 2023/2024 most often decided to pursue their studies in the Polish language (58.7%), while 41.3% of them participated in programs conducted in a foreign language, predominantly in English (38.5%). Notably, a certified competence in the Polish language on the level of at least C1 can grant the foreigner a possibility to study free of charge (Act of 20 July 2018, Article 324). So, also such courses as Polish as a foreign language for academic purposes are indispensable (cf. Jasińska, 2023).

Tracer study of HEI graduates (Fila & Sobestjański, 2022, p. 23) on over a thousand of those who graduated between 2013–2019 and participated in Erasmus+ mobility “who found permanent employment during or after their studies invariably place foreign language skills high on the list” (p. 23). However, the Erasmus+ statistics for 2023 show that only 56,888 Polish students (European Commission, 2024b) participated in the mobility program, which corresponds to a 4.71% participation rate within a higher education population

of 1,245,153 (Statistics Poland, 2024a). The number of academic staff and administrative personnel who left Poland as part of mobility activities under the Erasmus+ program was reported as 28,480 individuals. The numbers for those travelling to Poland are even lower: 43,602 learners and 12,483 staff participating in the Erasmus+ mobility program (European Commission, 2024b). These rates are currently below the optimal standard desired at the EU level, indicating a critical need for improved strategies to promote such exchanges to and from Poland.

2.2 LANGUAGE EDUCATION PRACTICES IN POLISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Poland's response to the EU objectives may also be explored by the assessment of the specific language education practices within Polish higher education institutions. These practices are documented and evaluated by the Polish Accreditation Committee (Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna, PKA). The PKA, an independent statutory body, was established by the higher education laws of 2005 and 2018 (Act of 27 July 2005; Act of July 2018), which entrusted it with the responsibility of assessing academic institutions in specific fields, including teacher training, as well as ensuring alignment with the conditions for conducting studies. The PKA is also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) owing to its compliance with standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA.

The PKA inspects all aspects related to foreign languages that are part of a given study program at Polish higher education institutions, regardless of their public or non-public status. Specifically, Criterion 7 of the PKA's "Detailed Criteria for Program Evaluation" (PKA, 2019) connects language development with the process of internationalization and assesses the preparedness of academic staff to teach and students to acquire the vital knowledge and skills in foreign languages. Moreover, it evaluates institutional support for international mobility of students and academic staff, and availability of an educational offer in foreign languages, which is considered to be leading to a systematic increase in the degree of internationalization and exchange of students and staff.

This comprehensive evaluation demonstrates how language development is integrated into academic programs, which is recognized as crucial for fostering internationalization in higher education (PKA, 2019). In addition to a

positive or negative evaluation, the PKA may award a given study program with a certificate based on its educational quality-based practices or documented regular achievements of students and graduates (PKA, 2023). The study programs indicated in the analysis of the awarded Certificates of Excellence in Education (PKA, 2023) and listed under Criterion 7 encompassed Chemistry, Food Technology and Nutrition, Graphic Design, International Economic Relations (at two different institutions), and Internal Security. Surprisingly, language studies do not appear on the list. The reports included numerous exemplary, and effective practices, for example,

- expanding the dimension of the English language courses at Bachelor's and Master's levels of study as well as introducing a wide range of English-language courses for the students;
- offering a double diploma / a double degree program or continuing education in English-language studies;
- providing language training for the teaching staff, encompassing an intensive specialized English language course;
- introducing a personalized course on teaching methodology in English (including one-to-one sessions or class observations);
- implementing an intensive 2-week specialist English course abroad in a renowned language centre;
- providing students with opportunities to participate in numerous classes delivered by foreign academics, including lectures (as well as open lectures), trainings and workshops;
- preparing students and teaching staff for internationalization as well as supporting their active participation in mobility programs;
- collaborating as part of the European University initiative;
- providing the opportunity to pass European Competency Tests, such as the EChemTest;
- taking part in internships and staff residencies in prestigious research centers outside of Poland;
- enabling participation of the teaching cadre, students and graduates in international organizations and associations;
- conducting international projects and participating in international conferences;
- hosting foreign students as guests and involving foreign students in the typical course of study;
- offering education in foreign languages and such short educational programs as a "Scandinavian Module";

- modernizing curricula and teaching methods by using good practices from abroad inspired by numerous foreign exchanges of students and academics;
- creating conditions for virtual mobility for both academics and students in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- offering a number of elective courses in foreign languages in addition to allocating 240 teaching hours to a foreign language as part of a full-time Bachelor's degree study program;
- enabling the participation of faculty staff in the activities of international working groups and expert groups operating within NATO and the European Union.

These actions certainly contribute to qualitative linguistic development and reflect many of the EU objectives. Nevertheless, apart from good practices, there are also reports evidencing a burning need for improvement in some institutions which either partially align with the standards or may have not met them yet. Randomly selected PKA reports that have identified errors and deficiencies within study programs call for such fundamental and necessary actions as:

- adding foreign literature in diploma theses and syllabi;
- introducing the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), which is a requirement for all higher education institutions in participating countries that wish to take advantage of the Erasmus+ programme;
- motivating students and lecturers to participate in Erasmus+ mobility, or expanding the scale and scope of student mobility;
- meeting the potential of language studies by including activities in the area of language and intercultural education in the form of dual/joint degrees, international summer schools or intensive courses;
- employing native instructors and inviting lecturers from abroad to conduct classes;
- introducing classes taught in a foreign language and taking into account the opinions of students and academic teachers.

While the above-mentioned list is not exhaustive, such recommendations demonstrate Poland's commitment to the EU policy goals and reflect ongoing efforts toward their implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, the EU has consistently urged higher education institutions in the member states to take specific actions to prepare students for a globalized workforce. Academic institutions in Poland, due to the requirements established by national legislation and the rigorous audit performed by the Polish Accreditation Committee, are continually motivated to increase the quality of language education. Numerous national and institutional accomplishments, as evidenced by various European and Polish reports and statistics discussed herein, demonstrate the ongoing enhancement of individual multilingual skills of Polish university graduates.

While currently the position of the Polish language is assured within Polish higher education, the increasing emphasis on English-language programs echoes broader global trends where English has become the lingua franca of academia and business. However, to offer innovation to language education, multilingual curricula incorporating multilingual didactics should be more vigorously developed across all academic disciplines.

Therefore, it can be concluded that, despite the need for continued development in certain areas, a significant correlation exists between the European Union's objectives and Poland's strategy for language education within its higher education system.

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