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LANGUAGE AWARENESS OF NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF POLISH

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the level of language awareness manifested by the advanced learners of Polish as a FL (146 students of the Polish Language Course attending the School of Polish Language and Culture at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland). The exact focus is on learning outcomes (areas of language progress and regress), and perception of the Polish language material learnt (including grammar, vocabulary and phonology), an emphasis being put on most problematic issues. Having presented learners' opinions and reflections on language, implications for teachers including teaching materials raising language awareness are offered.

KEYWORDS: language awareness, language difficulty, language material

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł bada poziom świadomości językowej wśród zaawansowanych użytkowników języka polskiego jako obcego (146 uczestników kursu języka polskiego prowadzonego przez Szkołę Języka i Kultury Polskiej Uniwersytetu Śląskiego). Badana świadomość językowa odnosi się do rezultatów w nauce i obserwowanych zmian w języku respondentów oraz percepcji materiału językowego (gramatyki, słownictwa i elementów fonologii) pokazując przede wszystkim trudności językowe, z jakimi borykają się badani. Po ukazaniu najbardziej problematycznych kwestii, autorka przedstawia propozycję ćwiczeń podnoszącą świadomość językową osób uczących się języka polskiego.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: świadomość językowa, trudności językowe, materiał językowy

INTRODUCTION

Language awareness, initially defined by Fairclough (1992) as "conscious attention to properties of language and language use as an element of language education," is substantially impacted by the experience and perception of the individual, and for this reason Andrews (2007) has recently worded it as involving "a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life".

That role can be examined from the perspective of three distinct levels:

– the cognitive level, referring to awareness of language patterns,
– the affective level, i.e. with regard to forming attitudes, and
– the social level, which references the improvement of learners' effectiveness as communicators.

This form of consciousness-raising language awareness facilitates language development, the sources of which are explained by Leow (1997) explains in the following way:

– meta-awareness apparently correlates with an increased usage of hypothesis testing and rule formation (conceptually driven processing)
– learners demonstrating a higher level of awareness perform significantly better than those with a lower level of awareness on both the recognition and production of the targeted forms (Leow 1997: 560, as cited in Gabryś 2002).

In such a situation, as Arndt, Harvey and Nuttall (2000) have it, a focus on language awareness may only bring numerous benefits. First of all, speakers are more appreciative of the complexity and sophistication of communication through language. Secondly, they are encouraged to consider what is involved in attempts to transfer L1 skills to another language and, thus, to draw inferential relationships between languages, which is one of the steps in developing intercultural communication skills. Finally, speakers derive a broadened and deepened understanding of how languages work when learning.

LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND LEARNING

Following Schmidt (1993), learning is only possible if certain conscious processing takes place. Here, it is referred to as intention, attention, noticing and understanding. The very mechanism of the first of them tells us that when a task does not focus attention on what needs to be learned, intentional learning may be superior. In such a case the motivation to learn may lead to the adoption of effective cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. In second language learning, in spite of Krashen's evidence supporting incidental approaches, the findings from controlled studies have generally shown that intentional subjects do consistently better than incidental subjects, and that attempts by adults to learn second languages incidentally through communicative interaction have often been only partially successful (Skehan 1992).

While the intention to learn is not always a key to success, attention to the material to be learned is (Schmidt 1993: 209). In second language acquisition it has been frequently claimed that attention to input – or the subjective experience of noticing – is necessary for input to become intake. It is then that it becomes helpful for the learner because of its availability for further mental processing in long-term memory. As noticing is related to the transfer of information to long-term memory, understanding is related to the organization of material in long-term

memory, to restructuring, and to system learning (Schmidt 1993: 213). In other words, understanding is a higher level of awareness than noticing. Although it is not very clear which aspects of language are better learned with and which aspects without understanding, the new emphasis represents an attempt to complement communicative language teaching with instructional approaches that focus on formal features of language and consciousness raising.

The (non) existence and functioning of the very processes constituted the rationale behind the present study on language awareness conducted among non-native speakers of Polish. The areas investigated included learning outcomes and learning material, and were looked at from the perspective of language change and difficulty as perceived by the sample.

LA OF NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF POLISH: THE RESEARCH

The sample constituted 146 students of the Polish Language Course attending the School of Polish Language and Culture at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland.

8 different nationalities and languages the sample represented allowed for presenting them under the label of 3 different branches of the Indo-European language family, namely Germanic, Slavonic and Romance. The first group (A) comprised 13 German, 16 Scandinavian and 13 English students of Polish as a FL, it being 46 altogether. The second (B) was composed of 24 Ukrainians and 25 Slovaks, which makes 49 in total, whereas the third group (C) consisted of 14 Italian, 18 Spanish and 19 French course participants, that is 51 as a whole. As far as gender and age distribution is concerned, group A was made up of 17 female and 29 male students aged 21–45, group B contained 21 females and 28 males between 24 and 49 years of age, while in group C the number of female representatives came to 25 and male ones to 26 between the ages of 20 and 31. In terms of qualifications, groups A and B seemed homogeneous and included similar proportions of BA and MA degree holders, i.e. 25 vs 21 and 25 vs 24 respondents respectively. Groups C, being younger in general, predominated in BA students (27), it being 10 more than MA students (17), as well as 7 subjects with no diplomas whatsoever.

The questionnaire entitled *Learning experiences*, was divided into two interrelated sections, and aimed at gathering information corresponding to subjects' self-awareness of their use of Polish. It consisted in a series of open-ended and closed questions under the following headings:
– Learning outcomes,
– Evaluation of the Polish language material learnt.

When it comes to the *Learning outcomes* section, the respondents' task was, as the name suggests, to evaluate their learning outcomes, placing an emphasis on

any changes observed in their linguistic competence. Accordingly, the students were expected to take a critical stance on the above-mentioned changes, and present their impressions on a four-point scale, where 2 stood for negative, 3 meant mediocre, 4 was good, and 5 indicated very good.

Next, in the part devoted to the *Learning material*, the students were requested to assess levels of difficulty of the Polish language material. More precisely, a list of specific questions was made so as to identify and specify the language areas the students considered easy and difficult. Furthermore, they were asked to assess their reading, speaking, writing, and listening skills using another four-point scale, covering the marks the subjects in question received for a particular skill, where 2 corresponded to an unsatisfactory mark and 5 reflected a very good grade.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Confronted with the questions concerning the level of satisfaction taken from the current and past learning outcomes, the respondents' reactions differed not only between language groups, but above all from one nationality to another.

As regards the present learning outcomes, a Germanic group expressed a relatively low enthusiasm, namely 55% of Germans, 45% of Scandinavians and 50% of English were satisfied with their learning process, it being made up of good language performance and grades. The representatives of a Slavic group were more positive about their language results in general, that is, 80% of Ukrainians and 60% of Slovaks identified their satisfaction with the sense of making progress on a course and the ability to "use language outside school". The third (Romance) group was similar in their responses to the Germanic group, which means that the level of their satisfaction oscillated around 50%, it being 55% in the case of Italians, 50% reflected in Spanish answers and 45% of French students happy about their results. Those adopting a negative attitude stressed the fact that "the test or course outcomes do not translate into their real competence".

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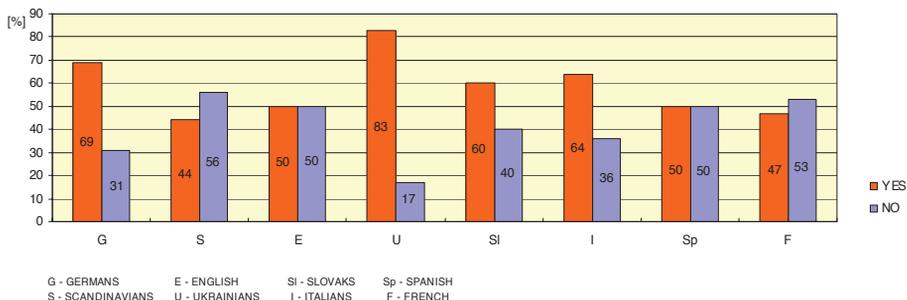
Figure 1. Are you satisfied with your present learning outcomes?

In the case of the past, which covered the period prior to the beginning of the course, 100% of all the informants in question revealed their dissatisfaction underlining the fact that their previous education lacked instruction, guidance, systematicity, and feedback.

When asked about changes in their language competence after enrolling on the course, the subjects listed a few language areas of a similar degree of alteration or sensitivity for alteration, each reaching 30% of the responses:

Table 1. Changes in language competence

Students	Changes
Germans	spelling, writing, comprehension
Scandinavians	spelling, writing, grammar
English	spelling, writing fluency
Ukrainians	intonation, pronunciation, lexis
Slovaks	pronunciation, spelling, lexis
Italians	writing, spelling, comprehension
Spaniards	writing, spelling, comprehension
French	writing, spelling, comprehension

It should be emphasised that the students were asked to reflect on any 3 language aspects that underwent development. Mainly for that reason the data were diverse and ranged from language skills to language subsystems. All the changes were perceived by the sample as positive and progressive, and judging by their common distribution, could be termed idiosyncratic, that is specific of a given group and L1 background. The tendencies observed could be, among others, spelling and writing typical of the representatives of Germanic languages, phonology and morphology of the Slavonic population, whereas it was spelling, writing and comprehension of the Romance group.

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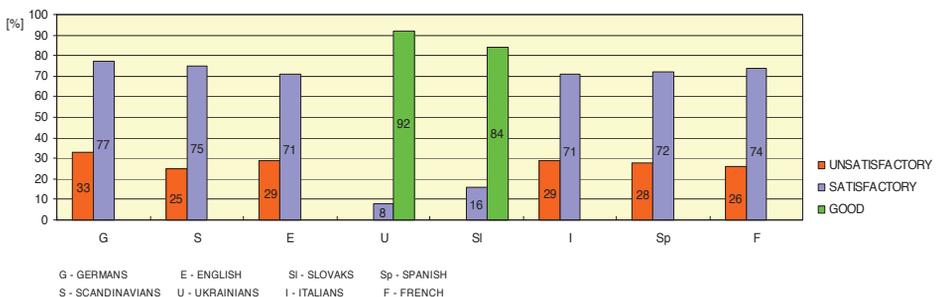
Figure 2. How do you evaluate language changes?

The subjects' exact attitudes towards the above-discussed language changes, as well as their present command of Polish were reflected on a 4-point scale. Deriving from the outcomes scaled from 2 to 5, where 2 stood for unsatisfactory, 3 meant satisfactory, 4 was good and 5 indicated very good, all three groups of students seemed optimistic and happy about their language competence.

More specifically, three quarters of German- and Scandinavian-speaking informants, as well as 70% of the English from the Germanic group gave a satisfactory score to the present state of affairs, choosing 3 on the scale. Italian, Spanish and French choices of their satisfaction were also around 70%. Much more optimism was expressed by Ukrainians and Slovaks perceiving their post-change experiences as good, which amounted to 90% and 85% of 4 rates respectively.

MATERIALS LEARNT

The opening question presented in this section concerned the language areas the students considered relatively easy in Polish. Surprisingly, nobody answered either that question and/or even commented upon it, or none of the following delving deeper into language easiness, which might result from a general belief held among foreigners that Polish is difficult.

This difficulty, consequently, was very much pronounced and highlighted by all the respondents under investigation. In practical terms, all the language areas considered troublesome by the sample received high ratings slightly below and above 90%. They very list goes as follows:

Table 2. Difficult language areas

Students	Difficult language areas
Germans	Grammar
Scandinavians	Morphology
English	Vocabulary
Ukrainians	Grammar
Slovaks	Vocabulary
Italians	Grammar
Spaniards	Vocabulary
French	Phonology

The students' choices showed one more consequence, namely the areas considered to be difficult hardly ever corresponded to those the sample regarded as their language improvements. What they reflected and were identical to, on the other hand, constituted the language aspects to be revised by the students, giving an equation mark between what is hard and what needs to be made up for.

In trying to investigate the actual scope and/ or examples of language difficulty, the subjects were asked further questions aimed at problematic language items and incomprehensible rules. This time, when comparing the data, the former correlated with the latter or, more often, the latter gave rise to and provoked the former:

Table 3. Evaluation of the material learnt (difficult language items and rules)

Students	Area	Difficult language item	Incomprehensible rule
Germans	Grammar	Declension, conjugation	Inflection
Germans	Vocabulary	Neologisms, phraseology	Word combination
Germans	Pronunciation	Voiced & voiceless sounds	Aspiration
Germans	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
Scandinavians	Grammar	Subject-verb/pronoun agreement	Word order
Scandinavians	Vocabulary	Adjectives, adverbs	Inflection
Scandinavians	Pronunciation	"ś", "ł" consonants	Palatalization, Diacritics
Scandinavians	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
English	Grammar	Plurals, conjugation	Inflection
English	Vocabulary	Idioms and hybrids	Word combination
English	Pronunciation	"l" vs "ł" consonants, voiced vs voiceless consonants	Aspiration
English	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
Ukrainians	Grammar	Comparison of adjectives and adverbs	Comparison
Ukrainians	Vocabulary	Phraseology, idioms	Word combination
Ukrainians	Pronunciation	Long vs short vowels, ą vs ę vowels	Vowel duration
Ukrainians	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
Slovaks	Grammar	Subject-verb/pronoun agreement	Word order
Slovaks	Vocabulary	Adjectives, nouns	Word orthography
Slovaks	Pronunciation	Intonation, "ł" sound	Intonation patterns
Slovaks	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation

Table 3. Cont.

Students	Area	Difficult language item	Incomprehensible rule
Italians	Grammar	Case, conjugation	Inflection
Italians	Vocabulary	Nouns, adjectives	Word orthography
Italians	Pronunciation	"ł" sound, "ś" vs "ć" consonant	Palatalization, Diacritics
Italians	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
Spaniards	Grammar	Declension, conjugation	Inflection
Spaniards	Vocabulary	Nouns, adjectives	Word spelling
Spaniards	Pronunciation	"ź" sound, "ń" sound	Palatalization, Diacritics
Spaniards	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation
French	Grammar	Progressive aspect, subject-verb agreement	Tense formation, inflection
French	Vocabulary	Adjectives, nouns	Word spelling
French	Pronunciation	"r" sound. Intonation	Articulation, Intonation patterns
French	Morphology	Prefixes, suffixes	Word formation

Each of the language items was complained about by 50% of the subjects, and went slightly beyond the aspects they admitted to have problems with when evaluating the language troubles in general. The regularities observed here allow for ascribing rule and linguistic difficulty to a given language (sub) group. The Germanics, apparently, seemed to complain about inflection, word order, word formation, word combination and sound aspiration (e.g. Germans and English facing conjugation or idiomatic problems, and Scandinavians "suffering from" diacritics). The problems dealt with by the Slavs ranged from comparison and word order to word formation, including word orthography and intonation patterns (e.g. Ukrainians struggling with adjective or adverb comparison and Slovaks coping with intonation problems). The Romance representatives, in turn, extended the list of difficulties by word spelling, tense formation, consonant palatalization and articulation (e.g. Spaniards misspelling adjectives or the French regarding progressive aspect troublesome). What was idiosyncratic and typical of one population only, on the other hand, included vowel duration time (in the case of Scandinavian students), and r articulation (reported by the French).

Given difficulties related to language subsystems, the subjects were asked to evaluate four language skills, starting from reading. Here, the data show reserve the Germanic and Romance groups treat their reading performance with, and almost three-quarters of good reactions on the part of the Slavonic respondents, being a reflection of marks received for reading (Fig. 3).
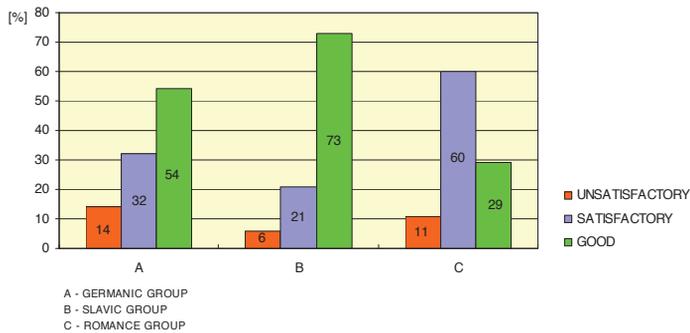
Figure 3. How do you evaluate reading? (general data)

A - GERMANIC GROUP
B - SLAVIC GROUP
C - ROMANCE GROUP

On closer inspection, the proportion of good scores the skill received on the evaluation scale was highest in the case of Scandinavians (82%), which was an exception to the rest of the group, and slightly smaller for Slovaks (76%) and Ukrainians (71%), which only proved a general optimistic feeling expressed by the Slavs (Fig. 4).


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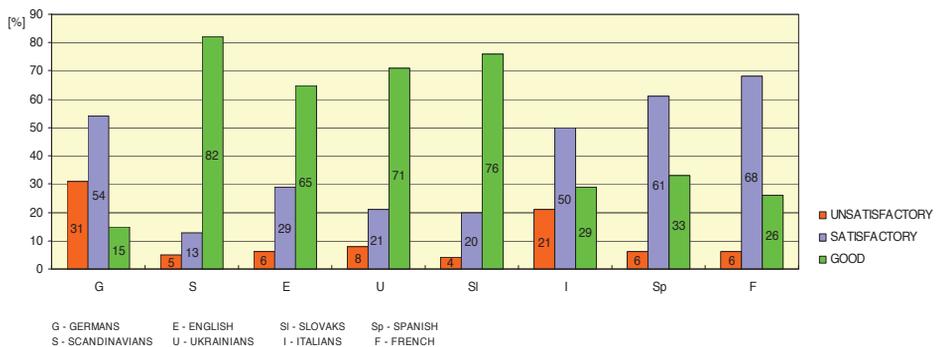
Figure 4. How do you evaluate reading (specific data)

If only the same could be said about listening, which, on the contrary, received the majority of negative responses in Germanic and Romance populations (67 and 57% respectively) (Fig. 5).

The poor German, Scandinavian and English poor scores could be partially accounted for their difficulties with intonation and sounds in general mentioned previously that contribute a lot to comprehension. In a similar vein, overlapping of Polish and Ukrainian sounds could explain their better listening results and a number of subjects considering their listening skills as good (Fig. 6).

Writing, on the other hand, aroused more toned reactions that, being presented on a wider scale, oscillated around 30% of choices on average. In terms of group proportions, the Germanic and Romance slightly predominated in the number of good scores over the Slavonic representatives (Fig. 7).
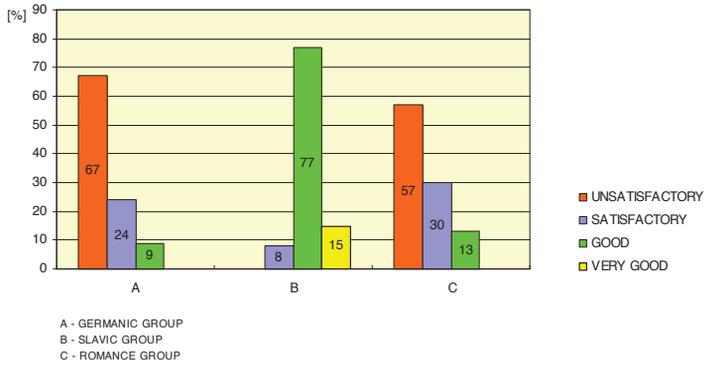
Figure 5. How do you evaluate listening? (general data)

A - GERMANIC GROUP
B - SLAVIC GROUP
C - ROMANCE GROUP
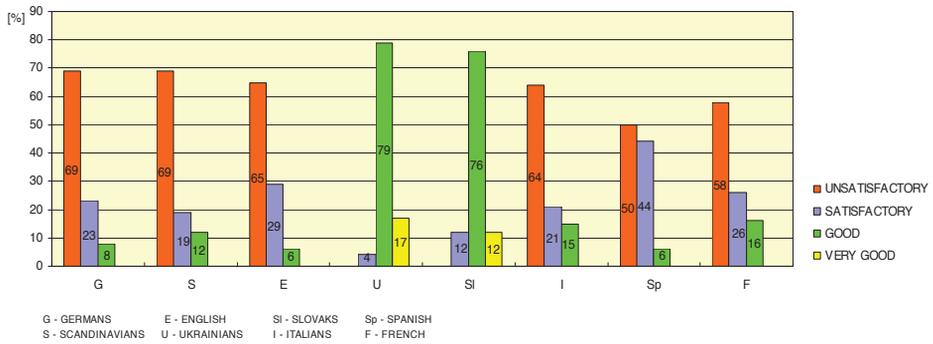
Figure 6. How do you evaluate listening? (specific data)

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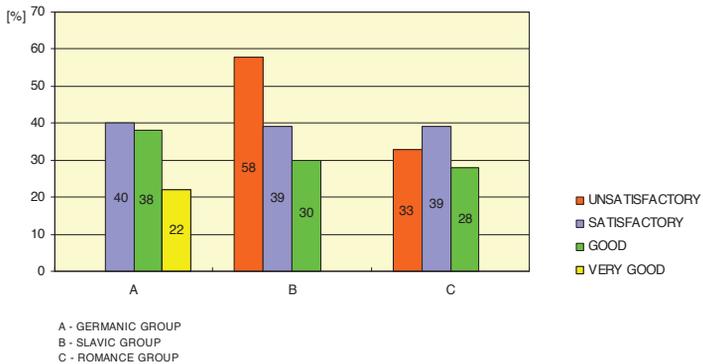
Figure 7. How do you evaluate writing? (general data)

A - GERMANIC GROUP
B - SLAVIC GROUP
C - ROMANCE GROUP

The percentage of the respondents satisfied with their writing production, however, was above mediocrity in the case of the latter group, going beyond 50%. More precisely, it was 58% of Ukrainians and 56% of Slovaks whose satisfaction derived from satisfactory marks and e.g. the lack of problems with word spelling reported beforehand (Fig. 8).

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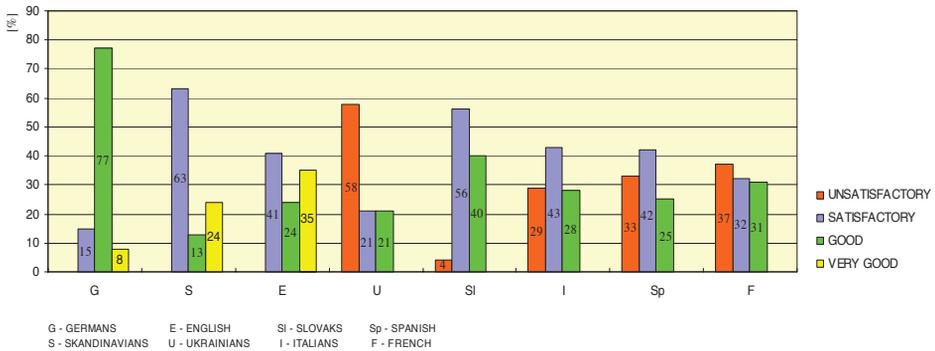
Figure 8. How do you evaluate writing? (specific data)

Finally, speaking received the lowest score, and, at the same time, the biggest waves of pessimism, were particularly observed in the Slavonic and Romance language groups (Fig. 9).

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B - SLAVIC GROUP
C - ROMANCE GROUP
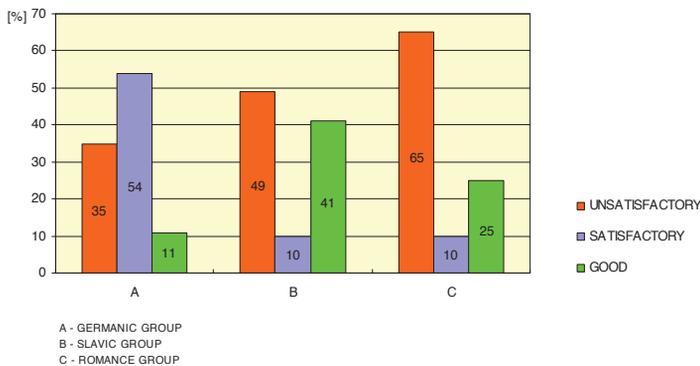
Figure 9. How do you evaluate speaking? (general data)

The Germanic group was an exception here, where 54% of the sample expressed their satisfaction with oral production, which could be accounted for by the lack of intonation problems they were proud of previously (Fig. 10).

As it emerges from a detailed analysis, the most dissatisfied seemed Spanish and Ukrainian students (67%), as well as Italians (64%) followed by the French
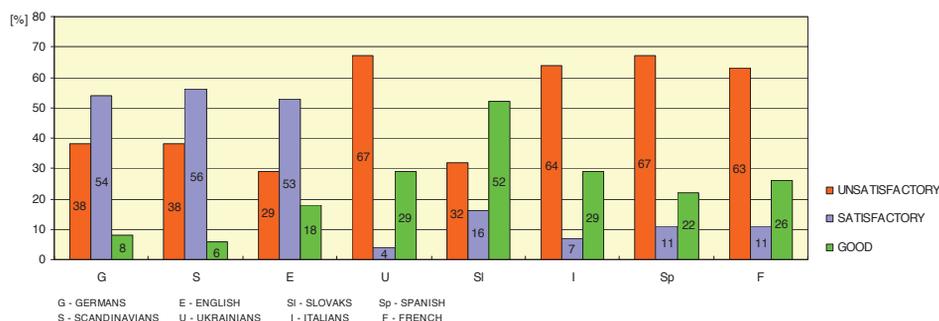
Figure 10. How do you evaluate speaking? (specific data)

(63%). Their choices could be determined probably by the fact that speaking was one of the language areas they regarded as unchanged when evaluating linguistic advancement.

CONCLUSIONS

The observed language tendencies allow us to state that the subjects in question are definitely language aware, and represent previously-mentioned awareness and attention, as well as recognition. Their reflections on the language quality express the sense of being progressive rather than regressive. The opinions on the level of language difficulty consist in treating Polish as a considerable difficulty in general, predominance being given to grammar, lexis and phonology, as well as to listening and speaking owing to L1–L2 differences.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

How to change and balance the subjects' perceptions in extreme and negative cases might be the question concerning some teachers. The answer seems to lie in the material and instruction balance best achieved when following task based language teaching. This approach, as Long (1998) has it, shifts focus on meaning or communication, but when comprehension or production problems are encountered, students' attention may be temporarily shifted to linguistic elements in context. Which forms are targeted, and when, is determined by the learner's developing language system, not by a predetermined external linguistic description. Focus on form, according to Long, is learner-centred in a radical, psycholinguistic sense: it respects the learner's internal syllabus and it is under learner control.

The examples of assignments presented below, though they cater for only some problems listed above, differ from the tasks included in traditional coursebooks as they are based on poetry. They are believed to not only broaden the perspective of problem recovery, but also language mastery, developing linguistic competence and reflection on language at the same time irrespective of the course or study attended. The poems in question were written by the author of the article, and offer a remedial work on a language, relying on language meaning, comprehension and recognition/production.

Table 4. TASK 1. (Poem taken from Wysocka 2010)

TASK 1. Przeczytaj wiersz, wypisz wszystkie rzeczowniki w mianowniku, a następnie od każdego z nich utwórz formę odpowiadającą na niżej sformułowane pytania

W PORCIE

Najpierw przypłynęły
zapach i oddech sztormu
głębokie jak Ocean Spokojny
i niespokojne jak Morze Czerwone
a gdy tylko przybiłeś do portu
zalały mnie ciepłe fale twoich myśli
i po raz pierwszy

żałowałam, że umiem pływać

....

....

....

Z kim? Z czym?...

Kogo? Czego? ....

O kim? O czym?..

Here, it is the case of nouns that the learners are confronted with. First, they are asked to write down all the nouns in the nominative case, and then proceed to answering a few questions, each reflecting a different case in Polish.

The next exercise is more demanding, having three parts. It opens with a part devoted to all the adjectives presented in the text. What follows concerns the way the very adjectives should be matched with nouns given leaving the original forms unchanged. And, finally, sentences are to be created on the basis of previously-coined adjective+noun combinations.

Table 5. TASK 2. (Poem taken from Wysocka 2010)

TASK 2. Przeczytaj wiersz, wypisz przymiotniki znajdujące się w tekście, połącz je odpowiednio z podanymi niżej rzeczownikami nie zmieniając istniejących form i utwórz po jednym zdaniu z każdym utworzonym połączeniem (przymiotnik+rzeczownik).

***
    Chciałabym zamknąć
    Oczy i uszy, usta i nos
    I wyłączyć myślenie
    A pilot z czerwonym
    Guzikiem „włącz"
    Schować gdzieś głęboko
    Żebyś nie mógł
    Mnie uruchomić
    Przez parę ładnych,
    Brzydkich dni.

nocy, liści, kolorem, znakiem, słów, paskiem

Przymiotniki:
....

Przymiotniki z rzeczownikami:
....

....

....

Zdania:
....

....

....

The suggestion is to use poetry-based exercises for any language area(s) the students have problems with or are not confident about, and, thus, influence their language awareness; its attention, noticing and understanding components.

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