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THINGS THAT POLISH TEACHERS OF ENGLISH DISLIKE

Data presented in this paper comes from the results of the questionnaire devoted to the professional development of English teachers. It discusses the activities that the teachers under study consider to be of a negative nature in their work. These are: working with more and less capable learners, evaluation of student progress, contacts with school authorities and student parents. It is assumed that the knowledge of these problems will be used by teacher trainers and university lecturers.

1. Introduction

Data presented and discussed in this paper comes from the questionnaire devoted to the development of FL teachers' professional careers. There were 30 teachers of English with not less than 8 years of teaching practice who agreed to answer it (cf. Wysocka, 1996: 165-173). Data collecting ended in 1996, detailed analysis proceeded through 1997. Now, I will try to concentrate on those activities of teachers under investigation which they definitely consider to be of a negative nature in the overall picture of their whole work. I assume that although the material presented here refers to Polish situation, the nature of the phenomena described may appear interesting to study by foreign language teachers and teacher trainers from other countries. It may supply the data for analysis done by researchers working on the quality of the teaching-learning process.

2. Working with more and less capable learners

In the beginning of their careers, the majority of teachers (19) declared that they simply "did not care" about the more capable students, thinking that they simply did not need additional attention, and they concentrated on the less capable individuals. At the time of the interview, however, they admitted that they had become discouraged with the unsatisfactory progress of these learners and definitely concentrated on their work with the good students. Poor students were described as boring, disappointing, troublemaking and/or "inconvenient". The effort invested in teaching them did not bring expected results since "they did not understand anything although they worked hard". The

teachers realized that they presented an inappropriate attitude to this group of students and also realized that these learners needed additional attention and help. They admitted that they tried hard to provide this to them, and, at the same time to change this unfriendly attitude of which they are absolutely aware. Out of the 30 teachers answering the questionnaire, only 11 still believed in their less talented students, and showed patience towards them.

Neither are the good and capable learners favoured by their teachers. All respondents pointed out that they did not like and did not want to work with good students whom they consider lazy. The interviewees do appreciate both talented and hardworking individuals but such cases are described as absolutely exceptional; several teachers said that they had never met such a student so far.

At first, good learners were favoured by their teachers, since they formed a challenge for them, provoking them to further study. In the course of time, the teachers noticed that good learners “need not necessarily be liked” because they are constantly showing off, continuously creating discipline problems, and “asking difficult questions”. There were respondents who openly admitted that they felt threatened by and even afraid of such learners who frequently possess better and deeper knowledge than their own. The above statements could indicate that the teachers really like average learners.

3. The problem of evaluating student progress

Construction of FL tests, their administration and especially grading are the components of the whole FL teaching process with which the teachers have the greatest amount of trouble. They admitted that most problems had appeared in the beginning of their work; however, even now, the majority of teachers (21) have the feeling that their evaluation of student progress is somehow improper and/or inaccurate. They realized that they did not know how to cope with this phenomenon. This may be the reason why our respondents supplied rather general and insufficient information on this subject.

The tendency that can be noticed among the teachers’ answers is that, in the beginning of their teaching careers, they concentrated on written tests devoted to grammar and/or vocabulary, which were carefully corrected and the mistakes commented upon. Now, together with their increased teaching experience the teachers decided to concentrate mostly on oral tests, evaluating global language behaviour of their students. The teachers noticed that they had become less accurate and careful in correcting errors. Only 6 persons reported compositions as regular assignments and/or tests. All the teachers were of the opinion that they had difficulties in correcting and evaluating this type of test and simply preferred to avoid it.

Basing the evaluation of student progress mostly on global speaking abilities seems to be the method that the interviewees adopted to cope with the problem of grading that they do not like because they cannot solve it.

4. The problem of attitude toward school

Teachers’ work does not only mean regular teaching during lessons. General relations between particular teachers and school authorities on the one hand and other teachers on the other hand determine the character of their work, since its quality depends on how a particular teacher feels at school.

Unfortunately, the analysis of data collected proved that the relations between the English teachers and school authorities are problematic, or to say the least, indifferent. The respondents admitted openly that they did not like school and did not care about headmasters/headmistresses and other teachers, pointing out at the same time that teaching was most important for them because they like it regardless of being underpaid.

School authorities are generally considered by all the teachers as very "traditional" in the sense that they did not accept any innovations in the teaching process, including even such trivial changes as the rearrangement of tables and chairs in the classroom. When criticized, teachers stop being innovative and use the generally accepted patterns of behaviour.

The headmasters/headmistresses received particularly negative evaluations from the teachers under investigation. First of all teachers objected to poor results of the class observation which was the headmasters' duty to perform. Since they were not English teachers, they could not provide any remarks or opinions that would appear useful (there were only two teachers who reported discussions concerning classroom management that followed such visits). The visited English teachers spoke about headmasters criticizing them in public, i.e., in the teachers' room, in front of other teachers. In general, headmasters were blamed for acts of disloyalty and dishonesty directed against teachers. When asked about details, the informants refused any concrete information.

The investigated teachers are tired of school. They point out that their institutions are interested only in bureaucracy, checking student attendance, and statistics, never in the quality of the teaching-learning process. There are two significant quotations that may sum up this description: "Now I never ask anybody for help because I always asked in vain." and "School disturbs teaching".

The relations between our teachers of English and teachers of other subjects need separate discussion. Since there still exists a shortage of well-qualified English teachers, they are treated in schools much better than other teachers. These are teachers of English who dictate the conditions of their employment and usually receive what they ask for (e.g. a schedule of their classes constructed according to their wishes). The English teachers have the possibility of making extra money and they may always go to another school when they find a more attractive offer. There exists the atmosphere of envy around them in the teachers' room. They feel that they are "the aristocracy at school" - as was described by one of the respondents and they also feel that other teachers treat them with cool indifference. Five persons point out that mathematics teachers show particularly negative attitude towards them, since they realize that it is not mathematics but English that has become the most important school subject.

Obviously part of the teachers must like the role of the favourite. For the majority, however, it contributes to the whole situation at school which they consider unpleasant. It is surprising that they have not left teaching yet and looked for some other, better paid job, which is still easy for them to find.

5. The problem of contacts with student parents

All the investigated teachers associated contacts with student parents with the function of being a form-master (tutor). The nine teachers who never were form-masters or form mistresses were unable to talk about this problem, as if none of student parents has ever come to them and asked about their child.

Eighteen teachers declared that they were either sorry to be form-masters at the moment, or in the past, and now they are doing everything to avoid this, because of the fact that it requires contacts with student parents. These contacts are described as particularly difficult since the parents represent only negative and critical attitudes both to the teachers themselves and to school. The teachers noticed that the parents were not at all interested in what their children were doing at school or what their progress was like. If the students show no progress in learning, the parents arrange private lessons for them and never think about discussing the problem with the teacher. If they do talk to teachers, they only blame them for ineffective teaching and keep defending their children. Parents blame school for "bad education and wrong influence on their children". Teachers in turn blame parents for total lack of co-operation and they point out that this situation is continuously deteriorating. At the moment, they see no solution to this problem. Neither special meetings with student parents nor individual conversations are likely to bring any improvement in this matter; the teachers maintain that at present normal co-operation with student parents is impossible. They even stated that "it is better when the parents do not interfere because such an interference appears harmful".

Unfortunately, this situation makes the teachers' work still more difficult and, to make the matter worse, we are not able to perceive any indicators that would suggest changes for better.

6. Conclusions

The first two problems presented here are strictly connected with the teaching-learning process, whereas the other two belong rather to the organization and characteristic features of the whole educational system and problems of pedagogical nature. Let us discuss them separately.

It does not seem surprising that the teachers are disappointed with their work with less capable learners after a few years of teaching. I think that it is a normal phenomenon that in the course of time fewer teachers remain devoted to hard work with poor students and are still happy with the smallest success. On the other hand, the fact that good learners are not liked by the teachers either could be considered more dangerous. The fact that the teachers feel threatened by the learners whose knowledge may appear greater than theirs suggests that the former (let us assume that this concerns the teachers with worse qualifications) do not treat the talented learners as a challenge but try to suppress their activity in order to maintain teacher domination over the whole class. In practice, the attitude of teachers to such learners may become more and more authoritarian, which in turn will not cause the students' proper and successful development.

The results of the present study describing the difficulties with testing and evaluation of student progress are confirmed by many other teacher opinions expressed during various meetings and discussions. The teachers do not like this probably because of the fact that they do not know how to measure student progress and the majority was not able to work out their own system of grading in the course of their teaching practice. There were respondents who openly admitted that they used a specific "strategy of avoidance" by giving the students the smallest possible amount of grades. The justification of such an approach is easy: they are working according to the principles of communicative language learning and they are allowed to accept student errors. Moreover, it is the global language

behaviour of the learner which remains in the centre of the teachers' attention. Following these principles, it is easy for teachers to escape from problems with grading by not analysing the details of student production. This is another point of view, from which we may criticize this approach, so commonly followed by the majority of teachers: such procedures lead to superficial and imprecise grading.

Another dangerous phenomenon, which was not signalled by the teachers under study, but is strictly connected with this problem is my observation that the teachers found another way of escaping from reliable grading. They simply avoid giving bad marks to their learners, limiting their evaluation only to the very good and good marks. Their problem is solved but only apparently: students are happy, nobody protests, but in fact they stop working and the good grades lose their value. When asked about the justification for this procedure, the teachers answered that worse grades discourage learners from further studying, which, as we know, is not true.

What remains to be done in this matter is to devote much more time to evaluation of student progress during courses of FL teaching methods that we offer to future teachers at the university.

The reasons for the poor relations between English teachers and school as an institution on the one hand and student parents on the other are of very complex nature. They are directly connected with the general crisis that schools are going through at the present time and the background of this crisis is of a social nature. This is of course connected with pedagogical problems with the young generation which both the teachers and parents have and so far nobody has been able to solve these problems or at least explain their nature.

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