

Michał Daszkiewicz

Uniwersytet Gdański

pedmd@ug.edu.pl

Personal experiencing of spoken English by Poles

Summary

The paper addresses applicability of terms and rationale normally associated with early language education to the learning (and articulation) of English by adult Poles. It discusses how grown-ups – supposedly aware of how important speech is for their language success – prove victim to affective obstacles, require the personally – and emotionally-experienced sense of achievement, which implies that the character of their language learning does not depart too far from that of young children. The paper opens with a section concerning the (Polish) national edge of the learning of English and focusing on the learners' decision not to speak having a personal and crucial character. Then, the issue of affective obstacles is examined theoretically in a discussion on the suitability of specific early education terms for adult language education, and empirically – through a qualitative study of what effect is obtained among Polish grown-ups by using a language teaching method resting on L2 early education terms. It is observed that following a simple teaching procedure in which learners were presented with a set of topic-oriented questions and exemplary answers and then requested to remark (in Polish) on (a four-faceted construct reflecting) how they feel about their productive language learning, an immediate positive outcome is obtained on the affective stratum.

Keywords: English, second language, affect, personal educational event, directed utterance

National edge

A situation in which an adult learner understands a question posed by the teacher but does not provide an answer to it can be regarded as a situation in which that learner decides not to improve. That we learn by uttering things is far from being a novel statement¹, the validity of which applies not only to the learning of languages but to any school subject or any discipline we can envisage. That we view such instances of lack of speech as a **personal decision** does, however, appear not to be sufficiently acknowledged and discussed. Having control over what they articulate in the course of learning, (sane) mature

¹ The beneficial character of learners' speech has been addressed in numerous discussions concerning various conceptual categories such as *thinking aloud*, *self-expression*, *verbalization*, or *verbal expression*, the undertaking of which by students, as Klus-Stańska and Nowicka note, should be of particular interest to the teacher due to the fact that this way of using a language, not reading or writing, is most often undertaken in life and most markedly determines the functioning of an individual in a society (Cf. Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005: 78).

learners who consciously opt for speechlessness choose something that is detrimental to both themselves (as they do not find out whether they are actually capable of articulating subject matter) as well as those that happen to be learning alongside them (as they do not hear possible paraphrases of that subject matter which can always be expressed in a number of ways).

The said decision not to speak despite knowing what to say (or even strongly wishing to formulate an utterance) is frequently made by Polish learners for reasons of a social, interpersonal and emotional character. This significance of the emotional side of learning can well be seen with Polish adult learners of English: despite being fully aware of the necessity to utter things as a part of language learning, and theoretically quite capable of (handling their emotions and) deciding to do what is best for their language progress to occur, many of them will decide not to articulate their thoughts out of several fears. The vast majority of these fearful learners, if asked about why they do not speak, will refer predominantly to the fear of formulating in the foreign language utterances that may sound colourless, plain, or even “stupid” (Wilczyńska 1999: 106), the fear of saying things which are grammatically incorrect, of being ridiculed by others (be it for their pronunciation), the fear of what they say being considered not innovative enough, and/or the fear of improper articulation of words they do not know how to spell. And at the same time, odd as it may seem, they will show lots of appreciation or even admiration of people coming from other countries not being bothered by such evidently unnecessary inhibitions.

It follows from the above that with Poles (and most probably with many other nations, too) the fact of formulating utterances in a second language remains emotionally loaded and as such calls for instruction taking into account not only cognitive aspects but affective aspects just the same. It thus seems erroneous to (consciously or unconsciously) assume that once learners have reached the final stage of (extensively described in literature) cognitive development we, as teachers, may become less concerned about the affective side of language education; such an assumption appears to underlie the fact that adult learners, as opposed to children and adolescents, systematically fail to “deserve” a chapter in publications on teaching foreign languages (e.g. cf. Dakowska 2005: 157–178). Somewhat paradoxically, the reality speaks in favour of the contrary: the aforementioned fears, being so widely scattered across Polish adult learners, are acquired rather than inborn (with children being endowed with capabilities of acquiring any human language and with Polish kids having no reputation of being particularly reticent), which renders affective issues most significant as the learners age.

The above has prompted a hypothesis that *by applying instructional terms from the domain of early language education to teaching a second language to adult students we may obtain a more positive approach to their own speech fostering an increased volume of (voluntary) language production*. The hypothesis has been analysed theoretically and then put to an empirical test below.

Theoretical grounds

The teaching of foreign languages to children is generally seen as radically different from the second language education of adults, as a result of which it has been covered in a number of children-devoted publications. As the aim of this text is of a conceptually-empirical (rather than didactic/practical) character, in order to outline the key premises of early language education, we shall refer in this respect primarily to one of such books that theorises teaching practices so as to “complexify oversimplifications about working with children” (Cameron 2001: xiii), entitled *Teaching Language to Young Learners*. The secondary sources used here to support observations made on this central book are *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom* by S. Halliwell, *Teaching Young Language Learners* by A. Pinter, and *The Primary English Teacher’s Guide* by J. Brewster, G. Ellis and G. Girard.

What emerges straight away from the reading of these publications (highly representative of early language education literature) is that the special character of teaching children as opposed to grown-ups pertains to both a general approach to it and a number of specific instructional concepts, which despite the fact that they do not necessarily presuppose any certain age, are employed almost exclusively to language learning by children and so their relevance and significance to adult education are consistently underestimated. On the general level, its specificity, apart from (i) the rather obvious premise that young learners will work mostly with the *spoken language*, is presented as requiring predominantly (ii) children’s *active learning* (interacting with the world, experiencing physically), (iii) supporting children in *constructing meaning* for every activity and language use in the FL classroom, and (iv) *understanding* on the part of the child – with the last two requirements constituting “a central principle for teaching young learners” (cf. Cameron 2001: 2, xiii).

On the specific level, a set of (psychologically-grounded) concepts are quickly recognised when perusing the said publications, implying their nearly exclusive relevance to the teaching of children and developmental sciences. This concerns, most noticeably, (v) the *zone of proximal development* concept, referred to by multiple writers and numerous publications, whereby it is the child that falls within or reaches his or her ZPD, whilst adults remain those that help the child do so by providing appropriate guidance (cf. Vygotsky 1997: 33); (vi) the concept of *scaffolding* first introduced for the sake of the “developing child” (Wood et al. 1976: 92, 89) and construed as “talk that supports a child in carrying out an activity” (Cameron 2001: 8), with the child particularly needing language as the most important tool for cognitive growth (cf. Bruner 1983; Cameron 2001: 8); (vii) Bruner’s notion of *formats* and *routines*, which (allow scaffolding and) build up the child’s sense of security and excitement by combining the familiar with the new (Cameron 2001: 9); and (viii) the so-called *Goldilocks principle* (Cameron 2001: 27) (the name of which itself mistakenly suggests its exclusive relevance to the teaching of children), whereby tasks should be neither too easy nor too difficult.

Considered jointly, both the four general qualities as well as the four specific concepts prescribed for the teaching of children share a markedly affective element in that they

all serve to give priority to attitude goals (cf. Halliwell 1992: 10) so as to prevent child's experience of excessive difficulty or failure and to reduce or eliminate altogether dissatisfaction and discouragement (which can also be viewed to lie at the heart of texts recalling such educational phenomena as e.g. the Rosenthal effect, whereby pupils gradually acquire characteristics (explicitly or implicitly) assigned to them by their teachers; this and similar effects are, again, associated with the teaching of children only, as if it was assumed that "adults can cope emotionally with their own learning, obstacles and failures"²).

Methodological grounds

To put to test the hypothesis formulated at the end of the first section so as to see what kind of effect we may expect after application of the eight notions above to the teaching of adults, a study has been carried out, in which a group of 13 adult language learners (university students) have taken part in four (topic-oriented) lessons and subsequently responded to a set of research questions. The key premises and the build-up of the lessons and the study proper, both carried out in compliance with the rationale above, relate to their four major facets as follows:

LESSONS have been based on a plan³ securing continuous focus on the learners'

- a) *speech*, elicited by means of a set of (topic-related) questions provided to them on paper alongside model answers so that the learners could either formulate an utterance closely following the conventional response shown or give a more spontaneous answer; hence, each lesson participant could respond depending on his or her own *zone of (linguistic) proximal development*;
- b) *activity* (in its cognitive sense), guaranteed by a continuous flow of speech (question-answer sequence) and the students selected at random for the sake of their continuous attention; additionally, in order to *scaffold* the students' verbal activity, the organisation of topics was made explicit, rehearsal was fostered, and the most significant language elements were emphasised (these being some of the ways in which, according to Wood (1998), learning can and should be scaffolded);
- c) *construction*, executed by examples of and training in the so-called replacements, i.e. words and expressions that the learners could use in the same language context

² The author's personal experience suggests – although it would need to be empirically verified – that the erroneousness of such an assumption can be proved by, for example, the immense popularity of the so-called Callan method observed in Poland in the first decade in the 21st century; this (direct) method, designed for the purposes of adult language learners, rested strongly on the emotionally undesirable experience of failure by among other things, employment of predictable content suited to the learners' level, which effectively "took the emotional load off" Poles, who, owing to the method's principles, had to remain constantly attentive, responded to familiar questions and, as a result, had the impression of "having English under their control".

³ Its detailed description lies beyond the scope of this text, but it has been presented in another paper by the author concerning such a way of teaching a language to adults in which they "compose their own English".

- (questions or answers) and gradually depart from the convention proposed, and blends, i.e. combinations within and across different topics; regular exercise in replacements and blends developed into main *routines* performed during lessons;
- d) *understanding*, ascertained by translating into Polish every new question occurring on the handouts provided which caused problems to the student answering it; hence, the procedure was meant to eliminate excessive difficulties in compliance with the *Goldilocks principle*.

RESEARCH (interview-based) following the lessons has focused on the same four facets, which, owing to their reminiscence of Carl Roger's concept of the *personal meaning of learning* (Rogers 1969: 92), has been referred to jointly as the *personal meaningfulness* constituting the study construct. Accordingly, the study performed under methodological premises of action research, with the teacher (the author) knowing very well the trajectory of the respondents' (learners') English studies and with the sequence of the four lessons being conducted in accordance to new principles explained to them in advance and analysed together later, has been devised to address:

- a) the learner's general impression of the subject matter learnt,
- a) the learner's satisfaction with himself or herself,
- b) significance of the subject matter as experienced by the learner, and
- c) obstacles recognised by the learner in his or her learning of the subject matter.

It has thus been considered in the study following the lessons (a) how the students experienced the lessons (topics), (b) when they felt pleased with themselves, (c) what they found significant in the content, and (d) where they recognised obstacles, which had been operationalised by formulation of the following respective questions (answered by the students in writing, in Polish), the form of which remained open enough to prompt the respondents to remark freely on their individual experience and thus to inform an analysis of their perspective of the learning on English (cf. Kvale 2010: 19):

- Q1. *How do you feel about our talk based on the 10 questions?*
- Q2. *During our talk based on the 10 questions, which questions/answers gave you a reason for satisfaction (or dissatisfaction)?*
- Q3. *Could you show on the list any words, expressions, or sentences which you find important? Explain your choice.*
- Q4. *Which questions or expressions from the list have you got most difficulties with? Why these?*

Discussion of results

The responses were juxtaposed against the theoretical concepts presented earlier in this text typically (or nearly traditionally) associated with early language education. Most remarkably, the comments provided related to those concepts wide across the answers given, which implied that from whichever perspective the respondents were prompted to address their language learning, they proved to find the concepts in question highly relevant,

with the chief difference from early education being that they expressed themselves using their own more “grown-up” language. The rationale manifested by them via four answers clearly that they do struggle with uttering things in English, one implication of which is that the line drawn between early education and adult education by theory does not find its equivalent in practice. In other words, the common tendency of emphasising the ability to express oneself solely or predominantly with children only is mistaken as one does not cease to acquire the skill in question.

An analysis of responses (collected on two occasions, after the third and fourth lessons, so as to foster its authenticity and validity, and to check on the results’ consistence (cf. Flick 2011; 45, 55)) brings to the fore the fact that once the respondents have been provided with language substance made accessible to them by observance of the aforementioned “child-like” rules, they managed to overcome their emotional obstacles and successfully build fully comprehensive utterances. This effect stood in stark contrast to their former experience (and also the experience of the author, who had earlier taught them, too), which they repeatedly associated with obstacles and inhibitions resulting from not knowing not only how but also what to say.

This has been observed with a number of responses to the first question pertaining to the students’ general impression, of which the most representative reads as follows:

“In the past I had a block in my head and now I didn’t think about it. Now I think that in order to speak, you need to speak. Also with mistakes, as we do it during our meetings.”

Plain as it sounds, it confirmed the author’s initial belief that when the focus on the lesson was to be on the subject matter rather than the students, their language skills or personalities, the Polish students would articulate their thoughts more readily and comfortably. In a number of appreciative responses (“excellent”, “I enriched my practical knowledge of English”), the students claimed to have been engrossed in the issued addressed by the questions, which is an advisable effect regardless of the learners’ age.

- a) Answers to the second question were particularly noteworthy (although the respondents failed to pinpoint specific questions as the source of (dis)satisfaction, which might be an effect of lack of training in meta-analysis of language content): prompted by one category of an emotional character ((dis)satisfaction, the learners gave answers illustrating their personal experiencing of English speech with remarks demonstrating a wide range of other emotional categories such as surprise (“When I look at these questions, I’m often amazed at how many things we do automatically in our own language”), wishes (“I would like there to be more questions at each lesson”), amazement (“When I look at these questions, I’m often amazed at how many things we do automatically in our own language”) and others. Most remarkably, some others responses additionally showed gladness about negative emotions having been avoided

“(This idea with questions and answers makes me realise what I have forgotten over the last years (...). After the lesson I’m satisfied with myself, because there are many new things. It’s good that ‘the bar’ is at the right level, as it requires demand but does not cause frustration.”)

- b) When asked to pinpoint (subjectively) significant language elements, most respondents failed to do so (which might be viewed to undermine the third question's validity). Yet, Question 3 generated topic-oriented comments on what the students find important in their use of English as a whole and how it helps them handle reality:

“In a way I think every topic is important, but I’m happy that with these questions we touch every shade of the topic which we choose to discuss. I’d like each topic to be addressed in this way. I believe that through such practice we learn to better define the surrounding reality.”

Provided with ready-given examples of language use, the students also reported on their emotional achievements (“I’m happy I could recall many words I learnt in the past”), enjoyment of speech (“When I see the questions, they help me communicate my thoughts even when I don’t know all the expressions necessary to present my opinions”), or increased language awareness (“I have difficulty reading some questions, which mostly results from the gaps in my knowledge”). It needs to be emphasised here that Many of these comments, if they were provided by children, would make us enthuse over how and what our students learn, and we have every right to cherish exactly the same feelings when these remarks are made by adult learners.

- c) Similarly to the above, replies to Question 4 proved less specific than initially expected, which may be viewed to mark the students’ lack of experience in commenting on what and how they learn (rather than the two questions’ invalidity). Most importantly, a number of responses pertained to language production problems:

“What I find most difficult here is something that initially seemed dead easy to me, that is constructing very simple, conventional sentences in English. When we see or hear such sentences, they are very clear, but constructing them by ourselves is a much greater problem.”

Yet, some replies did address the very character of the language exemplified on the handouts, noting, for instance, how it differs from what they learnt earlier: “I’m glad we learn not only such vocabulary that is used at schools, but also such that is commonly or colloquially applied”. The discrepancy observed here between the school and street language is as odd as noteworthy and it is yet another issue frequently discussed with regard to young learners (especially in the context of children from disadvantaged environments). It proves to be equally important with adult students, who – despite having reached the last stage of cognitive development – may also be at a loss as to what to say or how to finish a sentence. Just like children.

The value of directed utterances

The last but one response cited (“*What I find...*”) implies that considering the two advances that need to be made in the course of language learning, that is a shift from *the conventional* to *the spontaneous*, and progression from *the receptive* to *the productive*, it is the latter that is experienced by the Polish learners as a greater obstacle. This being the

case, to render this move more feasible and thus “lessen the pain” of language learners, all instances of articulating language elements never uttered earlier by particular students (i.e. all new attempts at language production) need to rest on contacts (i.e. experiencing language reception) with conventions, popular word combinations, formulaic speech, which jointly can be referred to as *directed utterances* (as secured above by means of ready-given questions and exemplary answers).

Such a conclusion made with reference to adult learners of English sounds strongly reminiscent of guidelines formulated for early language education teachers. Apparently then, adult language learners, whose mature L1 categories mask L1-L2 (not only perceptual but also semantic and syntactic) categories (cf. Baker et al. 2008: 320), need a sufficient number of opportunities to utter language before they gain enough confidence to formulate sentences of a novel character by themselves. What seems not to develop with age (or even change in an undesirable direction and make speaking skills deteriorate) is that the affective side of learning and using English by Polish students pre-determine linguistic success, as if the emotional layer kept blocking the cognitive stratum. The exact nature, direction and causes of this phenomenon undoubtedly merit further investigation.

It thus emerges from the theoretical considerations and the empirical findings that categories applied to the teaching of children prove largely suitable to lessons conducted with Polish grown-ups. Jocular as this statement may sound at first, differences associated with language learning by younger and older learners – additionally emphasised at the level of terminology, with “early language education” and “adult education” having earned their largely independent status and character⁴ – can be seen as highly detrimental to grown-up learners (and possibly to young pupils, too). Accordingly, the recommendation of a shift in the balance between attitude goals and content goals (towards the latter) found in literature on early language education (cf. Halliwell 1992: 10) is rather misleading as the emotions involved in the side of language learning do not change in terms of their volume but character, with an utterance in English remaining to adult Poles something of a personal adventure.

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⁴ One of the most significant difference to be observed between the two seems to pertain to what justifies language teachers’ enthusiasm over their learners’ speech: in the case of young children articulation of short sentences, words or even single syllables suffices to secure their sense of achievement, whilst with adults it seems that there must be at least a small degree of students’ innovativeness and creation before anyone enthuses over utterances generated. This, however, needs to be studied closer, too.

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