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The Approach to English Language Teaching in the Polish Education System

The paper elaborates on the way English language is taught in Poland. Firstly, the author wishes specify the division between different types of schools which create Polish education system. Secondly, the article intends to present the methods which are being used to create a lesson on different levels of education and how many hours of English students are exposed to. Finally, the paper is to show the approach to English in Poland.

1. Introduction

Political transformation of year 1989 in Poland brought not only socio-economical changes but also laid the foundations for changes in education. The Polish education system of today is based on the following parliamentary acts: the Education System Act of 7 September 1991 (with further amendments), the Act of 8 January 1999 on the Implementation of the Education System Reform (with further amendments) and the Act of 26 January 1982 – Teachers' Charter (with further amendments)[2]. As far as the first regulation is concerned it identifies education as a common welfare belonging to the whole society based on respecting Christian values and ethical principles. Furthermore, it states that, "Education and upbringing serve the development of young people's sense of responsibility, admiration of the fatherland and respect for the Polish cultural heritage, while being open, at the same time, to values of European and world's cultures. The objective of the school is to provide each pupil with conditions necessary for his/her development and to prepare him/her for the fulfillment of family responsibilities and civil duties based on the principles of solidarity, democracy, tolerance, justice and freedom"[3]. The aim of the mentioned Act of 8 January 1999 was to implement changes to improve the overall level of Polish education by increasing educational opportunities for students and improve quality of education system. To achieve better results a comprehensive primary school cycle of 6 years was introduced, to be followed by a lower-

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[2] Eurydice.org.pl, (2008). *The system of Education in Poland* [online] http://eurydice.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/the_system_2008.pdf [10 April 2017]

[3] Ibe.unesco.org, (2010). *World Data on Education* [online] http://www.ibe.unesco.org/sites/default/files/Poland.pdf [20 March 2017]

secondary school of 3 years and 3 or 4 – year long secondary schools (general upper secondary school or technical schools). Such goals were to be achieved by a new set of external examinations after each type of schools were assigned, which from now on were to be passed by every pupil to measure his/her level of education. Along with structural changes, Poland also implemented changes in school curricula which focused on acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and shaping attitudes by changing the teaching philosophy from the passive one when students learnt things by heart to the active one where they were asked to think and analyze concepts they were to acquire[4].

Structurally speaking, the education system in Poland consists of pre-school institutions as well as primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary schools and it is obligatory for every children until they are 18 years old to attend school of his/her choice. Within such structure English is one of the most popular foreign languages taught in Europe and its status is no different in Poland[5]. It might be surprising as due to the historical influences the languages popular in Poland were Russian and German respectively. However, after 1990 when Poland became a democratic country, and especially after 2004 when it joined the European Union Polish education system favoured English as the main foreign language. The reason behind it lies within the conviction that this language among many others is fairly simple to learn. This generalisation helps students and us, educators – but is it true that English is so easy?

English has many grammar rules with hundreds of exceptions. It is the language with over one million words, where many are pronounced similarly. As far as English is concerned learners of this language are often challenged with some major problems: it holds the record for the most words not spelled as spoken. Also, over half of its words are not spelled as pronounced. It holds some great number of irregular verbs. Many phrases in English are often idiomatic and have to be memorized. Some pieces of vocabulary like: "set" for example have many meanings. Many students of English, even after many years of study, do not achieve fluency. Despite these facts, English is most commonly taught. Thanks to methods and ways of introducing this language by teachers within a classroom environment English is perceived

[44]siteresources.worldbank.org, (2010). *Successful Education Reform: Lessons from Poland* [online] http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTECALEA/Resources/ECA_KB34_Education_Reform_in_Poland.pdf [15 March 2017]

[5]*„English is the most widely spread foreign language which is taught in European schools. In the previous issue of Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2008 it was stated that English dominates in Europe as it is used in 14 countries. In countries where it was not state which language should be chosen English also is the most popular language"*. [in:] Gorowska-Fells, M. (2012). *Kluczowe dane o nauczaniu języków obcych w szkołach w Europie 2012* [Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012], w: Czasopismo dla nauczycieli. Języki: obce w szkole [Foreign languages in school], Warsaw, p. 53. [author's translation from Polish].

as fairly simple language to learn. It is perhaps because at the very early stage of learning English seems very simple, because the Polish language borrowed from it enormous number of vocabulary[6]. Otwinowska-Kasztelanic adds, that "certain new constructions have been introduced into the language via the influence of mass media and advertising. The three major syntactic borrowings are attributive adjectival constructions (where an adjective precedes the noun it modifies) instead of postpositive ones, attributive use of nouns (where a noun pre-modifies another noun) and the use of the adverb *generalnie* as a discourse marker" (Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2000, p. 37). For these very reasons, at the beginning when exposed to English students find it fairly easy, educators might be astonished at how students like learning this language.

2. Teaching of English in pre-school and in primary school

However, officially in Poland they start their education as early as in pre-school. Every child has a chance to attend the so called preparatory English language classes. During this period the main stress is put on listening and speaking. The classes last approximately 15 minutes during which students aged 3-6 are greeted by a teacher and introduced to new pieces of vocabulary, which normally concentrates around topics like: numbers 1-10, colours, toys, animals, parts of human body, clothes, food, birthday, adjectives and adverbs of movement, members of family, shopping and goods, parts of house, house equipment, sport disciplines, days of the week, seasons, the weather, musical instrument, means of transport, outdoor games, holidays (Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska, 2015). Here, we have to explain that teaching English in a pre-school is a new concept since previously pupils used to start learning a foreign language when they were in 4th grade. It was changed as the period between 3 and 6, by many is believed to be crucial in the language acquisition process. It is only then when students learn the language naturally and they achieve the best results. As it is advocated by Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović "early foreign language learning experience was found to have a significant impact on outcomes in the case of successful learners. Participants who began their EFL study before age 16 and spoke two or more languages

[6] Sztencel, M. (2009). *Boundaries Crossed: The Influence of English on Modern Polish* [online] http://research.ncl.ac.uk/e-pisteme/issues/issue02/contents/e-pisteme%20Vol.2(1)%20-%20Magdalena%20Sztencel.pdf [1 March 2017]

obtained higher nativeness scores than the participants who began later"[7]. As children are spontaneously curious, they are not discouraged towards the foreign language learning by any negative experience. Here, the Total Physical Respond Method is often used to engage students in learning a foreign language. Larsen-Freeman explains that within this method listening comprehension is a dominant skill as it comes first, as the meaning in the target language can often be conveyed through actions. Students will talk when they are ready, they are not pressed to do so. Students' feelings are monitored not to discourage them. The teaching process is done by commands (Larsen-Freeman, 1990, p. 54). During such classes pupils have a chance to react to activities conducted by the teacher. It normally happens through dancing, movement, singing, drawing, painting, etc. This method is especially popular in primary school in classes between grade 1-3. Additionally, as educators want the learning process to be similar to the native language they often use the Direct Method while teaching. Because of that students are exposed to a foreign language, they try to imitate their teacher's vocabulary and later they try to use it independently. At this level, the teaching of grammatical aspects of the language is avoided, as it is believed that students do not need these aspects of the language to be explained. Furthermore, at this stage the Audio-lingual Method is used as to expose students to the sound of a language, the patters of sentences by repetitions (drills). As it is explained by Richards and Rodgers "the language was taught by systematic attention to pronunciation and by intensive oral drilling of its basic sentence patterns. Pattern practice was a basic classroom technique. It is these basic patterns that constitute the learner's task. They require drill, drill, and more drill, and only enough vocabulary to make such drills possible" (Richards and Rodgers, 1999, p. 46). Within primary school it is conducted by exposing students to listening dialogs. As far as listening is concerned, students are asked to react to teacher's questions, showing by doing type of exercise, enumeration, filling in the gaps, listening and then singing, acting. If it comes to speaking, students are asked to copy whatever the teacher says. It can be achieved through repetition, pictures' descriptions, telling the stories or finishing them. The aspect of reading concentrates on recognition of different letters of the alphabet, silent and loud reading, words recognition, choosing the right answer to a question, filling in the gaps in the text. Both pre-school and first stage of language education in primary school in Poland are based on learning through discovery and playing educational games. It is supposed to be pleasurable for pupils.

[7] Nikolov, M., Mihaljević Djigunović, J. (2006). *Recent Research on Age, Second Language Acquisition, and Early Foreign Language Learning* [online] https://www.nuffic.nl/en/publications/find-a-publication/recent-research-on-age-second-language-acquisition-and-early-foreign-language-learning.pdf [22 February 2017]

Moreover, education in grades 1–3 is structured on integrated teaching provided by a generalist teacher. Music education, art education, physical education (PE), computer classes and modern foreign language classes can be taught by a specialist teacher with relevant qualifications. This type of education supports children with their intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, physical and aesthetic development which later is evaluated upon scope of knowledge and skills to be acquired by pupils completing education in grade 3. As far as the foreign language hours are concerned there are minimum of 190 of them on this level of education (Fig. 1).

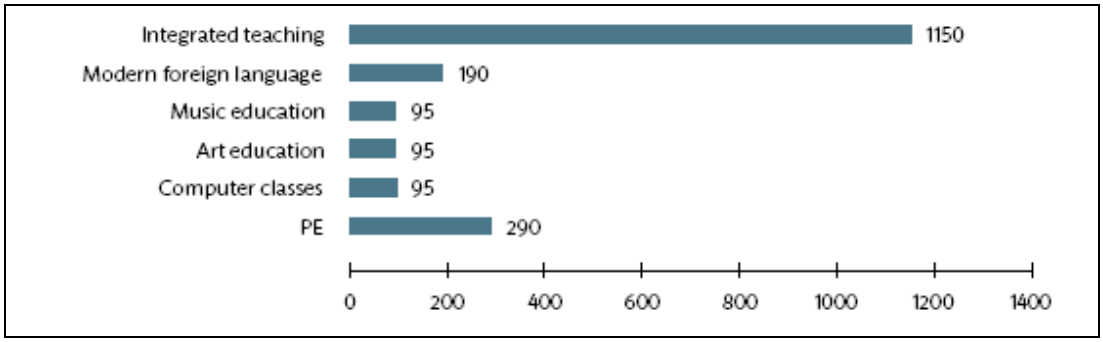

Figure 1. Stage I (grades 1–3, primary school) – minimum number of teaching hours by subject in the 3-year period

Mainly because of a different approach towards learning we need to discuss language teaching in grades 4-6. Teaching at this stage is divided into subjects, where the minimum of 290 teaching hours (45 minutes) is devoted to teaching modern foreign language (Fig. 2). It is also worth stating that at this level English teaching can be conducted by general teachers who finished language courses devoted to teaching foreign languages and held one of the officially recognized by the Ministry of Education language certificates[8].

[8] For further information see: the Regulation of the Minister of Education from 12 March 2009 on the specific qualifications required by teachers and the identification of schools and cases in which teachers can be hired without suitable higher education training or completion of establishment of teacher training education. [online] http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU20090500400 [10 March 2017]

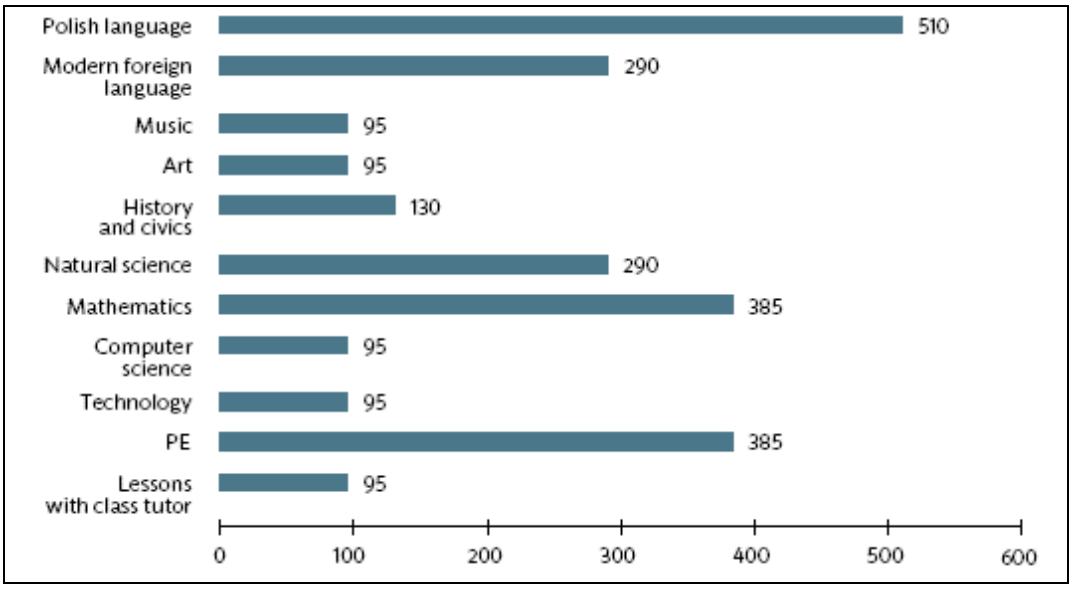

Figure 2. Stage II (grades 4–6, primary school) – minimum number of teaching hours by subject in the 3-year period

As far as teaching of English in grades 4-6 is concerned, it is taught by English language teachers with at least a Bachelor's degree in English Philology. Each lesson lasts 45 minutes and the number of students in class varies from 8-12 pupils. It means that a class is divided into two language groups as it is believed that learning in smaller groups guarantees the individual approach of a teacher and much better learning environment. There are at least 3 hours of English per week. The teaching is divided into stages, where each lesson is devoted to a different aspect of a language (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Here students are exposed to themes like: man, house, school, work, family and social life, food, shopping, travelling and tourism, culture, sport, health, wild life but also aspects of grammar like tenses and constructions which students are required to learn too. Grammar itself here is more explicit. It is even possible that entire unit of a lesson will be devoted to one aspect of English grammar. Additionally, a list of phrases and language functions is provided at this level (Piotrowska and Sztyber, 2012, pp. 17-20). Normally teacher concentrates his/her efforts on listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is mainly because at the end of this type of school students will be examined through standardized test which is set by the Central Examination Board and assessed by Regional Examination Boards. The exam itself is obligatory, however it does not have an impact upon the admission to the circle of study. It serves as an guideline for parents. It is intended that by graduating students will achieve at least A1 level of English (CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

3. The lower-secondary school (gymnasium)

This type of school last 3 years, for those who successfully completed the primary school confirmed by the leaving certificate it is accompanied by a certificate from the Regional Examination Board where students' results are stated. Nowadays, at school, pupils aged 13 to 16 are required to study not one foreign language but two. Normally it is English and German, rarely French, Spanish or Italian (there are 450 hours devoted to both languages, fig. 3). At the end of this school students are required to take external examination which gives them access to upper-secondary school.

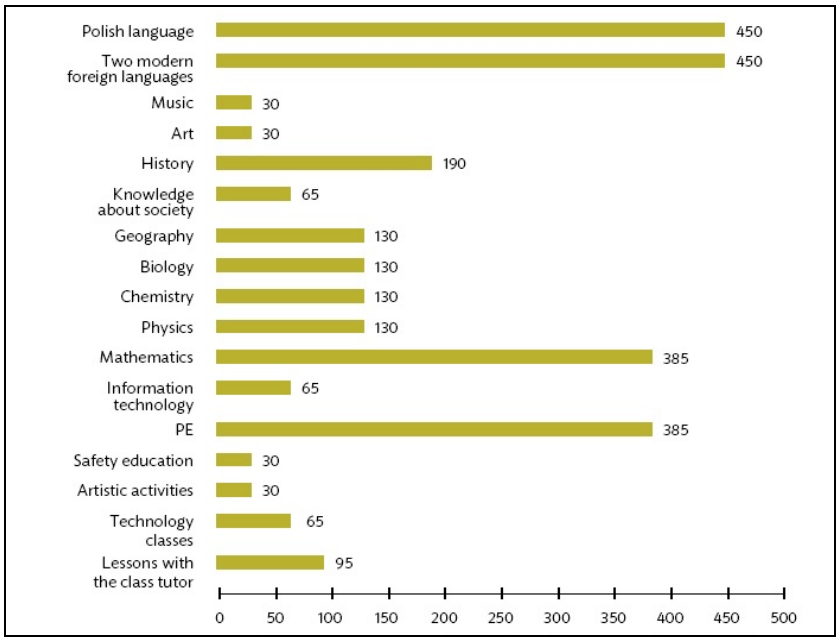

Figure 3. Stage III (grades 1–3, lower secondary education) – minimum number of teaching hours by subject in the 3-year period

The language classes are divided into 14 themes where students listen, speak, read and write on the topic which is covered. These topics are as followed: human, home, school, work, family and social lives, food, shopping and services, tourism and traveling, culture, sport, health and nature (Tittenbrum and Piotrowska, 2012, pp. 10-20). Despite many similarities, at this level of education the material is covered in greater details. At each lesson students explore the abovementioned themes through discussions, reading articles, listening to dialogs, writing stories, essays, etc. Each topic should be interesting to as many members of the class as possible. Unfortunately, what many educators experience is that students are clueless about aspects of their daily lives. Even though, the topics are relatively easy students are unable to

explore these topics thoroughly – they lacks ideas not to mention the vocabulary that they should have gained previously in primary school. Maybe, it is the lack of revision and the fact that they do not use a foreign language outside so commonly. Of course, it can be overcome as educators have a chance to engage their pupils in exchange programs like *Erasmus*, to enable them to speak a foreign language in more natural environment.

4. The upper-secondary school

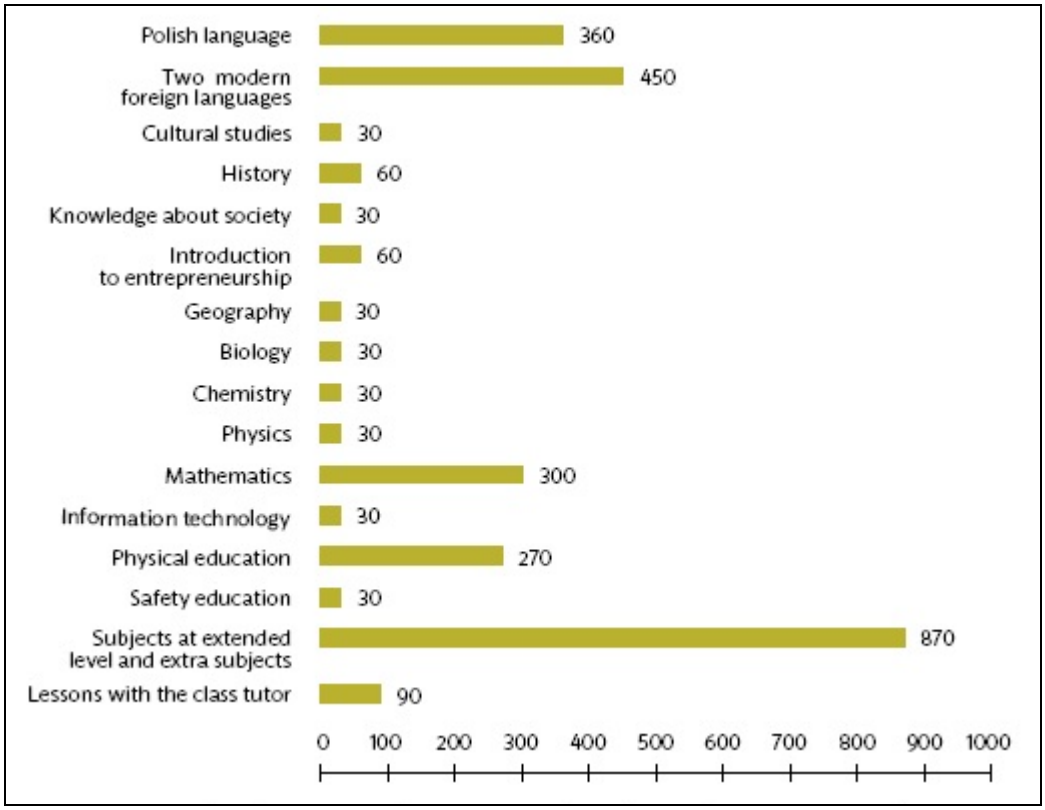

Figure 4. Stage IV (grades 1–3, general upper secondary education) – minimum number of teaching hours by subject in the 3-year period

To teach in this type of school a language teacher is required to hold a master degree. Again, at this type of schools students often choose English as the main language. As we can see from the chart there are 450 hours for two foreign languages, which around 360 is dedicated to the first language and around 90 to the second depending on the type of school or classes' majors (Fig. 4). At this level of teaching it is even more challenging for any language teacher to create thought provoking, interesting classes when the topic of a lesson is weather. Obviously, such classes can be conducted in a way so they are extremely interesting but it

involves extensive lesson planning and resources. At this stage students should be challenged with more suitable core curriculum and not an upgrades version of the very same core which has already been covered in the lower-secondary school. As the very same vocabulary is covered both in lower and upper-secondary schools. The process concentrates on the same topics, like home, school, human etc (Krajewska, 2012, pp. 17-27). Of course the learning process is more demanding and the exercises covered during learning are different. However when we think that we deal with students aged 16-20 years old we, as educators, should ask ourselves whether our students are interested in classes when they are asked about the weather and their favorite book… And so on and so forth. For this reason it is essential for any educator to use additional materials, for example: English literature to work with students, to make it a litter bit harder and suitable for their age. The language teaching at this stage should be similar to what the native language looks like as there are many students who, at this point, have been learning English for more than 10 years. The content of it in upper-secondary school should be concentrated more on philosophy, concepts of truth, lie, death, life during which students should expand their knowledge. Only because of that approach students would be able to use English in their everyday life. The topics covered should be adjusted to what aspects of lives matter to them, they must not be trivial. As, for many of them the only reason they learn English at this level is the fact that a foreign language is required to be taken during the matriculation exam.

5. Conclusion

Pupils and students are the subject within the teaching process. Especially in public schools each subject is different as far as his/her abilities, skills, interests and motivation towards learning. Even the way every pupil or later student acquires knowledge is different – they study using different senses, some of them use their visual potentials, others rely on their hearing and those who need to involve every sense they can to make it possible to absorb the information presented by the teacher. English language teaching in Poland despite its level, whether it is conducted in primary, lower-secondary or upper-secondary schools is based on different methods of language teaching, which is a "scientific way of teaching any subject. It guides teacher *How to teach* and *How his teaching may be effective"* (Patel and Jain, 2008, p. 71). Currently, within Polish education system the *eclectic approach* is commonly used. As it is explained by Billah it "is the label given to a teacher's use of techniques and activities from a range of language teaching approaches and methodologies. The teacher decides what

methodology or approach to use depending on the aims of the lesson and the learners in the group"[9]. Teaching foreign languages and especially English language is concentrated on *holistic approach*, which takes into consideration individual approach towards the learning process and especially to a pupil and later a student. It is done by encouraging students that they are capable of achieving success. Also, by building a learning awareness within each student so he/she is able to measure knowledge on its own. Additionally, the approach we can witness within Polish education system is a communicative one when speaking seems to be the most important skill. The great deal towards speaking is seen, teachers value fluency over accuracy. So as long as the student expresses his ideas orally, minor mistakes are not so important. However, for the communication to be possible it is also important for students to understand that such great influence is placed on listening and vocabulary because without them it will not be possible for students to understand anything.

The English language teaching in Poland is a changing process due to the fact that the education system depends on the government for this reason it is exposed to great number of changes almost every cabinet change (the upcoming change is to be expected school year of 2017/2018). We can speculate whether such changes are positive or negative, as one is able to find both advantages and disadvantages in it. However, we can advocate that the fact that pupils in Poland start their language education early is a very positive aspect. Still, we should work on the fact that whenever a pupil starts a new school primary, lover-secondary and upper-secondary school it starts the language learning from the very beginning. Of course, we may say it is very good as each of them has a chance to revise. Unfortunately, it is very hard and almost impossible to obtain B2 level of language proficiency in public education system. Honestly speaking for the great number of students it is a well deserved B1 plus. It should be required that especially during the lower and upper-secondary schools the once-covered topics will be only explored further, without unnecessary repetitions. It has become a good practice for many educators to engage their students in exchange programs like Leonardo da Vinci, *Erasmus Plus* or *Euroscola* where students have a chance to go abroad and use the language that they learn, to be able to see the real reason behind learning. Also the fact that more and more students, not only those living in the urban areas but also rural ones have access to the Internet where they can use English and other languages is useful. Moreover, the fact that students want to have access to the latest movies, series, video games which are not translated instantly, such reality determines them to use a foreign language whether they want it or not.

[9] Billah, M. (2015) *Eclectic approach to teaching language* [online] http://www.observerbd.com/2015/02/13/72233.php [15 March 2017]

Last but not least, the fact that in the future they might be forced to work abroad is a determinant for them to learn at least one foreign language, mainly English. However, I strongly believe that the content of it should be more suitable to the knowledge they already posses and topics they study during other classes, especially the ones they cover during the classes of their mother tongue.

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