

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE OF CIVILIZATION. EDUCATIONAL DILEMMAS ABOUT THE APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

English is the world language. Therefore, English taught and learned as a foreign language has a different status than other languages. Teaching and learning is no more connected to the specific cultural or national values of the English-speaking countries. Instead, they are substituted with the global/universal values. This phenomenon has got many educational consequences, for example it requires the new role of the teacher of English who becomes a broker of the global values. Questions about model of teaching English are also posed here.

Key words

English language, world (universal) language, teaching English, cultural values, global culture.

Resumé

Angličtina je světový jazyk. Proto, pokud je vyučována jako cizí jazyk, má odlišnou pozici oproti ostatním jazykům. Vyučování a učení angličtiny není spojeno s předáváním informací o specifických národních a kulturních hodnotách jednotlivých anglofonních zemí. Tyto informace jsou nahrazeny informacemi globálního či univerzálního charakteru. Tento fakt přináší množství vzdělávacích souvislostí, například změnu role učitele angličtiny, neboť ten se stává osobou, jež zprostředkovává univerzální hodnoty. Příspěvek také řeší některé otázky modelů vyučování angličtiny.

Klíčová slova

Anglický jazyk, světový (univerzální) jazyk, výuka angličtiny, kulturní hodnoty, globální kultura.

1 English as a world language

It goes without saying that English is the most common foreign language. It is a mother tongue for about 350–400 million of people, and it is currently the foreign language most often learned and taught as a second language around the world. Nowadays about 1.5 billion people are learning it¹. It is predicted by the magazine *The Economist* that until 2050 about half of the people in the world will declare knowledge of English at all levels².

No doubt, people who are learning English are highly motivated. It has the status of the first or second official language in almost one hundred countries (Bryson, 1991, Graddol 2000). English is one of the official languages of the United Nations. It is also widely used by many corporations and international institutions. It is the major language of almost every field of human activity: science, business, tourism, world politics and economy (cf. Olszewska-Dyoniziak, 1996). For example, more than 90 per cent of the airlines in the world use English as their official language of communication – this can be the proof of how dominant this language has become. It is also estimated that about 75 per cent of the whole amount of scientific publications worldwide are published in English (Bryson, 1991).

Due to its historical and cultural determinants, English is not only dominant in the world communication but it also strongly influences other languages. Many loanwords from English can be noticed in other languages. These loanwords appear not only in professional jargons or in colloquial language (for example in German or Polish). A lot of English words can also be often found in a standard language, e.g. in Japanese. All of them are words referring to Western and global reality and culture and they have become part of standard Japanese with small phonetic modifications only (e.g. “*chokorēto*” – chocolate, “*vaiorin*” – violin, “*hoteru*” – hotel, “*resutoran*” – restaurant). This is an interesting aspect of globalization of the English language.

Nowadays English has taken over the role of the universal world language. First of all, this fact has been caused by political reasons: the historical domination of the British Empire up to the beginning of 20th century and, in our times, the political and economical supremacy of the USA (cf. McWhorter, 2009). It is worth to stress that learning English as a foreign language is highly promoted in both of these countries and relatively much money is spent on this

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language, cf. also: http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C4%99zyk_angielski.

² http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=883997.

branch of “industry”. Profits from teaching and learning English make quite an important part of the national budgets’ incomes in these countries. They come from publishing the English course books, producing teaching and learning materials, creating websites for teachers and students, etc. One of the institutions that support learning English is the British Council, where the English language is promoted worldwide, and so is the British culture. British Council works in more than 100 countries and it also participates in carrying out the English certificate exams in the whole world.³

There are also linguistic reasons that could explain why English has become the world language. Compared to many languages, English is found to be concise and economical: relatively much can be said in a few words – so that the expression is often shorter than in many other languages. It is also regarded to be relatively easy to learn for people of most nations, especially at the beginner’s level (not too much declination and conjugation to learn and simple syntax rules). On the other hand, it is more difficult to learn and use English at the advanced level because the words have ambiguous meaning, and they can make different parts of speech. Therefore, it is always necessary to analyze the wider context of the speaking/writing act in English. Numerous native speakers of other languages (e.g. French, Chinese or Japanese) might also find the English pronunciation a bit difficult.

Yet, these drawbacks have never been any serious arguments against English achieving the status of a universal language. The top position of English on the map of languages is strong. Even though there are other world languages with a comparable number of (native and non-native) speakers worldwide (e.g. Chinese, Spanish), they do not aspire to take over the position which is currently held by the English language. Thus, it is the English language that seems to meet all hopes and expectations of people who have always had the eternal wish to communicate with help of one universal language. People in the world have always wanted to have one language that would be accessible for everybody and that would also express “unity and brotherhood of men” (Eco, 2002). At the same time, all attempts of inventing one universal artificial language of the whole mankind and introducing it on a wide range (e.g. Esperanto, interlingua, Volapük) have not met most of the expectations so far. In comparison to English, known worldwide, these languages are known rather to small circles of enthusiasts and it is surely not possible to tell in which regions or among which groups of professionals they are most often used. What is more, it is even hard

³ www.britishcouncil.org.

to estimate how many people in the world speak Esperanto and sources give different numbers here – from 100 thousand to 2 million users in the whole world⁴.

2 New status of English as a foreign language

If we analyze the process of decision-making why people begin to learn a certain language, there has always been the natural relation between unique cultural values (e.g. music, art, cuisine) of particular countries and the potential student's decision which foreign language to learn. "I have always been fascinated with Japan, so I started to learn the language", "The Spanish people I met were so nice, and I liked the sound of their language so that's why I decided to pick up Spanish when I got back from holidays" seem to be the typical answers explaining reasons of learning a language.

Nowadays we can notice that these cultural values as a deciding factor are still important when it comes to starting to learn *all* languages, *except for* English. In other words, culture of particular English-speaking countries does not play an important role for the people who are making the decision to start to learn English anymore. As it was mentioned earlier by "The Economist" – this decision is, first of all, caused by pragmatic reasons (ability to communicate with people all over the world) rather than only fascination with culture of any English-speaking countries. This changes the status of English as a foreign language, in comparison with other languages.

We can also observe an interesting phenomenon: the cultural values of English speaking countries as a deciding factor are less important or even non-existing for people who start to learn English. Instead of this we notice the learners' aspirations to have access to the global civilization values and to benefit from them (Polak and Leska-Ślęzak, 1999). Nowadays, learning English is associated mainly with becoming a part of the global information society and the civilization of universal values, and it has almost nothing to do with any particular culture of an English-speaking country. Most people learning English are aspiring to participate in the world of global culture. This aspiration is forced by the development of the information technology, mass media, and especially the Internet.

3 Educational consequences: dilemmas at the lessons of English

The new status of English language has its educational consequences. First of all, there is an important educational dilemma for the teachers of English as

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esperanto>.

a foreign language: how to plan the English course and which textbooks and teaching materials to choose? Should the course include British or American cultural aspects or should the English lessons be culturally neutral – or international, to be more precise? Should the students of English gain some knowledge about the English-speaking countries or can the teachers skip it?

There are two models of English teaching and learning:

The “culturally neutral” approach is presented by some leading modern English course books edited in Great Britain. There is very little in them about culture or specific traditions of the English-speaking countries. For example, the textbook “New English File” consists of chapters of “International English”⁵ which has neutral cultural background. Also, teaching listening comprehension is mainly based on recordings of people who are not English native speakers and who talk about their non-English speaking countries⁶. This model is more popular in the countries that are not heavily influenced by the so called Western civilization, or they can even look at the Western culture as an “enemy”. Teachers and students there might be “suspicious” about conveying the culture of English-speaking countries in the textbooks and, what is more, they would think learning from these textbooks means being subjected to “western” indoctrination. This is why this neutral approach to culture is especially popular there. On the other hand, the approach to the culture-free form of learning English, which is offered by many textbooks is not trusted everywhere and it raises many doubts (Bandura, 2000).

The traditional approach simply means teaching English as it has always been taught before, i.e. in the same way as other languages. There are linguistic skills and competences to be acquired, but the lessons also provide information about the English speaking countries, their history and culture. In the traditional approach, culture is the source of the individual and national identity. Therefore, together with learning the language, the students will learn, e.g. about the Royal Family in England, St. Patrick’s Day in Ireland or Halloween and how it is celebrated in the USA. This traditional concept of teaching English as a foreign language has many advantages, because many facts from the British or American culture have become known worldwide – there is noticeable influence of film, music and literature produced in these countries.

⁵ Oxenden, C., Latham-Koenig, Ch. *New English File Intermediate*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁶ Oxenden, C., Latham-Koenig, Ch. *op. cit.*; *New English File Pre-Intermediate* by the same authors, OUP 2005; cf. also all levels of *Headway English Course*, Oxford University Press.

4 Conclusions

Our article surely will neither give an in-depth description of all these issues nor will it solve the dilemmas. However, these problems become more and more topical in the post-modern world. Nowadays we are observing the process of “erosion” of identities, the meanings blend and cross beyond the identity line. Anthropologists and sociologists talk about “cultural supermarket” (Mathews, 2005). The access to it can be obtained with help of the English language which is not limited strictly to carrying any specific cultural or national values.

Therefore, it is worth noticing that the English teachers find themselves in a different situation, in comparison with their colleagues who teach other foreign languages. Teachers of English are not only the culture brokers of the English-speaking territories but they have also got the new role: the global values’ advocates. This makes an extra task for teachers of English who must be aware of the problems of identity and difference in the process of globalization. They must decide how much culture there must be at their English lessons and what are the most optimal methods of developing the cultural competences in the changing society. How can the teacher find a balance between being the culture broker of all what belongs to the English culture (Bandura, 2000) and acting as the advocate of universal values? Apart from that, it must always be remembered that the lessons of foreign language must have, first of all, their educational aim of developing the linguistic and communicative skills and competences.

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