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Between Scylla and Charybdis? An Attempt to Resolve the Problems Caused by the New Matura and Teacher Training Programmes in Poland

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Aeddan Shaw*

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS? AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE NEW MATURA AND TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMMES IN POLAND

Abstract

In our day and age it is perhaps odd that some students, after 7 years of English, profess to being elementary learners of a language: The Council of Europe suggests that 240 hours of study is enough to progress from A1 to B1. When questioned, most students give in justification the plea 'but I didn't learn anything at High School'. But is this really the case? Are high schools really that bad?

In 2005 the eclectically translated Supreme Chamber for Control (NIK) conducted an audit of the tuition of Modern Foreign Languages in Poland which had some startling results. Almost half of the schools audited (49.3%) were found to be employing teachers who did not meet the educational and linguistic standards set by the auditor and 85% of institutions were guilty of some kind of irregularity. Even basic issues such as materials were found to be wanting, with 20% using a handbook that was unacceptable or unsuitable for the group. Overall, only 1 in every 7 schools met the requirements set by the auditors. Furthermore, the imminent winding down of the Teacher Training College system in Poland threatens to leave the education system with a greatly reduced pool of potential staff and heavily reliant on the creaking system of University English departments for its teachers. To compound matters, the current system, whilst seemingly demanding and thorough, is wholly inadequate preparation for future teachers. By way of an example, at present it is enough to complete 144 hours of teaching practice in order to become a teacher in high school, but this seemingly impressive figure is highly misleading, since in actual fact it only requires a minimum of 20 hours of independent teaching and one course in methodology —completely inadequate by contemporary European standards. In the UK, for example, trainee teachers complete 6 hours of real teaching practice per week during their

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* **Aeddan Shaw** – having completed a B.A. hons degree in Philosophy and English at York University, Aeddan did the natural thing for all philosophers and became an English teacher. A DELTA qualified CELTA trainer, he has extensive experience of teaching, training and ELT management in Poland, Italy, the UK and Canada. Having completed his M.A. on the problem of multilevel classes, somewhat surprisingly he continues to be interested in this phenomenon and its potential solutions, as well as teaching methodology at tertiary level, the Polish state system of education and teaching techniques in the developing world. He currently works for TEU as the Vice Director for Modern Foreign Languages, where he heads the English section, having helped to set up the centre in 2006.

course— and this only allows them to attain ‘Qualified Teacher Status’, a full year of work being required before one becomes a true teacher.

As a disclaimer, perhaps the best teachers I have met are Polish state school teachers, and ‘Native Speakers’ perhaps the most overrated; but clearly, to paraphrase the Bard, something is rotten in the state of Poland. Where does this problem stem from, and what are the implications for educational policy makers? This paper will address these issues, examine some alternatives and put forward some tentative suggestions and ideas for future discussion.

Keywords

Teacher development, higher education, education reform, ELT, Poland.



Introduction

According to a NIK¹ report published in 2005, almost half of the schools audited (49.3%) were found to be employing teachers who did not meet the educational and linguistic standards set by the auditor, and 85% of institutions were guilty of some kind of irregularity. Even basic issues, such as materials, were found to be wanting, with 20% using a handbook that was unacceptable or unsuitable for the group. Overall, only 1 in every 7 schools met the requirements set by the auditors (from the NIK report featured in *Słabo z nauczaniem języków*, 2005). This data was extended by research conducted by the author for his M.A. thesis on heterogeneity in Polish state schools: from a sample of 175 subjects representing 114 high schools in the Małopolska, Upper Silesian and Podkarpackie Voivodeships², 63% were found to have used material which was inappropriate³ and had participated in multi-level classes (Shaw 47: 2009).

The crux of the problem seems to lie in two interweaving problems: the Scylla of the New *Matura*⁴ exam and the Charybdis of inadequate teacher development programmes. This essay will examine both issues and attempt in an Odysseus like manner to find a way between the two, beginning with the New *Matura*.

¹ Najwyższa Izba Kontroli – the Supreme Chamber of Control, the Polish national audit office, hereafter referred to as NIK

² Representing 19% of all high schools in the area and 34% of those in Małopolska.

³ Understood as using material which was at least 2 CEF levels different to their actual level.

⁴ The final exam taken on graduation from Polish high schools, similar to A Levels in the UK.

The state we're in

The Matura exam has long enjoyed a key role in both the education system and cultural framework of Poland. Instrumental in retaining and promoting Polish language and literature during the partitions, the Matura has long been regarded as the minimum level of education in a remarkably literate society. Its influence continues to resonate even abroad, where *Polonia*, the Polish community abroad, can sit the same exam and maintain a connection with a country that they may have never even seen.

Aside from the brief post-war period, where the exam was divided into *mala Matura* (taken at the age of 16) and *wielka Matura* (taken at 18), the exam has traditionally served as the graduation exam for high schools in Poland.

The English-language Matura, following years of neglect in favour of Russian, experienced a surge in popularity after the transformation of 1989. Preparation for the exams themselves was done on a voivodeship basis, with the *Kuratorium*⁵ in the regional capital responsible for the creation of the exam. This lack of standardisation resulted in a considerable variation in terms of difficulty: the Małopolska Voivodeship, for example '*generally produced exams which were at the same level or even harder than the present Matura* (at a B2 level on the Common European Framework —author) *but the Lublin one was a different story*'⁶. Putting feelings of pride aside, the head of the Kuratorium merely echoes a commonly held view: the old Matura was a variegated and chaotic beast. With problems and issues ranging from inadequate listening tests,⁷ the lack of objectivity in marking⁸ and differing topics between regions, the exam was ripe for reform.

Following a transition period in 2005 and an accompanying reform of high schools, the New Matura was launched, having addressed a number of key problems in the old exam but, as we shall see, containing the seeds of its own destruction. Gone were the regional exams, replaced with a centralised board (CKE⁹) responsible for the produc-

⁵ The regional exam board.

⁶ Extract from an interview with the head of the Kuratorium archive in Krakow.

⁷ The examiners (who were teachers in the same high school) opened an envelope and read the contents to the class – aside from practical problems such as mispronunciation, repetitions, lack of clarity etc, this method also unfairly biased those learners who had studied under the examiner in question, since they were already accustomed to their voice.

⁸ Papers were not given an exam number, but were signed and marked by teachers from the same high school.

⁹ Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna – Central Examinations Board.

tion of all exams and their correction. Revamped exercises, a detailed mark scheme, recorded listening and a firm communicative bias effectively transformed the exam and allowed the effective comparison of exam scores across the whole country.

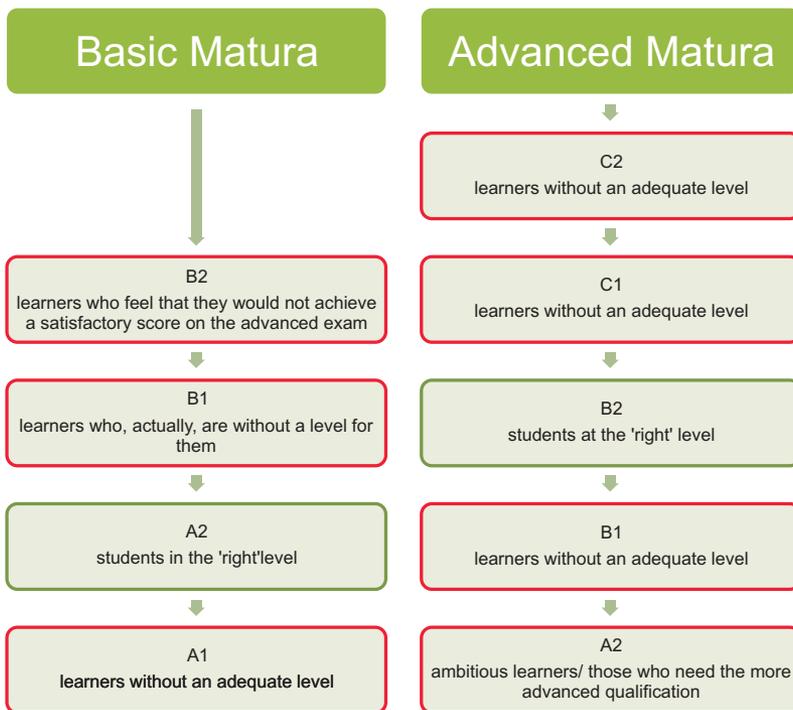
However, in the author's opinion, the introduction of the New Matura contained a fatal flaw, which has greatly contributed to the creation of multi-level classes: it introduced a new basic level (basic level – fixed at A2 level), ostensibly to permit less able students from specialist schools to pass the exam, and made taking a foreign language compulsory for all students.

In this particular context, the creation of the new Matura exam with its two-level proficiency structure is perhaps the biggest problem in the Polish state school system. Because it intends to fix learners on two very different scales of proficiency, A2 and B2 respectively, a large number of learners are effectively lumped together, regardless of their actual proficiency. Learners may opt for the basic level Matura exam if they feel that they lack the ability to achieve the higher level, would prefer to get a better score on an easier exam (90% compared with 50%, for example) or simply because they wish to focus on other more important exams. The fact that certain university courses do not require the advanced exam and count the percentage of the exam in the same way regardless of the level taken merely compounds this problem. Learners taking the extended level may also have differing motivations: they may recognise that they require the more advanced qualification even though their ability is somewhat lacking; they may be under parental pressure to strive for the higher qualification.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that a large number of learners are actually much better than the level of the exam itself – it is not unusual in cities such as Krakow to be teaching students who are already at C1 or C2 level – and yet this is the only course or option open to them, since the alternative is the bilingual Matura (*Matura dwujęzyczna*) which is notoriously hard. A brief glance at the numbers of students taking the different levels of English is telling: according to the CKE report for 2007, 83% of students took the basic level exam, 17% took the extended level and a mere 0.19% took the bilingual option. The pattern continued in 2009, with even more learners choosing basic level – 86% – and English's share of the exam total increasing too – around 80% of all Matura students took English, a grand total of 360,000 students ("Dzisiaj" 1: 2009). The share enjoyed by French, Spanish and Italian has also plummeted, with less than 1% of all students choosing these subjects. This has three key implications: firstly, that many students are taking an exam which is too easy for them;

secondly, that the overall level of English proficiency has actually declined following the introduction of the new Matura, and finally that English is becoming a 'killer' language, creating an increasingly 'monolingual' graduate profile. Whereas students previously took an exam which was more or less B2, now the overwhelming majority opt for a qualification which is A2 and after a longer period of study.

As a consequence, it also causes the creation of multi-level classes: the following diagram gives a pictorial representation of a possible overview of Matura groups at the two levels, showing the true range of levels to be found within them:



Thus Teacher A is given the unenviable task of teaching a group which is nominally A2 but actually ranges from A1 to B2, whilst Teacher B has learners ranging from A2 to C2. It is perhaps little wonder that many high school students claim not to have learned anything from their English classes if this was the case.

Most schools do attempt to stream their learners to some extent into more closely defined groups but the root problem is the limiting structure of the end of course exam.

The other main factor revolves around the current situation in teacher education and development in the Polish tertiary sector. Following the economic and social transformation in the early 90's and the subsequent surge in popularity in English, the Polish government responded by creating a new type of teacher training institution for primary and junior high school teachers – the *kolegium nauczycielski*. High school teaching remained the strict domain of those with an M.A in English, ironically enough meaning that graduates of the three-year long *kolegium* system were considered to lack the ability and quality of a Literature major who attended a methodology course and undertook some teaching practice. Whilst there were weaknesses in this system, particularly the fact that non-methodology specialists essentially are (and were) regarded as the same as those who lived and breathed methodology for 5 years¹⁰, it was enough to meet the demand and expansion in the intervening years.

The situation today, however, is much less rosy and, indeed, the already creaking system is being stretched to breaking point as a result of the following factors:

- The *kolegia* were only granted a charter for 20 years, a term which expires this year. This will eventually cause a shortfall in the number of primary and junior high school teachers;
- Poland's accession to the EU has meant that English-speaking graduates are very much in demand, both at home and abroad, in positions which pay rather more than the basic salary for a high school teacher.
- The switch over to the Bologna process has caught a number of higher education institutions napping and many put their M.A. programs on hold whilst they prepared syllabi and B.A. graduates under the new system. Combined with a new ministry requirement which demands all teachers be able to teach two subjects, many institutions have abandoned their methodology programmes entirely. Even the Jagiellonian University, which prides itself on its methodology programme, is considering scrapping it completely when the new 2-year M.A's come online next year.
- Current programmes contain very little in the way of methodology, with the majority of time being devoted to Ministry dictated courses which belong more in the realm of linguistics (psycholinguistics,

¹⁰ Take, for example, the current year at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, the only institution in Krakow currently producing teachers: there are 11 methodology specialists, but over 40 students will be able to teach in High Schools following graduation. This is a fact which almost all in the methodology specialisation find inexplicable.

sociolinguistics, intercultural communication) and literature than teaching methodology. At present it is enough to complete 144 hours of teaching practice in order to become a teacher in high school, but this seemingly impressive figure is highly misleading, since in actual fact only a minimum of 20 hours of independent teaching and one course in methodology are required – completely inadequate by contemporary European standards. In the UK, for example, trainee teachers complete 6 hours of real teaching practice per week during their course – and this only allows them to attain ‘Qualified Teacher Status’, a full year of work being required before one becomes a teacher.

- Early retirement for teachers has been retained for those who have 20 years ‘in front of the blackboard’. This will wipe out much of the surplus of teachers gained from the 90’s in a few years’ time.

Granted, Poland is facing a population crisis in comparison with the boom of the Solidarity babies, but surely what it requires in the future are fewer and *better* teachers, rather than fewer and worse.

The way forward?

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The situation depicted above seems bleak but there are a number of practical and easily implemented reforms which could be made to ease the problems.

Solutions for the Matura exam – avoiding the rocks of Scylla

One potential solution, particularly given the recent furore over the marking of Matura exams, would be to **outsource assessment**. The education authorities in Bretagne, France offer an instructive model for Poland, since they have just implemented a bold and, in the author’s opinion, eminently sensible scheme. By scrapping their own exam preparation board, they have instead switched over to a system whereby students choose from one of the Cambridge Main Suite exams. Automatically gaining international recognition for the students, the system also ends up being cheaper for the education authority (Cambridge Bulletin: 2009). It also goes some way towards addressing the problem of multi-level classes – with the curriculum and syllabus sources removed, students merely select the exam that they feel most comfortable with. This has the added benefit of raising extrinsic motivation amongst students – whereas, in Poland, universities merely put em-

phasis on the score from Matura (encouraging many to opt for the higher percentage but lower level basic level), compelling students to choose an internationally recognised exam would actually pressure them to choose a higher level. By way of comparison, when the Polish authorities stated that they would exempt students holding FCE or CAE from the need to take the exam, the numbers of learners taking the exam rocketed and actually ensured that more university undergraduates had a better level of English. Four years ago, TEU did not have an A1 or an A2 level group: this is a phenomenon which has only come about in the last 3 years, following the introduction of the new Matura.

The simple expedient of **raising university admission requirements** to demand 3 subjects at extended level would also have a significant impact on the situation of multi-level classes. From the author's research, almost 69% of learners who took the basic level Matura in English could have taken the extended version, effectively resolving the problem of multi-level classes (46: 2009).

Solutions for teachers – negotiating the whirlpool of teacher development

For high school teachers this means **separating teacher training from M.A. programmes**. Instead, an intensive year-long course devoted solely to teacher development and practical teaching should be devised, followed by close supervision and subsequent training until the teacher reaches *dyplomowy* status. The entry level would be a B.A *taught* in English. The practical and the theoretical should be combined seamlessly but with the focus on theory in practice. The Cambridge CELTA course, suitably adapted to the Polish context, would offer a good model for an initial teacher training qualification. With its emphasis on practical experience and reflection, the CELTA does not produce 'finished' teachers, but ones who are ready to teach and engage in the learning process. The author should at this point reveal a potential conflict of interest: he is an accredited CELTA trainer, but it is this experience that motivates the current proposal, rather than a hidden agenda. A number of Polish CELTA trainees, already qualified and experienced teachers, have professed to having learnt more about teaching from this short 4-week course than during the 5 years of their M.A.

For primary and junior high schools, the **kolegia should be reinstated** with a rejuvenated program. Having conducted teacher development sessions all over Małopolska, Silesia and Podkarpackie, the author

can honestly say that the brightest and most promising teachers were to be found in the kolegia of small towns. From a social point of view, it is also essential to ensure that rural communities have qualified and motivated staff and the decentralised kolegium system ensures this.

Conclusions

The situation created by reforming the Matura exam without an accompanying reform of teacher training in Poland has created an unwieldy and creaking system. Exacerbated by little support and undermined by a hostile press and public, state school teachers are in need of help and assistance. The looming shortfall in qualified teachers is also an issue which needs to be addressed, especially in rural areas.

Above all, this reform should be both practical and bottom-up in nature: teacher development programs should be focused on the practice of teaching and delivered by experts, those very teachers who have experienced life in the trenches of Polish junior high school. The issue of multi-level classes can be relatively easily resolved by a change in the university admission requirements and the annual controversy over the Matura exam could also be bypassed by switching over to Cambridge exams. The latter point would very much be in keeping with the spirit of this edition of the journal, as it would offer high school graduates a transferable and internationally recognised qualification. Polish teachers are remarkable: with the reforms mentioned above, they could set international examples of best practice.

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Aedden Shaw ukończył Bachelor of Arts (Honors) z Filozofii oraz Anglistyki na Uniwersytecie Yorku. Posiada certyfikat DELTA oraz jest trenerem CELT dla nauczycieli języka angielskiego. Uczył języka angielskiego we Włoszech, w Polsce, Wielkiej Brytanii i Kanadzie. Obronił pracę magisterską poświęconą klasom wielopoziomowym; interesuje się tym zjawiskiem i szuka rozwiązań tego problemu w szkolnictwie wyższym oraz w krajach rozwijających się. Od 2006 roku uczy w Wyższej Szkole Europejskiej im. ks. J. Tischnera. Jest wicedyrektorem Centrum Języków Obcych, gdzie pracuje głównie w dziale nauczania języka angielskiego.

Streszczenie

Co dalej z kolegiami nauczycielskimi?

W naszych czasach wydaje się dziwne, kiedy studenci po siedmiu latach nauki języka angielskiego przyznają się do tego, że znają angielski jedynie na poziomie podstawowym, zwłaszcza że według Rady Europy wystarczy 240 godzin nauki, aby przejść z poziomu A1 na B1. Kiedy pyta się ich, dlaczego tak słabo znają angielski, często tłumaczą: „tak naprawdę nie nauczyłem się niczego w szkole średniej”. Czy naprawdę tak jest? Czy szkoły średnie są na takim niskim poziomie?

W 2005 roku Najwyższa Izba Kontroli prowadziła audyt poziomu nauczania języków obcych w polskich szkołach. Wyniki były zaskakujące. Okazało się, że prawie połowa szkół (49,3%), w których przeprowadzono audyt, zatrudnia nauczycieli niespełniających ministerialnych i lingwistycznych wymogów, założonych przez audytorów. Oprócz tego aż 85% instytucji nie w pełni spełniła ministerialne wymogi. Nawet w sprawach najbardziej podstawowych również były braki: 20% szkół korzystało z nieodpowiednich podręczników. W sumie tylko jedna z siedmiu szkół spełniła ministerialne wymogi. Poza tym zapowiadane zamykanie kolegiów nauczycielskich najprawdopodobniej będzie skutkowało tym, że zapotrzebowanie na nauczycieli nie będzie zrealizowane i zostawi kształcenie przyszłych anglistów w niepewnych rękach wydziałów filologii angielskiej. Sprawa jest jeszcze bardziej skomplikowana, ponieważ obecny system kształcenia anglistów, choć wymagający i dokładny, nie zapewnia odpowiedniego przygotowania przyszłych nauczycieli. Na przykład obecnie wystarczy zrealizować jedynie 144 godzin praktyki, aby być nauczycielem w szkole średniej, co może wyglądać imponująco, ale jest mylące, gdyż jedynie 20 godzin to samodzielnie prowadzone lekcje i jeden kurs z metodologii, co jest kompletnie niezgodne ze standardami europejskimi. W Wielkiej Brytanii, na przykład, praktykanci muszą zrealizować sześć godzin dydaktycznych tygodniowo, co pozwala im uzyskać „status wykwalifikowanego nauczyciela”. Aby zostać samodzielnym nauczycielem, muszą jeszcze pracować jeszcze rok.

Nie zmienia to faktu, że najlepsi nauczyciele, jakich kiedykolwiek poznałem, to angiści w szkołach państwowych i „native speakerzy”, choć ci ostatni najbardziej przecenieni. Skąd się bierze ten problem i jakie są jego konsekwencje dla tych, którzy tworzą prawa? W niniejszym artykule postaram się opowiedzieć na te pytania i sformułować sugestie przydatne w dalszej dyskusji na ten temat.

Słowa kluczowe

Rozwój nauczycielski, studia wyższe, reforma edukacyjna; nauczanie języka angielskiego, Polska.