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**The Impact of Barriers  
on the Process of Learning  
Foreign Languages**

by

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**Beata GBUREK**

# **THE IMPACT OF BARRIERS ON THE PROCESS OF LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

## **Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to answer some vital questions related to learning and communicating in foreign languages. I have focused on obstacles in both processes. The background was a survey conducted among my students and teachers, 10 years of business experience in the field of teaching foreign languages, over 20 years of experience in learning foreign languages and trainings on personal growth. In the theoretical part I touched on the subject of barriers and their origins in an applicative and psychological approach. Subsequently, I described the nature of barriers in learning foreign languages in a frame of the general operations of my Language Centre, and elaborated on its mission and staffing. The practical part is about the methodology of the research, its organization, place, techniques and tools as well as the characteristics of the respondents. I also compared the question of barriers in the process of mastering languages with the results of the research and presented some conclusions for the future and indications for further research.*

**Keywords:** language, communication, barrier

**JEL codes:** I 121

## 1. Introduction

In my study I touched on the subject of barriers that students encounter while learning foreign languages. The main purpose of every Foreign Language Centre is to offer services which allow their clients to achieve their linguistic goals as soon as possible. The centre can ensure the best teachers, the best programmes, the best equipment in the classrooms, nevertheless this does not imply success. One of the reasons for this status quo is the impact of barriers on the process of learning foreign languages.

First and foremost, this paper is the fruit of my 10 years of business experience in the field of teaching foreign languages, secondly of over 20 years of learning languages (Polish, Russian, English, German, Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Chinese) and last, of literature, seminars, workshops, trainings on personal growth. Among my students and teachers I conducted a survey intended to reveal their motivation to learn, estimate their level of self-esteem, find their sources of satisfaction and discover what they found difficult in both learning and communicating in foreign languages.

Moreover, while writing the study I was also working on language workshops called Training in an Assertive Approach to Self-Directed Language Education. At workshops I touch on the following subjects:

- "How did they do it?", i.e. methods of learning foreign languages.
- Visual learners, auditory learners and others, i.e. how I can learn most efficiently.
- You learn on your own the most important things in your life, i.e. what the teacher cannot do on your behalf.
- *I am helpless at languages vs. Everybody who speaks their mother tongue is able to master a foreign language*, i.e. destructive thoughts and alternative opinions related to foreign languages.
- I want to, but I do not feel like it, i.e. motivation.
- Important/not important and urgent/not urgent, i.e. priorities.
- You cannot „have” time, but you can use the time you are given, i.e. time management.
- Truth and myths about regular study.
- How will my life be different when I have learned a foreign language,

i.e. when I visualize – I materialize.

- Learning languages as a lifestyle.

After the training the participants:

- Are able to learn languages on their own.
- Do not depend on courses and teachers.
- Have new general skills available to them.
- Learn faster than before.
- Adapt the process of learning to their needs.
- Feel a more considerable influence on their own life.
- They overcome their own limits.
- They have a higher self-esteem.
- They shift the limits of their world.

## **2. Barriers and their origins**

Even before I started to run the Language Centre GBUREK<sup>®</sup> it was obvious to me that most obstacles in the process of learning languages are the result of non-linguistic factors. I decided to train my teachers so that they are capable of detecting these reasons and efficiently managing them in the process of learning languages. Section 2 is focused on achievements of researchers from various fields and psychologists who have helped us the most in this area.

### **2.1. Applicative approach**

In the Subsections below I have described instruments and methods that I use at work and which are supposed to steer more efficiently – compared to ones we knew and applied before – the process of personal growth so that the progress is maximized, e.g. while learning foreign languages.

#### **2.1.1. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**

According to Franklin Covey's (1989) programme, an organization will not succeed until its employees succeed, a company will not achieve its goals if its employees do not achieve their personal goals. Covey (1989) shows how to make people act effectively and consequently influence the efficiency of the organization they work for. I apply similar strategies at my trainings for

nothing can guarantee our survival and development in the changing fortunes of time. Advanced technologies, changes in the local, national and international markets, mergers are only some of challenges that organizations face. Fast solutions do not work in this environment. Little changes bring merely apparent improvement. Only those people who make the effort of building a solid foundation of effectiveness can surely and safely meet their destiny.

Covey's (1989) habits help to see, think and act in a different way and, thanks to this, achieve better results. Covey assumes that nowadays in the industrial environment it is not enough to implement changes in actions – we are to start new actions and give up typical, ineffective ones in order to create strong relationships based on synergy. At my trainings the most vital habits are: firstly – „begin with the end in mind” because at the very beginning of the course we describe how we will recognize that the goal of the course has been achieved. Secondly - “put first things first” to be aware of where learning foreign languages ranks on our list of priorities. Thirdly, “sharpen the saw” which puts emphasis on self-improvement as a remedy to burn-out and non-productivity.

### **2.1.2. *Nonviolent communication (NVC)***

Simply put, NVC is a way of relating to ourselves and others, moment to moment, free of past reactions. By learning to identify your needs and express them powerfully, as well as to bring understanding to the needs of others, you can stay connected to what is alive in you and create a life that it is more fulfilling (Cf. Rosenberg 1998).

NVC (also called Compassionate Communication) can be used in any interaction. NVC provides practical skills in language, awareness, and using power to communicate in ways that inspire compassionate giving and receiving toward meeting the needs of all concerned. These skills provide clarity, understanding, and connection leading to mutual respect and cooperation. Whether you are caught up in long-term hostility or a new dispute, this process can help create resolutions that are satisfying for everyone involved without painful compromise or sacrifice. NVC gives concrete tools for replacing old patterns of defensiveness, resistance, and counterattack with an experience of greater harmony and power with people. NVC can dramatically

improve relationships by helping you focus your attention on empathic understanding of others without compromising your own values, and expressing your real feelings and needs openly and honestly, yet without blame or criticism. Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D. who created and has developed the process of Nonviolent Communication says: "Violence in any form is a tragic expression of our unmet needs".

### **2.1.3. Assertiveness**

Briefly, to be assertive means to have and express your own opinions and emotions without either violating the rights and mental territory of others or behaving aggressively, as well as to defend your rights. My experience shows that it is too challenging to practice language skill and then communicate in a foreign language if you are not assertive. The main points are: firstly, to be able to express an opinion, criticism, needs and wishes without the feeling of guilt; secondly, to be able to say „no” without hurting others; to be self-conscious, flexible but resolute. An assertive person has clearly defined targets, can control their emotions, is not easily influenced by the emotions of other people. This is particularly important in our business in case of intensive courses, where the aim of the course is vital. To be assertive does not mean to ignore the emotions and aspirations of others; it is rather the ability to achieve your goals in spite of negative pressure in your environment, to take good care of yourself in a sensible way, while respecting the others. Practical assertiveness is teaching other people how they are supposed to treat us because it assumes that they do not know what we think and feel and will not know until we tell them. On the other hand, assertiveness is an invaluable tool for teachers in their personal growth as their students are sometimes top executives. These people are used to ruling with an iron fist and in a lesson the roles are reversed: the teacher is their boss who monitors and evaluates their work.

### **2.1.4. Life in freedom and justice**

A.S. Neill (1968) drew my attention to how important the above mentioned aspects are in the process of finding myself and consequently doing my best in many fields. "All crimes, all hatreds, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness" wrote A.S. Neill (1968), founder of Summerhill School. Today, all over the world, education is moving towards more and more testing, more ex-

aminations and more qualifications. It seems to be a modern trend that assessment and qualification define education. If society were to treat any other group of people the way it treats its children, it would be considered a violation of human rights. But for most of the world's children this is the normal expectation from parents, school and the society in which we live.

Today many educationalists and families are becoming uneasy with this restrictive environment. They are beginning to look for alternative answers to mainstream schooling. One of these answers is democratic or 'free' schooling. The oldest and most famous of these schools is Summerhill, on the east coast of England. Summerhill School was founded in 1921 at a time when the rights of individuals were less respected than they are today. Children were beaten in most homes at some time or another and discipline was the key work in child rearing. Through its self-government and freedom it has struggled for more than eighty years against pressures to conform, in order to give children the right to decide for themselves. The school is now a thriving democratic community, showing that children learn to be self-confident, tolerant and considerate when they are given space to be themselves.

There is a wide choice of subjects. A new timetable is created each term when the older children have "signed-up" for classes, though there is no compulsion to attend. As well as the structured timetable, there is free access to art, woodwork and computers. There are also open areas where kids not in classes can hang out, amuse themselves, socialize, play games, be creative etc. Adults are not there to create things for the children to do - they need to create things for themselves. So sports, games and other amusements are all generated by the pupils and adults, according to need. The staff meet daily to discuss any problems or concerns. A Special Attention List monitors new children, and those who may have problems with lessons. Staff consider various actions that will assist the child in learning. For example, if a child is nervous of the classroom, one-to-one lessons can be offered. This is the case for fast or slow learners. The important freedom at Summerhill is the right to play. All lessons are optional. There is no pressure to conform to adult ideas of growing up, though the community itself has expectations of reasonable conduct from the individual. Bullying, vandalism or



other anti-social behaviour is dealt with by specially elected ombudsmen, or by the whole community in its daily meetings. Summerhill is a happy and caring community that recognizes the importance of expressing emotions and learning through feelings. There is a general openness and honesty among the community members. Staff do not use adult authority to impose values and solve problems; these are solved by the individual with the help of friends or ombudsmen or by the community in meetings.

## **2.2. Psychological approach**

The input of psychologists in eliminating barriers in the process of learning (not only foreign languages) is primordial in our work.

### **2.2.1. Brain-friendly**

Vera F. Birkenbihl – a German who studied psychology and journalism in the USA is the author of this approach. Since 1969 she has been developing the learning techniques based on research on how the human brain works. In 1970 she gave her first lectures in the USA. Since she came back to Europe in 1972 she has been working as an independent trainer and author of books on brain-friendly methods of learning. Birkenbihl (1999 and 2000) is said to have invented „infotainment“ long before the name itself was created.

In the 80ties Birkenbihl became famous for her method of learning foreign languages, which implies the best use of students' linguistic potential. She puts special emphasis on students' involvement in the process since we learn on our own the most important things in our life. E.g.: when we were kids we learned our mother tongue on our own, without teachers, classes and tests. To some extent she copies the child's strategy and adapts it to the adult's reality. Surprising, the first person to mention this approach in 1892 was Bernhard Teichmann. Zygmunt Broniarek, a Polish journalist who speaks fluently eight languages, learned them in a similar way.

Nowadays, the most important issues concentrate on sharing one's knowledge through games and learning strategies (so called NLLS – Non-Learning Learning Strategies), whose target is to simplify the work of both learners and teachers.

### **2.2.2. Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)**

NLP encompasses the three most influential components involved in producing human experience: neurology, language and programming. The neurological system regulates how our bodies function, language determines how we interface and communicate with other people and our programming determines the kinds of models we create of our world. Neuro-Linguistic Programming describes the fundamental dynamics between mind (neuro) and language (linguistic) and how their interplay effects our body and behaviour (programming). NLP is a pragmatic school of thought – an 'epistemology' – that addresses the many levels involved in being human.

NLP is a multi-dimensional process that involves the development of behavioural competence and flexibility, but also involves strategic thinking and an understanding of the mental and cognitive processes behind behaviour. NLP provides tools and skills for the development of states of individual excellence, but it also establishes a system of empowering beliefs and presuppositions about what human beings are, what communication is and what the process of change is all about. At another level, NLP is about self-discovery, exploring identity and mission. It also provides a framework for understanding and relating to the 'spiritual' part of the human experience that reaches beyond us as individuals to our family, community and global systems.

NLP is not only about competence and excellence, it is about wisdom and vision. In essence, all of NLP is founded on two fundamental presuppositions: 1. The Map is Not the Territory. 2. Life and 'Mind' are Systemic Processes (Seymour, O'Connor 2003). In the belief system of NLP the people who are most effective are the ones who have a map of the world that allows them to perceive the greatest number of available choices and perspectives. NLP is a way of enriching the choices that you have and perceive as available in the world around you. Excellence comes from having many choices. Wisdom comes from having multiple perspectives. NLP was originated by John Grinder (whose background was in linguistics) and Richard Bandler (whose background was in mathematics and Gestalt therapy) for the purpose of making explicit models of human excellence.

Through the years, NLP has developed some very powerful tools and skills for communication and change in a wide range of professional areas including: counselling, psychotherapy, education, health, creativity, law, management, sales, leadership and parenting. In my work I apply NLP while teaching our students how to select proper constructive words to describe their process of learning (e.g. "There is no failure, there is only feedback"), achieve their goals, take care of the ecology of their goals, improve communication skills, trust their own remote control, learn to relax, use metaphors and affirmations in order to solve the problem and take the responsibility for their progress in learning a foreign language.

### ***2.2.3. Transactional Analysis (TA)***

Transactional Analysis is a social psychology developed by Eric Berne, MD (1964 and 1975). TA is a powerful tool to bring about human well-being. In psychotherapy, transactional analysis utilizes a contract for specific changes desired by the client and involves the "Adult" in both the client and the clinician to sort out behaviours, emotions and thoughts that prevent the development of full human potential. Transactional analysts intervene as they work with clients in a safe, protective, mutually respectful – OK/OK – environment to eliminate dysfunctional behaviours and establish and reinforce positive relationship styles and healthy functioning. Counsellors who utilize Transactional Analysis work contractually on solving "here and now" problems.

Transactional Analysis is a practical educational psychology that offers a way of transforming educational philosophy and principles into everyday practice. TA concepts provide a flexible and creative approach to understanding how people function and to the connections between human behaviour, learning and education. Teaching them to both teachers and students is a process of empowerment, enhancing effective methods of interaction and mutual recognition. Educational TA is both preventive and restorative. TA concepts are developed and used with people of all ages and stages of development in their various social settings. The aim is to increase personal autonomy, to support people in developing their own personal and professional philosophies and to enable optimum psychological health and growth.

The key philosophical concepts that underpin Educational TA are:

- 1) Effective educators offer empathic acceptance of all human beings as people together with respect for their dignity. These qualities are at the heart of successful learning relationships.
- 2) People at any age and stage can learn to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions.
- 3) Educational difficulties can be addressed effectively with co-operative goodwill and a coherent theoretical framework that makes sense of the human dynamics involved.

The process of educational TA is contractual, so that all parties know where they stand, and what agreements have been made, and for what purposes. Throughout the process the ideas and methods of TA are used openly to promote informed co-operation and the sharing of power between all parties. TA can be used to address important issues in initial and continuing teacher education, self-esteem building, student motivation, staff morale and teacher well-being, blocks to learning and teaching and behaviour management.

In the process of learning a foreign language, when students encounter a barrier in making progress, two important factors exist. The first, we need to reveal their script (parental programming) or anti-script (adolescent rebellion that can be the reaction to the script) that does not allow them to succeed and find a script-breaker. The other, it is essential to be aware of the games students may play with the teachers.

#### **2.2.4. *Breath Integration (BI)***

Breath Integration is a tool for bringing about personal transformation. This type of breathing is an ancient technique, a process of awakening to oneself. Breathwork affects the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual levels simultaneously to implement deep and lasting changes in every aspect of one's life. Breath Integration helps an individual get in touch with suppressed feelings. As feelings are suppressed, the natural aliveness that is within the individual is also suppressed. Suppressing feelings, in turn, causes additional problems, such as relationship issues, health problems, alcohol, addictions, career failure and low self-esteem. During a Breath Integration session, people get in touch with many aspects of themselves – these can include the

forgotten memories, mistaken core beliefs, and old hurts and angers that develop self-defeating patterns. Suppressed emotional pain acts as a kind of "glue", holding in place these mistaken beliefs. Until the emotions surrounding these old thoughts and beliefs are allowed to surface, are felt, and then released, the mistaken thoughts will continue to manifest. This is one reason why some people do not see lasting effects from just doing affirmations or visualization. The feelings still need to be addressed. Using a circular, connected breath allows a person's body to relax and naturally release pent-up emotions and thoughts. The outcome of Breathwork is a sense of peace, awareness and compassion for oneself. In essence this is a process of healing the wounds of the inner child so he/she can start making adult choices and open to his/her natural aliveness, innocence and joy (Sisson 1996 and 2000). In our work when students report difficulties in self-directed education, we draw their attention to the fact that if they start feeling helpless or inconsistent, the large spectrum is feeling like a victim and breathing shallow and short. Obviously, a victim cannot succeed in learning a language, so the first strategy is to start breathing deeply and long and reminding themselves that although they feel like a victim they are much more as a person.

#### **2.2.5. Family constellations**

Bert Hellinger says that he did not discover or invent family constellations, he just described them. His 16 years in South Africa with the Zulu deeply shaped his later work. His peculiar ability to perceive systems in relationships and his interest in the human commonality underlying cultural diversity made itself apparent during those years—he saw that many of the Zulu rituals and customs had a structure and function common to human experiences. Several other therapeutic schools have had major influence on his work. In addition to the phenomenological orientation of the group dynamics, the fundamental need for humans to align themselves with the forces of nature, he learned psychoanalysis in Vienna, and body-work in America as well as Gestalt Therapy. The dynamics of identification also gradually became clear during this period. Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy's book "Invisible Bonds" and his recognition of hidden loyalties and the need for a balance between giving and taking in families were also important. He trained in family therapy with Ruth McClendon and Leslie Kadis. That is where he first

encountered family constellations. In a sense, he is the ultimate empiricist. All his conclusions are based on observation. He had no theory about it. He saw thousands of family constellations, and exchanged his observations and findings with many colleagues who also study family constellations. They found some basic laws operating in families. This subsection only describes the method, but behind the method there are very important insights into family relationships, the relationships between men and women, parents and children, and in a wider field also. It is these insights that are most important, because in the course of years it became apparent that many failures, accidents, tragedies and illnesses are caused by entanglements in the family. These entanglements are unconscious (Hellinger 1999).

### **2.2.6. Emotional Intelligence**

Emotional Intelligence – EQ – is a relatively recent behavioural model, rising to prominence with Daniel Goleman's 1995 Book called 'Emotional Intelligence'. Emotional Intelligence is increasingly relevant to organizational development and developing people, because the EQ principles provide a new way to understand aspects of intelligence: understanding yourself, your goals, intentions, responses, behaviour and assessing people's behaviours, management styles, attitudes, interpersonal skills, and potential. Emotional Intelligence is an important consideration in human resources planning, job profiling, recruitment interviewing and selection, management development, customer relations and customer service, and more. Emotional Intelligence links strongly with concepts of love and spirituality: bringing compassion and humanity to work, and also to "Multiple Intelligence" theory which illustrates and measures the range of capabilities people possess, and the fact that everybody has a value. The EQ concept argues that IQ, or conventional intelligence, is too narrow; that there are wider areas of Emotional Intelligence that dictate and enable how successful we are. Success requires more than IQ (Intelligence Quotient), which has tended to be the traditional measure of intelligence, ignoring essential behavioural and character elements. We have met people who are academically brilliant and yet are socially and interpersonally inept. And we know that despite possessing a high IQ rating, success does not automatically follow. This is the essential premise of EQ: to be successful requires the effective awareness, control and management of

one's own emotions, and those of other people. Goleman (1996) identified the five 'domains' of EQ as:

- 1) knowing your emotions,
- 2) managing your own emotions,
- 3) motivating yourself,
- 4) recognizing and understanding other people's emotions,
- 5) managing relationships, i.e., managing the emotions of others.

By developing our Emotional Intelligence in the five EQ domains we can become more productive and successful at what we do, and help others to be more productive and successful too. Consequently, we achieve our spiritual, private professional and of course linguistic goals more easily. The process and outcomes of Emotional Intelligence development also contain many elements known to reduce stress for individuals and organizations, by decreasing conflict, improving relationships and understanding, and increasing stability, continuity and harmony.

### **3. Work with barriers in learning foreign languages in a frame of general operations in the Centre GBUREK®**

At the beginning of this Section I would like to introduce my Language Centre. Before I started Trainings in an Assertive Approach to Self-Directed Language Education, I specialized in my method called "simultaneous teaching" and my formula in a nutshell said: one course – one teacher – two foreign languages. My target is, among others, people who treasure their time, who want to use and improve their skills in one language while learning another, who are interested in quickly mastering two foreign languages.

The method I apply is extremely efficient because we teach the students how to use their linguistic potential to its full. We tell them how to get personally involved in the process of learning since I am convinced that even the best schools are not able to substitute self-directed education. They are encouraged to create a total immersion environment, as we did inadvertently when we were children and learned our mother tongue without having enrolled to a course. Moreover, simultaneous teaching is so efficient because thanks to an additional foreign language in the class we are given another reference point, consequently we get more incentives to associate, compare

similarities and differences etc.

We offer courses in Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Rumanian.

Since there were many people interested in learning only one language, we also offered mono-lingual classes, one-to-one or in groups up to four. In order to ensure our student optimal progress in their learning process, we specify at the first meeting at what level we start, what our target level is, when we want to achieve our goal, and how much time students can devote to self-directed education. Next step is to match students with a programme (elementary, beginner, intermediate, advanced, business language), precise number and length of classes accordingly.

### **3.1. Mission of the company GBUREK®**

Our mission statement says:

*We make it easier for people to communicate. We want as many people as possible to speak foreign languages. We revolutionize the process of learning foreign languages so that it contributes to a comprehensive development of the students' personality and character. We combine business with the promotion of learning foreign languages.*

I discovered the method of simultaneous language teaching while attending University, when French and English students exchanged lessons with each other. Undoubtedly, Confucius' saying: *Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life* was groundbreaking in my carrier. Thus, I started running my business in 1999. I did market research and came to the conclusion that there was a niche in the market of Language Centres: students who are aware that merely speaking English is not enough. These students wish to not only improve their English, but also learn another foreign language, and who wish to accomplish both without the necessity of attending two classes.

I needed a lot of legal advice at the beginning of my business. In order to avoid plagiary of my idea I engaged a patent office. Consequently, the name GBUREK® is a trademark in the area of teaching foreign languages.



Furthermore, we created a precise contract that we sign with all the teachers in order to make sure that even under external pressure they respect the Act from 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1993 on fighting against unlawful competition.

My assumption is that the following features of my product are its most important advantages: „tailor-made” teaching programme, target-oriented course, “2 in 1” product, the best teachers. For over ten years I have become more and more convinced that success is inside us and does not depend on outside factors, and being successful is mostly based on clarifying the following questions:

- Am I aware of the fact that nothing is permanent except change?
- Am I lucky?
- Do I realize that if I want something, I search for a way/method/solution and if I do not want it, I search for an excuse?
- What are my beliefs?
- Do I remember that it is not what I have but what I do with what I have?
- Am I able to be here and now?
- Do I understand that I am 100% responsible for my life and that everything in my environment reflects myself?
- Do I know that reality is the way I perceive it?
- Am I detached from the results?
- Am I disciplined and well organized?
- What am I going to be like in 20 years?
- Do I distinguish important tasks from urgent ones?
- Am I ready to experience tension in relationships with people whose material condition is worse than mine?
- What is my inner voice/intuition saying?
- What do I feel?
- Am I conscious of my feelings?
- Do I remember that I choose how I am?
- I have to or want to?
- I should or can /decide /choose?
- I should not or do not want to?
- I will try or will do it?

- I cannot or will not do it?
- I have problems or challenges and opportunities?
- I make mistakes or learn lessons?
- I fail or receive essential feedback?

### **3.2. The importance of staffing**

The influence of employees on the results of a company is huge. This refers especially to Language Centres where good teachers are the most precious asset because of their three main roles: teaching, a marketing engine, a display window to the Centre.

The particularity of our students requires from our teachers certain didactic and motivational skills. Therefore, after a traditional recruitment process the candidates are tested in the following categories:

- how they prepare a lesson when they emphasize a given language skill (listening, speaking, reading, writing),
- language trap, e.g. when a student is asking the teacher to immediately translate *obróbka skrawaniem* (internal machining) into a foreign language,
- organizational trap, e.g. when students are 20 minutes late and expect the teacher to work 20 minutes longer.

Selecting teachers is a key factor in my business. We recruit them among students and graduates recommended by Heads of Philological Institutes. We find very useful the personality test created by Oldham and Morris (2007).

## **4. Methodology of the research**

### **4.1. Area of the research**

The aim of the survey conducted was to find out firstly, what motivates our students to learn foreign languages; secondly, what they find satisfying and what they find difficult while learning; last, to what extent it influences their communication in a foreign language. As I mentioned in Section 2, I had no doubts even before I started running the Language Centre GBUREK<sup>®</sup> that the reasons for problems in mastering a foreign language do not have solely linguistic roots. The better we understand these reasons, the better product

we can offer our customers. Since one of the objectives of running every business is to maximize the profit, one of my targets is to train the teachers so that they are able to recognize the reasons and eliminate them and consequently encourage more and more people to learn at my Language Centre.

I asked five main questions in my survey:

- What motivates students to learn foreign languages?
- What do students find the most satisfying while learning foreign languages?
- What do students find the most difficult while learning foreign languages?
- What do students find the most satisfying while communicating in foreign languages?
- What do students find the most difficult while communicating in foreign languages?

#### **4.2. Organization and place of the research**

Assuming that the behaviour of the clients in the Language Schools is a complex and versatile subject due to various social, economic and psychological mechanisms that are its source, I decided to adapt a very specific procedure in my research. In February and March 2008 I conducted my survey on my own among the customers of the Language Centre GBUREK<sup>®</sup> on the premises of the Centre, i.e. in Poznań as well as via e-mail. There were 30 participants.

#### **4.3. Methods, techniques and tools**

In my research I applied the method of diagnostic survey and the technique of questionnaire with interview elements.

I created a survey in five parts.

- 1) Part I referred to the respondents themselves (gender, age, education).
- 2) Part II was related to the command of foreign languages and time students needed to master them.
- 3) Part III contained the question of the aim of learning foreign languages.
- 4) Part IV referred to language skills.

- 5) Part V described the factors making learning and communication either satisfying or difficult.

#### **4.4. Characteristics of the respondents**

I surveyed 30 students of my Centre, among whom the majority are women. My respondents are mainly 26 to 35-year-old people. Nevertheless, the youngest student in my carrier was 5 and the oldest – 76. An overwhelming majority of my students have a degree. Moreover, the second biggest age group among my respondents are too young to have graduated.

### **5. Barriers in acquiring a foreign language in the light of the results of the survey**

#### **5.1. Analysis of the results**

Part II of the questionnaire starts with the question intended to reveal how many foreign languages respondents speak and at what the level (Table 1). It is very important to emphasize at this moment that the way the level of the command of languages is evaluated is not clear because of two reasons. Firstly, students evaluated themselves, consequently, perfectionists marked themselves down and people with unjustifiably high self-esteem marked themselves up. Secondly, in my Centre students learn according to their own or their group's programme, so among people whose English is pre-intermediate there are specialists in business language who would not pass the FCE exam and vice-versa.

The next question was: how long have you been learning foreign languages? The shortest period was – a couple of months, the longest – 25 years. Surprising, in case of students reporting a relatively short period their level is proportional to their input; nevertheless, there is no evident correlation between the time of a learning process and its effects. It is due to three factor. Firstly, learning a language is not simply about attending language classes and adapting to a programme, but also involves struggling to communicate in a foreign language. That is why it is not astonishing that sometimes we come across people who have been learning a language for over 10 years and are not able to answer simple questions related to their daily routine. Secondly, courses that took place in Poland in 80's rarely finished by a

„test” in a real life, e.g. when talking to foreigners. Thirdly, the pace of making progress in a foreign language is a result of this language’s specificity. E.g. it is relatively easy to start to communicate in English in quite a short time of learning. However, jumping from intermediate to advanced sometimes requires a longer stay in an English-speaking country, without company of Polish people. As far as German, French or Chinese are concerned it is the other way round: they are more demanding at the elementary stages.

**Table 1*****Languages and levels***

Language	a	b	c	d	e	f	g
English	-	27.00%	40.00%	27.00%	-	-	7.00%
German	3.00%	23.00%	17.00%	20.00%	-	3.00%	10.00%
French	-	10.00%	7.00%	3.00%	-	-	3.00%
Spanish	7.00%	3.00%	-	3.00%	-	-	-
Italian	3.00%	-	-	-	-	-	3.00%
Russian	-	-	7.00%	3.00%	-	10.00%	7.00%
Chinese	-	7.00%	-	3.00%	3.00%	-	-
Latin	3.00%	-	-	-	-	3.00%	-
Norwegian	-	3.00%	-	-	-	-	-
Dutch	3.00%	-	-	-	-	-	-

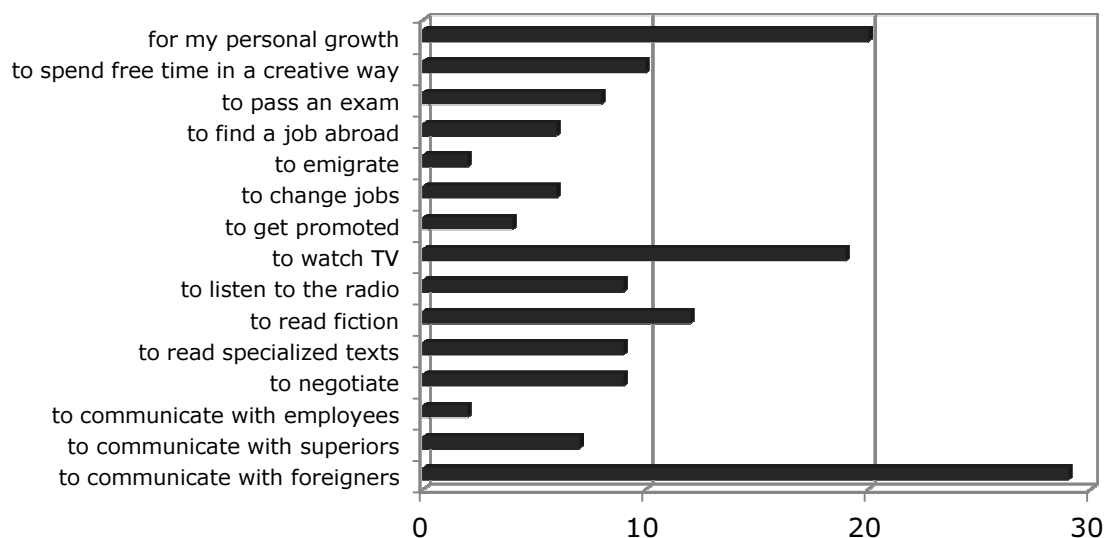
a – elementary  
 b – beginner  
 c – intermediate  
 d – advanced  
 e – native  
 f – false beginner  
 g – I do not know

*Source:* Author’s study based on questionnaire surveys.

In Part III we learned why our students needed to speak foreign languages.

The results are shown in the Figure 1. The others include:

- to fulfil my own need to polish my skills, for I find languages as important as reading and writing,
- because it is compulsory at school,
- to spread my network of international contacts,
- my own contentment,
- activating my brain,
- improving my tools at work.

**Figure 1.*****Aims of learning foreign languages***

Source: Author's study based on questionnaire surveys.

Our students are very pragmatic as far as the effects of their language course are concerned. The fact that nearly everybody said their aim was to communicate with foreigners reflects their pragmatism. Two pieces of information were essential for us. Firstly, according to our mission we want *to make the learning of foreign languages contribute to a comprehensive development of the personality and character of our students*, so the fact that personal growth is in the second place is evidence that in this case demand met the supply, if not: the supply created the demand. Secondly, one of the least mentioned aims was to emigrate for life, which means my customers come from what we set as our target: well-established middle class, who treasure their time and are success-oriented.

Part IV started with the question about language skills. The most respondents estimated their reading comprehension "satisfactory" or "needs improvement" and their writing "good". The second largest group consists of people who estimated their speaking "satisfactory" or "needs improvement", and the third – people who found their writing "satisfactory" or "needs improvement", listening comprehension – "satisfactory", and reading comprehension – "good". The next section of part IV elaborates on what students want to change in their language skills (Tables 2-5).

**Table 2*****Language skill – speaking***

I want to start to speak	3.00%
I want to have conversations	23.00%
I want to use words that I know passively	20.00%
I want to speak more fluently and correctly	33.00%
I want to speak as if it were my mother tongue	20.00%

*Source:* Author's study based on questionnaire surveys.

The most interesting students' remarks are as follows:

- I want to stop saying "er" etc.,
- I want to overcome difficulties in memorizing vocabulary,
- I want to apply grammar, not only know grammar,
- I want to speak and think in a foreign language,
- I want to get rid of my foreign accent,
- I want to stop being scared while speaking a foreign language,
- I want to remember collocations,
- I want to be able to express my thoughts,
- I want to be able to speak faster and to say more,
- I want to distinguish tones.

**Table 3*****Language skill – reading comprehension***

I want to catch words I know	3.00%
I want to understand what the text is about	23.00%
I want to understand newspapers and magazines with the help of a dictionary	27.00%
I want to read newspapers and magazines easily	33.00%
I want to read as if it were my mother tongue	13.00%

*Source:* Author's study based on questionnaire surveys.

The most interesting students' remarks are as follows:

- first and foremost, I want to understand professional texts,
- I do not want to get lost in complex sentences,
- I want to understand informal expressions,
- I want to understand the text I am reading aloud not only concentrate on my correct reading ,
- I want to be able to recognize 3000 Chinese characters.

**Table 4**

***Language skill – listening comprehension***

I want to catch words I know	10.00%
I want to understand what they are talking about	17.00%
I want to be able to repeat what I have heard	17.00%
I want to understand indistinct speech	40.00%
I want to understand as if it were my mother tongue	17.00%

*Source:* Author's study based on questionnaire surveys.

The most interesting students' remarks are as follows:

- I want to have at my disposition a richer vocabulary,
- I want to remember the text I have heard,
- I want to distinguish between accents and styles,
- I want to keep up the pace of my progress,
- I want to be able to handle sentences containing a couple of difficult words at once,
- I want to understand people who are speaking quickly,
- I want to distinguish paronyms,
- I want to stop guessing what they are talking about,
- I want to be able to write down the text I have heard.



**Table 5*****Language skill – reading comprehension***

I want to write simple texts	7.00%
I want to write letters	30.00%
I want to write reports etc.	23.00%
I want to write complex texts	28.00%
I want to write as if it were my mother tongue	13.00%

*Source:* Author's study based on questionnaire surveys.

The most interesting students' remarks are as follows:

- I want to improve my structure,
- I want to make fewer spelling mistakes,
- I want to write more accurate official texts,
- I want to use more adequate expressions,
- I want to avoid copying expressions word-for-word from Polish into foreign languages,
- I want to remember Chinese characters not only the words.

Part IV convinced me that my respondents are not only conscious of the level of their skills, but also that they specifically know what they need to work on. Such a constructive approach undoubtedly makes learning languages easier.

In Part V I investigated what gives our students the most satisfaction and what they find the most difficult while learning a language. Our students find most satisfying talking to the teacher, talking to the other students and reading original texts. In turn, they find least satisfying, exercises based on readings from their manual, grammar tasks and tests.

Listening to original texts and writing essays open the list of factors our students find the most difficult while learning foreign languages. Second is dictations and self study; third, tests.

Factors students find a little difficult while learning a foreign language include, first, talking to other students; second, decoding and working with CDs, writing essays and self study; third, reading original texts, doing exercises based on readings from their manual, doing exercises based on an au-

dio segment from their manual, dictations and tests. The last question of the survey was intended to reveal what the students find the most satisfying and what they find the most difficult in communicating in a foreign language, and when the difficulty arose, i.e. what caused them to perceive it as satisfying and/or difficult.

Here is the list of the most interesting remarks on the events that make students regard an aspect of communication as satisfying or difficult:

- my first travel abroad,
- when I first understood a song in a foreign language,
- when we got lost on a motorway,
- when I read the original version of "Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland",
- when I solved my problem at the airport in the USA,
- when I could not breathe a word in the company of my business partners from Sweden and Israel,
- when I could negotiate effectively,
- when I was in a new environment and met interesting people,
- when I could earn better money,
- when I learn something new,
- when my task is to translate,
- when I speak to foreigners over the phone,
- when foreign auditors come to our company for a couple of days,
- when I watched the German equivalent of "Family Feud",
- when I went to a job interview,
- when I can choose: "Rzeczpospolita" vs "The Economist",
- when my son is proud of me,
- when I quickly switch from one foreign language to another,
- when I learn and see my progress,
- when I am able to perform a task,
- when I travelled alone,
- when I started a new job,
- when I felt that my interlocutor had understood me,
- when I can get by on my own although there is an interpreter available,

- when I went abroad in business,
- when I had my first presentation.

It was of utmost importance for me to find out that our students hardly associate communication in a foreign language with difficulties or low level of satisfaction. According to my forecast based on Part III of the survey, the respondents find communication with foreigners, personal growth and watching TV the most satisfying.

## **5.2. Summary of the results**

In Section 4 of this paper I asked five questions which I answer in this Section. The answers are based on the results of my research.

### ***What motivates students to learn foreign languages?***

The research clearly indicates that factors motivating students to learn can be divided into three groups that I have called: external, internal and personal. The first group includes: communication with foreigners, watching TV, reading fiction, taking an exam, communication with superiors, negotiations, reading technical / specialized / professional texts, listening to the radio, changing jobs, promotion, finding a job abroad and communication with employees. The second group consists of: talking to the teacher, talking to other students and reading texts in the original version. In the third group are personal growth and spending one's free time in a creative way. For people who run a Language Centre it is vital to realize that we are totally responsible for the quality of the factors from the second group and that we can stimulate the factors from the third group.

### ***What do the students find the most satisfying while learning foreign languages?***

Our students find talking to the teacher, talking to the other students and reading texts in the original version the most satisfying while learning foreign languages. In turn, what they find the least satisfying is exercise based on reading in their manual, grammar tasks and tests.

***What do the students find the most difficult while learning foreign languages?***

First and foremost I would like to draw the attention to the fact that only half of the respondents observed difficulties at all. The most difficult are: listening to original texts and writing essays. Secondly, dictations and self study. Thirdly, tests. When considering the least difficult factors, we can state that four times fewer students observed these kinds of difficulties compared to the question of highly satisfying factors. Here number one is talking to the other students, number two decoding, working with CDs, writing essays and self study, number three reading texts in the original version, exercises based on readings from their manual, doing exercises based on an audio segment from their manual, dictations and tests.

***What do students find most satisfying while communicating in foreign languages?***

According to our students, the following are the most satisfying factors while communicating in foreign languages: communication with foreigners, personal growth, watching TV, spending one's free time in a creative way, reading fiction, passing an exam, communication with superiors, negotiations, reading technical / specialized / professional texts, listening to the radio, changing jobs, promotion, working abroad and communication with employees.

***What do students find the most difficult while communicating in foreign languages?***

I was pleased to discover in the survey that while our students find communicating with foreigners and watching TV the most challenging, they also find these both very satisfying.

## EPILOGUE

Every company needs to make a profit. Companies called Language Centres make the most money when they help students master foreign languages, and consequently, their success attracts a wider group of potential customers. If we want to offer a more competitive product, we must realize that factors which are not directly connected with our work influence its quality. Among them there are barriers that both people who learn foreign languages and people who communicate in foreign languages encounter. Therefore, there are two main aims of this study: to examine and describe the above mentioned barriers and their origins and to draw practical conclusions for staff in charge of Language Centres.

Since I obtained answers to the questions related to the barriers, I am of the opinion that the goal has been achieved.

To sum up, I can state that there are three basic practical postulates stemming from the survey: put even more emphasis on reading and listening to original texts, continue stressing the communicational aspect of learning foreign languages and reinforce the factor of personal growth of students and teachers.

In my view, the most noteworthy conclusion for the Centre of Simultaneous Language Teaching is the confirmation that I reach people who identify with my mission: *"We make it easier for people to communicate. [...] We revolutionize the process of learning foreign languages so that it contributes to a comprehensive development of the students' personality and character."*

Teachers who consider it essential to improve their teaching skills will certainly find the results of this research useful. Moreover, while working on the paper I discovered much room for further development: motivation to learn, priorities, adapting the process of learning to one's needs, concentration, visualization, self-control, destructive thoughts. I am therefore very happy to have integrated them over one year later in my Trainings in an Assertive Approach to Self-Directed Language Education.

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