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Foreign language teachers in dialogue

1. Introduction

The dialogue referred to in the title of this article concerns the 2006 Polish Neophilological Society (PNS) conference in Kraków (11–13 September 2006) *Dydaktyka języków obcych na początku XXI wieku* [Foreign language teaching at the beginning of the 21st century]. The Society is the only multilingual foreign language teachers' organization in Poland which provides a dialogic forum for an exchange of ideas and opinions in its annual conferences¹. The 2006 conference was mainly devoted to evaluation and assessment in foreign language teaching. Apart from the main focus, other papers concerning foreign language teaching and learning were also presented during the conference. The conference language was Polish because the speakers were Polish teachers of English, German, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, and marginally, Polish as a second language². The aim of the following analysis is comparing different approaches of the conference participants to academic discourse focused on foreign language learning and teaching.

My claim is that different traditions linked with academic discourse in foreign language teaching in different countries and academic settings have their impact on the theoretical approaches, methods of research and ways of presentation of seemingly similar topics. What follows is a diversity in the treatment of knowledge, attitudes towards listeners and readers, as well as global versus local approaches to the language of communication and relevant literature. Foreign language teachers in Poland, on the one hand, are influenced by target language traditions but, on the other hand, they create their own approaches on the basis of local situations and problems.

Such differences could be an inspiring source of richness in dialogic encounters. However, it may also happen that authors and their audience do not accept authors coming from other traditions and they put up, consciously or subconsciously, mental barriers, which can be seen in using a specific discourse, characteristic only of a particular tradition, and relying exclusively on the target language models. In such cases there is

¹ *Foreign language* is usually acquired/learned only in the classroom, in the countries where it is not spoken as a first language, e.g. English is a foreign language in Poland.

² Those different foreign languages are referred to as *target languages*.

no dialogue between diverse ideas. Conversely, each academic tradition and discourse is closed in its own world and immune to enriching mutual influences.

2. Diversity as a strength and as a weakness

Let us define academic discourse as the discourse of academic communities focused on particular academic disciplines. In the case of foreign language teachers, relevant academic disciplines encompass non-native language learning, teaching and use. These broad disciplines can be subdivided into narrower theoretical and practical areas of interest, among others, theory of second language acquisition vs. theory of foreign language learning, assessment of foreign language learners' and users' competence/proficiency, language teaching policy, new technologies in language teaching, evaluation of foreign language syllabuses and materials, developing language learners' autonomy, evaluation of the foreign language teaching and learning process, new language teaching techniques, teaching foreign languages to young and very young learners and second/foreign language teacher education and development. Obviously, this list can be further expanded. The above areas of interest have all been present in the papers given during the PNS 2006 conference.

According to Zalewski, academic discourse is used by the academic community "for functions related to knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating mission of that community" (Zalewski, 2004: 177). Let us try to focus on academic discourse in foreign language teaching from the perspective of knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating in the multilingual world. My claim is that the diversity of the academic discourse in foreign language teaching has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Different approaches do not preclude the mission of knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating. In fact, new foreign language teaching theories and practices are developed thanks to tensions and controversies between diverse approaches, which are inseparable aspects of development.

However, some basic assumptions and principles, as well as conventions of academic discourse are necessary in academic interactions. We must talk to somebody who will listen to us and will try to understand us. In other words, academic discourse assumes a degree of common knowledge and common discourse conventions.

Traditional academic discourse aims at objectivity and personal detachment from the subject, which is manifested in language use, e.g. the personal pronoun *I* is avoided and the passive voice is preferred. Discipline boundaries in traditional academic discourse are clearly stated. Conversely, in contemporary interdisciplinary academic discourse, boundaries are blurred and personal and contextualized points of view are emphasized. Foreign language teaching is a typical interdisciplinary field. Its source disciplines, to mention only the most important ones, encompass linguistics, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, communication studies, management studies, as well as a multi-faceted area of culture studies.

Let us enumerate some reasons for foreign language teaching academic discourse diversity. Firstly, foreign language teachers' discourse relies more or less heavily on

the authorities or on the teachers' own expertise and experience. It seems evident that foreign language teachers' knowledge manifested in their academic discourse, is not only delivered to them by knowledge-makers from the above mentioned academic disciplines but it is also co-constructed by language teachers themselves. Such a participatory approach is present, first of all, in writing courses, where social constructivist theory and critical pedagogy have had great impact on language teaching practitioners for a considerable period of time (see Larsen-Freeman, 1995).

Secondly, foreign language teaching discourse in plenary and session papers and in discussions following presentations and panel discussions can be differently structured and presented. The dialogic aspects of academic discourse are enhanced in the papers which have a clear structure and delivery, as well as when oral presentations are supported by visual aids (handouts, power point presentations), which aim at making the presentations more accessible to the audience. The dialogic character of presentations is also emphasized by frequent eye-contacts with the audience.

On the other hand, dialogue in academic discourse can be jeopardized owing to traditionally hierarchical "top-down" nature of academic communication. Academics have been traditionally used to giving lectures, in which students' questions and feedback were not taken into consideration. Similarly, conference organizers and presenters may leave too little time for discussions following presentations. Listeners are frequently intimidated, especially on a forum where they are supposed to speak in a non-native language. Speakers may also use register and stylistic devices which exclude "others", such as, e.g. using very specialist vocabulary, including difficult terminology and making an impression that what they say is so well-known to professionals that it would be a sign of unprofessionalism to ask for clarification. Chair persons in conference sessions are able to skilfully manage discussions in such a way that questions taken by the presenters are limited to those asked by the participants who the chair persons can recognize as well-known professionals. Summing up, dialogue at conferences is frequently endangered by undemocratic behaviour of those involved in academic discourse.

It seems that the dialogic aspects of presentations were also partly neglected for organizational and psychological reasons at the 2006 PNS conference: under time pressure and due to the presenters' lack of empathy and the participants' reluctance to take part in the discussions.

Finally, diversity stems from the language of communication. There is no consensus on one language of international communication. Although in the world of global communication, facilitated by the Internet, English has doubtlessly become a language of international communication in business, science and technology, teachers of other European languages, such as, e.g. French, frequently resist the dominance of English, relying to a great extent only on the sources written in their target language or translated into it. The same may be the case with teachers of English (as well as with English native speakers), who do not perceive any necessity to learn and use other languages. This attitude may reflect a degree of arrogance but more frequently it is an evidence of a narrow specialization in only one foreign language.

Teachers of less popular languages, such as, e.g. Polish, are used to the fact that they attend conferences and read literature in languages other than Polish. Paradoxically, a dialogue between teachers of less popular languages through English as a language of

international communication might be more feasible than a dialogue between a teacher of French and a teacher of English, in particular in a situation when each of them would like to adhere to their own target language and the literature written exclusively in that language.

A conclusion which can be drawn from the above remarks is that academic discourse of foreign language teachers is not uniform due to diverse treatments of knowledge, presenters' approaches and target language traditions.

3. An analysis of academic discourse in the 2006 PNS conference papers

Let us analyse the conference topics and ways of their presentation from the dialogic perspective. Paradoxically, written versions of the conference presentations can provide a better opportunity for foreign language teachers to share ideas with other members of their profession than oral presentations. Teachers can have more time to get acquainted with the presented ideas and practical solutions and to confront them with their teaching practice. The dialogic perspective may refer to various oral and written comments made by foreign language teachers as a follow-up to other teachers' papers. It may also refer to various professional uses of the published papers by foreign language teachers and teacher-trainees.

In the following part of this paper I will focus on the 2006 conference topics and the way of their presentation as they were submitted to the editors to be published in the conference proceedings³.

The following analysis is based on 69 papers which have been or will be included in two volumes of the conference proceedings and in an issue of *Neofilolog*.

3.1. Roles played by the authors

The majority of the conference papers begin with definitions. Such an approach is common in academic discourse and distinguishes it from everyday discourse, in which people do not need to define things they talk about. The definitions refer to such conference topics, as multilingualism, bilingual competence, pragmatic competence, learner evaluation, etc. Other papers start with emphasizing problems the authors perceive in foreign language teaching, such as new developments in evaluation, developing teachers' and learners' autonomy, content and language integrated teaching, etc.

As has been said before, academic conference discourse combines both types of knowledge: a knowledge constructed by the authors themselves and/or based on other authors' works, and a knowledge co-constructed in discussions and workshops by the audience.

³ The first volume of the 2006 PNS conference proceedings *Dydaktyka języków obcych na początku XXI wieku* has been published in 2007 (Jodłowiec and Nizęgorodcew, 2007). The second volume is forthcoming. A few papers will be published in *Neofilolog*.

In the papers submitted for publication, their authors' preferences for different treatments of knowledge can also be discerned. Interestingly, some well-known authors present broad surveys of their topics based on literature (e.g. Zawadzka-Bartnik, 2007), others take on the roles of authorities themselves by presenting their own classifications, categorizations and models (e.g. Wilczyńska, 2007), still others rely on their own teaching experience (e.g. Siek-Piskozub and Strugielska, 2007), and, finally, a few authors follow a clearly structured academic paper model, which combines a literature survey and one's own research (e.g. Cieślicka, 2007).

What makes some authors choose a survey of literature type of paper, and what makes other authors draw more on one's own expertise and experience? It seems that the authors take on different roles in dialogue with their audience: the role of a reviewer (Zawadzka-Bartnik), the role of a theorist (Wilczyńska), the role of a creative teacher (Siek-Piskozub and Strugielska) and the role of a researcher (Cieślicka). Since each of them is a professor in foreign language teaching and they could choose their paper types, probably the roles have been chosen according to their personal preferences.

Such a diversity of approaches presented by the above mentioned representatives of the academic foreign language teaching profession in Poland is also characteristic of other authors whose papers are included in the proceedings. Some of them have chosen topics based on their own research (e.g. teaching vocabulary – Otwinowska-Kasztelanica, 2007; developing learners' autonomy and multilingualism – Pawlak, 2007), others presented surveys of theory and research based on literature (e.g. Ewert, 2007; Bromberek-Dyzman, 2007; Kubiczek forthcoming) or, most frequently, they drew on their own teaching experience, presenting new technologies, experiments and teaching suggestions, for instance, an interesting group of papers focused on e-learning (e.g. Widła, 2007; Krajka forthcoming). Thus, similarly to the former group of authors, other writers can also be classified according to the roles they play: of researchers, reviewers or creative teachers.

3.2. Authors as researchers

Let us pay special attention to one of the above mentioned roles – the one of researchers. Out of 69 papers there are 24 articles which focus primarily or partly on language learning and teaching research conducted by the authors.

The research studies are concerned first of all with various aspects of evaluation and assessment, although there are also a few studies focused on other problems, such as students' awareness of similarities between languages (Otwinowska-Kasztelanica, 2007) or understanding metaphors and idioms (Cieślicka, 2007; Sułkowska forthcoming).

On the basis of an analysis of the research topics, research methods, research subjects and types of presentation, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, evaluation and assessment as the main conference topics seem to have been interesting for a great number of the authors. It is a multi-faceted theme and, accordingly, it has been approached from different perspectives: teacher assessment, student assessment, peer assessment, self-evaluation, evaluation of teaching materials, evaluation of methods of assessment, etc.

Secondly, opinion surveys were the most popular method of research used by the researchers, e.g. Pawlak, 2007; Jarzabek forthcoming. A few studies were based on didactic experiments, e.g. Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2007. The remaining studies most frequently involved teachers' action research and case studies. Research subjects as a rule were university or school students and teachers. The authors frequently presented pilot studies or studies being part of larger projects.

Finally, the analyses and discussions of results were rather modest and they indicated that, except for a few experienced researchers, the remaining writers are first of all teachers and teacher trainers with very little experience in language learning and teaching research. The question arises how to educate language teachers and language teacher trainers to professionally design, conduct and present their research studies. It seems that a course in research design, including statistics for language studies, should be an indispensable component of undergraduate and graduate students' education.

3.3. Dialogue with readers in conference papers

The dialogic character of research papers is closely linked with a more general question of the treatment of readers by the authors. The question arises what should be an ideal presentation of one's topic, that is, a presentation which would enable readers to follow the authors' ideas as closely as possible.

The first observation that should be made is that the readers are not a homogenous group, which affects their treatment by the authors. The papers included in the conference proceedings have been intended not only for experienced language teaching lecturers, researchers and graduate students. They have been also intended for less experienced readers, school teachers and undergraduate students. Such a diversity is in line with the philosophy and mission of the Polish Neophilological Society, which is to link a theoretical and a practical side of the foreign language teaching profession. Yet, the authors are also a heterogeneous group as far as their sophistication and experience level is concerned. Some of them probably are not aware of the intricacies of stylistic and conventional matters in academic writing.

The second observation refers to the clarity of exposition. The question is obviously linked with the structure of the papers. In comparison with clearly structured academic papers published in renowned journals, the majority of the 2006 PNS conference papers are much more awkwardly structured. The question arises if the less experienced authors have known that their aims should be explicitly stated and the topical ideas highlighted.

In fact, only some authors clearly formulate their aims in presenting their views and research. For instance, Cieślicka (2007: 65) writes: "Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu analizę psycholingwistycznych badań nad językiem metaforycznym" [the aim of this article is to analyse research on metaphorical language]⁴. Similarly, Michońska-Stadnik (2007: 57) formulates her aim: "celem tego artykułu jest krótkie zaprezentowanie najciekawszych osiągnięć w najnowszych badaniach dotyczących przyswajania i przechowywania słownictwa w pamięci" [the aim of this article is a short presentation of the

⁴ This author's translations.

most interesting results in the most recent research on lexical acquisition and storage of lexicon in memory]. Also only a few authors begin their papers by presenting their content (e.g. Wilczyńska writes “omówię kolejno trzy aspekty: wielojęzyczność jako zjawisko współczesne, pojęcie kompetencji wielojęzycznej i rozwijanie tej kompetencji” [three consecutive aspects will be discussed: multilingualism as a modern phenomenon, the concept of multilingual competence and development of multilingual competence]).

As far as the treatment of topics is concerned, some approaches seem inherently easier than others. The presentation of a model is more difficult than detailed exemplifications based on case studies. A few graphical models accompanying the papers may be difficult to be followed without interpretation and examples, e.g. Chudak (2007). Workshop type papers illustrated with examples of discourse samples or tasks are more reader-friendly for teachers, e.g. Paprocka-Piotrowska (2007), Rokita-Jaśkow (2007).

Last but not least, one of the papers stands in sharp contrast to all other papers – in a plenary lecture Sławek (2007) asked a question belonging to theory and philosophy of literature “czy literatura pomaga nam być razem?” [does literature help us be together]. Obviously, such a philosophical question and its treatment in the paper is not reader-friendly in the sense of providing readers with ready answers to their professional problems. However, attempts to clarify the question on the basis of literary works show the author’s deep respect for the readers, who are invited to co-construct the meanings of the author’s implicit and allusive answers through their own unique experience with literature.

3.4. Background knowledge and language of communication

Diversity in the papers also stems from the authors’ knowledge of the subject matter and the target language/languages. Although Polish as the conference language has facilitated communication between teachers of different target languages, it has not removed differences in the approaches between teachers of English, French and German. Their papers show that their background knowledge has been first of all shaped by the theoretical approaches and research studies developed in the target language countries and/or by the target language theorists in Poland. A majority of the teachers make references only to the target language literature. On the other hand, if they refer to books and articles in another language, it is as a rule the English language. Thus, in spite of what has been said before about the reluctance of other European speakers to use English as a language of international communication, it seems that English has already attained such a status in language learning and teaching.

As a consequence of the privileged position of English language theorists in the field of foreign language learning and teaching, the latest developments in the field are most frequently published first in English, to be only later translated and made known to the teaching profession in other languages. It seems that academic teachers of other languages should be aware of that fact. Otherwise, as it has happened in a few papers given at the 2006 PNS conference, their authors “re-discover” in other languages theories and research studies which were first described many years ago in the original English versions. Such papers may be very useful in teacher training, yet they have a downgrading effect in an academic conference.

Academic communication requires efficiency. Both knowledge-making and knowledge-proliferating require efficient communication and common background knowledge. It seems that teachers of foreign languages who ignore English literature in language learning and teaching do a disservice to their profession. Diversity should not mean ignorance.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the diversity of the academic discourse as evidenced in the papers presented at the 2006 PNS conference may have positive and negative sides. The positive aspects involve the diversity of roles. The different roles the authors play enrich the readers' knowledge and provide them with inspiration for their own research and teaching. Writers in the roles of researchers, reviewers, theorists and creative teachers can all find interested readers among foreign language teachers and teacher-trainees. They can be also inspiring for one another.

As far as the conference topics are concerned, "dialogue of papers" in the sense of a great number of papers focused on the main conference topic – assessment and evaluation, has been successful and provided multi-faceted approaches. Another conference topic – multilingualism, has been much less popular.

On the other hand, "diverse" may mean "less valuable". In that other sense, negative aspects of diversity can be observed in an unclear structure and presentation of the papers, as well as in poorly designed and described research studies.

The question of the language of communication is open to discussion. However, it seems unquestionable that the latest developments in the field of foreign language learning and teaching are published in English. Ignoring them due to a negative attitude to the English language or inability to read in English is also a negative aspect of diversity. In consequence, one target language teachers tend to communicate only in a closed circle, even if the conference language, like in PNS conferences, is the first language of the conference participants. What seems to be necessary in order to develop an enriching dialogue of teachers teaching different foreign languages is their common knowledge of recent advancements in theory and research in the field of second/foreign language learning and teaching, as well as their willingness to communicate with teachers of different foreign languages.

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