

Cultural Topics in Foreign Language Teaching: On the Example of Advanced Polish Learners

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Abstract

Teaching foreign cultures requires thorough analysis and research, for example by focusing on the needs and interests of foreign language learners. The aim of the presentation is to explore selected topics related to foreign cultures that may: (1) arouse the interest of foreign language learners; (2) help the learners develop cultural competence and foreign language knowledge; and (3) assist teachers in selecting appropriate methods for teaching a foreign culture. A theoretical analysis was conducted and compared with the results of a study involving 150 individuals learning Polish at proficiency levels B2–C2 in selected universities in Poland offering Polish language courses. The survey findings revealed that sports and the natural environment were the least interesting topics to the learners, while subjects such as the state and society, everyday life, science and work garnered the highest interest. The results regarding the preferred ways of teaching a foreign culture may be considered as concerning for the development of learners' productive language skills. The majority of respondents expressed a preference for traditional lecture-style instruction regarding foreign cultures, rather than actively seeking information independently, or engaging in discussions with classmates. The findings may be an inspiration for specialists in language education in creating curricula for teaching foreign culture and foreign language taught in the cultural context. Additionally, foreign language teachers can benefit from these results when designing their own teaching/learning materials.

Keywords: cultural competence; cultural context; foreign culture learning; foreign language learning; language education

Introduction

Understanding the cultural context is crucial for effectively using a foreign language. Without knowledge of the cultural background of the society learners want to communicate with, it becomes challenging to formulate fully understandable messages. This holds true whether it refers to English language learners or those studying less commonly taught languages, such as Polish, as exploring the cultural foundation is valuable for every foreign language learner.

The study described below focuses on individuals learning a foreign language in an endolingual environment, where the target language is used in daily life (Dabene 1990). This fact significantly influences cultural knowledge acquisition, as learners not only learn about the foreign culture during lessons but also experience it firsthand. Immersion in a particular culture should be supported by the guidance and explanations of experts who possess deep cultural understanding and can effectively transmit their knowledge. Foreign language lessons and interactions with knowledgeable instructors present an excellent opportunity for improving understanding of a foreign culture (Kuo & Lai, 2006).

As Koester & Lustig (2010) point out, communication and culture are closely related due to attaching similar meanings and values to the objects of life. Familiarity with these cultural aspects facilitates adaptation to a new country and enables effective communication with its inhabitants, for whom these meanings and values are an integral part of everyday interactions. Studying the preferences of advanced learners, who have already gained some insight into the culture they are learning, can contribute to the design of curricula and the organization of language and culture classes. This assumption underlies the study presented in the subsequent sections, which aims to explore the interest in culture among advanced learners of Polish as a foreign language.

Method

This paper analyzes data obtained from 150 online questionnaires. The respondents took part in the study during online classes or in the classroom using a computer or mobile phone. The survey was developed using Google Forms, which guaranteed trouble-free accessibility and intuitive answering of survey questions, regardless of the learners' computer literacy. The results were automatically calculated within the Google Forms application, as the majority of questions were the closed ones. The respondents were asked to participate in the study between January and November 2022 while attending Polish language courses at levels B2 (Upper-Intermediate), C1 (Advanced) and C2 (Proficiency). The vast majority of learners who completed the survey were enrolled in courses offered by the Centre of Polish Language and Culture for Foreigners Polonicum, which belongs to the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw (70% of respondents). The predominance of respondents learning Polish at the University of Warsaw is due to the relatively large number of groups at the

highest proficiency levels offered by the Polonicum Centre (ranging from eight to ten groups at levels B2-C2).

In the first part of the questionnaire, the respondents answered questions about their background, language proficiency level, and the location where they were learning Polish. In parts two to seven, they answered questions about various aspects of learning about Polish culture as a foreign one, including (1) their interest in Polish culture as a foreign one; (2) the thematic areas covered in previous lessons; (3) their preferred thematic areas in subsequent lessons; (4) the ways of teaching culture used in previous lessons; (5) the ways of teaching culture used in subsequent lessons; (6) their ways of learning Polish culture outside of formal lessons. Participants marked their responses on a four-point scale, with "1" representing "no", "2" representing "rather not", "3" representing "rather yes", and "4" representing "yes".

Results

Characteristics of participants

The groups at the Upper-Intermediate (B2) level are the most numerous, which is why the majority of respondents attend classes at this level (72.7%). Most of the study participants were between the ages 20 and 30 (55.3%) and originated from Belarus (39.3%) or Ukraine (29.3%). The age and origin of the majority of respondents were related to the characteristics of the B2-C2 level groups at the University of Warsaw, which mainly attract students of that age range. Additionally, learners from Belarus and Ukraine are included in special programs that help them learn Polish at a level that allows them to study in Poland (for example, the Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Program and the "University of Warsaw for Ukraine" Program). The creating of programs for these two national groups is related to the political situation in both countries. This resulted in an influx of people from Belarus after the presidential election in 2020 and an influx of people from Ukraine after the outbreak of war in 2022.

Interest in Polish culture as a foreign one

The vast majority of study participants answered "yes" or "rather yes" to the questions about their interest in Polish culture (Figure 1). Even though they are advanced learners and know many facts about Polish culture, they still want to learn more about it. Also for the majority of respondents, learning Polish as a foreign language and Polish culture as a foreign language is equally important (Figure 2). The results give grounds for talking about a great need for cultural education among learners at B2, C1 and C2 levels.

Figure 1: "I am interested in Polish culture" (by author)

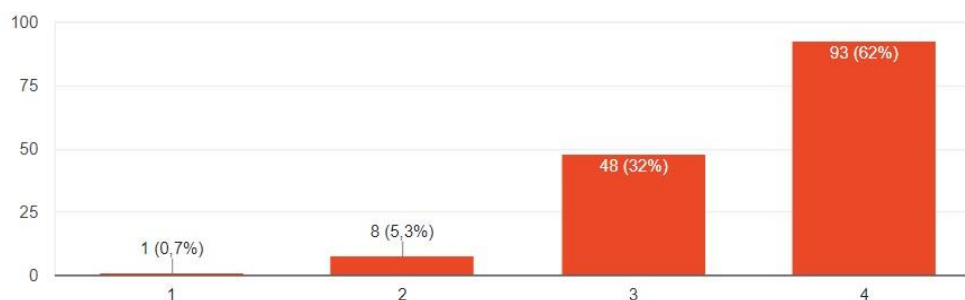
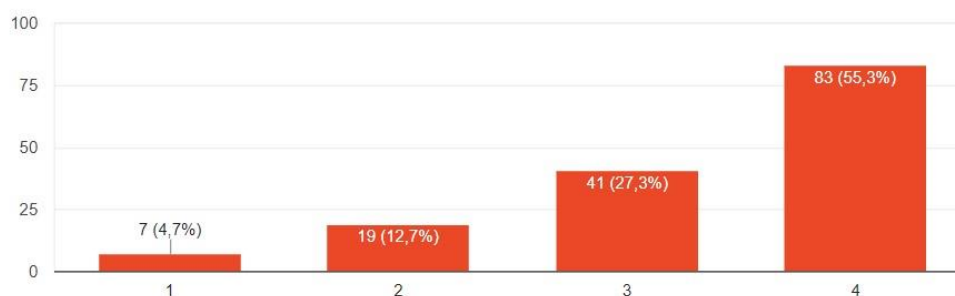


Figure 2: "Getting to know Polish culture is as important to me as learning Polish language" (by author)



Thematic areas in previous lessons and preferred thematic areas in subsequent lessons

Respondents were asked about topics related to culture that had been discussed in their lessons so far and which they would like to have in the subsequent Polish lessons. These ten topics were selected from the resource "Curricula for Teaching Polish as a Foreign Language. Levels A1-C2" (Janowska et al., 2016). This publication is the main source of grammar, lexical and cultural topics for teachers of Polish as a foreign language.

The subjects that participants least want to discuss in foreign language lessons are sport and the natural environment. Thus far, 93 people (62%) indicated that they have not or would rather not discuss the topic "Sport in Poland" during language lessons, and 72 people (48%) would like to talk on this topic in the future. Thus far, 69 respondents (47%, Figure 3) have discussed the topic "Natural environment in Poland", while 50 respondents (33.3%, Figure 4) would not like to discuss it or would rather not discuss it in the future.

Figure 3: Topic "Natural environment in Poland" – previous lessons (by author)

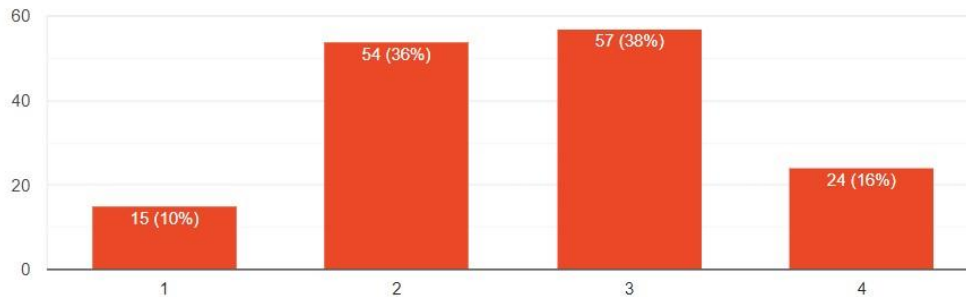
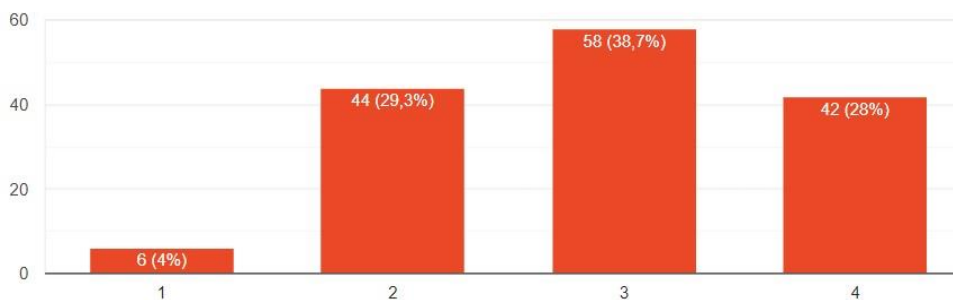


Figure 4: Topic "Natural environment in Poland" – subsequent lessons (by author)



The results of the survey indicate that the topics "Polish state and society", "Everyday life in Poland" and "Science and work in Poland" are of great interest to the majority of respondents. These three topics have been covered in Polish language lessons, and the participants already have knowledge about them. However, the respondents consider these topics important and valuable enough to warrant further exploration in the future. Specifically, 118 respondents (78.7%) have discussed the topic "Polish state and society" in their lessons, and 131 people (87.7%) would like to explore it in the future. Regarding the topic "Everyday life in Poland," 128 respondents (85.5%) have already discussed it, and 140 people (93.3%) express a desire to explore it further. Thus far, 107 participants (71.3%, Figure 5) have discussed the topic "Science and work in Poland", and 134 people (89.3%, Figure 6) express an interest in studying it in future classes.

Figure 5: Topic “Science and work in Poland” – previous lessons (by author)

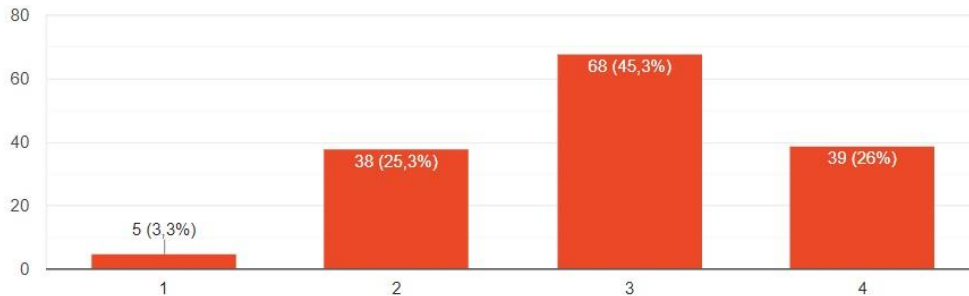
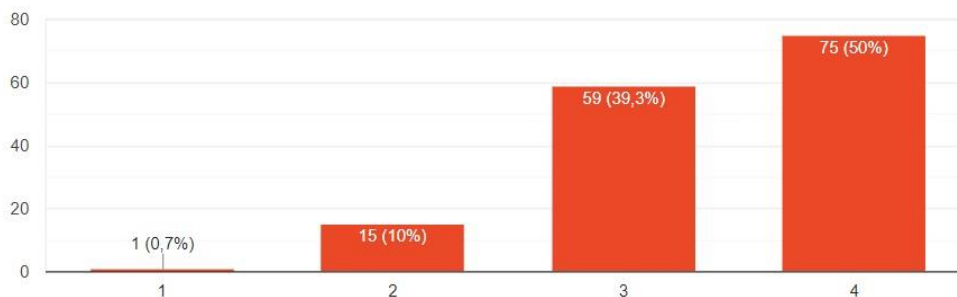


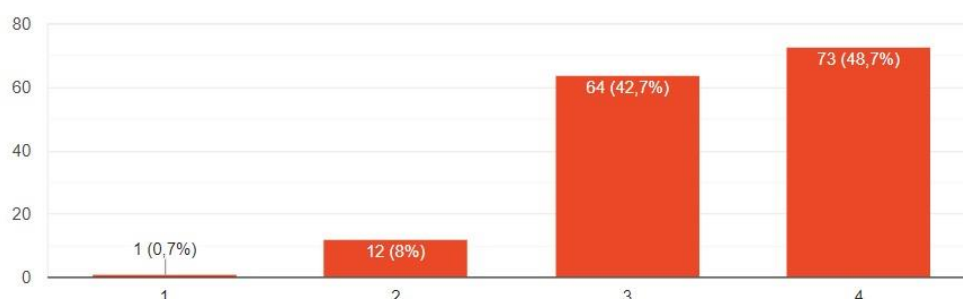
Figure 6: Topic “Science and work in Poland” – subsequent lessons (by author)



Teaching methods – selected aspects

The study participants were also asked about their preferred techniques for teaching Polish culture in Polish as a foreign language classes. One of the mentioned techniques was "Providing information about Polish culture by the teacher". This method can be considered quite traditional, as it prioritizes the direct transmission of knowledge by the teacher during class. However, if the teacher's approach does not involve student engagement, it may not adequately support the development of productive language skills, which play a crucial role in intercultural competence (Ökten & Özer-Griffin, 2016). The results of the quantitative study indicate that the traditional lecture format is popular among students, as they overwhelmingly prefer cultural knowledge to be transferred in this manner (Figure 7).

Figure 7: "Providing information about Polish culture by the teacher" (by author)



On its own, the transmission of knowledge by the teacher is not a negative teaching method, it should be an integral part of classes focused on learning the foreign culture and language. It is worth noting, however, that significantly fewer respondents considered student-centered teaching methods with active student involvement. A total of 91.4% (137 respondents) preferred the teacher providing information, while 66% of the study participants (100 respondents) favored using tasks based on independent information search. Half of respondents (75 respondents) chose role-playing scenes set in the context of Polish culture.

Discussion

This paper serves as a complementary exploration of the topics addressed in the aforementioned scholarly texts. It shows selected results of a study on teaching Polish culture as a foreign language to learners of Polish at levels B2 (Upper-Intermediate), C1 (Advanced) and C2 (Proficiency) in 2022. Before that year, everyone studied in different places, which resulted in differences in the experience of learning Polish as a foreign language. The results of the study showed that some topics still need to be discussed in the classroom, even though advanced learners already know a lot about Polish culture. It is worth noting the great need to talk about everyday life. Although it is a topic included in the foreign language curriculum from A1 (Elementary) level, learners at advanced levels still want to learn about it. The reasons why the natural environment and sport were considered the least worth exploring in the future may be thought-provoking and interpreted in different ways. Without knowing the educational past of learners, it is difficult to clearly determine the reasons. In fact, the results of the study presented in the article should be supplemented by qualitative study, for example, interviews with participants who would explain the reasons for their choices. Moreover, the results may be the basis for further analysis regarding the methodology of teaching foreign culture in Polish as a foreign language classes in the area of the discussed topics and techniques for teaching foreign culture that would help activate the learners. Also, the results on the preferred techniques of teaching a foreign culture should be supplemented with qualitative study, which would help explain the reasons for the choice of the teacher's fact-based teaching technique by the majority of respondents. Thanks to this, it would be

possible to more effectively specify the reasons for the choice of the respondents and determine the teaching methods to which advanced learners would have the best approach.

Conclusion

The study was conducted on foreigners learning Polish, so its results pertain to the specificity of the methodology of this language as a foreign one. Moreover, most of the participants of courses at B2-C2 levels are people of Slavic origin, and therefore the obtained results may be related to the characteristics of teaching and the education system in these countries. The results are therefore not universal and cannot be applied universally with certainty to other foreign languages. However, perhaps the results show some trends that will be confirmed or disproved by researchers studying the preferences of people learning other languages. In the future, this type of research should be repeated and compared with the results of questionnaires completed by learners of specific languages. Including the learners' insights in the creation of lesson plans and lesson programs will certainly help meet the expectations of foreign language learners.

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