

The Structural Diversification of Foreign Language Proficiency

Introduction

In this paper we analyze the structural diversification of foreign language proficiency and changing trends in foreign language preferences in Poland during the period from 1993 to 2013. We treat foreign language proficiency as a dimension of educational inequality. In shaping such inequalities, the role of ascriptive factors is crucial (Butler 2014). Previous studies show that foreign language acquisition depends not only on individual motivation and abilities, but also on such ascriptive factors as, for example, parental education (Hattie 1993, Enever 2011).

Our analyses concentrate on a specific qualification, namely the ability to speak a foreign language in Poland. The socio-economic reforms of Poland's transformation period resulted in the devaluation of various skills and in shifts in the value of certain assets. For example, the value of manual skills and knowledge of Russian have decreased considerably compared with the value of computer skills and knowledge of English (Kaneff, Pine 2011).

To stress the role of foreign language proficiency, the European Commission suggests treating this competence as being of equal importance with the ability to speak the native language (European Commission 2006). The *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) states that each citizen of the European Union should speak at least two foreign languages in order to enable mobility and competitiveness on the labor market. This recommendation has been continuously repeated in various European Commission documents (see, for example, Council of the European Union 2002).

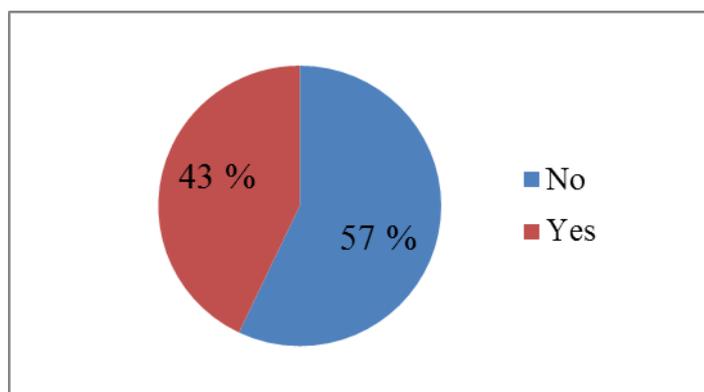
The ability to speak at least one foreign language is declared by around 50% of adults in Poland (based on data from the *Special Eurobarometer 386: Europeans and Their Languages 2012* and CBOS 2012). However, the *First European Survey on Language Competences* reveals that at age 15 only 25% of Polish students exhibit foreign language proficiency on the intermediate and upper intermediate levels B1/B2 (European Commission 2011). With respect to second language proficiency, Polish teenagers are in the lowest scoring group compared with teenagers of other European countries.

We base our analyses on the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN (1993-2013), which makes it possible to compare the skills and language preferences of the same respondents over a period of 20 years. We have also conducted a more detailed analysis of the determinants predicting foreign language proficiency in the cohort of 21- 25-year olds in 2013 in Poland.

Selected results

In 2013, 43% of respondents declared their ability to communicate fluently in at least one foreign language. Among these, the most popular was English (54%), followed by Russian (28%), and German (15%). The second foreign language for Poles is usually Russian, German, or English (see Table 1).

Graph 1. Foreign language proficiency in 2013



Source: POLPAN, 2013.

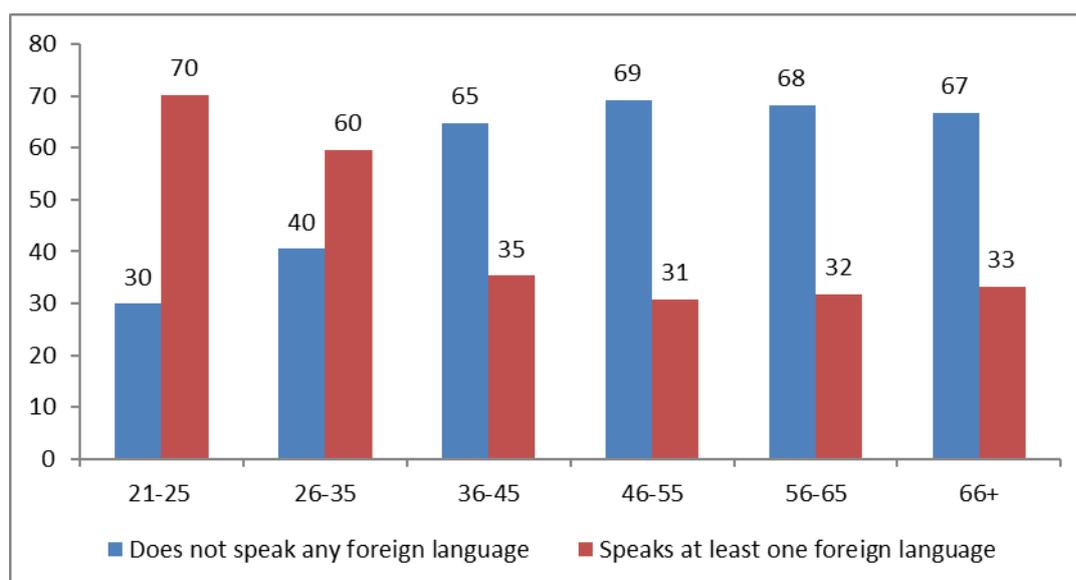
Table 1. Proficiency in more than one foreign language (FL) in 2013

Foreign Language	First FL	Second FL
English	54%	19%
German	15%	26%
Russian	28%	29%
Other *	3%	25%
Sample Size	798	152

Source: POLPAN, 2013.

The youngest respondents, who finished school after the educational reforms of 1999, have higher skills in speaking foreign languages in comparison with other age cohorts (see Graph 2). 70% of respondents between the ages of 21 and 25 declare they can speak at least one foreign language fluently.

Graph 2. Foreign Language proficiency in different age groups (%), 2013



Source: POLPAN, 2013.

Language preferences differ in various age groups. English dominates among young people: 83% of 21- 25-year olds and 73% of 26- 35-year olds speak English. English and Russian are distributed more symmetrically in the middle age group (36- 45-years old): 43% declared a knowledge of English and 32% declared a knowledge of Russian. In the oldest groups (over 46 years of age), Russian is much more popular than English (see Table 2). Knowledge of German was also higher in the older cohorts (the largest group of people who declared a knowledge of German were 56- 65-year olds, 19%), while German was the third most popular foreign language in all age groups.

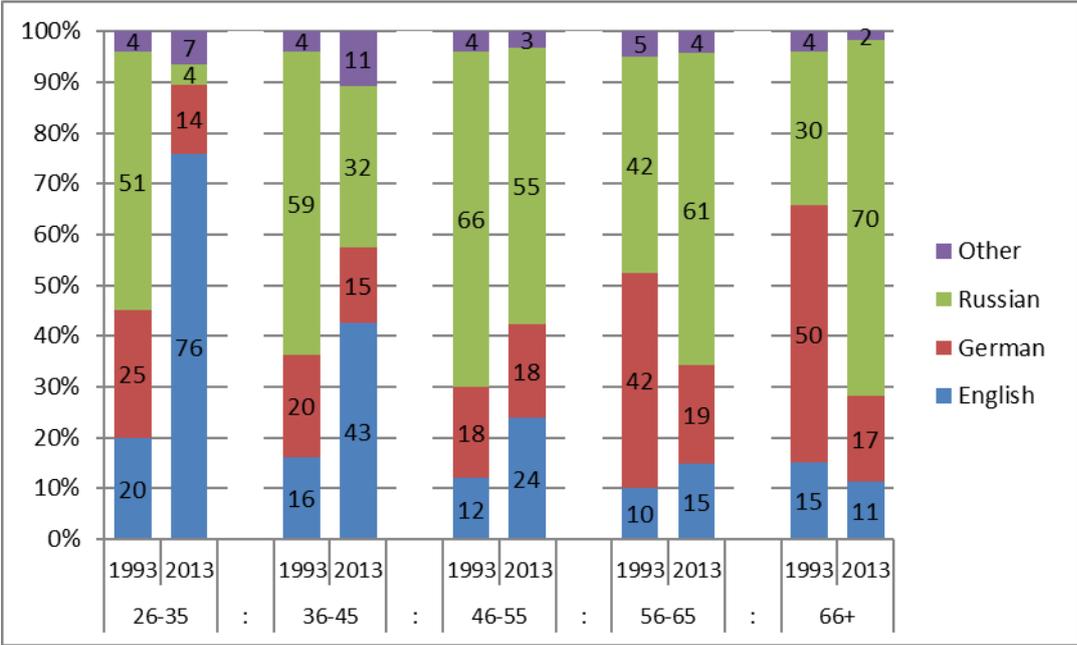
Table 2. Percentage of respondents speaking foreign languages in 1993 and 2013 in different age groups

Age group	POLPAN wave	English	German	Russian	Other FL
26-35	1993	20%	25%	51%	4%
	2013	76%	14%	4%	7%
36-45	1993	16%	20%	59%	4%
	2013	43%	15%	32%	11%
46-55	1993	12%	18%	66%	4%
	2013	24%	18%	55%	3%
56-65	1993	10%	42%	42%	5%
	2013	15%	19%	61%	4%
66+	1993	15%	50%	30%	4%
	2013	11%	17%	70%	2%

Source: POLPAN, 1993 and POLPAN, 2013

Compared to 1993, in 2013 we observe a significant increase in English proficiency in the age group of 26- 35-year olds – from 20% in 1993 to 76% in 2013. It is a particularly strong trend, since in 1993 respondents answered a question about basic communicative language skills, while in 2013 they reported on fluent language proficiency. There has also been a change in knowledge of Russian in the oldest cohort (persons aged 66 and over) – from 30% in 1993 to 70% in 2013.

Graph 3. Percentage of respondents speaking foreign languages in different age groups, 1993 and 2013



Source: POLPAN, 1993 and POLPAN, 2013

Such factors as place of residence, gender, and parents’ education have a significant impact on a person’s likelihood of knowing foreign languages. Young people (21- 25-year olds) from rural areas are 32% less likely to know a foreign language than those from an urban area. In turn, there is a 43% lower probability that a young man will speak a foreign language than a woman of the same age. Having a mother with a higher education – as opposed to only an elementary or secondary school education – increases the likelihood of knowing a foreign language by four times, while having a father with a higher education increases the likelihood by four and a half times.

Table 3. Results of the logistic regression: declared foreign language proficiency in the age group of 21- 25-year olds, controlling for ascriptive factors

Independent Variables	Variable Values	Regression coefficients (B)	Odds Ratio $exp(B)$	Odds for Variable values=1
Place of residence	1 = rural 0 = urban	-1.84	0.68	32% less likely
Gender	1= male 0 = female	-2.66	0.57	43% less likely
Mother's Education	1 = higher 0 = otherwise	2.94	3.85	Almost 4 times more likely
Father's Education	1 = higher 0 = otherwise	2.39	4.54	Almost 4.5 times more likely

*Number of cases: 497, $pseudo R^2 = 0.08$

Source: POLPAN, 2013.

Classic determinants of educational attainments, such as social origin and parents' education, are precise predictors of second language proficiency in Poland. In the groups of the most privileged respondents, i.e., those whose fathers belong to the upper class and whose mothers have a higher education, the ability to speak a foreign language approaches 97%. In the most disadvantaged group – that is, children of fathers from the lower classes and mothers with only secondary or elementary school education – it is only 60%.

Table 4 . Foreign language (FL) proficiency in the age group of 21- 25-year olds, accounting for father's social class (social origin) and mother's education

Social origin	Mother's Education	
	Secondary or below	above secondary
	Percentage of respondents speaking FL	
upper class	88% (31)	97% (32)
middle class	79% (59)	87% (21)
lower class	60% (163)	89% (16)

Source: POLPAN, 2013.

Other Tables and Graphs in the paper: age, gender, and place of residence as predictors of foreign language proficiency in 1993.

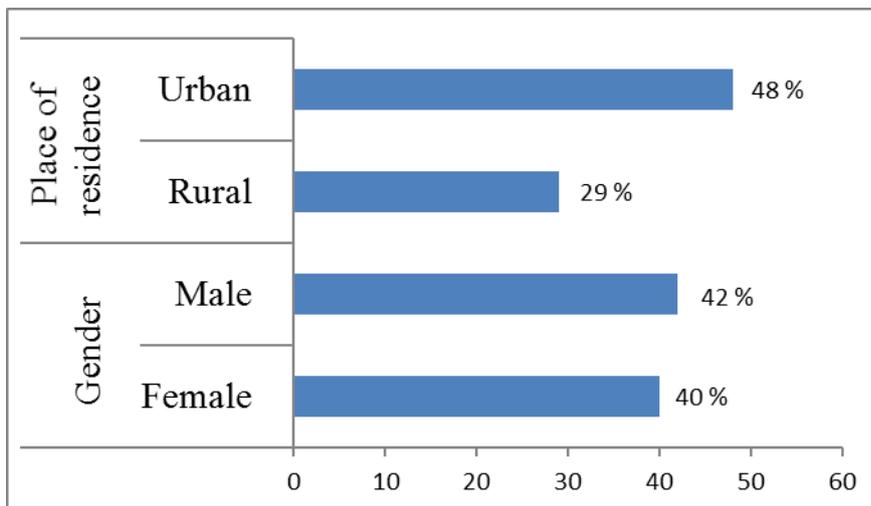
Table 5. Foreign language proficiency in different age groups in 1993

Age group	English	German	Russian	Other foreign language*
26-35	20%	25%	51%	4%
36-45	16%	20%	59%	4%
46-55	12%	18%	66%	4%
56-65	10%	42%	42%	5%
66+	15%	50%	30%	4%

* Italian, Czech, French, Greek, Spanish, Dutch, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Romani, Hungarian.

Source: POLPAN, 2013

Graph 4. Foreign language proficiency with respect to gender and place of residence, 1993



Source: POLPAN, 1993.

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