Report on Project Participants' Context

Part One: teacher-focused questions

The survey was done amongst foreign language teachers working in three primary schools which cooperate under the "English in Modern Times of Fluid Change" project - Escola Básica Fialho de Almeida (Portugal), Szent Gyorgy Katolikus Altalanos Iskola (Hungary) and Szkoła Podstawowa im. Powstańców Styczniowych, Osjaków (Poland).

Overall, 13 teachers have submitted their answers.

Target group's profile

39% teachers hold a BA degree, 54% hold an MA.
30% have additional certificates (e.g. language proficiency) and qualifications, e.g. Oligophrenopedagogy, translation, teaching other school subjects.

The target group are teachers with considerable experience - all have worked for over 10 years, including 4 persons over 20 years, and one person with a 35-year long career.

As per the professional status:
    + both trainee and chartered teachers represent 25% of the group respectively,
    + the remaining 50% account for contractual (15%) and chartered (39%) teachers.
Such composition guarantees a diverse and complex approach to the project and significantly opens for the participants new channels of communication and sharing - varied perspectives and viewpoints will only enrich and enhance their skill set and competences to be a vivid outcome of this project.

10 out of 13 have extra roles in their schools - they are project coordinators and managers, programme leaders, heads of Foreign Language Teachers' Team, European Club Coordinator, members of PR team and department heads.

Only one teacher is currently undergoing formal education - a postgraduate university course. The remaining consider duties linked with multiple projects and initiatives taking place at their institutions a form of CPD (Continuous Professional Development).

From the answers given, it clearly transpires that plenty of non-formal and informal education is, actually, happening in each of the schools, i.e. during the meetings of the foreign language teacher's team and other.

This project also aims to raise awareness and help build an adequate attitude regarding CPD amongst teachers; both the authors and the participants not only have voiced their intention to do so but they have been openly mentioning the matter in their conversations leading to run this project.

Foreign language teachers' motivation to teach

When asked about their opinion of their colleagues' attitude towards foreign language teaching, 77% (10 persons) reacted positively and chose the 'motivated' option', 8% (1 person) negatively - 'demotivated', and 15% (2 persons) have submitted inconclusive answers - 'other'.

In their comments to this question, the participants said:
+ 'professionals', 'enthusiastic, helpful, patient, creative', 'competent', 'cooperative, open, creative', 'keen', 'ambitious, helpful, cooperative',
but also:
- 'tired', 'sometimes motivated', 'overworked', 'needing'.

No particular trend as to a specific country has been noticed, and such moods seem somewhat equally shared across the three countries. This is not surprising and may help form even stronger bonds between the teachers.

The following question's purpose was to identify the root causes behind the teachers' attitudes towards teaching and uncover the details of their work environments.
Here, 9 pointed to their experience, good training and good teaching skills next to professional approach full of readiness to assist students, creating purposeful learning situations for them and meeting their needs as the source of energy and motivation.
All the same, 4 see the darker side of school life and mention inadequate conditions, lack of time and troubled relations with local Ministry of Education to indicate why some might not be equally motivated to teach.

Autoreflection and broadening one's knowledge on colleagues' professional contexts through trustful sharing will surely empower the participants in their daily operations.

"We want to go forward, to learn new things, to be more effective as language teachers. We want to develop our teaching methods and be more and more interesting for our students."

Teaching methods used

This question has continuously proven to be misinterpreted, perhaps to its straightforward nature - it does not call for techniques and forms of classroom work to be named, and yet, they do appear in the answers given. Again, no specific geographical trend has been observed.

Interviewees have enumerated the below:
● The Grammar-Translation Method,
● Task-Based teaching,
● Communicative Method,
● interactive and new generation methods,
● CLIL ,

- activating methods, communication-based methods.

Other than that, the teachers use:
- language games, projects, presentations, interactive online language tasks,
- brainstorming, pair/group work, role-playing, games, debates,
- class participation, demonstration, recitation, memorization, or combinations of these,
- coursebooks, CDs, Internet materials,
- pair and group work,
- watching videos,
- interactive platforms,
- dynamic classes with interactive tools,
- songs, films, digital tools.

It might be interesting and useful to note that:
> the The Grammar-Translation Method and Task-Based teaching are used by a chartered teacher,
> CLIL is used by a trainee teacher.

Since the main focus of this project lies in sharing best practices and developing lesson scripts through a transnational collaboration, the above answers prove hopeful for the project objectives to be met in a novel and interesting way.

Methods and techniques based on student cooperation and engagement are believed to be the most effective; quite in line with modern pedagogy and didactics. The teachers said:

"Games and debates because the students are really the centre of the learning process."

"Involve a large number of pupils, eliminate fears, introduce an element of competition, motivate pupils to act."

"Communicative Method because it's focused on communication, on speaking which is the main objective of foreign language teaching, but also grammar - translation method because students like cooperation, they like translating new texts."

Teaching techniques used

Only at this stage of the questionnaire (Question 22) was the notion of teaching techniques to be disputed. Nicely enough, the answers further elaborated on the replies given beforehand. Teachers included here:
- tables and charts, visual aids, gap filling, role-playing,
- making songs and doing small theater clips in English,
- various didactic games, mini-drama, joint reading,
- using a mascot to teach English,
- visualisation, individual work, team(group) work, differentiation, design thinking,
- individual work, pair work, group work, projects, brainstorm, activating methods, dramas or role plays,

- teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, the use of audio, visuals, video hands-on demonstrations and exercises,
- cooperative techniques because they teach and educate students for independence, responsibility so they learn to check themselves and work with their mates.

Asked about their opinion on the most effective techniques, teachers indicated the importance of ICT, commonly used in this target group, and student cooperation - an essential element of student-centred education.

"New generation method is suitable for students because they live in the world of technology where the Internet plays an important role. They do project work with the help of the Internet searching pieces of information on it and give PPT presentations in the circle of their classmates."

"Students like to work in pairs and in groups because they like to cooperate. [...] All activating methods are also effective as well as games and quizzes when students can compete with each other."

Little needs to be added as a comment. With such toolkit, the expected results of this project should pass with flying colours.

Assessment of students' foreign language proficiency

Answers submitted to this question are quite interesting - only 4 respondents enumerate objectively conventional ways of checking student progress:
+ questioners,tests,evaluation of progress check or progress diary, oral or written monthly summary evaluation,
+ class watching by colleagues,
+ annual evaluation,
+ achievement and proficiency tests.

Amongst the rest, 2 have answered 'no' and 1 'none', 1 has implied that language assessment methods depend on "the characteristics of each class" and the remainder rely on student-in-action approach, i.e.:
+ project work,
+ educational games and quizzes,
+ board games,
+ interactive boards,
+ learning apps,
+ e-books and digital tools,
+ online exercises,
+ problem solving.

Asked which are most effective, several teachers point in the direction of digital tools, 1 mentions observation "to improve both colleagues", 3 respondents think that none are effective at all.

The ICT trend can be clearly observed here; numerous digital options are the first choice for the majority of the target group surveyed - gamification has been welcome to these classrooms and is widely used.

"Interactive whiteboard, web applications - attractive, interesting, different, encouraging to work, helpful in working with shy students or with learning difficulties."

Surely, it is worth mentioning that one teacher in particular chooses to go for the more analogue and explains it this way:

"Progress check or diary because it gives strengthening about the correctness or mistakes so helps students in developing of their language skills."

Digital tools used

All interviewees include modern technology in their language teaching, the most popular are:
- interactive whiteboard or Smart Board,
- web applications: LearningApps, Kahoot, Hot Potatoes, Insta, Quizlet, Voki, Prezi,
- websites: britishcouncil, super simple learning, YouTube (Dave and Ava), Oxford University Press' Super Sparks Fun Zone,
- the Internet: interactive online grammatical, vocabulary and communication tasks, BBC materials,
- tablets, smartphones
- PPT presentations on the computer
- word processing tools,
- e-books.

Teachers' satisfaction with learning outcomes

3 out of 13 said 'no' and mentioned "not good grades", "average results", "generally demotivated students" to substantiate.

"They feel they don't have to memorize and learn some issues, they think they are overwhelmed by the material they have to learn."

Vast majority see their students as motivated, well prepared, "willing", making effort and achieving "satisfactory results". One respondent included positive feedback from parents

whereas another concentrated on adequately equipped classrooms -- with projectors and Internet connection to justify their positive perception of learning outcomes at their school.

Exchanging best practices

10 teachers said they share knowledge and 3 disagreed.

Only 2 respondents said they had regular meetings with other colleagues however, it clearly transpires that the target group meet with other staff members at:
+   conferences,
+   teacher meetings,
+   workshops organised by the area manager,
+   meetings of the language team.

Both formal and informal ways of peer-to-peer teaching take place; materials are exchanged and cases discussed.

What could help to improve the process of teaching foreign languages in your school?

All answers submitted are precious and two distinctive trends appear - part of the participants focus on the internal factors (teacher-dependent or easily teacher-controlled) and the other concentrate on the external aspects (decisions are beyond teachers' individual decision making process, outside authority is usually required to proceed):

EXTERNAL FACTORS	INTERNAL FACTORS
language lab	contact with native speakers or people from other countries who also learn English
more student's trips to foreign countries (the chance to verify one's language skills and to improve one's general level of English)	increasing the amount of communication and writing tasks
student exchanges	more methodological training focused on various topic
sponsored language competitions	trips abroad, reading English books
less classes per teacher	more teacher collaboration
less bureaucracy	more open to new techniques
classes of 50 minutes	more teacher training
English lessons at least 3 times a week	good videos

The last question in this section was an 'open-floor" to any remarks or comments the target group may have before more concrete project activities, especially the mobilities, take place.

8 participants have not responded, others shared their thoughts:

"I'm not sure if I can cope with all the tasks, if the project will fulfil all the expectations, I hope so. It's the first time our students will have the opportunity to go [abroad] and they also have certain doubts."

"I think that contact with other people and their culture will motivate children to learn, because they will see that English is needed."

"I would like to get to know some new and useful methods and techniques I can apply to my everyday practice."

"I think this project will be very positive to refresh the teachers' ideas and mostly their methodologies."
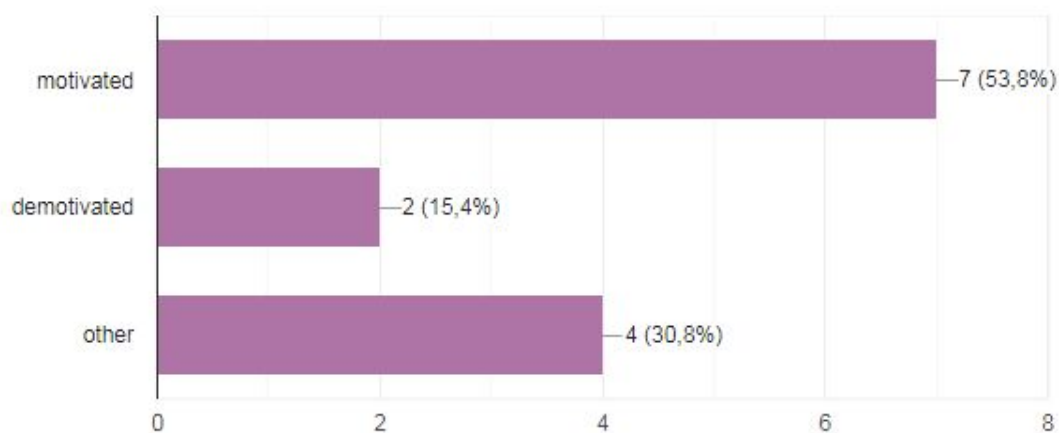
Part Two: student-focused questions

In this section of the questionnaire, the teachers answered a selection of questions about students in their schools.

Students' English language proficiency

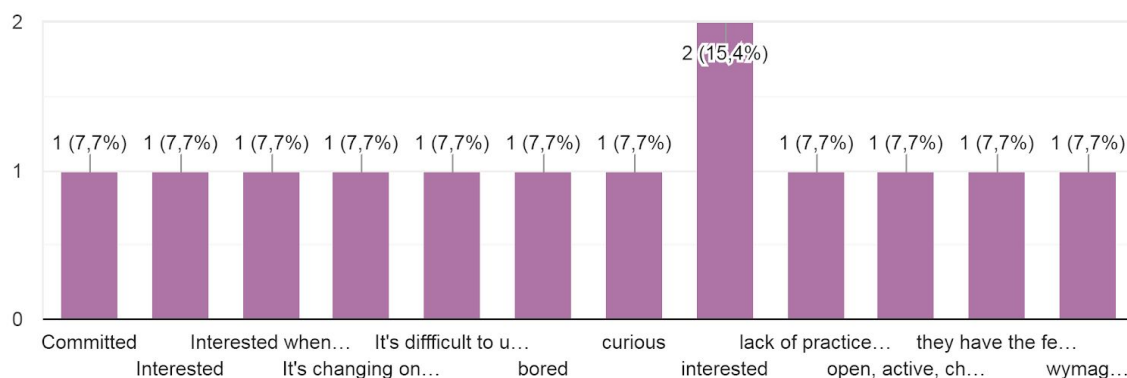Based on the teachers' self-assessment, the results are as follows:
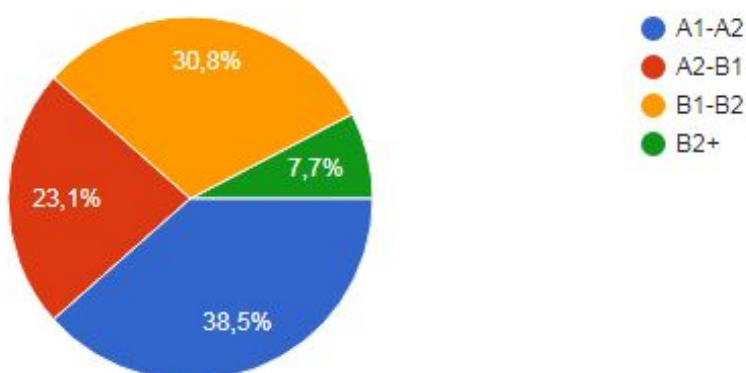
Students' motivation level

9. What other words would you use to describe it?
13 odpowiedzi

The teachers' rationale for the above answers was as follows (direct quotes from the survey):
- English in schools focuses on grammar.
- We observe that problems generally start in the 6th or 7th grade when material becomes more and more difficult, when learning is not only playing games but also grammar and when students have to work really hard to cope with everything (with all subjects not only English). It's then, when their motivation falls down.
- The amount of teaching material increases every school year and the students have sometimes the feeling it's simply too much for them. They have to learn many different subjects too, and there are more and more requirements.
- Not interested in anything.

On the positive note, they wrote:
+ Because they need it; funny practising during lessons.
+ Later good job opportunity.
+ Because they want to learn new things in a playful way.
+ Many digital techniques.

Best absorbed language skills

11. Which language skills are best absorbed by students in your school?
13 odpowiedzi

Skill	Value
listening	10 (76,9%)
reading	8 (61,5%)
writing	1 (7,7%)
speaking	2 (15,4%)
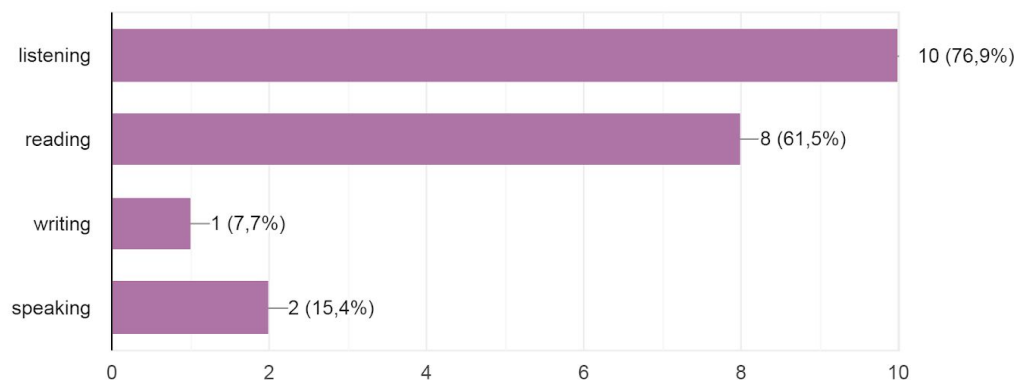
The majority of justifications for the above can be considered standard, logical answers the language barrier, plenty of listening and reading exercise, practice, motivation, films and music.

Some are especially interesting, though: *"Because they are less formal."*
"When we talk about reading, it's easier for many students to achieve better results because of their visual skills."

Worst absorbed language skills

13. Which language skills are most difficult to absorb by students in your school?
13 odpowiedzi

Skill	Value
listening	1 (7,7%)
reading	1 (7,7%)
writing	6 (46,2%)
speaking	12 (92,3%)
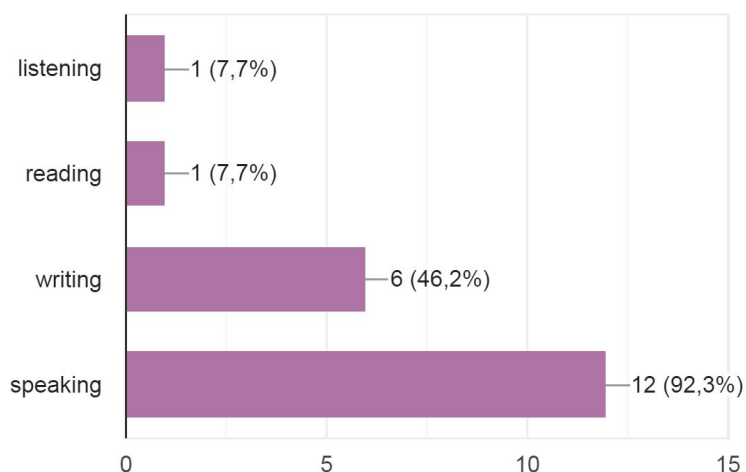
5 out of 13 teachers said it is due to the "lack of practice", 1 said these skills are "not appealing", 1 that the students don't have enough contact with English outside school, 1 that "their language usage is not suitable".

Only 3 teachers wrote that the students are:
- "usually afraid of making a mistake",
- "distressed when they have to say something, sometimes in front of the class, they feel they won't manage it"
- "ashamed or embarrassed while doing speaking exercises. They are afraid of pronunciation, that others will laugh at them".

Whilst all above prove a certain point, the last comment seems to be neglected and regarded as somewhat 'invisible' to the teacher's eye.

Can we, as educators, do anything about this?

Focus on developing the students' speaking skills

15. What percentage of each foreign language lesson is focused on students' speaking activities, in your opinion?
13 odpowiedzi
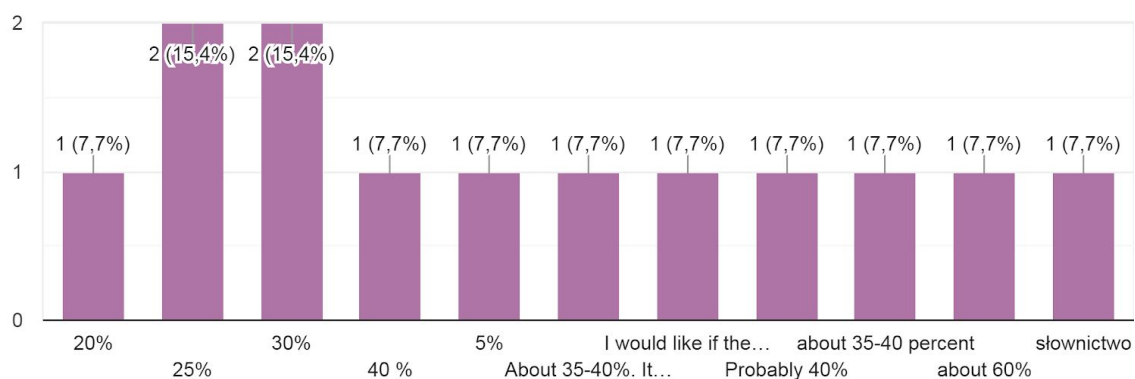
Autodidacticism and student self-study initiatives

In the question about supporting students' self-study/autodidacticism, 3 respondents said there was no such initiative in their schools and 1 that they didn't know. Two teachers advocated the use of CLIL, with a comment "it's really effective".

Distinctively, the Polish section included EU-funded projects as the way to address the matter with "compensatory [...] English classes for students" and "extra English classes for talented students (zajęcia rozwijające), as well as for students who have problems with English (zajęcia wyrównawcze)".