

HANNA KOMOROWSKA  
SWPS University, Warsaw  
hannakomo@data.pl  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9395-2734

## A DIACHRONIC APPROACH TO PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

**Keywords:** language learning, language teaching, norms, assessment, teacher education

### Abstract

The paper is an article of reflection which aims to critically analyze the concept of success as viewed from an individual's perspective as well as through the lenses of others. Historically and socially dependent norms and values regulating psychological and sociological approaches to success and failure are also considered and their personal and social consequences examined. Against this background the postwar concepts of a successful language learner and a successful language teacher are examined from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. A model with six stages is proposed, the function of which is to estimate their approximate duration as well as to identify criteria adopted in order to distinguish between success and failure in particular periods. Terminology, drawn from the philosophy of law, relating to norms and expectations is presented to examine methodological issues in evaluation and assessment. Implications for language teacher education are also considered.

### 1. Introduction

The notion of success and failure has been reappearing in SLA/FLT publications since the end of World War II with stable reference to the quality of institutions, curricula, methods, teachers and learners (Carroll 1962; Kelly 1969; Rubin and Thomson 1983; Howatt and Widdowson 2004; Heyworth 2013; Griffiths 2018; Bernstein 2020). The conceptual difficulty causing the vagueness of the concept lies in the variety of the objects of study, in dynamic changes of the criteria applied as well as in diverse

attempts to objectivize inherently subjective approaches. Problems arise in the analysis of the concept itself, as external and internal channels of assessment not infrequently tend to bring diverse results (Kunnan 2015), a phenomenon augmented by disparate ways of identifying possible roots of success or failure. It should be noted here that, although assessment links success to high levels of linguistic proficiency (Council of Europe 2001, 2018), achievement thus measured belongs to the field of language testing. The present article, however, focuses on changes in the social and individual perception of roots of what is considered success or the lack of it, i.e. on the qualitative rather than the quantitative perspective on assessment, an endeavour calling for an attempt at a periodization of stages characterized by very different evaluation criteria.

## 2. Approaches to success and failure in language education – an attempt at periodization

Any attempt at periodization poses unavoidable difficulties as particular theories, perspectives or schools of thought fade away making room for new ideas slowly enough to enable differing approaches to function in parallel for long stretches of time. Assigning dates to particular periods may contribute to the clarification of the history of a given discipline, but does not necessarily protect typologies from the risk of overlap, as demonstrated in periodization attempts offered for applied linguistics by de Bot (2015) or for language teaching by Howatt and Widdowson (2004).

In the present overview of the history of approaches to quality and success in SLA/FLT a model is proposed, the function of which is to identify the criteria adopted to distinguish between success and failure in particular periods as well as to estimate their approximate duration. The model includes six stages in the development of perspectives thus understood and labels each of them with a dominant criterion functioning at that time as a *sine qua non* condition for the quality of the educational process. The stages thus distinguished are the following:

- the theory-method stage,
- the curriculum-construction stage,
- the classroom-behaviour stage,
- the organization-based stage,
- the psychology-oriented stage,
- the new technologies stage.

### Stage 1: The theory-method perspective (1945–1970)

The efficiency of *ASTP* courses based on structuralism in linguistics and behaviourism in psychology during World War II (Schueler 1944) gave rise to expectations of similar achievements in the school system (Fries 1945). Success in language learning was measured as the main empirical index of a dependent variable resulting from an

independent one, which then attracted the attention of researchers. This causative factor was conceptualized as the value of the theory deemed relevant to learning processes taking place in the brain. Teachers, however, referred to classroom procedures rather than to the audiolingual theory underlying instruction and operationalized language practice as a repetition and substitution activity dictated by the linguistically based selection and gradation of the teaching content and the linear structure of content presentation (Lado 1964). Success was identified with the high quality institutions offering language programmes and judged by the full implementation of the principles of the audiolingual theory, while teachers' appraisal was based on the degree of precision in the employment of accompanying materials and skills to provide language lab instruction (Howatt and Widdowson 2004).

When the well-rooted behaviourist approach came under more and more frequent attacks, it was expected to stand firm as too much investment had been made in its wide promotion, although more cognitively oriented solutions were expected to soon take its place. Assessing the value of two conflicting theories took place via an *experimentum crucis* – a battle of theories (Sinico 2018).

It is worth mentioning here that the audiolingual theory, and – in consequence – the audiolingual method, also called the *structural method*, *mem-mem* or *méthode audiovisuelle*, gave way to the cognitive stance not, as was expected at the time, due to data yielded by large-scale experimental projects, such as the *Pennsylvania Project* or the *Colorado Project* (Valette 1969), but as a consequence of reflection and theoretical considerations initiated by Piaget in the field of psychology and Chomsky in the field of linguistics, a situation not infrequent in applied linguistics. A similar methodological phenomenon could be noticed more than a decade later when the Cognitive Theory gave way to the Communicative Approach. It was the theory-based work of the Council of Europe, rather than the empirical research, that gave birth to the new approach, alive and flourishing even today.

What is important for the periodization, however, is the fact that the theory-method approach has not changed with the shift from audiolingualism to cognitivism; both institutions and teachers were perceived as offering quality education if the new theory was fully adopted and the new method carefully implemented.

## Stage 2: The curriculum-construction perspective (1970–1980)

Although method-oriented views on success and failure kept attracting attention of parents and teachers, towards the end of the 1960s a tendency prevailed among educational administration to seek criteria for language success in the selection and gradation of the teaching materials rather than in teachers' classroom behaviour. As early as in the 1950s researchers started building on the early principles of curriculum construction and syllabus design formulated by Tyler (1949). In the field of language education earlier developments in curriculum construction initiated by Benjamin Bloom's team in the field of general education with their *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals* for cognitive and affective domains (Bloom et al. 1956, 1964), later continued by Schwab (1970), were combined

with curriculum evaluation studies (Hamilton 1976; King and Brownell 1976). Important contributions should also be acknowledged of the work on modular curricula initiated at the University of London in 1967 as well as of innovative research and development activity started in 1970 by the R&D Center for Teacher Education, University of Texas at Austin (Ertl 2000). Focus on the curriculum was soon reflected not only in studies undertaken by the team based at University of Edinburgh's Linguistics Department, led by S. Pit Corder, editor of the seminal *Edinburgh course of applied linguistics* (Allen and Corder 1974), but also in the outline of the notional and linguistic content of the common core syllabus commissioned by the Council of Europe and designed by David Wilkins at the University of Reading (Wilkins 1976; Trim 2002). Concerted efforts led to the birth of the communicative-functional syllabus format popularized in language didactics by the Council of Europe's publication *The threshold level* (Van Ek 1975) and to more theoretical studies on the communicative curriculum structure (Munby 1978), no longer closely connected with audiolingual or cognitive approaches to language learning.

### Stage 3: The classroom behaviour perspective (1980–1990)

The 1980s marked a new stage, which combined the communicative approach with increased attention given to pedagogical rather than language-oriented behaviour of teachers. The change took place under the influence of developments in the fields of educational sciences, social psychology and sociology of education in the preceding decade. The late 1970s brought a new wave of studies launched by researchers who came to view educational achievement through the lens of the functioning of the teacher. The new classroom behaviour-oriented perspective on success and failure, a phase that lasted for the whole decade, may be viewed as an early attempt at individualization in language teaching. Here empirical research plays a critical role, although it arrived from areas at that time far from the field of applied linguistics. Sociological studies looked at the hidden curriculum as well as at overt strategies for dealing with large groups of learners, monitoring learners' attention levels, ways of demonstrating power over behaviour and communication in the classroom as well as ways of operating sanctions (Jackson 1968; Stubbs 1976; Stubbs and Delamont 1976; Edwards and Furlong 1978). Social psychological studies aimed at identifying the behaviour of teachers considered successful (Rosenshine 1971; Nash 1976). A vast array of aspects of the classroom functioning of the teacher were researched, such as a teacher's reaction to noise (Denscombe 1980; Woods 1980) or other unacceptable learners' behaviour, demonstrating a sense of humour (Walker and Goodson 1977; Stebbins 1980), introducing relaxation periods, and dealing with a variety of learners' strategies, yet no clear criteria of selecting teachers who contribute to their learners' success were identified. The aim was to list behaviours to be modelled or avoided in the teaching process for the benefit of pre- and in-service teacher training institutions.

A much more disciplined approach to sample selection for teachers' classroom behaviour research was demonstrated in the huge project launched in 18 countries

by UNESCO's International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (UNESCO-IEA). The teachers selected to be observed during all the lessons they taught for three weeks were those both liked and respected by groups of students achieving higher than average group scores on an internationally administered foreign language test (Carroll 1975; Lewis and Massad 1975). The classroom behaviour-oriented perspective looked at learners' behaviour and teachers' reactions to it, although attempts at identifying correlations between management styles and learning outcomes were yet to come. The only Polish research project of the time, seeking correlations between learning outcomes and certain sociological and didactic variables, marked a move toward a broader perspective on success and failure (Komorowska 1978).

#### Stage 4: The organization-based perspective (1990–2010)

In the 1990s, dramatic economic, social and political changes led to a considerable re-focusing of attention from theories, methods and curricula to the institutional framework of language education, a concept supported by the Council of Europe, the European Union, the European Centre for Modern Languages and OECD (Komorowska 2015). All these institutions promoted an early start for the first foreign language, lowering the age for starting the study of a second foreign language, increasing the number of contact hours and limiting the size of language classes (Council of Europe 1998; European Commission 2002). Attention was also given to the organization of pre- and in-service teacher training: apportioning theoretical courses and field work, managing induction or probation periods and evaluating teacher training institutions (European Commission 2005, 2007; ECML 2007; OECD 2008). Quality was believed to be ensured by meeting organizational standards and ethical values of tolerance and inclusion, irrespective of the type of curriculum and the characteristics of the teaching method employed, as later summarized in the *Graz Declaration on Language Education* (ECML 2012).

Although the beginning of this stage is relatively easy to demarcate due to the launching of activities targeting language education by international organizations mainly interested in economy, such as the European Union and OECD (Komorowska 2015), determining the end of stage 4 in time is a controversial issue. No significant activities of a new type have been undertaken since 2010, yet the engagement of the main European institutions in the promotion of solutions agreed on in the 1990–2010 is undeniable with numerous diagnostic studies and reports continuously being published (Council of Europe 2018; EURYDICE 2018; OECD 2019a, 2019b). The difficulty in question is augmented by a considerable overlap with stage 5 to be discussed below.

#### Stage 5: The psychology-oriented perspective on success – the 21st century

Although the first publications on the so-called “good language learner”, “successful language learner” and learners' strategies date back to the last quarter of the

20th century (Komorowska 1978; Naiman et al. 1978; Rubin and Thomson 1983; Oxford 1990), the psychology-oriented perspective on success was a sign of the 21st century. In its first two decades, an overwhelming number of research projects on the relationship between specific individual variables and the learning outcomes was launched, for which reason it would be counterproductive to even attempt any citing of relevant sources. Therefore, although stage 5 is abundant in publications on attitudes, motivation, willingness to communicate, personality, memory, learning strategies, etc., presentation of this stage takes a small part of the present text. What seems worth noting is the influence of a branch of psychology focused on individual differences and an insignificant role of social psychology or sociology of education. Research interests have moved from the cognitive to the affective sphere of the learner, i.e. to motivations and emotions, such as anxiety or willingness to communicate. Implications seem to be important for the development of teacher awareness, although with a clear, although possibly also dangerous, intention to manipulate individual learner variables in accordance with the goals of the educator.

### Stage 6: New technologies and online teaching (2012–)

The coronavirus pandemic unexpectedly redirected interests towards new technologies and online teaching, once considered tools, but now elevated to the status of a *sine qua non* condition of any language education. It is, however, too early to decide whether this new position marks the beginning of stage 6 and how long such a stage may last.

## 3. Evaluating approaches across stages – methodological issues

### 3.1. Pitfalls of analysis

In the overview of perspectives on success in language education it has to be stressed that negative evaluation has so far never turned against curriculum-, organization- or psychology-based perspectives. It has not even targeted the one based on classroom behaviours of teachers, most probably for the reason that in foreign language teaching this particular factor is in most cases linked to the method employed. It was the method that found itself at the centre of criticism: the audiolingual one became an obvious candidate for the first victim. Critics labelled it old-fashioned and outdated, many indicated a large number of its disadvantages and shortcomings (Richards and Rogers 2001), although information that it helps younger students as well as those with learning difficulties came relatively early (Komorowska 1978). Yet, despite the lip service paid to the avoidance of audiolingual practices by a large number of language teachers, many ideas introduced by the audiolingual theory and practice were acknowledged and integrated in both the cognitive and the communicative approaches, a fact rarely – if ever – openly admitted. Evidence for this can be found in the history of the most important concepts, such as syllabus design, criteria for the selection and progression of the teaching content, the PPP lesson structure,

the leading role of oral skills, a variety of auditory and visual teaching aids, as well as the theory and practice of objective language testing. It was the awareness of the origin of the valuable solutions in the practice of language teaching that blunted severe criticism, which most probably explains a tolerant attitude towards the audiolingual Callan Method in spite of its 1963 copyright.

The difficulty in renouncing all the innovations introduced by the audiolingual approach and the inconvenience of blaming it for unsatisfactory levels of students' proficiency redirected all the disparaging remarks towards an easy target, i.e. the Grammar-Translation Method (Kelly 1969). The field of SLA/FLT found itself among the first ones to engage in cancel culture which is getting more and more widespread, but also more controversial, especially when it targets personalities and events from the distant past and evaluates them on contemporary criteria anachronistically ignoring the context of the time. Disrespect was directed at the Grammar-Translation Method whose promotion was a result of the late-18th century introduction of mass education in Austria, Denmark and Prussia. It was widely employed throughout the 19th century and until World War I for reasons perfectly justifiable at the time: learners came from diverse contexts, largely from poor, culturally deprived families, therefore excerpts from literary masterpieces familiarized them with various achievements of their community and gave learners at least a certain level of access to high culture. Translations into the mother tongue and summaries written in L1 helped students, most of whom used local dialects, to become acquainted with literary language and develop writing skills, often alien to their parents. The method was, therefore, extremely functional in largely illiterate communities and contributed to the life success of many students. The fact that it is inappropriate in the contemporary educational context of national schooling is today indisputable.

### 3.2. Success and the issue of expectations – a terminological proposal

To examine appraising moves in this field, a terminology is needed that best lends itself to an analysis of evaluative trends in SLA/FLT. With a view to learners' success, authorities and the public cherish certain expectations of educational institutions and teachers, thus appraising their activity vis-à-vis those expectations.

The question of expectations and norms is most extensively analyzed in constitutional theory and philosophy of law, disciplines which offer terminology applicable to reflection on language and communication (Paprzycka 1999; Mellema 2004; Rubio 2015). These expectations are either *predictive*, i.e. formulated beforehand or *postdictive* when people are unaware of their own expectations and become aware of disappointment when subconscious expectations remain unfulfilled (Rubio 2015). Demands expressed as evaluative standards result from *normative expectations*, i.e. typically “mind-to-world” expectations; according to these, an individual's unexpected behaviour must be changed or punished. Those expressed as *cognitive expectations* are of a “world-to-mind” category, therefore, if unfulfilled, expectations rather than behaviour need to be changed and thus a major reform is called for. When normative expectations are clearly identified and officially presented, they become *rule*

*expectations* or take the form of *conduct rules*, which – when broken – bring about legal consequences. *Moral expectations*, not necessarily connected with conduct, trigger less intense reactions, such as distress or disappointment (Mellema 2004).

Normative consequences are experienced by those who are held responsible and called to respond to what has happened (contract, promotion), though *attribution of responsibility* may be based – as Rubio puts it – on causal, intentional or magical explanations. Responsibility refers to duties vis-à-vis other people, while obligation is connected with how an individual decides to act according to their own values (Rubio 2015).

Applying this terminology to the analysis of the stages presented above, we can say that *postdictive expectations* caused the first attempts at undermining the audiolingual theory as an approach responsible for learners' failures to communicate in a natural, everyday situation, a factor resulting in conflicts within stage 1. *Cognitive expectations* with their "world-to-mind" orientation brought about not only a cathartic move from the audiolingual to the cognitive theory and method, but also resulted in the birth of the Communicative Approach.

*Predictive expectations* were inherent in stage 2, as Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives was believed to guarantee success, if only the curriculum and syllabus are properly constructed. At the beginning of stage 2, expectations were of a moral nature, i.e. deviations from the model might have met with disappointment, but no formal consequences were borne by the designer.

*Normative expectations* were introduced when success in education became associated with the classroom behaviour of the teacher. Checklists operationalizing teachers' professionalism started with the one presented by Cambridge Institute of Education (Bollington and Bradley 1990) and soon mushroomed across school systems (Kyriacou 1991; Poster and Poster 1991). The British Department of Education commissioned report no 216 which contained an extensive list of expected teaching skills and behaviours (McBer 2000). The *National Board for Professional Teaching Standards* in the United States developed a list of 13 characteristics (Berliner 2001). Other checklists appeared that were targeted specifically at language teaching; these, promoted by educators engaged in teacher appraisal, formed a solid foundation for *rule expectations* and *rules of conduct*, a set of criteria crucial in deciding the teacher's contract, salary, career path and promotion opportunities. *Rule expectations* are at times required to be followed precisely and strictly, as has taken place since the 2010–2011 reform in Portugal (Santiago et al. 2012) and at times remain formulated only in general terms, which usually occurs in decentralized systems, e.g. in New Zealand (Nusche et al. 2012). In both groups a *teacher's obligation* to perform according to set standards during their classroom teaching is in focus, yet in some of the systems, e.g. in the UK, *responsibility* for learners' well-being and their learning outcomes is also strongly stressed.

Expectations, especially the normative ones, are, however, unstable not only in language teaching – as demonstrated by the history of sharp turns in many other disciplines. Although Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) could not be counted among the success stories of his times, the change of the norms in astronomy earned him



a statue at Campo de' Fiori. Hieronymus Colloredo, the Archbishop of Salzburg who employed Mozart would never have hired a musician composing operas in a Wagnerian style. Even rejection and scorn, immediate reactions more influential than a lack of understanding on the part of the elite, are powerless vis-à-vis time: the art critic Louis Leroy (1874) – who, after his 1874 visit to an exhibition in Boulevard des Capucines to see Monet's *Soleil Levant*, coined the mockingly contemptuous term *impressionism* – would have been amazed to find the same painting worshiped half a century later, just as it is difficult for today's normative eyes to recognize the value of the Beeple JPG file sold for \$69.3 million at Christie's.<sup>1</sup>

It is more than difficult to take announced successes and declared failures without skepticism, as time often proves judgments to be unfair, discriminatory or unreasonable, although they were perfectly justified in the eyes of the public witnessing the pronouncement. In art aesthetic criteria change; in science – state of the art changes. Expectations together with research perspectives move, sometimes very rapidly, although overlaps and parallel paths seem quite common. What moves together with both is the power to judge and the attribution of responsibility. Several questions, therefore, arise: Who or what can gain the status of the agent of change? Who has the right to declare success? Who can be labelled a failure – when, by whom and on what grounds? To attempt answers to these questions, let us look at which aspects undergo changes in language education.

#### 4. A diachronic perspective on learners' and teachers' success

##### 4.1. Language learners and their success

In language teaching the situation is even more difficult than in the other fields mentioned above: not only have the criteria underlying methods kept changing, but also, which is much more important, the objectives. Such changes make drawing comparisons between academic disciplines difficult, but even comparing levels of learners' success across the stages becomes logically impossible. The 19th century success and failure would need to be assessed on the basis of translation, the skill considered the main educational aim at that time. An analysis of success in the 19th century would need to concentrate on reading and writing skills, as the educational objectives were no longer the same. In the 20th century, the educational aim shifted to balanced, integrated skills and in the 21st century – to speaking and interaction. Not only educational aims, taking the form of a moving target, become an obstacle. Practical and budgetary restrictions involved in large-scale research projects do not allow language testers to examine learners' achievement of key objectives, e.g. in the European Union's *SurveyLang* (European Commission 2012) 50 000 students' speaking skills,

---

<sup>1</sup> Monumental collage by Beeple is first purely digital artwork NFT to come to auction. [available at: <https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7>; accessed: 19 June 2023].

the main curricular objective in all European school systems, were not tested for financial and organizational reasons.

Further difficulties in applying a diachronic approach to success and failure come from changes in assessment tools and methods – another factor thwarting any plan to compare success levels. In the 20th century, a strongly subjective, qualitative assessment of the Grammar-Translation period gave way to the quantitative testing of isolated items typical of the audiolingual period. A move towards qualitative approaches based on CAN-DO descriptors replaced the quantitative toolkit in the early 21st century, to finally arrive at a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in assessing accuracy and fluency, while new aspects of what is to be assessed, such as *mediation*, are constantly added (Council of Europe 2018).

A combination of internal and external factors is most probably responsible for the momentous change I have observed in my own students' approach to success over the last forty years (Komorowska 2021). Having always been interested in how individuals perceive accomplishment, decade by decade and year after year I continued to conduct informal surveys among my philology students. Throughout the last two decades of the 20th century, an internal assessment of external goals, such as access to information from abroad, was absolutely predominant. Before the fall of communism, the students in the 1980s started mentioning external criteria, such as school and university grades. During the first decade after the transformation of 1989/1990, most students frequently pointed to objectivized external criteria, such as internationally recognized language certificates. The 21st century brought students' interest in their ability to communicate with foreigners, a skill perceived by them individually in the course of self-assessment activities rather than assessed externally by examiners – an obvious result of the country's access to the European Union and increase in student mobility. For the last few years almost every student in their definition of language success has mentioned the achievement of diverse, individually set goals. The very few exceptions can be ascribed to the students' external locus of control, when individuals find it difficult to take responsibility for their learning outcomes, rather than to differences in criterion identification. Failure is most often ascribed to demotivation caused by interpersonal problems, such as stigmatization by other students or conflicts with the teacher, but also to the spiral of disappointment, when unrealistic expectations lead to frustration and boredom. Contextual factors, however, only strengthen the students' tendency to rely on their own assessment of the situation.

Self-assessment on personally defined aims and criteria demonstrates a subjective, individual approach to the feeling of self-worth. Singularity can be seen to have become the main category of success, although it should not be forgotten, as the sociology of art has confirmed, that singularity does not belong to the category of the norm (Heinich 2012).

Any external perspective on learners' success is not devoid of internal contradictions and contextual hindrances. In any analysis of learners' success, variables are extremely difficult to control as the length of study differs from learner to learner, and so does its intensity across time, even in the learning process of the same individual,

due to the changing frequency of international contacts and participation in private tuition. In attempts to assess the levels of success in a given group of students, differentiation within the sample hinders the possibility of making useful generalizations from the results obtained. When researching the success and failure of Polish secondary students in a nation-wide research project at the end of the 1970s (Komorowska 1978), it was relatively easy to remain close to the reliability standard for a paradoxical reason: the country was closed, English entered the curriculum very late, i.e. in secondary education and was taught from scratch, contacts with foreigners for secondary school students were nil and satellite TV and the internet did not exist. What is more, teenagers were proud of their participation in extra lessons of English and, therefore, saw no reason to hide this fact when questioned about private tuition. However much the situation helped to control research variables, linguists today can only be happy to see their learners enjoy freedom and mobility.

Conditions created by the US *National Defense Education Act* of 1958 were even more conducive to reliable success and failure research launched in the United States by J. B. Carroll on students taking Russian as a foreign language course, as RFL courses were government-funded and the admission of a false beginner among those enrolled was highly unlikely (Carroll 1962). At present, for full variable control, only lab experiments can be envisaged, yet these are by definition deprived of contextual authenticity; moreover, they cover short stretches of time and target fascinating, yet extremely narrow, aspects of language acquisition and learning, such as working memory.

Achievement is always measurable, yet it is more than doubtful whether learners' scores on tests can be justifiably considered an index of success. In an ideal situation, with full equal educational opportunity and equal learner home context guaranteed and controlled – a score could be treated as the sole criterion of achievement. Equal educational opportunity, especially in the field of foreign languages, is, however a myth. Learners have always differed in the amounts of out-of-school exposure, which depends on their family's economic, social and cultural status, the quality of their home environment and the length of parallel study with a private tutor.

Educational systems use rankings based on test scores to give visibility to students considered to be successful, yet on the one hand, students coming from culturally and educationally deprived families should be declared successful even when – working hard – they obtain relatively low scores, while – on the other – proficient students should not be perceived as successful learners when they come from bilingual contexts or benefit from education abroad. Difficulties multiply when unexpected life success is achieved by pupils remembered by their teachers as low-achievers, but especially when the lack of success is felt by those considered high-achievers in their school days, which makes us ponder upon the questionable value of school hierarchies.

There are also more problems here. One important difficulty is connected with the criterion of the native-speaker, which – according to some researchers (Davies 2015) – cannot easily be avoided, even when English is taught as a *lingua franca*. The criterion of a proficient speaker seems to be the best option, yet proficiency is, in one way or another, compared to that of L<sub>1</sub> users. The question remains how to avoid the model of an ideal educated native-speaker. For the time being the solution consists in allowing

for modifications, which – in fact – are often reduced to the lowering of NS standards for pronunciation, grammar and idiomaticity (Jenkins 2007), while the concept of the native-speaker remains a frame of reference rather than a model to follow.

Another controversy has to do with both assessment and self-assessment of interactive skills. Very often problems in listening comprehension have their roots in the individual way of speaking which characterizes an interlocutor rather than in the complexity of the text or deficiencies in skill. A speaker's personality and interactive skills influence the listeners' understanding, which is additionally influenced by their skills to decode nonverbal signals.

#### 4.2. A diachronic perspective on the success of language teachers

A diachronic perspective also shows dramatic changes in normative expectations of successful language teachers. Until the 19th century, being a native-speaker or benefiting from early bilingualism was the main criterion of success measured by employability in society's upper circles. The turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries brought a division of teachers into those employed in the language schools of the Reform Movement and those teaching in state schools. The former were assessed on the degree of precision with which they managed to follow the basic principles of a given method, the latter – on their moral conduct reflected in complying with restrictions invading their private life and religious feelings. In the interwar period, affective factors, such as moral qualities and attitudes towards learners played a significant role in deciding a teacher's educational professionalism. After World War II teacher classroom behaviour was assessed vis-à-vis the method promoted at that time, first audiolingual, later cognitive, finally communicative. Both moral and normative expectations have been changing as well, making the concept of successful teaching blurred and unclear (Komorowska and Krajka 2021).

In the so-called post-method era (Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2012), teachers are perceived as successful if they find themselves on top of the career ladder, their promotion being decided by appraisal committees. This, however, invites the question of the power to judge. Who has the power to declare a teacher's success? The problem is sensitive as evaluators managing teacher appraisal are recruited from experienced teachers, yet experience does not always equal expertise (Tsui 2003; Day et al. 2006; Chi 2011), which further damages the reliability of success narratives. Experienced teachers are described as overusing schemata and overlooking the specificities of the situation, a phenomenon first mentioned by Berliner (1994), while experts treat more situations as routine, but skilfully identify those which call for an in-depth analysis. Experienced non-experts, however, not infrequently decide the career path of their colleagues.

What is more, teachers are assessed by committees which differ considerably in the number and type of criteria applied, thus making appraisal decisions unpredictable. The lip service paid to teacher autonomy does not guarantee teachers' professional freedom, as various performance criteria are used and these by definition set standards, define expectations and pose restrictions undermining teacher autonomy. Quality assurance, in its turn towards accountability, promotes bureaucracy,

and therefore, only those completing all the required paperwork on time are likely to be considered worthy of promotion. Overburdened with administrative work and difficulties in maintaining classroom discipline, 20% of novice teachers leave the profession after the first five years, while between-school mobility of experienced teachers looking for better working conditions grows considerably (Okeke and Mtyuda 2017; Koffeman and Snoek 2019). Instructors successful in a former context become, therefore, novice teachers in the new one, in which the degree of their professional success is more difficult to be appropriately assessed.

Declaring a teachers' success on the basis of their students' learning outcomes is another popular way to identify top teaching professionals. Yet, this particular measure should be treated with caution as it seems to be a poor index of teaching quality in countries in which living standards reflected in ESCS/HOMEPOS indices in the student population show a difference of more than 20 points, a result considered equal to three years of learning (IBE 2015). Living standards prove to be factors correlated strongly with education in the family and its participation in culture, yet changes in the financial situation of learners' families are totally beyond the control of teachers who are often negatively assessed on the basis of their learners' educational attainment. Neither can teachers influence the linguistic situation of a learner's multilingual family, even though proficiency in the language of schooling is decisive for the children's school success. The early leaving education and training (ELET) index shows a dropout rate of 22 per cent of students learning through a language of schooling other than their mother tongue, which reveals additional difficulties teachers must face in the process of teaching children whose low language proficiency hinders their ability to acquire curricular contents (European Commission 2014). What is more, language teachers expected to develop FL reading and writing skills encounter pupils with literacy problems in both their home language and the language of schooling. PISA studies demonstrate that 12 per cent of 15-year-old girls and 26 per cent of boys do not reach average educational levels across subject areas; girls also consistently outperform boys as early as in the fourth grade where every fifth child proves to be a struggling reader (OECD 2010). Considering the number and weight of factors affecting learner achievement, most of which remain beyond the teachers' control, it is almost impossible to treat any of them as a criterion sufficient to deliver judgments upon a teacher's professional success.

## 5. Conclusions, questions and controversial issues – a need for a synchronic perspective.

Because of these frequent and drastic changes in norms, standards and normative expectations, no diachronic approach to educational success and failure on the part of students and teachers can be rationally applied. The only possible assessment path lies in the synchronic approach, which is itself subject to historical relativism.

As seen in the above discussion, no single factor can be treated as a touchstone in the process of teacher appraisal. A fair appraisal that ends with proclaiming

a teacher's success is, however, possible and success can be pronounced, if an ample and varied set of assessment criteria is used, and when multiple aspects of learners' achievement, a teacher's didactic and interactive skills, classroom behaviour and student-teacher rapport are all taken into consideration.

Learner success seems more difficult to be determined by external evaluators – unlike a learner's proficiency, a factor objectively measurable in the testing process. Considering difficulties in assessing a learner's individual effort vis-à-vis his or her predispositions, social milieu, instruction received, affordances and personally identified communicative needs, assessment of language success must be left to the individual judgement of the learner.

There still remain problems not yet resolved, questions not yet answered and issues calling for discussion. One major controversy in the field of evaluation and assessment in FLT/SLA is the goal to be pursued by learners, who may then be labelled successful (Kucharczyk 2015), but also the external perception of a student's success. The following questions arise:

- Is the notion of success connected with any particular variety of the language – standard or substandard, regional or official?
- What is the role and the type of code (restricted vs. elaborate) in perception or self-perception of a learner's proficiency?
- What is the influence of the conversational style of the learner in L1 (high involvement or high considerateness style), which can characterize a learner's oral production, on the perception of his/her proficiency?

What is difficult to ignore is the teachers' approach to learners' success. However much autonomy may be praised, school teachers usually appreciate a student's being motivated by what the teacher considers attractive, learning what the teacher selects as the teaching focus, being diligent, conscientious and scoring high on externally imposed instruments. Ironically, teachers want learners to be autonomous in learning what the teachers consider worth teaching.

Such an approach elicits a boomerang effect on the part of the students, who naturally lean more and more strongly towards an individual definition of their language success and an individual feeling of self-worth. Learners, therefore, except for those who are disinterested and demotivated, set their own goals and pursue their own paths. The era of emotions and individuality seems to be well established, which is likely to make any future analysis “deep and too dark” rather than “clear but shallow”, in line with the alternative presented by Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981), a prominent Polish philosopher and logician, in one of his epigrams,

A finicky herring disliking the chatter  
 Didn't know how to get to the heart of the matter  
 Profound and clear – am I mentally callow?  
 Either deep but too dark, or clear but shallow. (Tr. HK)

Each of the options, however, calls for more awareness raising in teacher education.

## References

- Allen J.P.B., Corder S.P. 1974. *The Edinburgh course in applied linguistics: Techniques in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berliner D.C. 1994. Expertise: The wonder of exemplary performance. – Barnes H., Mangieri J.N., Collins Block C. (eds.). *Creating powerful thinking in teachers and students*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 141–186.
- Berliner D.C. 2001. Learning about learning from expert teachers. – *International Journal of Educational Research* 35: 463–482.
- Bernstein K. 2020. *(Re)defining success in language learning. Positioning, participation and young emergent bilinguals at school*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Bloom B.S., Englehart M.D., Furst H.J., Hill W.H., Krathwohl D.R. 1956. *Taxonomy of educational objectives. The classification of educational goals. Handbook I. Cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Bloom B.S., Englehart M.D., Furst H.J., Hill W.H., Krathwohl, D.R. 1964. *Taxonomy of educational objectives. The classification of educational goals. Handbook II. Affective domain*. New York: David McKay.
- Bod R. 2013. *A new history of the humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bollington R., Bradley H. 1990. *Training for appraisal. A set of distance learning materials*. London: Routledge.
- Carroll J.B. 1962. *The prediction of success in intensive foreign language training*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Carroll J.B. 1975. *The teaching of French in eight countries*. New York: John Wiley.
- Chi M.T.H. 2011. Theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and trends in the study of expertise. – Li Y., Kaiser G. (eds.). *Expertise in mathematics instruction: An international perspective*. Cham: Springer: 17–39.
- Council of Europe. 1998. *Recommendation no R (98) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states concerning modern languages*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe. 2001. *Common European framework of reference for language: Teaching-learning assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. 2010. *Graz declaration on language education. Quality language education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies*. Graz: Council of Europe Publications.
- Council of Europe. 2018. *CEFR 2018 Companion volume with new descriptors*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Davies A. 2015. 40 years in applied linguistics: Interview by Antony John Kunnan. – Kunnan A.J. (ed.). *Talking about language assessment: The LAQ interviews*. London: Routledge: 35–50.
- Day C., Stobart G., Sammons P., Kingston A., Quing G., Smees R., Mutjaba, T. 2006. *Variations in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness (VITAE). Research Report RR743*. London, Nottingham: Department of Education and Skills.
- de Bot K. 2015. *A history of applied linguistics. From 1980 to the present*. London: Routledge.
- Denscombe M. 1980. Keep'em quiet. The significance of noise for the practice of teaching. – Woods P. (ed.). *Teacher strategies: Explorations in the sociology of school*. London: Croom Helm: 61–83.
- ECML. 2007. *VALEUR project report: Valuing all languages in Europe*. Graz: European Centre for Modern Languages.
- ECML. 2012. *Graz Declaration "Quality education for plurilingual people living in multilingual societies"*. Graz: European Centre for Modern Languages.

- Edwards, A., Furlong, V. (1978). *The language of teaching*. London: Heinemann.
- Ertl H. 2000. *Modularisation of vocational education in Europe. NVQs and GNVQs as a model for the reform of initial training provisions in Germany?* Wallingford: Symposium Books.
- Ertl H. 2002. The concept of modularisation in vocational education and training: The debate in Germany and its implications. *Oxford Review of Education* 28.1: 53–73.
- European Commission. 2002. *Education and training in Europe: Diverse systems, shared goals for 2010*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission. 2012. *Surveylang – First European survey on language competences: Final report*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission, EACEA, EURYDICE & CEDEFOP. 2014. *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: Strategies, policies and measures*. Eurydice and Cedefop report. Brussels: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. 2005. *A new framework strategy for multilingualism. Communication from the Commission to the Council of the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Commission. 2007. *Multilingualism. Report of the high level group on multilingualism*. Brussels: European Commission.
- EURYDICE. 2018. *Teaching careers in Europe. Access, progression and support*. Brussels: The European Commission.
- Fries C.C. 1945. *Teaching and learning English as a foreign language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Griffiths C. 2018. *The strategy factor in successful language learning: The tornado effect*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Hamilton D. 1976. *Curriculum evaluation*. London: Open Books.
- Heinich N. 2012. *De la visibilité. Excellence et singularité en régime médiatique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Heyworth F. 2013. Applications of quality management in language education. – *Language Teaching* 46.3: 281–315.
- Howatt A.P.R., Widdowson H.G. 2004. *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- IBE – Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych. 2015. *Efekty nauczania języka angielskiego na III etapie edukacyjnym. Raport końcowy. Badania umiejętności uczenia się i nauczania języków obcych w gimnazjum. Badanie umiejętności mówienia*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych.
- Jackson Ph. 1968. *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston.
- Jenkins J. 2007. *English as a lingua franca: Attitude and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly L.G. 1969. *25 centuries of language teaching. an inquiry into the science, art, and development of language teaching methodology, 500 B.C. – 1969*. Rowley (MA): Newbury House Publishers.
- King A.R., Brownell J.A. 1976. *The curriculum and the disciplines of knowledge*. New York: Wiley.
- Koffeman A., Snoek M. 2019. Identifying context factors as a source of professional learning. – *Professional Development in Education* 49.3: 456–471.
- Komorowska H. 1978. *Sukces i niepowodzenie w nauce języków obcych*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne.
- Komorowska H. 2015. The European language policy and the teaching profession in the 21st century. – *Studia Linguistica Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* 132: 135–150.



- Komorowska H. 2021. *Notes on success and failure in language learning and teaching. The power to extol or disparage*. Paper given at the 32nd ICFSLA "Narratives of success and failure", Szczyrk, 20th May 2021.
- Komorowska H., Krajka J. 2021. *Cultural and social diversity in language teacher education*. Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Kucharczyk R. 2015. Jak definiować poprawność językową w epoce wielojęzyczności? Kryteria oceny wypowiedzi ustnej na egzaminie z języka obcego nowożytnego (na przykładzie egzaminów maturalnych). – Sujecka-Zajac, J. (ed.). *Ewaluacja biegłości językowej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego: 119–132.
- Kunnan A.J. (ed.). 2015. *Talking about language assessment: The LAQ interviews*. London: Routledge.
- Kumaravadivelu B. 2001. Toward a postmethod pedagogy. – *TESOL Quarterly* 35.4: 537–560.
- Kumaravadivelu B. 2012. *Language teacher education for a global society: A modular model for knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing and seeing*. London: Routledge.
- Kyriacou C. 1991. *Essential teaching skills*. London: Blackwell.
- Lado R. 1964. *Language teaching: A scientific approach*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lantolf J.P. 2000. *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leroy L.J. 1874. L'exposition des impressionnistes. – *Le Charivari* April 25.
- Lewis E.G., Massad C.G. 1975. *The teaching of English as a foreign language in ten countries*. New York: John Wiley.
- McBer H. 2000. *Research into teacher effectiveness: A model of teacher effectiveness*. Research Report no 216. Nottingham: Department for Education and Employment.
- Mellema G. 2004. *The expectations of morality*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Munby J.L. 1978. *A communicative syllabus design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Monumental collage by Beeple is first purely digital artwork NFT to come to auction. [available at: <https://www.christies.com/features/Monumental-collage-by-Beeple-is-first-purely-digital-artwork-NFT-to-come-to-auction-11510-7>; accessed: 19 June 2023].
- Naiman N., Fröhlich M., Stern H., Todesco A. 1978. *The good language learner*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Nash R. 1976. Pupils' expectations of their teachers. – Stubbs M., Delamont S. (eds.). *Explorations in classroom observations*. New York: John Wiley: 83–98.
- Nusche D., Laveault D., MacBeath J., Santiago P. 2012. *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: New Zealand 2011*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD. 2008. *Education at a glance*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD. 2010. *PISA 2009 results: What makes a school successful? Resources, policies and practices*. [vol. IV]. Paris: OECD.
- OECD. 2019a. *Trends shaping education. OECD indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD. 2019b. *How teachers learn: An OECD perspective*. Paris: OECD.
- Okeke C.I., Mtyuda P.N. 2017. Teacher job dissatisfaction. Implications for teacher sustainability and social transformation. – *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability* 19.1: 57–68.
- Oxford R.L. 1990. *Language learning strategies. What every teacher should know*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Paprzycka K. 1999. Normative expectations, intentions, and beliefs. – *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37.4: 629–652.
- Poster C., Poster D. 1991. *Teacher appraisal. Training and implementation*. London: Routledge.

- Richards J.C., Rogers T.S. 2001. *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenshine B. 1971. *Teaching behaviours and student achievement*. London: NFER.
- Rubin J., Thomson I. 1983. *How to be a successful language learner*. New York: Heinle and Heinle.
- Rubio S.F. 2015. Expectations and attribution of responsibility. – *Journal for Constitutional Theory and Philosophy of Law* 26: 111–128.
- Santiago P., McGregor I., Nusche D., Ravela P., Toledo D. 2012. *OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Mexico 2012*. Paris: OECD.
- Schueler H. 1944. Foreign language teaching under the Army Specialised Training Program. – *The German Quarterly* 17.4: 183–191.
- Schwab J. 1970. *The practical: A language for curriculum*. Washington: National Education Association.
- Sinico M. 2018. Why *Experimentum Crucis* is possible in psychology of perception? *Gestalt Theory* 40.1: 45–58.
- Stebbins R. 1980. The role of humour in teaching strategy and self-expression. – Woods P. (ed.). *Teacher strategies: Explorations in the sociology of school*. London: Croom Helm: 61–83.
- Stubbs M. 1976. *Language, school and classrooms*. London: Methuen.
- Stubbs M., Delamont S. 1976. *Explorations in classroom observations*. New York: John Wiley.
- Trim J.L.M. 2002. *Modern languages in the Council of Europe 1954–1997*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe – Language Policy Division.
- Tsui A. 2003. *Understanding expertise in teaching. Case studies of ESL teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tyler R. 1949. *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Valette R. 1969. The Pennsylvania Project: Its conclusion and its implications. – *The Modern Language Journal* 56.6: 396–404.
- Van Ek J. 1975. *The threshold level*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Walker R., Goodson I. 1977. Humour in the classroom. – Woods P., Hammersley M. (eds.). *School experience*. London: Croom Helm: 196–227.
- Wilkins D. 1976. *Notional syllabuses*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Woods P. 1980. Strategies in teaching and learning. – Woods P. (ed.). *Teacher strategies. Explorations in the sociology of school*. London: Croom Helm: 18–33.