RESEARCH ARTICLE

Balancing Acts: Polish Language Teachers Navigating Identity, Language Promotion, and Multilingual Education

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Article Info	Abstract
	Teaching Polish as a foreign language today requires a delicate balance—promoting Poland's linguistic and cultural heritage while embracing an increasingly multilingual and multicultural social reality. This study explores Polish language teachers' multiple responsibilities in response to growing internationalization and diversity. Drawing on classroom observations at the University of Warsaw and interviews with language instructors, we examine how Polish language teachers navigate multilingual classrooms, maintain professional identities, and foster inclusion and integration. The analysis employs Bakhtin's concept of Heteroglossia, Wenger's Communities of Practice, and Freirean critical pedagogy to highlight the fluidity of teacher identities and the intersection of language, culture, and society. Findings reveal how instructors emphasize practical communication skills to support students' integration into Polish society, while also transmitting cultural traditions and stressing advanced language proficiency. Within the institutionalized context of Polish language education, instructors become mediators between national heritage and global realities. We advocate for enhanced institutional support and collaborative training to help educators balance cultural promotion with internationalization and migration, positioning Polish language teaching as a bridge between tradition and global diversity.

INTRODUCTION

Pivotal historical events have profoundly shaped the evolution of Polish national identity. The 18th-century partitions erased Poland from the map for 123 years and catalyzed sustained efforts to preserve Polish culture under foreign rule (Davies, 2005). These movements reinforced a cultural resilience that underpinned Poland's resurgence after World War I, revitalizing national pride and cultural continuity (Porter-Szűcs, 2014). Following the profound human and cultural losses of World War II, including the devastation of the Holocaust, Poland's national identity deepened further. Although Poland was subject to Soviet control from 1945 to 1989, grassroots movements like the Solidarity (Solidarność, in Polish) protests eventually led to the collapse of communism, reaffirming the strength of Polish national identity (Ash, 2002). Throughout these periods of foreign domination, the Polish language

served as both a means of communication and a powerful symbol of cultural resistance embedded in the nation's identity (Janion, 2006). Beyond its historical significance, the Polish language today remains integral to education, acting as both a medium of instruction and a mechanism for transmitting cultural values and national heritage (Janion & Figlerowicz, 2023; Wierzbicka, 2003). As Poland navigates its current socio-political landscape, the language serves as a nexus for dialogues around national identity, independence, and globalization. In education, linguistic strategies employed to reinforce Polish identity are essential, as they shape students' understanding of what it means to be Polish within a globalized world.

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 presented new challenges for maintaining national identity amid growing global influences (Bachmann, 2010, 2024). This integration with the EU has fueled debates about sovereignty and the preservation of cultural values, particularly in education. Despite EU policies promoting a multilingual, inclusive educational approach (European Commission, 2020), Polish language education has traditionally prioritized linguistic purity and high proficiency (Pisarek, 2007; Wąsikiewicz-Firlej et al., 2022). More specifically, institutions such as the Polish Language Council (Rada Języka Polskiego, in Polish) control the standardization of the language and prescribe language use in an effort to do away with borrowing from other languages and to ensure high proficiency in Polish among all its speakers. As argued by Bańko (2023), linguistic purism has been a phenomenon of societal importance in Poland for five centuries. According to him, Poles consider their language "a value to be cherished and preserved" (Bańko, 2023, p. 16). As this study shows, such attitudes toward the national language influence Polish language education, especially in the foreign language classroom.

Rising immigration, particularly from non-European countries, has introduced new cultural dynamics that challenge traditional conceptions of Polish identity. This transformation holds significant implications domestically and for the global Polish diaspora (White, 2018; Garapich, 2016). By the end of 2023, Poland hosted approximately 32,600 EU citizens, and 402,800 third-country nationals (non-EU citizens), corresponding to about 1.2% of the population. While modest compared to the EU average, these numbers exclude a substantial population of Ukrainian refugees, estimated at 956,633 by the end of 2023. This influx represents more than a numerical shift—it reshapes educational needs and strategies as policymakers respond to social and linguistic integration demands. Forward projections suggest that, in order to maintain workforce sustainability, Poland will need nearly two million immigrant workers in the coming decade (ZUS, 2023). Such trends underscore the critical role

of language education in fostering integration, especially as residency and citizenship often require B1-level proficiency in Polish (defined as an intermediate language level by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)).

As Poland's demographic and cultural landscapes evolve, scholarly attention has shifted from language learners to the complexities of language teacher identities (LTIs). Since the late 1990s, research on LTI has expanded, initially exploring how "non-native" language teachers, particularly in EFL contexts, navigate professional identities (Pavlenko, 2003; Ilieva, 2010). Critical scholars like Pennycook (1994), Canagarajah (1999), and Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003) have since interrogated how capitalist and neoliberal ideologies affect language teaching, foregrounding issues of power and inequality (see also Giroux, 2014; Ball, 2012; Harvey, 2019; Becker, 2023). Further studies have examined how hierarchical structures within schools affect teachers' self-perception and authority (Brodie, 2021; Kilinç et al., 2016; Thomason et al., 2023; Becker, 2024). Varghese et al. (2005) noted the significant role of teachers' positionality in relation to their students and the broader educational context. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that language teachers' self-perceptions as professionals significantly influence their professional development (Kanno & Stuart, 2011), pedagogical decisions, classroom practices (Duff & Uchida, 1997), interactions with peers (Kayi-Aydar, 2015, 2019), and their access to power and ownership of the language they teach (Becker, 2024; De Costa & Norton, 2017).

Moreover, emotional labor, emotional experiences, stress, and burnout significantly influence the development and transformation of teacher identities, particularly for novice teachers facing institutional challenges (Aminifard et al., 2023; Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2022). Scholars like Kocabaş-Gedik and Ortaçtepe Hart (2021) and Song (2016) have examined how stress and burnout affect teachers' professional identities, emphasizing the need for institutional support. Pentón Herrera et al. (2022) advocate for integrating emotional well-being practices in teacher training programs to mitigate these challenges, while Dimitrieska (2022) underscores the value of collaborative reflection in professional identity development. All these complex factors influencing LTI and teaching practices increase teachers' responsibilities, either perceived or (self-)imposed.

In this qualitative case study, we examine Polish language teachers' lived experiences and perspectives, focusing on how they balance promoting the Polish language and national identity with the inclusive and multifaceted demands of multilingual education. This study was conducted at the Polonicum, which is the Center of Polish Language and Culture for Foreigners

at the University of Warsaw, where Polish is taught to linguistically and culturally diverse international students as well as other language schools serving migrants, refugees, and other adult learners. This institutional setting exemplifies the tensions that language teachers face between adhering to national linguistic traditions and accommodating multilingual classroom realities. We seek to identify the obstacles teachers face in these roles, analyzing the effects of these challenges on their professional identities, instructional approaches, and educational policy implementation. We do so by asking the following questions: 1) How do language teachers navigate their professional identities while balancing a prescribed focus on Polish and multilingual classroom realities? 2) What strategies do Polish language teachers employ to foster inclusion and linguistic and cultural integration in multilingual classrooms?

Addressing these questions will contribute to a better understanding of teachers' professional identities, new multilingual realities, self-perception, instructional methods, and, overall, their shifting responsibilities due to complex societal developments. By exploring the influence of global challenges such as "migration crises" and armed conflicts, this study aims to illuminate how these external forces shape teacher identity and the responsibilities attributed to the teaching profession.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Our study employs a broad poststructuralist framework, emphasizing identity as fluid, dynamic, and socially constructed (Baxter, 2016; Fawcett, 2012; Zembylas, 2003). We support the view that language teachers construct evolving and multiple identities as they develop over time (Becker, 2024; Afreen & Norton, 2022; Norton & De Costa, 2019). Within this overarching framework, we integrate three complementary theoretical perspectives, which further elaborate the processes shaping teacher identities to deepen our understanding of language teachers' professional experiences. Bakhtin's dialogic framework helps us examine how teachers negotiate the inherent tension between authoritative institutional discourses and the diverse, multilingual realities of classroom practice.

Wenger's Communities of Practice (CoP) perspective sheds light on how teachers collectively construct and continually adapt their professional identities through social engagement within their professional networks. Lastly, Freire's critical pedagogy highlights teachers' active efforts to challenge inequalities and implement inclusive, socially responsive educational practices. Combining these perspectives allows us to more precisely analyze how

Polish language teachers interpret and enact their professional responsibilities in classrooms characterized by linguistic diversity and broader sociocultural complexities.

Navigating Multilingualism and Identity in Polish Language Education: A Bakhtinian Perspective

Bakhtin's (1981) conceptualization of language emphasizes identity's dynamic, dialogic nature, which is continuously shaped through linguistic interactions. Central to this understanding of identity and the self is heteroglossia or multi-voicedness, a concept showcasing multiple diverse voices from different social, cultural, and ideological backgrounds within and among ourselves (Bakhtin, 1981). These voices are fundamental to communication as they interact and shape meaning through a blend of perspectives. In studies by Ilieva (2010) and Menard-Warwick (2011), heteroglossia has been used to examine how "non-native" English-speaking teachers construct their identities, revealing the relevance of this approach beyond English teaching. For Polish language teachers, these challenges of integrating diverse linguistic, cultural, and professional voices into teaching are even more pronounced. As teachers of the national language, they must navigate authoritative discourses that emphasize the Polish language as a symbol of national identity while accommodating the internally persuasive discourses of multilingualism in the classroom.

Bakhtin's concept of "ideological becoming" (1981) adds depth to this understanding, illustrating how teachers continually assimilate, reshape, and internalize their professional identities through interactions. This ideological negotiation is crucial in understanding how Polish language teachers reconcile their professional roles with personal beliefs and external expectations. Such integration becomes increasingly vital as Poland's growing cultural and linguistic diversity creates educational spaces where multiple linguistic and cultural narratives coexist. This Bakhtinian framework directly informs our analysis by examining how teachers embody and adapt to these complex roles within their classrooms (and beyond).

Communities of Practice: Collaborative Identity Formation Among Polish Language Teachers

Etienne Wenger's concept of "Communities of Practice (CoP)" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) offers a complementary foundational perspective on the dynamics of identity formation and professional development among Polish language teachers. Grounded in social theory and situated learning, the concept of CoP emphasizes that identity is largely constructed

through social interactions within professional communities. For language teachers, these communities allow for the exchange of insights, strategies, and experiences, all essential to shaping pedagogical approaches and integrating diverse linguistic narratives into curricula.

CoPs, or "identities-in-practice," as developed by Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger et al., 2002), embody professional identities that are not merely acquired but actively constructed through participation in communal practices. Lave (1996) highlights that learning is not simply knowledge acquisition; it involves becoming a member of a community, incorporating its values, and shaping one's identity through collective engagement. This dynamic identity formation process is influenced by teachers' roles, activities, and relationships within their professional communities (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Singh & Richards, 2006; Tsui, 2007). Singh and Richards (2006, p. 158) emphasize that "becoming a member of a new community of practice is not just about learning new content but also about acquiring new practices, values, and ways of thinking that enable particular identities to be realized." Similarly, Lantolf and Johnson (2007, p. 885) affirm that teachers "enact socially situated identities while engaging in socially situated activity." For Polish language teachers, this perspective reveals how their professional identities are influenced not only through formal education but also through their teaching practices, peer interactions, and active participation in professional communities.

Critical Pedagogy and Multicultural Competence in Polish Education: A Freirean Approach

Paulo Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy provides a suitable conceptual framework for examining power dynamics, marginalization, and social justice in Polish language education. Freire's transformative approach to education empowers teachers as active agents in shaping sociocultural environments, challenging them to address inequalities and encourage inclusive practices (Golombek & Jordan, 2005). Freire's emphasis on empowering teachers highlights their role not simply as knowledge transmitters but as agents of change who address the social inequalities that can arise in diverse classrooms. This perspective reinforces the idea that language teachers can foster inclusive practices that validate all students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Yazan & Rudolf, 2018; Tao & Gao, 2017).

By challenging established power structures within educational settings, Freirean pedagogy aims to create more equitable learning environments. This approach underscores the view of language education as a critical platform for social transformation, emphasizing that language teaching should extend beyond linguistic skills to promote inclusivity. Integrating

Freire's framework into this study allows us to explore how Polish language teachers develop pedagogical strategies that are both linguistically effective and socially conscious, contributing to the broader goals of social equity and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on the lived experiences of Polish language teachers. Adopting a critical ethnographic sociolinguistic approach (Heller et al., 2017), it explores how teachers navigate their dual roles: promoting Polish national identity through language teaching and adapting to the multilingual realities of their classrooms. The qualitative design enables an in-depth understanding of how teachers construct and reshape their professional identities within these complex sociocultural environments.

We draw from two primary sources of data: (a) classroom observations of Polish language classes for university students and (b) five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Polish language teachers. Participation was voluntary with informed verbal or written consent, as well as the university's permission to conduct classroom observation obtained before data collection. All classroom observations were conducted at Polonicum, the Center of Polish Language and Culture for Foreigners (Polonicum, 2024), affiliated with the University of Warsaw (UW), specializing in teaching Polish as a foreign language to students, faculty, and staff. The classes at Polonicum serve students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, providing a rich setting for examining how national identity is embedded in the language curriculum and how classroom practices implement policies and beliefs. To further gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Polish language teachers in this multilingual context, interviews were conducted with instructors from Polonicum as well as from other language schools. These additional schools similarly cater to adult foreign learners, broadening the study's scope by including perspectives from teachers across diverse institutional settings.

Participants

The participants who responded to our interview request were five teachers of Polish as a foreign language, with four identifying as female and one as male. Three teachers were between 30–39 years old, while two were 40 and above. All participants were Polish nationals with advanced degrees, for instance, in Polish Philology. Four out of five held a

Bachelor's degree in Polish Philology, and three completed additional academic training, including Master's degrees and a postgraduate specialization in language pedagogy. Two teachers further diversified their expertise by pursuing studies in fields such as library science, preschool education, early childhood education, and specialized translation.

On average, these educators bring around 12 years of professional experience in teaching Polish as a foreign language, highlighting their depth of experience. Most have between 10–15 years of teaching experience, indicating sustained engagement in the field, while one teacher has a slightly shorter tenure (5–10 years), and another has over 15 years of experience. The group's multilingual proficiency is a notable asset, enriching their ability to communicate across cultures. All teachers are proficient in English, which is essential in multilingual teaching contexts. Additionally, two instructors speak Italian, two have a basic command of Russian, and individual teachers are proficient in French and German. This linguistic diversity enhances their ability to support students from various cultural backgrounds, contributing to a culturally inclusive classroom environment.

The two teachers whose classrooms we observed were both female and between 35 and 45 years old. They also hold advanced degrees, ranging from a Master's degree to a doctorate. They have both taught Polish as a foreign language for many years and can integrate (certain references to) English, German, French, Italian, and Russian into their classrooms. All participants were fully informed about the research purpose and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed written or verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection

Classroom observations were conducted at the University of Warsaw's Polonicum twice a week in December 2023 based on an observation guide (see Appendix) established through relevant literature beforehand. Questions included, for instance, which languages were used, whether a visible hierarchy existed, how languages were valued and integrated into teaching, which language practices were allowed, if teachers used sheltered instruction strategies, or whether students were excluded due to their linguistic repertoire. We took notes by hand and then copied them into Microsoft Word to store electronically for analysis. After class, we had lengthy conversations with the teachers about their perspectives on teaching, students, and the institutional setting. The classes focused on Polish as a foreign language at the beginner level, with 12 students (eight female and three male) in Class A and 19 students (11 female and

eight male) in Class B. Students in Class A came from diverse countries, including Ukraine, Germany, Australia, France, Brazil, Italy, Belgium, and Latvia. In Class B, students came from Azerbaijan, Turkey, South Korea, China, Belarus, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, France, and Italy. According to the teachers, all students were international students and typically stayed at UW for one to two semesters. Most of them participated in the Erasmus exchange program.[1]

In addition to our classroom observations, we conducted five semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perceptions of their professional identities and pedagogical approaches as they balance national identity promotion with multilingual education. Conducted online via Zoom between July and October of 2024 in Polish, the interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. Questions encouraged teachers to reflect on their experiences, challenges, and evolving professional identities. We asked, for instance, how teachers handled linguistic and cultural barriers with students from different backgrounds, how they understood multilingual education and how they implemented it in their teaching, or what challenges they encountered in their teaching (see Appendix for the complete Interview Guide). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for dissemination.

Ideally, we would have been able to observe all interviewed teachers' language classrooms to triangulate the data. Permission to conduct ethnographic data collection through classroom observation was, however, only obtained at Polonicum. Expanding our data collection through interviews with language instructors from other institutions bears the risk that we cannot assess whether teachers' beliefs expressed verbally match their teaching practices. Yet, including more teacher interviews provides a better understanding of current societal challenges and gives those individuals a voice who work at the frontline of social transformation through immigration and the internationalization of higher education.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed within a post-structuralist meta-framework that connects Bakhtin, Wenger, and Freire's perspectives, highlighting the fluid, socially constructed nature of teacher identity. This approach underscores that identity evolution is a dynamic process shaped by teachers' participation in professional communities and their interactions with students rather than a mere response to external challenges like political crises, technological

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[1] The Erasmus exchange program, or Erasmus+, is the European Union's primary mobility program and offers support in education, training, youth, and sport in Europe (European Commission, 2025).

shifts, or the demands of multilingualism. The classroom observation data were first analyzed using linguistic ethnographic analysis of classroom dialogue (Lefstein & Snell, 2019). This approach examines linguistic practices in concert with an ethnographic interpretation of cultural practices and is particularly suited to reveal information about participants' identities. We analyzed our field notes, identified categories, and themes, and matched those to our observation guide.

For the interview data, we conducted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2021), combining inductive and deductive approaches in an iterative manner to ensure a comprehensive and reflexive interpretation of the dataset. Initially, we closely engaged with the data through repeated reading, familiarizing ourselves with teachers' narratives and annotating preliminary insights, including those that did not neatly correspond with established theoretical constructs. Subsequently, descriptive labels were applied systematically to meaningful segments of the transcripts, resulting in initial codes such as "teacher autonomy," "cultural adaptation," "professional identity," and "multilingual strategies." These codes were then clustered into broader, meaningful themes, including "Teaching Philosophy and Professional Identity," "Cultural Integration in Language Teaching," "Adaptation to Multicultural and Linguistic Diversity," and "Student-Centered and Practical Communication Approach."

In the subsequent deductive phase, we explicitly aligned the inductively derived themes with our theoretical framework, drawing upon Bakhtin's dialogic perspective, Wenger's CoP, and Freire's critical pedagogy. This abductive approach (Patton, 2015) allowed us to systematically connect participants' lived experiences with broader theoretical insights, enriching existing conceptual understandings. Throughout this process, ongoing reflexive discussions within our research team ensured analytical rigor and credibility. Ultimately, this dual inductive-deductive strategy provided a robust exploration of how Polish language teachers conceptualize their professional roles, adapt pedagogically, and negotiate identities amid the evolving demands of multilingual educational contexts.

FINDINGS

This section combines the findings from our linguistic ethnographic analysis of classroom observations with our Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of the five interview transcripts with Polish language teachers working in multicultural and crisis-affected contexts. To ensure

confidentiality while allowing for clear attribution of individual perspectives, we refer to the participants as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 (interviews), and R6 and R7 (classroom observation).

Our analysis has shown that some of our participants view their profession as a calling but also feel underappreciated, particularly given their multifaceted responsibilities in accommodating migrant and refugee students beyond language instruction without much institutional guidance. Instinctively, they prioritize practical communication skills over advanced grammatical exercises to help students navigate real-life situations with the local population. They do so while managing the complexities of multilingual, multicultural classrooms with varying proficiency levels and ongoing socio-political tensions due to armed conflicts across Europe. Despite institutional expectations in favor of a Polish-only policy, teachers incorporate multilingual strategies, using English as a *lingua franca* and allowing translanguaging to facilitate comprehension. Cultural immersion is central to their teaching, and they integrate Polish traditions, geography, and social norms to help students become familiar with their new country context. While some teachers engage in professional development and explore AI tools in their teaching, they emphasize that human connection remains essential in language education. Ultimately, they balance promoting Polish national identity with fostering inclusion in an increasingly diverse educational landscape.

Bridging Language Instruction and Well-Being: Supporting all Students

Teachers' intrinsic connection to their work is reflected in their teaching philosophy and professional identity. The participants viewed teaching as both a vocation and a core aspect of their overall identity. R1, for instance, referred to teaching as "a calling," a philosophy she perceives as "fundamental," shaped and reinforced by her interactions with students over time. R3 further noted that, while she believes that teaching is "the most important profession in the world," it is "not appreciated here [in Poland]." This lack of societal recognition influenced how teachers perceived their role, instilling a commitment to professionalism that transcends mere duty. What is more, teachers were concerned for their students' overall well-being, particularly for those adjusting to Polish society as refugees and migrants. This feeling of responsibility has become particularly strong since Russia's attack on Ukraine and many new students filling Polish as a foreign language classrooms as a consequence. Given that they often only have limited time to cover many topics in language education, teachers prioritized essential communication skills, such as healthcare needs. The participants realized that hands-on learning was demanded most as their migrant students had to be prepared to

deal with real-life situations in Polish society. R4 further stressed the importance of "ensuring that a foreigner feels safe in Poland… they know how to explain what hurts." Similarly, R1 emphasized the emotional weight of teaching students "forced by political situations," aiming to help them "feel as comfortable as possible." That said, despite their understanding and willingness to help make students feel safe, teachers were neither properly prepared to do so nor should the language classroom be the sole place to receive emotional and mental support.

In their classroom practices, Polish language teachers emphasized a student-centered approach that prioritizes practical language skills for real-life situations. Teachers created a supportive environment where students are encouraged to communicate, even if they make mistakes. R5, for instance, stated, "I'm not a 'grammar Nazi.' I don't reprimand them for every mistake… The most important thing is to be communicative and to try to speak despite their mistakes." R3 similarly focused on helping students "feel confident in the language" for everyday interactions. This emphasis on real-world communication over theoretical accuracy demonstrates teachers' dedication to making language learning accessible and relevant.

At the same time, teachers encounter logistical and interpersonal challenges when managing diverse classrooms. With students at varying proficiency levels, teachers often balanced multiple resources. R4 explained, "With mixed-level groups… teaching can be complicated, as I often need to use several books to create a full lesson." Additionally, socio-political dynamics affect classroom interactions, especially when students from conflicting regions (e.g., Russia and Ukraine) sometimes refuse to work together. As our accounts show, teachers adapted their methods to navigate these complexities, managing both educational and interpersonal dynamics. In fact, our participants demonstrated a commitment to professional growth by seeking workshops and modernized resources. R4 valued workshops on "teaching strategies" from the Polish Language Institute, while R3 emphasized the need for more "methodological courses." By participating in ongoing professional development, teachers adapt to the changing educational landscape and integrate culturally responsive practices into their pedagogy.

Finally, R2 reported appreciating AI training for its classroom applicability, highlighting openness to digital resource adaptation. Yet, despite advancements in technology, the respondents emphasized the irreplaceable role of human connection in language learning. For instance, R5 noted that "language is about real communication and connecting with another person… you probably can't get that with a machine." R4 acknowledged AI's role but believes that "teachers will always be necessary" for cultural

understanding. This perspective reveals teachers' belief in the enduring value of human interaction.

Negotiating Identity: How Teachers Balance Cultural Heritage with Global Perspectives

During our classroom observation, we witnessed a very rich linguistic and cultural diversity among the international students. Their first languages included Ukrainian, German, English, French, Portuguese, Latvian, Azerbaijani, Turkish, Korean, Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese, Kazakh, and Italian. English, the common lingua franca among all participants, was used frequently in both classes. At the beginning of the classes in Class A, R7 asked, "Are you ready?" in both English and Polish. She also regularly asked for translations from Polish into English to ensure that students understood (new) words in Polish. Students seemed comfortable using both Polish and English and mixed languages to use their resources. For instance, one student said, "It's not dobrze" ('It's not good').

When students talked to each other during exercises, they often did so in English, indicating that teachers generally welcome other languages and do not impose a Polish-only language policy, for instance. R7 offered English translations as well, either introducing a new word or helping some students remember recently covered vocabulary. R7 also used entire phrases in English, switching back and forth between Polish and English, to accommodate all her learners and the different language levels. For instance, to help a student complete a speaking exercise, she translated the question she had asked all students in Polish ("What would you like to order?") into English. The student could, therefore, participate in the activity and respond using words with which they were familiar. Interestingly, R7 also relied on English to make jokes, which facilitated rapport and enhanced classroom engagement.

In Class A, students often asked questions in English to which R6 responded in Polish. When students needed further explanation or help, R6 first explained in Polish and then switched to English to ensure they understood. She was very accommodating and aware of her students' needs. For instance, she said, "If you need me because you skipped two lessons, tell me." Generally, she also used other semiotic features and body language to illustrate contexts and scenarios in which the missing words would be used to stimulate learning without relying on translations. Furthermore, when explaining grammatical features in Polish, R6 referred to German and English structures for comparison.

Our analysis further revealed the Polish language teachers' commitment to embedding cultural understanding within language instruction, emphasizing that language and culture are inseparable. For instance, the teachers at the Polonicum integrated cultural references and artifacts into their teaching. Even the classrooms themselves act as transmitters of cultural knowledge. For instance, they have a map of Poland on the wall for students to familiarize themselves with the geographical situation. Additionally, there were photos of famous Polish individuals (e.g., writers, Nobel prize winners, etc.) on the wall for students to learn about. An important cultural reference made in class was Polish food in comparison to students' cultural backgrounds. For instance, students shared their accounts of grocery shopping. They talked about differences and asked the teacher for advice in finding similar products with which they were familiar (e.g., the equivalent of fig-flavored yogurt, which is not commonly sold in Polish stores; contrasting cultural norms around serving beer warm or cold; or cucumber soup as a Polish specialty). Finally, on December 6, students (and visitors) were given a piece of chocolate to honor the Polish tradition of Mikołajki ("Santa Claus Day"). R7 explained the tradition using both Polish and English to ensure students understood the cultural meaning behind it.

R4 described her "mission" as helping students "discover as many areas of Polish culture as possible," encompassing elements such as history, literature, and traditions. R2 echoed this approach, stating that a primary goal was to "make the course participant a fan of Polish culture." These educators seemed to embody an integrative approach, combining language instruction with cultural awareness to foster a deeper connection to Polish society. Our analysis also showed that teachers were very sensitive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their students. In mixed groups, English often served as a lingua franca; R5, for example, admitted to using it "to explain certain grammar points" more effectively, facilitating comprehension for diverse learners. R2 similarly reported that students from Asia often required additional support, and he sometimes directed them to lower groups to ensure effective learning. This adaptability highlights teachers' commitment to inclusivity, aiming to make language accessible for all students.

DISCUSSION

Our findings have shown that teachers incorporate Polish cultural elements into their instruction while remaining attentive to their students' diverse linguistic backgrounds, indicating awareness of their perceived primary responsibility as Polish language teachers.

By blending Polish cultural insights into language instruction, these teachers foster a deeper connection with Polish identity and culture among students. Thus, our participants fulfill what Byram and Wagner (2018) have called "a special responsibility." They posit that "the development of students' (multilingual and multicultural) identities is a crucial matter in which language educators have a special responsibility" (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 8). The teachers in this study embrace the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity and ensure that their teaching is reflective thereof. Thus, Bakhtin's heteroglossia is manifest in the teachers' effort to bring multiple voices into the classroom, not only when introducing students to the Polish language but also when embedding it within a broader cultural dialogue that resonates with a diverse audience.

Additionally, teachers showed a strong commitment to their cultural roots while simultaneously adapting their teaching styles to their students' needs. For example, teachers emphasize inclusivity and respect for individual narratives, allowing students to explore and develop their understanding of Polish culture within a supportive environment. Teachers' responses further indicated a willingness to shift from more traditional, national narratives toward a broader, internally persuasive discourse that values students' unique cultural contributions. This openness to incorporating multiple linguistic perspectives demonstrates the practical application of heteroglossia in fostering inclusivity within the classroom. Further, it also shows their shifting perceived responsibility of being a teacher for all, inclusive of all linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

At the same time, the dominance of Polish remains visible and uncontested. Teachers seem to feel a certain pressure–an institutionally imposed responsibility–to provide students with as much input in Polish and about Polish culture as possible since the prevailing view is that the language class is supposed to teach exactly this language and this language only. As Bakhtin described it,

> A common unitary language is a system, of linguistic norms…they are…the generative forces of linguistic life…, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language, or else defending an already formed language from the pressure of growing heteroglossia. (pp. 270-271)

Polish is the primary language of communication, inside and outside of the classroom, and the importance of learning is made clear. It is the "already formed language" that is being influenced by growing social diversity and the accompanying multi-voicedness. Polish is the

"stable linguistic nucleus" that represents unity, access, and belonging while transmitting cultural know-how as well as local norms.

Wenger's CoP framework emphasizes that identity formation is a social process developed and reinforced through community interactions. Teachers engage in professional communities where they can share strategies, confront challenges, and refine their teaching practices, which allows them to build a shared understanding of professional roles, supporting an adaptable, resilient identity responsive to diverse classroom settings. In our study, teachers continuously adapted their practices through community support and interacted with peers to find solutions to complex classroom dynamics, from managing mixed-level groups to addressing socio-political tensions between students from diverse backgrounds. For instance, when faced with language barriers or socio-political issues between students (that is, those from conflicting regions like Russia and Ukraine), teachers relied on insights from their professional community to navigate these dynamics, reinforcing Wenger's idea of identity and expertise shaped within a community of practice. The reliance on peer support for addressing logistical and pedagogical challenges emphasizes how CoP fosters resilience and adaptability in complex educational environments. It further indicates that teachers adapt to their environment and continue reassessing their professional responsibilities.

At the same time, as we argue here, teachers should not be overburdened or take on other professional roles such as psychologists, counselors, or else, which may be crucially needed when teaching migrant students. A successful CoP would therefore provide the necessary resources and decentralize the responsibility so that many different experts can share their work and feel less pressured. In order for CoPs to become institutionalized and legitimized within the education system, the current rather narrow understanding of teaching and learning has to be reconsidered and expanded. Classrooms should not be closed to the outside but open to other professionals where they can co-construct learning together with students and teachers. Bennouna et al. (2019), in their review of school-based programs for supporting the mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent forced migrants, found that trusting, collaborative partnerships with schools, communities, and students (similar to our proposed CoPs) can be beneficial for all stakeholders. They also attest to an increasing demand for such support programs since the influx of immigrants fleeing armed conflict and persecution is on the rise worldwide. Even for international students who were not forced to leave their country, support infrastructure in academic contexts is often lacking once they arrive, which can also lead to poor mental health and anxiety (Becker & Zakharova, 2025).

The same holds true for teachers who may face their own mental health challenges, striving to support vulnerable students with many diverse needs, navigating pressures from administrators and policymakers, and having to confront societal issues firsthand as they deliver often-mandatory language classes to newly arrived individuals. Drawing on Freire's Critical Pedagogy, this implies that it is time to re-humanize education. Both students and teachers are at the center of it as they are not only part of the education system to provide and receive knowledge; rather, they are humans co-constructing learning together. Freire's Critical Pedagogy further advocates for education as a means of addressing social inequalities and promoting inclusivity. Similar to other studies (e.g., Roffey, 2015; Graham et al., 2011), teachers in our study positioned themselves as advocates for student well-being, prioritizing safety, empathy, and emotional support—especially for students adjusting to life in Poland. Through Freire's lens, this approach positions teachers as facilitators who prioritize individual empowerment and recognize students' rights to linguistic and social integration.

In addition, the student-centered and practical communication approach adopted by many of the teachers in this study further embodies Freirean pedagogy by promoting practical, accessible language use that fosters student autonomy (see also Viesca et al., 2021). Teachers create inclusive learning environments by prioritizing communication skills essential for navigating everyday life, from healthcare to routine interactions in bi- or multilingual ways. By doing so, they increase students' agency since they can draw from existing resources of their linguistic repertoire while learning (about) the local language and culture (see also Chang-Bacon & Colomer, 2021). Thus, Freire's principles of empowering marginalized groups are evident as teachers strive to build students' confidence in using the Polish language for practical purposes. By focusing on students' lived experiences, teachers support an empowering educational experience, fostering a strong sense of agency and belonging. As put forth by Nix et al. (2022, p. 64), "a student's sense of belonging at school has been found to enhance resilience, engagement, and motivation; and students with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to have a strong sense of self-belief and self-efficacy," which can be important features and skills to have when navigating a foreign context with often limited resources. The teachers' empathy and understanding for their students, other (perceived and self-imposed) responsibilities, help accommodate students and provide a sense of belonging through the learning of the local language and culture. It is important to note, however, that emotional and psychological support infrastructure is also needed for teachers. Thus, we advocate for an institutionalized offer serving all, reducing the (perceived) responsibility for teachers and

tasking institutions and policymakers with providing safe spaces that focus on students' and teachers' holistic well-being and learning.

Finally, the analysis above provides a multi-layered view of how Polish language teachers address complex pedagogical, cultural, and societal demands in their classrooms. The study's findings, based on the interview and classroom observation data presented, reveal a shared commitment among teachers to adapt, innovate, and advocate for inclusive language education that respects students' linguistic diversity while reinforcing Polish cultural identity. The data showed the increasingly multifaceted realities of teachers as both cultural ambassadors and agents of social equity, and they offer critical insights into their professional identities and practices. Just like the outside world and the influences stemming from an ever-changing, dynamic, unstable geopolitical environment, teachers' responsibilities and identities are always becoming and never static. This leaves teachers at the frontline of tackling complex, real-life issues while institutionally expected to transmit linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Given the interconnectedness of language, culture, and society, especially in the Polish as a foreign language classroom, their teaching practices can never be neutral or free of ideological influences. Similar findings were reported by Gębal (2017), who advocates for better teacher training and institutionalized mechanisms to address the additional educational needs and often problematic ideological beliefs. Our study supports this call for action and further recommends ongoing training modules to adjust to the increasingly complex reality of the "new world," characterized by rapid geopolitical instability, technological advances, social polarization, and climate change, among others, which often directly impact teaching practices in the language classroom.

CONCLUSION

The changing dynamics of Polish as a foreign language education reveal a complex balancing act between promoting national identity and embracing the new multilingual realities of today's classrooms and the increasing (perceived) responsibility language teachers are taking on. Teachers in this study demonstrate a strong commitment to integrating Polish culture into their classrooms while adapting (personally, professionally, pedagogically) to the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of their students. Through inclusive, student-centered practices and the prioritization of practical communication (e.g., medical needs), the participating teachers were able to bridge the gap between tradition and internationalization. Our findings highlight that teaching practices in typically monolingual and monocultural contexts are

inherently ideological, shaped by historical, cultural, and societal factors that are sometimes invisible and often remain obfuscated and, therefore, unquestioned. Drawing on Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Wenger's Communities of Practice, and Freirean critical pedagogy for our analysis has helped unravel how teachers navigate their roles and responsibilities as cultural ambassadors and agents of social equity. These theoretical perspectives reflect the fluidity of teacher identities and the necessity of professional development and adjustment to address the challenges of diverse classrooms and multifaceted, complex issues in today's societies.

Ultimately, the study advocates for improved institutional support mechanisms, ongoing professional development, and interdisciplinary collaboration in the form of international, hybrid CoPs (Becker & Zakharova, 2025) to address the changing needs of teachers and students alike. As global migration and sociopolitical shifts continue to reshape the educational landscape, Polish language teaching must evolve to uphold its dual mission: preserving linguistic and cultural heritage while fostering inclusion and diversity in an interconnected world. We argue that, in order to enhance the teaching of Polish as a foreign language, teachers should employ multilingual strategies and foster cultural immersion in their classrooms. Translanguaging practices, allowing students to draw on their entire linguistic repertoires, in which some of the study's participants already engage, can deepen understanding, while the use of English not only ensures comprehension but also legitimizes multiple languages in the Polish language classroom. Teachers should further aim at incorporating cultural artifacts, using visual methodologies or linguistic landscaping activities onsite to initiate interactive discussions and foster intercultural understanding. Teacher training for novice teachers and on-the-job training opportunities for in-service teachers should necessarily include modules in multilingual education, emotional intelligence, and digital tools that are vital for teachers to adapt to a rapidly changing society and promote true inclusion.

Finally, institutions must expand support mechanisms to include mental health counselors and cultural mediators to assist students, particularly migrant students, in adapting to Polish society in the broadest sense of the term. Policymakers and curriculum designers should create appropriate policies and materials. Through a blend of innovative teaching strategies, supportive institutional frameworks and infrastructure, and meaningful intercultural engagement, Polish language education can evolve into a dynamic force that not only preserves heritage but also builds bridges across linguistic and cultural divides in an interconnected world.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide for Polish Language Teachers

Demographic Information

- Preferred pseudonym
- Gender
- Age group (20-29; 30-39; 40-49; 50-59; 60+)
- Nationality
- Education background
- Teaching experience
- Language skills

Interview Guide

1) What is your teaching philosophy?

2) What is your mission as a Polish language teacher? How do you define this for yourself and what is the institution's perspective on this?

3) What is most important to you in your teaching?

4) What are challenges in your teaching?

5) How do you handle linguistic and cultural barriers with students from many different backgrounds?

6) How do you understand multilingual education and how do you implement this in your teaching?

7) How multilingual can Polish as a foreign language class be in order to be efficient and meaningful for language learning?

8) What are the challenges that still exist from the COVID-19 pandemic? How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your teaching?

9) What are other challenges that impact your teaching? What are you and/or your students worried about?

10) What responsibilities do you think you have other than instructing speaking, writing, listening, and reading in Polish?

11) How do you bring your personal interests and identity into the classroom?

12) Do you participate in training and professional development opportunities? Are these offered/incentivized by the institution? What are the areas that you might want to learn more about?

13) How do you incorporate research into your teaching?

14) How do you receive feedback and how does it affect your professional identity as a teacher?

15) In your view, what is the future of language learning? In general and at your institution specifically. What do teachers need to do to be prepared for it?

16) How are your learners shaping the university and Polish society?

17) What does Polonicum mean to you? What does it stand for in your view?

Classroom Observation Guide

1) Which language(s) is/are used?

2) Where/in which context is it/are they used? How is it/are they used?

3) Is there a dominant/non-dominant language? Which one(s)?

4) Appreciation/devaluation of certain languages/attribution of prestige – how?

5) Who is allowed to talk when, how, to whom in what language? (turn taking)

6) Which language practices are allowed/not allowed? How is this encouraged/punished? How is "wrong language" corrected?

7) Do teachers and/or students use translanguaging techniques to communicate or are languages used separately?

8) Do teachers explicitly or implicitly refer to and/or integrate students' linguistic repertoire (other L1s than language of instruction)?

9) Do teachers use sheltered instruction strategies/scaffolding (verbal and/or non-verbal) to support students with a different L1?

10) What is the instructional language context? (mono-, bi-, multilingual)

11) Is the concept of linguistic insecurity present in the classroom? How is it visible?

12) Are students excluded due to their linguistic repertoire?