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## **New School, the Same Old Rut? Action Research of Unsuccessful First-year Students in a High School**

### **Abstract**

Action research is one of the tools that a reflective teacher may use in order to solve specific problems they encounter in their daily teaching practice. The article describes action research carried out in a high school to investigate some of the reasons behind the poor performance of some first-year students. It has been observed that students' lack of success during the first semester corresponds directly to their low results in the end-of-middle school exam, despite the fact that they were allocated to groups on the basis of a placement test. In a questionnaire survey, students reflected upon their motivation, attitude, classroom anxiety, and assessed their performance against other group members. This article offers an analysis of the questionnaire results and attempts at presenting certain ways in which teachers could help students who did not manage to wipe the slate clean avoid some learning barriers.

*Keywords:* action research, unsuccessful students, motivation, attitude, classroom anxiety

### **Introduction**

Professional development is an inherent part of the teacher's job. It is expected by the authorities that teachers who want to climb the career ladder take part in various methodological conferences, complete postgraduate studies, participate in IT courses, etc. This demand certainly makes Polish teachers a professional group for which life-long learning is not just a slogan. But does this mean that teachers' motivation for professional development is solely extrinsic? Perhaps the busy teacher has no time left for critical reflection on their everyday teaching practice, reflection other than "talking shop" with their colleagues, which is often reduced to complaining about the youth of today?

According to Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009), although reflection is an indispensable element of teacher inquiry, there is a difference between the two. Reflection is coincidental, whereas inquiry is a planned and intentional activity, the results of which are more visible. But is it realistic to expect a school teacher to conduct such classroom inquiry, whose objective is to increase teaching effectiveness, to solve problems teachers face in the classroom and to gain a better understanding of the learners?

Being a practising teacher rather than a researcher, as apart from teaching at the University of Silesia I am also a middle school and high school teacher, I decided to carry out action research, since it overlaps the areas of professional development and conventional research, and for some practising teachers may well form a bridge between the two (Wallace, 1998). Such teachers, however, need to bear in mind some criticisms of practitioner research, for instance insufficient evidence, lack of appropriate methodology or a personal attitude (Cochran-Smyth & Lytle, 2009). Another important point is the issue of ethics. Study participants must give their “voluntary informed consent”: they must be informed about the purpose of the research, its tools, and how the findings will be made public (Baumfield, Hall, & Wall, 2013).

This article aims at describing and presenting the results of action research conducted in one of the high schools in Upper Silesia, Poland. The purpose of the research was to investigate possible differences in motivation, attitude, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with the English lessons among two groups of students: freshmen whose semester grades were low, and those who did well and very well during the first semester. The analysis of those differences should enable the teacher to help the weaker students improve their performance.

The first part of the paper briefly describes action research and highlights its importance for teacher development. The next one presents a problem that English teachers encounter at the school in question, which is significant level discrepancies among members of the same language group, reflected in their semester grades. It also discusses a questionnaire survey conducted among first-year students. The aim of the survey was to establish the relationship between learners’ performance and their motivation, attitude, anxiety, and the level of satisfaction with English classes. The question is whether students’ lack of success corresponds to their low motivation and a negative or lackadaisical attitude towards the English language. Next, the results of the questionnaire are presented and discussed. Finally, the article deals with measures that might be taken by the teacher to help freshmen whose performance is poor.

## Action Research

Action research is one of the tools that a reflective teacher has at their disposal. It is part of the reflective cycle suggested by Wallace (1998). The cycle, which is a kind of structured reflection, encompasses problems, asking questions, collecting and analysing data, and finally application of the conclusions to teaching practice. Although it would be unrealistic to expect teachers to have enough time and motivation to reflect upon their performance after every lesson, critical analysis and openness to change are indispensable to maintain a positive attitude towards teaching and to avoid boring routine. Teacher autonomy is necessary to introduce any change into the classroom. Only an autonomous teacher may be perceived as a good manager who feels responsible for making decisions that contribute to overcoming difficulties in the teaching/learning process, which leads to better performance and better results. Such a good manager is by no means an authoritarian manager, on the contrary: they are willing to share the decision-making process with the learners. Both parties should be engaged, at least to a certain extent, in finding solutions to classroom problems. Action research should facilitate the process, as it is precisely action research that is problem focused in its approach and very practical in its intended outcomes (Wallace, 1998). It is so because “action research is conducted by or in cooperation with teachers for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of their educational environment and improving the effectiveness of their teaching” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 191). It also “brings change into a classroom which ideally results in the elimination or at least progressive minimising of the diagnosed problems” (Gabryś-Barker, 2011, p. 14).

## The Problem

According to the ranking of schools published every year by *Perspektywy*, a Polish opinion magazine, in 2017 the school was not ranked among the best 500 high schools in Poland. There are quite a few difficulties that teachers have to cope with on everyday basis. In this paper I would like to outline one of the specific problems encountered by the teachers of English in that school. Every year, freshmen, for whom learning English is compulsory, are allocated to language groups on the basis of a placement test. This is the sole criterion. There is a certain limitation, namely it is not a cross-class division, but students of one class are divided into two groups. In the course of the first semester it was noticed that in every group there were students whose

level was significantly lower, students who had problems with basic structures, which was later reflected in their semester grades, being either 2 (E) or 1 (F), the lowest grades in the Polish grading scale. The first logical conclusion was that the placement test had not fulfilled its role. Consequently, the following year another placement test was used. This time it was a test offered by the publisher whose course books are used during English lessons. Unfortunately, this remedy turned out to be ineffective and the next school year showed the same level discrepancies. Apparently, the problem does not lie solely with the placement test. Perhaps there are some other aspects that the teachers must take into account before they divide freshmen into language groups. Apart from that, there might be other reasons for learners' poor performance, such as lack of motivation or a negative attitude towards English. Should this be the case, the teacher ought to focus on enhancing their motivation and improving attitude.

### **End-of-middle School Examination**

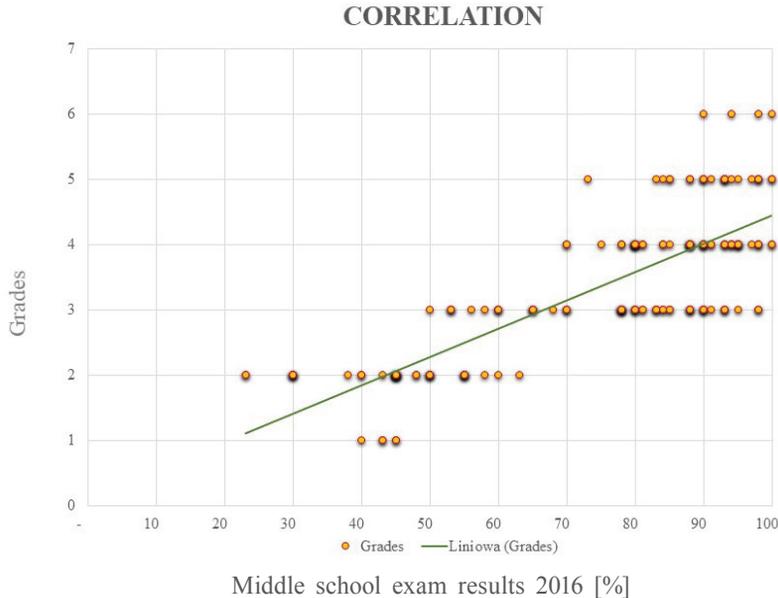
During some paperwork I made another important observation. It was connected with students' exam results. In the Polish education system, secondary education has two levels: the 3-year middle school / lower-secondary school (gimnazjum), which is compulsory for pupils aged 13–16, and several kinds of upper-secondary schools. One of them is the 3-year general high school / upper-secondary school (liceum ogólnokształcące), at the end of which students take a national external matriculation exam (Matura). Educational reform, which is being implemented since 2017, has changed the country's education system, removing middle schools and re-introducing an eight-year primary school and a four-year high school.

For the time being, every Polish middle school graduate sits a compulsory national foreign language end-of-school examination. There are two levels of the exam: basic and extended. In most cases the foreign language is English. In 2016 as many as 296,797 pupils took the basic English exam, whereas 48,323 pupils chose a different language. The national results for the basic level in 2016 were as follows: the mean result for a town with a population of between 20–100 thousand citizens (the population of the town where the school is located falls within that range) was 66%, with standard deviation of 25.7%.

### **Correlation between Exam Results and Semester Grades**

The analysis of exam results and semester grades showed that there was a correlation between those two factors. The Pearson correlation coefficient,

whose value is in the range from  $-1$  to  $+1$ , for the exam result and the semester grade variables was  $0.79$ , which indicates that this is a strong positive linear correlation. Figure 1 shows this correlation. The letter D stands for unsuccessful or “defeated” students and the letter G for the successful or good ones.



*Figure 1.* Correlation between exam results and first semester grades.

For the purpose of this action research a low score is a score below 60% in the basic examination, so a score below the average result, with the centile value of 48, which means that 52% of middle school graduates got a higher score in the exam.

Middle school exam results are neglected in the process of group allocation. In fact, very few teachers take them into account, probably because they do not realise their importance, and it requires some effort to get access to them. Nevertheless, we may conclude that low exam results correspond directly to low semester notes (E, F), which shows that students who did not succeed in middle school are still unsuccessful, and apparently, we as teachers do very little to change this state of affairs.

## Questions

There arise some questions: what can be done to help those learners who did not manage to wipe the slate clean, those who did badly in the exam and

in the first semester in a new school? Should the system of allocation to language groups that functions in the school be altered? Should middle school exam results be taken into consideration? Should English teachers insist that all students be divided into groups so that it will be a cross-class division? This seems to be a plausible solution, but it neglects other factors. Maybe there are other reasons for poor performance. Perhaps those learners who have been classified as unsuccessful would be underachievers in every group, as they lack the necessary motivation and have a negative attitude towards the English language? Does their motivation differ from the motivation of their more successful colleagues? Do they experience any classroom anxiety or are they simply reluctant to participate in the lessons? Are they dissatisfied with their English classes?

### **The Questionnaire Survey**

In order to find answers to those questions, I decided to try on my “teacher as action researcher” hat (Wallace, 1998, p. 213). At this stage, the research method had to be chosen. The basic division of research is between quantitative and qualitative research. The former deals with numbers and statistical analysis and may therefore be considered more “objective,” whereas the latter adopts a more individual approach and focuses on idiosyncratic differences. Quantitative researchers follow a “meaning in the general” strategy, whereas qualitative researchers concentrate on an in-depth understanding of the “meaning in the particular” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 27). Despite this, Dörnyei (2007) claims that there is no real opposition between those two approaches, and advocates combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. During the intervention stage of the present research, when the researcher designs data collection tools, the quantitative approach turned out to be more appealing to an inexperienced researcher. It seemed to be more “tangible,” as it is verifiable, systematic, and precise. Since an ill-constructed questionnaire might yield superficial or unreliable data, its items must be worded in a precise manner to ascertain that the respondents do not find them ambiguous. Bearing in mind all the limitations and pitfalls that a teacher/researcher might encounter, since “it is often unrealistic to expect teachers to have the expertise to conduct rigorous research, the danger is that even if teachers decide to initiate an action research project, the chances are that with little background knowledge and insufficient research expertise they will produce questionable or trivial results” (Dörnyei, 2011, pp. 191–192), I decided to adapt Gardner’s Attitude and Motivation Test Battery for the purposes of this study. As it was recommended by Wilczyńska

and Michońska-Stadnik (2010), Gardner's AMTB was chosen because of its reliability and validity.

### **Adaptation of Gardner's AMTB**

Gardner's questionnaire was first developed in 1985 and conducted among English-speaking Canadian students who studied French as a foreign language in order to assess their attitudes, motivations, and classroom anxiety, and to evaluate the teacher and the English course. It employed the 5-point Likert scale (1932). For the purposes of this study, the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 2004) was used. It is the English language version of the AMTB to be used among high school students who study English as a foreign language. The present action research was to focus on students' motivation, attitude towards English, classroom anxiety, and their dissatisfaction with the English class, so it was clear that the questionnaire must be adapted to the context of the researched group.

According to Zoltan Dörnyei, "the main emphasis in Gardner's model is on motivational components grounded in the social milieu rather than in the foreign language classroom" (Dörnyei, 1994, p. 273). Knowing that Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) recommend adjusting instruments to the context where they are going to be used, I eliminated those items that were outside the scope of this action research and added others that could contribute to finding satisfactory answers to the questions posed at the beginning. The adapted questionnaire encompassed 40 items, divided into 4 subscales:

- a) students' attitude towards English and learning English (7 items),
- b) students' motivation (11 items),
- c) students' classroom anxiety (9 items),
- d) students' dissatisfaction (13 items).

As it was advised by Harkness (2008), the questions were translated into Polish to ensure that participants would not have any problems understanding the statements. The questionnaire included both positively and negatively keyed items. The students were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale (5—strongly agree, 4—agree, 3—hard to say, 2—disagree, and 1—strongly disagree for the positively keyed items; and 1—strongly agree, 2—agree, 3—hard to say, 4—disagree, 5—strongly disagree for the negatively keyed items) in order to determine their level of agreement with each statement.

## **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted among a small group of students who did not participate in the study proper. The aim of the pilot study was to make the questionnaire more “user-friendly.” The subjects were asked to mark their answers and also to give comments that could help improve the questionnaire. After the pilot study, some items were changed not to confuse the participants, other elements were clarified or worded differently. The final version consisted of 40 statements.

## **General Participant Information. Fine Tuning**

Originally, all study participants were supposed to be first-year high school students whose semester grades were E or F and whose end-of-middle school exam results were below 60%. There were 33 such students. They were familiarised with the purpose of the study, their role as research participants and ensured about data confidentiality and anonymity. The survey was administered directly to the students because the sample was small enough (33), so the response rate was 100%. However, since the relationship between the initial problem at the beginning of the research project and the conceptualisation of the problem in the course of the research ought to be dynamic (Wallace, 1998), my initial idea of the research was modified.

The first analysis of the questionnaires made me realise that any analysis would be incomplete without comparing unsuccessful students’ results with data obtained from their successful colleagues: students whose middle school exam results were above 75% and who did well and very well in the course of the first semester. Their semester grades were 4 (C), 5 (B), and 6 (A). There were 43 such students to whom the same survey was administered (response rate 100%). Average students whose exam results were between 60% and 75% and their semester grade was 3 (D) did not participate in the study.

Eventually, the questionnaire was administered to two independent samples of learners (aged 16). Group D ( $N = 33$ ): learners with E and F semester grades and middle school exam below 60%. Group G ( $N = 43$ ): learners with C, B, A semester grades and middle school exam above 75%. The total number of participants was 76 ( $N = 76$ ) out of 136 first-year students of the school.

## **Reliability of the Questionnaire**

During statistical analysis, the reliability of the whole questionnaire and the individual subscales was checked using the Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient ( $\alpha$ ).

In order to calculate it and for statistical analysis the IBM SPSS Statistics programme was used.

The results for the questionnaire and each subscale are shown in Table 1: the letter D stands for the unsuccessful or defeated group and the letter G for the successful one. As we can see, the questionnaire is reliable for both groups, the results being 0.88 and 0.84, respectively.

Table 1  
*The Cronbach's alpha value ( $\alpha$ )*

$\alpha$	Motivation	Attitude	Anxiety	Dissatisfaction	All subscales
Group D	0.722	0.832	0.919	0.879	0.881
Group G	0.623	0.747	0.877	0.791	0.846

With the lowest result still above the minimum suggested by Zoltan Dörnyei (2007), which is 0.60, the survey results could be calculated and analysed.

## Analysis of the Questionnaire Results

For the four subscales survey results are presented in the form of charts (see Figures 2–5). Aggregated values for the four subscales and results for particular items are presented in the form of tables.

### Subscale 1: Motivation

It is outside the scope of this paper to present motivation theories; nevertheless, some aspects of motivation need to be discussed from the perspective of this action research. In the final version of the questionnaire, the items concerning students' instrumental orientation, motivational intensity and desire to learn English were included under the broad heading of motivation. Instrumental orientation, as opposed to integrative orientation, is connected with practical reasons for studying a language, reasons such as getting to university or making a career. It must be remembered that Gardner's division between integrative and instrumental orientation is by no means exhaustive. There are other reasons behind learning a foreign language such as the ones described by Oxford and Shearin (1994), for instance "showing off to friends" or "aiding world peace." Also, integrative and instrumental orientation may

be further divided; it was done by Dörnyei (2006) while investigating young Hungarians learning English as a foreign language. Nonetheless, it may be assumed that it is instrumental orientation that plays the most important role for foreign language learners, especially at the intermediate level (Dörnyei, 1990), in my view, especially in a school situation. Therefore, I focused on this type of motivation in my questionnaire.

Another aspect of motivation is motivational intensity, which may be defined as the effort students put into studying, doing their classroom or homework assignments. It also includes their persistence in learning, so this is a continuous activity, a process, not a single action. It appears that there must be a strong correlation between motivational intensity and being a successful foreign language learner.

Certainly, a motivated learner is goal-oriented and shows a desire to learn the foreign language. This desire should manifest itself in their efforts to achieve the goal and a positive attitude towards learning itself. Let us see how those three aspects of motivation are interrelated when it comes to the subjects of this study. Figure 2 shows the results for subscale 2—students' motivation. The red bar represents the results of group D—unsuccessful students, the green one of successful students—group G.

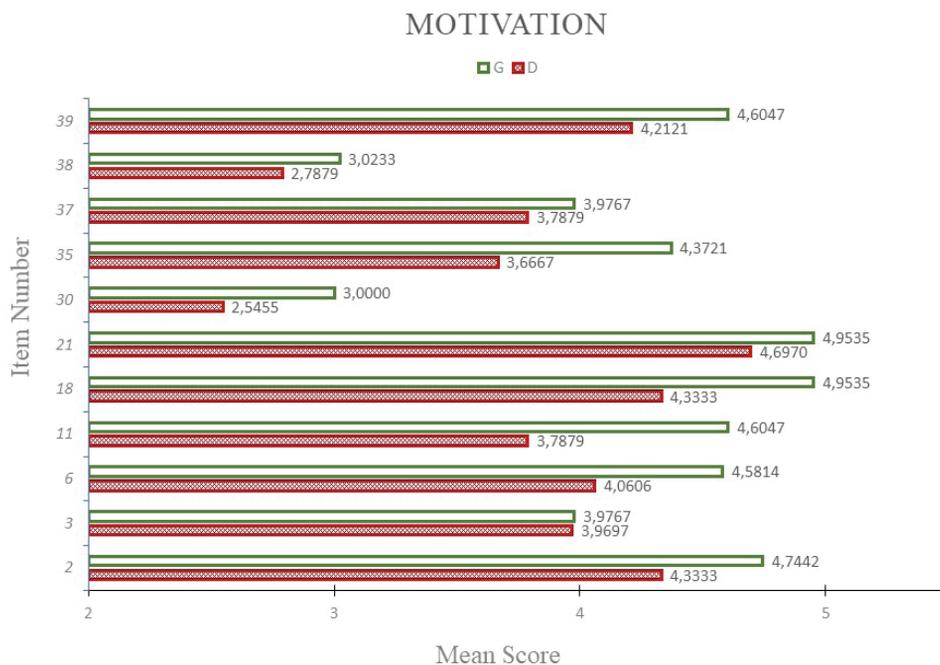


Figure 2. Students' motivation.

The mean values and standard deviation figures are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Overall mean scores and standard deviation for subscale 1: motivation*

Group	Mean score	Standard deviation
D	3.93	0.90
G	4.25	0.73

There is some difference in the mean scores; still, we can say that motivation in both groups is high, in case of some items even very high, with the mean above 4 for both groups. Almost every participant (97%) wishes they were fluent in English; a great majority (88.5%) would like to understand the lyrics of English songs, and as many as 90.9% will not be satisfied with a low score (30%) in the basic Matura exam. Students acknowledge that English is beneficial for their future career and education. Although motivation in the successful group is stronger, the differences tend to be relatively small.

Theoretically, instrumental motivation connected with career planning should not be very relevant for high school students as most of them do not think about the distant future (Clement et al., 1994, cited in Dörnyei, 1994). Contrary to this assumption, as we can see in Table 3, the questionnaire results show that there were no participants who would even moderately disagree with the statement that English is essential for their future career.

Table 3

*Studying English is important because it will be necessary to get a good job*

Group	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	It's hard to say %	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
D	0	0	12.1	42.4	45.5
G	0	0	2.3	20.9	76.7

This could be a consequence of the acquiescence bias, which is a tendency to say yes when the participant is the so-called yeasayer who believes that the answer to a given question should be positive because it sounds correct (Dörnyei, 2003). Another explanation could be that the subjects simply repeated what they had heard from their parents and teachers. According to a study conducted in 2015 for Cambridge English Polska by Millward Brown among 600 parents, 86% of them consider English to be the school subject which is most important for their children's future, and 92% believe that knowledge of English will give their children an opportunity to get a good job. A superficial look at the job advertisement section in any newspaper supports this belief.

Thus, it is not surprising that even very young people, who probably do not have a clear vision of their career yet, appreciate the role English will play in their professional life. It should be emphasised at this point that the percentage of students who strongly agree with the statement that studying English is important because it will be necessary to get a good job is much higher among successful students.

The declaration that English is crucial for professional success does not exactly match the energy put into learning. Table 4 presents questionnaire results for the items connected with the time students spend learning English.

Table 4

*I spend a lot of time learning English*

Group	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	It's hard to say %	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
D	3.0	42.4	51.5	3.0	0
G	2.3	20.9	55.8	16.3	4.7

There are two items where the percentage drops, and they both concern motivational intensity—the effort which students put into attaining their goals. One could draw a conclusion that even though students in both groups realise the importance of English, very few of them spend a lot of time learning or do it systematically. Only 25.4% of the participants admit that they keep up to date with English by working on it regularly. It is clearly visible that hardly any students in the unsuccessful group spend a lot of time learning English (3%), whereas their number is slightly higher in the successful group (21%).

### **Subscale 2: Attitude**

Since motivation and attitude are intertwined in the learning process, as positive attitudes increase and negative attitudes decrease motivation (Brown, 2000), it is not surprising that most students, irrespective of the group, have shown a positive attitude towards English, the average being above three. Researchers (Gardner, 1985; Morgan 1993; Noels et al., 2000; Dörnyei, 2005) emphasise that a positive attitude to the foreign language is crucial to language learning success; nevertheless, it does not seem to be the decisive factor. The data in Figure 3 reflect students' attitude towards the English language and towards learning English.



Figure 3. Students' attitude.

The mean values and standard deviation figures are presented in Table 5.

Table 5  
Overall mean scores and standard deviation for subscale 2: attitude

Group	Mean score	Standard deviation
D	3.86	0.97
G	4.32	0.72

The mean scores of the two groups demonstrate that although learners in group G have a more positive attitude toward English and learning English (M = 4.32, SD = .72), the attitude of learners in group D is also positive (M = 3.86, SD = .97)

Most respondents in both groups (66.7% in group D and 88.3% in group G) declare that they like the sound of English. Participants in the successful group demonstrate a much higher degree of agreement with the statements concerning the attitude towards English, except for item number two. Even though the difference is a slight one, it is still worth noticing that more students in the

unsuccessful group (group D 84.9%, group G 83.4%) strongly disagree with the statement that they hate the English language. The differences between groups become more significant in the attitude towards learning English, which corresponds to the results concerning motivational intensity.

When it comes to declarations, both groups demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning English since 84.9% of subjects in group D and 95.4% in group G do not believe that learning English is a waste of time. Difficulties arise when theoretical declarations are supposed to be put into practice. Table 6 shows the results for item number 15: I like learning English.

Table 6

*I like learning English*

Group	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	It's hard to say %	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
D	9.1	6.1	39.4	36.4	9.1
G	0	0	11.6	53.5	34.9

The item-wise analysis of attitudes towards learning English indicates the absence of successful participants who do not like learning English, whereas in the unsuccessful group there are many who do not seem to have decided yet. Many participants (15.2%) in group D do not like learning English. Even though it may seem tempting to conclude that this is the reason behind their lack of success, I believe that any attempts to establish the cause and effect relationship between the fact that students do not like learning English and their low results may lead to the logical fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

**Subscale 3: Anxiety**

Classroom anxiety is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to test anxiety, communication anxiety or fear of negative evaluation.

Although communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation provide useful conceptual building blocks for a description of foreign language anxiety, foreign language anxiety is not simply the combination of these fears transferred to foreign language learning. Rather, we conceive foreign language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process. (Horowitz, Horowitz, & Cope, 2012, p. 128)

According to MacIntyre and Charos (1996), who analysed the relations between affective variables and their impact on the frequency of second language communication, language anxiety has a negative impact on willingness to communicate and on perceived communicative competence. As we can see in Figure 4, anxiety is the first subscale where the red bars are higher, which means that unsuccessful students have a higher degree of classroom anxiety.

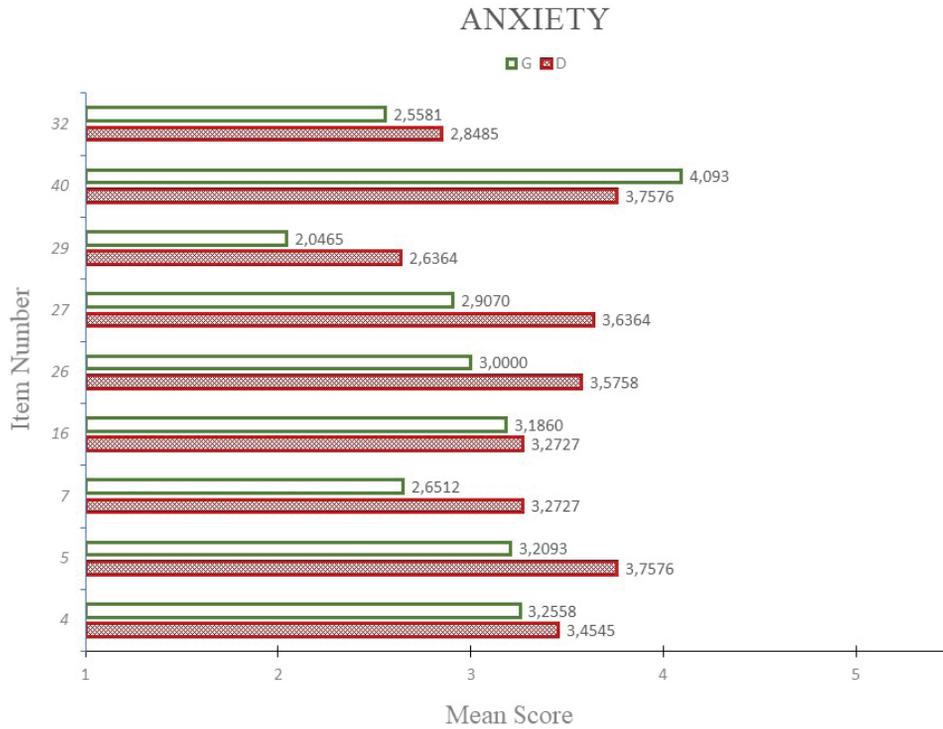


Figure 4. Students' classroom anxiety.

The mean values and standard deviation figures are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Overall mean scores and standard deviation for subscale 3: anxiety

Group	Mean score	Standard deviation
D	3.35	1.32
G	2.98	1.13

The data presented above show a relatively high standard deviation for both unsuccessful (SD = 1.32) and successful (SD = 1.13) learners, which

highlights anxiety to be the most inconsistent subscale. The mean score of 3.35 shows that unsuccessful students have a relatively high level of classroom anxiety.

The item-wise analysis demonstrates that both groups have a high degree of understanding why other students feel nervous about speaking English in class. The biggest differences between successful and unsuccessful students concern getting nervous while speaking English during classes. In the item “I get nervous when I am speaking in my English class,” the discrepancy reaches 35.6%, the results for group D and G being 72.8% and 37.2% respectively. It is worth mentioning that classroom anxiety is low (with the mean below 3) in the item: “I get anxious that other students will laugh at me when I speak English.” The results for this element are presented in Table 8.

Table 8

*I am anxious that the other students in class will laugh at me when I speak English*

Group	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	It's hard to say %	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
D	27.3	27.3	12.1	21.2	12.1
G	34.9	41.9	11.6	7.0	4.7

Interestingly, the majority of participants in both groups (group D: 54.6%, group G: 76.8%) disagree with the statement that they are afraid that other students will laugh at them when they speak English. Still, the number of those who agree with this statement is much higher in the unsuccessful group (33.3% vs. 11.7%). Considering that the level of anxiety in the unsuccessful group is generally high, with the mean above the average level, there must be reasons other than their colleagues' negative reaction that contribute to this state of affairs. Perhaps it is the teacher's reaction that they fear. The fact that they are not afraid of being ridiculed by their peers does not mean that they are not afraid of the teacher's negative comments or a bad grade. Another reason could be that group D participants are aware of their deficiencies. Their reluctance to speak may be a consequence of insufficient knowledge of English. On the other hand, it might be a question of not being used to speaking English. Perhaps Polish (the students' mother tongue) was the only language of communication during their English lessons in middle school and, eventually, they will get used to new circumstances and their anxiety will lower.

**Subscale 4: Students' Dissatisfaction**

The items in the last subscale, under the heading of students' dissatisfaction, the results of which are presented in Figure 5, aimed at answering the question whether students consider the level of their English class too high and whether they are disappointed with it or not.

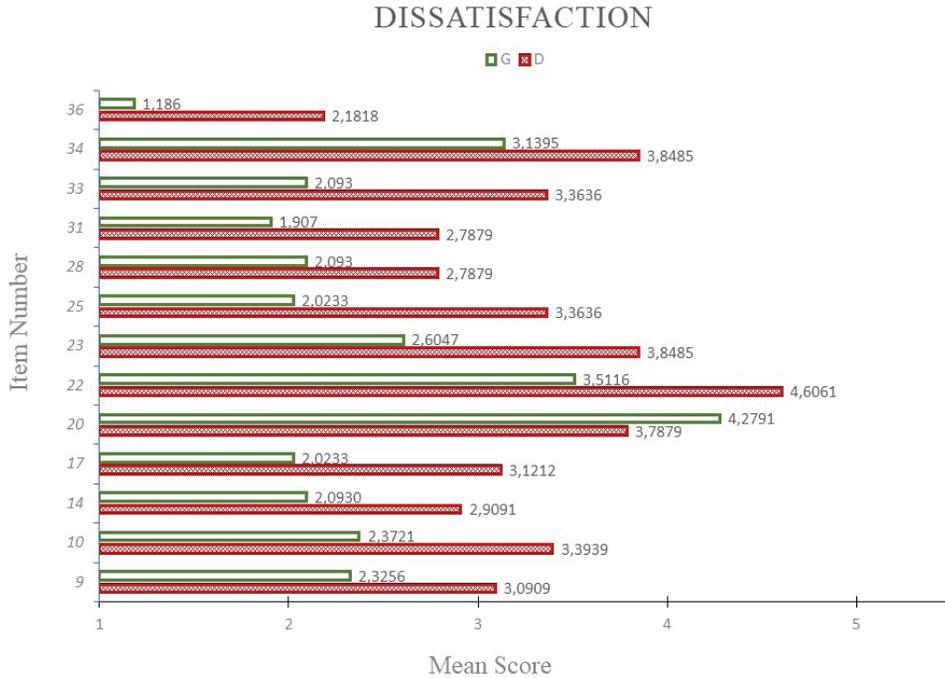


Figure 5. Students' dissatisfaction.

The mean values and standard deviation figures are presented in Table 9.

Table 9  
Overall mean scores and standard deviation for subscale 4: dissatisfaction

Group	Mean score	Standard deviation
D	3.31	1.11
G	2.43	0.99

The mean score of 3.31 (SD = 1.11) in the unsuccessful group shows that learners appear to be dissatisfied with their English lessons. The difference between mean scores for both groups is the most significant. When it comes to particular items, 45.5% of unsuccessful students admit that they would rather

their English course-book were easier. As many as 66.7% of them agree with the statement that they tend to give up and not pay attention when they do not understand their English teacher's explanation of something. One statement in this subscale was exceptional. It concerned students' expectations: more participants in group G (88.3%) than in group D (75.7%) expected that they would get good grades. As we can see, students in both groups were quite optimistic with regard to their future performance.

The remaining items in this subscale show visible differences. The item-wise analysis illustrates that unsuccessful students feel that their level of English is lower than the level of other students in the group. It is also worth noticing that a vast majority of unsuccessful students are fully aware of their need to revise basic structures. There is a noticeable discrepancy between the groups. The discrepancy is even bigger for the item concerning problems with basic structures (Table 10).

Table 10

*I know I have problems with basic structures*

Group	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	It's hard to say %	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
D	0	24.2	33.3	24.2	18.2
G	51.2	11.6	20.9	16.3	0

More than half of participants in group G strongly disagree with the statement that they have problems with basic structures, whereas there were no such responses in the unsuccessful group. In view of those results a question arises. What inhibits unsuccessful students from informing their teachers that they could use a few hours devoted to the revision of basic structures? Each teacher is obligated to conduct some extra lessons. My experience shows that very few students participate in them, and those who do are the ones who want to take part in language competitions or better prepare for the extended Matura exam. It would require further investigation to find out the reasons behind unsuccessful learners' reluctance to participate in those lessons, despite the fact that they are conscious of their shortcomings.

## Summary of the Findings

- Students' motivation in both group D and group G was high: 3.93 and 4.25, respectively.

- Both groups demonstrated a positive attitude towards the English language and learning English with the mean values of 3.86 (group D) and 4.32 (group G).
- Students' poor performance was not a result of their lack of motivation or their negative attitude toward English.
- Anxiety and dissatisfaction with the English course varied across the two investigated groups.
- Learners whose performance was poor demonstrated a higher level of anxiety and dissatisfaction with their English lessons. The mean value of anxiety was 3.35 in group D and 2.98 in group G, whereas the mean value of dissatisfaction was 3.31 in group D and 2.43 in group G.

## Conclusion

The limitations of the present study must be borne in mind. The participants were students of one school – the purposive strategy of survey sampling was used (Nunan, 1992). The study was restricted to investigating only attitude, motivation, anxiety, and students' dissatisfaction. As far as course evaluation is concerned, teacher assessment was deliberately omitted. Although we regularly mark our students' performance, Polish high school teachers are not accustomed to any kind of appraisal, especially if it were an appraisal made by their students. Besides, the head teacher's permission to investigate this aspect was not granted. Another limitation is that the only variable in this action research was students' results, so it would be hard to generalise the findings. Nevertheless, it seems that they might contribute to limiting the number of unsuccessful students in the school where the survey was conducted.

The most significant observation is that unsuccessful students, despite their positive attitude towards English and relatively high motivation, seem to be dissatisfied with their English class level, and show a higher degree of classroom anxiety than their colleagues with better results. In other words, it is not their motivation or attitude that should be worked upon. The teachers' efforts must focus on lowering learners' anxiety, and meeting their specific needs to increase their satisfaction with the English lessons.

In order to, at least partially, alleviate the problem, teachers should take into account end-of-middle school exam results and immediately offer freshmen whose results were low some remedial classes devoted to the revision of basic structures in order that learners have a chance to make up for their shortcomings from the very beginning of the school year. Simultaneously, they will become aware of the fact that their level of English is lower than the level of

other learners. These classes shall be conducted regularly to increase students' motivational intensity, which appears to be a key factor in foreign language learning. I dare suggest that the classes be imposed on first-year high school students with low exam results to make sure that they participate in them and, consequently, benefit from them.

I would also recommend that the division into groups be a cross-class division to minimise level discrepancies among members of the same group and, in consequence, to lower the anxiety of some students. It must be borne in mind, however, that this solution might pose a real challenge because it is difficult to implement. It could complicate preparing the timetable and would require tremendous effort on the part of the person responsible for this task. It remains an open question whether it will be considered worthwhile by school authorities.

Apart from that, the teachers should do their utmost to utilise the high motivation and positive attitude of the weaker students. They should be encouraged to take active part in the lesson in order that they can break the language barrier. Rather than wait for them to volunteer, the teacher could involve them in group or pair work, where English is the language of communication. If other students offer their help and the teacher praises the weaker students readily for any progress they make, their self-confidence is bound to increase.

Should the above recommendations be introduced, the first semester grades will indicate whether they have fulfilled their role. Better grades may suggest that the same solutions could be tested in other schools that face the same problem. Should the first semester grades not improve, it seems reasonable to expand the scope of the study to seek other factors that influence students' performance, apart from the ones included in the questionnaire.

Similar questionnaires should become part of teaching practice. They could be an invaluable source of knowledge, not only about our students' motivation and attitude, but also about their expectations concerning the content and form of their English lessons. It might be worthwhile to employ action research, which is a continuous activity, to improve the teaching/learning process. I believe that action research, although time and effort-consuming, might be interesting from teachers' and teachers-to-be perspective. Pre-service teachers and practising teachers should be encouraged to conduct this type of research as it will definitely transform them from passive into active participants of the teaching process. I am aware that Polish teachers are overloaded with work, the amount of paperwork they have to deal with surpasses all expectations and additional duties discourage even the most passionate ones; nevertheless,

- (a) many, if not most, language teachers would like to gain a more thorough understanding of the teaching and learning process as well as the various classroom events; (b) one main purpose of applied linguistics research is

to provide answers to questions that concern these issues; and (c) currently there is a wide gap between teachers and researchers in most countries, which needs to be bridged. (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 193)

This paper is just an attempt to bridge that gap and to encourage teachers to act.

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### **Neue Schule, dieselbe Routine? Eine unter den Schülern der ersten Oberschulklasse mit schwachen Schulleistungen durchgeführte Umfrage**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

Die Aktionsforschung ist eins der Werkzeuge, die ein nachdenklicher Lehrer zur Verfügung hat, wenn er bemüht ist, spezifische Probleme in seiner täglichen Arbeit zu lösen. Der gegenwärtige Aufsatz handelt von der in einer allgemeinbildenden Oberschule durchgeführten Forschung, deren Ziel war es, manche Gründe der schwachen Schulleistungen im Englischunterricht von den Schülern der ersten Klasse zu ergründen. Obwohl die Schüler in der neuen Schule den einzelnen Sprachgruppen aufgrund des Leistungstestes eingestuft

wurden, beobachtete man, dass schlechte Noten nach dem ersten Semester in starker positiver Wechselbeziehung zu schwachen Leistungen des Testes für Gymnasiasten standen. Es wurde eine Umfrage gemacht, in der die befragten Schüler ihre Motivation, Einstellung und Angst vor Unterricht beurteilen sollten. Sie bewerteten auch ihre Kompetenzen im Vergleich mit anderen Gruppenmitgliedern. Im vorliegenden Text werden die Ergebnisse der Umfrage präsentiert und die Vorschläge für die Lehrer angedeutet, wie diese manche Bildungsbarrieren den Schülern in ihrer neuen Schule zu bewältigen helfen können.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Aktionsforschung, Schüler mit schwachen Schulleistungen, Motivation, Einstellung, Angst vor Lehr-/Lernprozess

### Adapted Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Polish and English Version)

Table 11

#### Questionnaire Items

No.	Polish Version	English Version
1	Uczenie się angielskiego jest naprawdę pasjonujące.	Learning English is really great.
2	Uczenie się angielskiego jest ważne, ponieważ angielski jest konieczny, by dostać dobrą pracę.	Studying English is important because it will be necessary to get a good job.
3	Dobry wynik na maturze z angielskiego pozwoli dostać mi się na wymarzone studia.	A good English Matura exam result will allow me to get into my dream university.
4	Uczniowie, którzy twierdzą, że stresują się na angielskim, po prostu szukają wymówek.	Students who claim they get nervous in English classes are just making excuses.
5	Chętnie zgłaszam się do odpowiedzi na angielskim.	I eagerly volunteer answers in my English class.
6	Uczenie się angielskiego jest ważne, ponieważ będzie mi on potrzebny w przyszłej pracy.	Studying English is important because I will need it for my career.
7	Nie odczuwam niepokoju, kiedy odpowiadam na lekcji angielskiego.	I don't get anxious when I have to answer a question in my English class.
8	Nienawidzę języka angielskiego (chodzi o sam język, nie lekcje).	I hate the English language.
9	Mój poziom angielskiego jest niższy niż pozostałych osób w grupie.	My level of English is lower than the level of other students in my group.
10	Wolałbym, żeby podręcznik do angielskiego był łatwiejszy.	I would rather my English course book were easier.
11	Zależy mi na uzyskaniu wysokiego wyniku (powyżej 90%) z matury podstawowej z angielskiego.	I really want to get a high score (above 90%) in the basic Matura exam.
12	Podoba mi się brzmienie języka angielskiego.	I like the sound of English.
13	Uczenie się angielskiego to strata czasu.	Learning English is a waste of time.
14	Ćwiczenia, które robimy na angielskim są dla mnie za trudne.	The exercises we do in our English class are too difficult for me.
15	Lubię uczyć się angielskiego.	I like learning English.
16	Wstydzi się zgłaszać do odpowiedzi na lekcji angielskiego.	It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in our English class.
17	Mój podręcznik do angielskiego jest za trudny.	My English course book is too difficult.
18	Wystarczy mi 30% z matury podstawowej z angielskiego.	30% in the basic Matura exam will be enough for me.

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| 19 | Uważam, że uczenie się angielskiego jest nudne.   | I think that learning English is dull.   |
| 20 | Rozpoczynając naukę w liceum liczyłem/ liczyłam na to, że będę miał/miała dobre oceny z angielskiego. | When I came to this school I expected to have good grades in English.  |
| 21 | Chciałbym/Chciałabym mówić biegle po angielsku.   | I wish I were fluent in English.   |
| 22 | Byłoby mi łatwiej, gdybyśmy poświęcili więcej czasu na powtarzanie podstaw.                           | It would be much easier for me if we devoted more time to the revision of basic structures.                    |
| 23 | Kiedy nie rozumiem, gdy nauczyciel angielskiego wyjaśnia coś na lekcji, wyłączam się.                 | I tend to give up and not pay attention when I don't understand my English teacher's explanation of something. |
| 24 | Angielski jest bardzo ważną częścią programu nauczania.   | English is a very important part of the school programme.  |
| 25 | Wiem, że nie opanowałem podstaw angielskiego.   | I know I have problems with basic structures.  |
| 26 | Nigdy nie czuję się pewnie odpowiadając po angielsku podczas lekcji angielskiego.                     | I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking in our English class.                                     |
| 27 | Stresuję się mówiąc po angielsku podczas lekcji.  | I get nervous when I am speaking in my English class.  |
| 28 | Ćwiczenia z podręcznika są dla mnie zrozumiałe.   | I understand the exercises in my course book.  |
| 29 | Boję się, że inni uczniowie będą się ze mnie śmiali, gdy będę mówić po angielsku.                     | I am anxious that the other students in class will laugh at me when I speak English.                           |
| 30 | Poświęcam dużo czasu na naukę angielskiego.   | I spend a lot of time learning English.  |
| 31 | Poziom podręcznika mi odpowiada.  | The level of my English course book is right for me.   |
| 32 | Martwi mnie, że inni uczniowie w mojej grupie są lepsi z angielskiego niż ja.                         | It worries me that other students in my group are better at English.   |
| 33 | Angielski jest jednym z moich ulubionych przedmiotów.   | English is one of my favourite subjects.   |
| 34 | Moja motywacja do nauki była silniejsza na początku roku.   | My motivation was stronger at the beginning of the school year.  |
| 35 | Uczę się angielskiego tylko po to, żeby zdać maturę.  | I learn English only to pass the Matura exam.  |
| 36 | Czasem marzę o możliwości zrezygnowania z nauki angielskiego.   | I sometimes daydream about dropping English.   |
| 37 | Nie uczę się angielskiego w domu.   | I don't learn English at home.   |
| 38 | Systematycznie uczę się angielskiego.   | I keep up to date with English by working on it almost every day.  |

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| 39 | Chciałbym/chciałabym rozumieć teksty angielskich piosenek.                                 | I would like to understand the lyrics of English songs.                             |
| 40 | Nie rozumiem, dlaczego inni uczniowie stresują się, gdy mają mówić po angielsku na lekcji. | I don't understand why other students feel nervous about speaking English in class. |
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**Adapted Attitude/Motivation Test Battery Key**Table 12  
*Test Key*

No.	Category	Subscale
1	Positively Keyed	Attitude
2	Positively Keyed	Motivation
3	Positively Keyed	Motivation
4	Negatively Keyed	Anxiety
5	Negatively Keyed	Anxiety
6	Positively Keyed	Motivation
7	Negatively Keyed	Anxiety
8	Negatively Keyed	Attitude
9	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
10	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
11	Positively Keyed	Motivation
12	Positively Keyed	Attitude
13	Negatively Keyed	Attitude
14	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
15	Positively Keyed	Attitude
16	Positively Keyed	Anxiety
17	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
18	Negatively Keyed	Motivation
19	Negatively Keyed	Attitude
20	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
21	Positively Keyed	Motivation
22	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
23	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
24	Positively Keyed	Attitude
25	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
26	Positively Keyed	Anxiety
27	Positively Keyed	Anxiety
28	Negatively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
29	Positively Keyed	Anxiety
30	Positively Keyed	Motivation
31	Negatively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
32	Positively Keyed	Anxiety
33	Negatively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
34	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
35	Negatively Keyed	Motivation
36	Positively Keyed	Dissatisfaction
37	Negatively Keyed	Motivation
38	Positively Keyed	Motivation
39	Positively Keyed	Motivation
40	Negatively Keyed	Anxiety

