

*Grażyna Gramza*  
Independent researcher  
The Hague, The Netherlands  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5702-7218

BHE 39/2018  
ISSN 2544-7899  
DOI: 10.14746/bhw.2018.39.8

*Agnieszka Steur*  
Independent researcher  
Hilversum, The Netherlands  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7832-9987

## **“Understanding Bilingualism” – annual conference for teachers working with Polish students in Dutch**

*“A common language is the hardest to master among all the languages.”  
Aleksander Kumor*

### **Abstract**

According to statistics 160,000 Polish citizens currently live and work in the Netherlands. Half of these Polish migrants live there with their families. In April 2018, 36,000 Polish children lived in the Netherlands. Children and adolescents are required to go to local or international schools. Observing children who lived in the country for a few years and those who have just arrived, we can see recurring problems and issues. Students who do not know the Dutch language go to classes, where they only learn the language for two or three years. Within a few months, children become lazy. The curriculum that they are supposed to master is too simple, posing not enough intellectual challenges. Moreover, the first year in a new school abroad is stressful for children and adolescents. One of the major issues is the fact that teachers do not understand the processes that a child undergoes in the adaptation phase. Many schools also have an issue with the lack of knowledge regarding the development of a bilingual child. To help and support teachers, as well as parents and children, the School at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague and the “Kreda” Foundation from Lisse organised the first “Understanding Bilingualism” conference four years ago, inviting teachers and specialists who work with Polish children every day. The conference turned out to be a resounding success and in the following years, three additional editions of the event were organised, devoted to a variety of topics.

**Keywords:** conference, education, Polish children abroad, the Netherlands, bilingualism, schools in the Netherlands, migration

The “Kreda” Foundation is planning on organising the fifth edition of the “Understanding Bilingualism” conference in autumn 2018.

Thanks to close cooperation with the Hofstad Lyceum secondary school complex, the School Consultation Point and the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague, over the last four years, we offered Dutch teachers an extensive programme, covering issues and topics concerning children’s rights, cultural differences, activation of parents at school, special educational needs of students, communication between school and home, upbringing in a multicultural family and multilingual speech therapy.

To date, these meetings attracted about 300 participants, 18 of which gave speeches and conducted classes. About 50 volunteers helped in the organisation of the event. Each of the meetings was attended by special guests – the Consul of the Republic of Poland and the Rector of the Hofstad Lyceum in The Hague.

### **The idea behind the “Understanding Bilingualism” conference**

Since 2004, when Poland joined the European Union, the number of Poles, and thus of Polish children and children of Polish descent, who attend local and international schools in the Netherlands, was growing rapidly.

According to the Bureau of Planning (Het Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau – SCP), in April this year, there were 160,000 Poles registered, with 90,000 staying in the country temporarily. In 2005, only 30% of Polish couples lived in the Netherlands with their children. As of now, half of Polish migrants live with their families. It is estimated that in 2016, there were 32,000 Polish children in the Netherlands, and in April 2018 the number grew to 36,000.<sup>1</sup>

The situation of Polish families in the Netherlands is not bad, given that three quarters of Poles are gainfully employed, with only 6.7% receiving unemployment benefit. This is a small number, compared to the 20% unemployment rate among other groups of migrants. However, the average annual income of EUR 17,600 earned by Polish workers is three times less than that of a Dutch worker. Nevertheless, Poles are usually satisfied with their life in the Netherlands, and when asked to rate it, on average they give it 7.1 points out of 10, compared to 6.6, which is an average rating given by the Dutch. According to Poles, discrimination is on the rise, compared to the situation ten years ago. A quarter of Poles believe that Poles are often victims of discrimination, while half of them believe that it is only sometimes the case. This is quite a significant value, but such opinions can also be found among other migrant groups.<sup>2</sup>

Poles integrate quite quickly and do not stand out significantly from the rest of society. Surveys and opinions in the media show that many Polish migrants maintain regular

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bouwend aan een toekomst in Nederland*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], [https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2018/Bouwend\\_aan\\_een\\_toekomst\\_in\\_Nederland](https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2018/Bouwend_aan_een_toekomst_in_Nederland)

<sup>2</sup> *Situatie Poolse kinderen in Nederland dringend aan verbetering toe* [retrieved on: 23.08.2018], <http://www.childrightsfocus.org/nl/situatie-poolse-kinderen-in-nederland-dringend-aan-verbetering-toe/>

contacts with their compatriots. At home, Poles watch Polish television, they go to Polish stores and Polish church, cultivate their own traditions and still consider Poland to be their homeland. In spite of that, they do not present significant difficulties with regards to integration.<sup>3</sup>

Children and youth are another group that is worth checking in that regard. According to information from the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in The Hague and Polish schools, despite the fact that there are 36,000 Poles under 20 years of age in the Netherlands, only a small group, numbering about 2,000, is covered by regular Polish language courses in Polish schools or at school consultation centres (SPK). The fact that many parents living permanently in the Netherlands give up teaching their own language and even communicating with their children in Polish is quite alarming. Despite Polish being an official language of the European Union, only international and European schools in the Netherlands offer Polish language classes and the possibility of taking a matriculation exam in that language.

In the conversation with parents during Saturday school classes and meetings with the Polish community, we often raised the issue of bilingualism and concern for the mother tongue of the youngest Poles. Very often, they said that teachers in primary schools discouraged parents from sending their children to Polish weekend schools, at the same time convincing Poles to speak Dutch to their children at home. The reason for this was that children would acclimatise faster in the Netherlands and it would be easier for them to learn the local language. We knew that this view was outdated and that there was no scientific justification for it. In this situation, the promotion of bilingualism became a priority for us. We believed that cooperation between the Polish and the Dutch side was necessary.

Given our extensive experience as parents and organisers of Polish institutions in the Netherlands, as well as our expertise in the subject of bilingualism, we decided to organise a conference for local teachers who deal with Polish children and children of Polish descent in their work. Our main goal was to convince Dutch educators of the importance of caring for children’s language and identity for their development, as well as of the great value of knowing multiple languages in today’s world.

The activation of the Polish community, in particular people involved in teaching Polish children in the Netherlands, was also of paramount importance for us.

The Hofstad Lyceum in The Hague – a secondary school complex, which offers classes in English, which makes bilingualism and multilingualism a crucial aspect for the school – decided to join forces with us. For ten years now, the School Consultation Point at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague has been cooperating with the Hofstad Lyceum and thanks to this cooperation, it was possible for us to organise conferences at the school. Since 2014, four editions of the conference have taken place, and the fifth meeting is planned for 2018.

---

<sup>3</sup> GIJSBERTS M., ANDRIESSEN I., HAN N., HUIJNK W., *Bouwend aan een toekomst in Nederland, De leefsituatie van Poolse migranten die zich na 2004 hebben ingeschreven*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, Den Haag 2018.

From the very beginning, the activities of our institutions – the School Consultation Point in The Hague and the “Kreda” Foundation in Lisse – have been supported by the Embassy and Consulate of the Republic of Poland in The Hague, both financially, as well as substantively. The conferences are funded from the so-called “small projects” fund of the Senate of the Republic of Poland, which are allocated by foreign institutions to events supporting the culture and integration of Polish citizens in their countries of residence. Additionally, the events are also supported by donors. The work of volunteers is also crucial and very significant, because without them organising the event would be impossible.

### **First conference – “Children’s right to their mother tongue” – 26.11.2014**

The first “Understanding Bilingualism” conference was held in autumn 2014 and was attended by almost a hundred guests.

The conference was opened with a lecture by Professor Elisabeth van den Linden from the University of Amsterdam. Elisabeth van den Linden authored a number of works, including a guide for parents and teachers of bilingual children entitled *Het succes van tweetalig opvoeden (Success of bilingual upbringing)*<sup>4</sup>. She tried to explain why it is important for children to develop their mother tongue alongside the language of their country of residence.

Elżbieta Niemczuk-Weiss, a linguist at the former Faculty of Slavic Studies at the University of Amsterdam (currently the Chair of Russian and Slavic Studies), gave a brief presentation on the grammar and spelling of the Polish language to the conference participants. The most important part of her presentation, however, was the ending in which she showed how this knowledge can be used when learning Dutch.

The lecture by Beata Stappers-Karpińska, a lawyer, who spoke about the importance of respecting children’s right to their mother tongue and their identity, aroused great interest.

The last person to speak during the event was Loes van Oostveen, a teacher who devotes a lot of time in her school practice to the children of foreigners. She shared her experiences with phenomena such as cultural shock, but also presented ways to help students to acclimatise in new conditions. She also emphasised that the easiest way to get through to the child is to use their mother tongue.

During the first conference, we created an opportunity for discussions, during which the participants had the chance to talk about the problems they face in their daily work. This was critical to us, because the conclusions of these conversations set the direction and objectives for the next edition of the conference.

Joining us for this afternoon was an exceptional guest – Karolina Jagiełło, who was then only twelve-year-old, and who won the Hague 8th Grade Spelling Competition in

---

<sup>4</sup> VAN DER LINDEN E., KUIKEN F., *Het succes van tweetalig opvoeden*, Leeuwen/Den Haag, 2012.

2014.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that at the time of her participation in the competition, Karolina had lived in the Netherlands for only four years. For us, she was an example of a child who, while learning a second language, could speak it fluently after learning it for a relatively short time, without abandoning education in Polish. Karolina was a student of the School Consultation Point and she attended classes at this school once a week. It should be emphasised that each group learning at the SPK attends five hours of classes every week and learns according to the core curriculum for Polish schools abroad, which is developed by the Polish Ministry of Education. Apart from that, she also attended one of the local Dutch schools. She was doing well in both schools, receiving very good grades. Two years later, the Competition was won again by a boy from Poland, which served as a proof that learning the Polish language does not hinder mastering Dutch or any other language.

During the first conference, the participants received a guide on bilingual upbringing written by Agnieszka Steur for this occasion. The guide was improved and extended for each subsequent meeting. It is currently available on the “Kreda” Foundation website – [www.kreda.nl](http://www.kreda.nl). Every year, parents of children attending school consultation points in The Hague and Brunssum as well as Polish schools all over the Netherlands receive a printed version of the guide.<sup>6</sup>

After conversations with Dutch teachers and publishing a report on Polish students, which showed that children of foreigners have little chance of school success, as well as finding good work and achieving a good social position in the future, our activities became even more important.<sup>7</sup> We believe that the future of our children depends on us and on the quality of education that will be offered to them in their country of residence.

During the organisation of subsequent conferences, we put great emphasis on the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding between people involved in regular education and Polish community education.

### **Second conference – “Briefly in the Netherlands: What next?” – 25.11.2015**

Our second conference was held in November 2015, attracting about 60 guests. We consciously decided to lower the number of participants, since we planned workshops for this edition and we wanted to provide everyone with the best possible working conditions.

One of the two main organisers of the event, Grażyna Gramza, who at that time was the head of the School Consultation Point at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague, was the first to speak during the conference. During her lecture, she presented the differences between the Polish and Dutch education systems to the attending

---

<sup>5</sup> *Poolse winnares Haags Kinderdictee ontzettend blij en trots*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], <https://www.omroepwest.nl/nieuws/2599765/Poolse-winnares-Haags-Kinderdictee-ontzettend-blij-en-trots>

<sup>6</sup> STEUR A., *Codzienna dwujęzyczność*, Den Haag 2016.

<sup>7</sup> VOGELS R., GIJSBERTS M., DEN DRAAK M., *Poolse, Bulgaarse en Roemeense kinderen in Nederland. Een verkenning van hun leefsituatie*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, Den Haag 2018.

teachers. This topic aroused great interest among the participants, as this lecture enabled them to understand how different these two systems are and what misunderstandings often arise from these differences, starting with naming. Polish middle school is not an equivalent of a Dutch *gymnasium* – a secondary school with an offer of classical subjects. The international class has nothing to do with an international school. There are many such differences. An additional problem is posed by the fact that the Dutch system is very extensive and controlled by the educational authorities to a great extent, with Polish parents having great difficulties to adapt to its rules.

The next speakers taking part in the conference were Marianne van Leeuwen and Marietta Steenbeek, teachers at the “De Singel” Primary School in Leiden. This is an intercultural school, where a great deal of attention is paid to ensuring that parents take an active part in the school life of their children. Most of the students from “De Singel” have Ukrainian, Indonesian and Turkish roots, and overall, the school is attended by children from 18 countries. The teachers presented examples of activities and events aimed at integration, organised for students and their guardians. The participants received a proposal of class scenarios, which they can use in their schools.

Workshops were very popular among the conference participants. The first one, entitled: “Learning language through games” was led by Iwona Stempek, an experienced Polish language teacher at the “Glossa” language school in Krakow. Her workshop was very dynamic, as it used numerous examples of language games. It should be noted that the host did not use any foreign language as an auxiliary language – the workshop was conducted in Polish. After the workshop, many people said that it was only during this experience that they understood how lonely a student must feel when they have to learn a new language without being able to communicate with the teacher in their own mother tongue.

The participants were also impressed by the “Breaking the cultural barrier” workshop led by Karolina Eckardt, the second of the lead organisers of the conference, chairwoman of the “Kreda” Foundation and Dagmara Noordermeer, teacher of the special school in Bolenstreek. During the workshop, the teachers created an opportunity to talk about the four factors influencing the formation of children in migrant families. The participants agreed that cultural, personal, psychological and social factors were very important in this respect. The interest in this topic was so great that during the preparations for the next conference we decided to focus on the topic of cultural differences between Poland and the Netherlands.

### **Third conference – “From the perspective of the other side” – 23.11.2016**

The third conference in the “Understanding Bilingualism” series, which took place in 2016 was prepared according to the “wishlist” of participants of the previous meeting and people who declared their willingness to take part in the event.

Małgorzata Bos-Karczewska, journalist and editor of the Polonia.nl website, who has been living and working in the Netherlands for more than thirty years, gave the first pres-

entation of the conference devoted to cultural differences, enriched with a number of examples from her own experience from the time when she started her career in her new homeland. The topic turned out to be so interesting for the guests, that many of them declared their participation in the next conference, noting that they wanted to learn more about these differences.

The next presentation was given by Katarzyna Pokutycka, Polish language teacher at the School Consultation Point at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in The Hague and at an international school, where she prepares students for the matura exam. Her lecture concerned the “Mentor” project of the “Kreda” Foundation<sup>8</sup>, which offers support for Polish students and their parents. The main objective of the programme is helping students, parents and teachers in their education in the Netherlands, with a view to ensuring the optimal development and safety of children. The volunteer mentors participating in the programme inform, advise and provide personal help and support to parents, teachers and students in difficult situations in order to prevent problems at school. The “Mentor” programme has been running since 2013. Currently, the network of Mentors consists of around sixty trained and experienced people throughout the Netherlands. Special training and meetings are organised for volunteers in order to verify and update their knowledge regarding Dutch education. A special bulletin and training materials are also published as part of the project.

The lectures were followed by workshops – this time, the conference participants met with Katarzyna Kijewska, a speech therapist from The Hague, who works with bilingual children, and Margriet van Engen, the author of Dutch language speaking programmes for the youngest children.

During this conference, the teachers received useful methodological materials, including special cards which they could use to communicate with Polish children who do not yet know the Dutch language. Each of the cards featured illustrations and captions in two languages, presenting the basic words and phrases used in everyday school situations. These cards could be used as a great way to complement classes with students and a great help for the teacher.

#### **Fourth conference – “Diversity in education” – 22.11.2017**

The last conference in 2017 was devoted to education, in particular to cultural differences in this area.

Like every year, it was organised for Dutch teachers who teach children of Polish origin in their classes. During the meeting, the guests attending the conference listened to two lectures and participated in two workshops.

Marjolijn Distelbrink, a sociologist from the Verwey-Jonker Institute, presented the first lecture, concerning the results of research on the educational barriers faced by

---

<sup>8</sup> Program *MENTOR*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], <https://kreda.nl/index.php/onderwijsinformatie/mentor>

immigrants. She emphasised that language barrier is one of the most important problems for teachers teaching immigrant children (not only from Poland). Teachers are unable to communicate with many parents, and interpreters are not always available. For this reason, talking about upbringing and education becomes almost impossible. Problems and misunderstandings arise from the fact that the differences between the Netherlands and the countries of origin of the students are very significant in that regard. In the Netherlands, great importance is attached to the autonomy of the child from an early age, and not all parents think that this is the right way to go. In many countries, there is a clear separation between school and home, which means that parents feel that teachers should not interfere in what is happening in children's homes, while they also never get involved in school life. In the opinion of Dutch teachers, Polish parents tend to be very passive – they do not take part in school events, they never get involved in community work and often do not even come to compulsory teacher conferences. Some schools organise free Dutch language courses for adults, but Poles do not take advantage of such offers.

During her presentation, Marjolijn Distelbrink mentioned that one of the biggest problems faced by immigrants, newcomers in particular, is the lack of acquaintances and people who could help them, which is why she considered the “Mentor” programme to be very valuable and worthy of dissemination among other groups of foreigners in the Netherlands. During her presentation, the researcher emphasised the fact that children learn very quickly and it often happens that within a few months they learn the Dutch language and culture to a much greater extent than their parents, becoming kind of guides to the new country for them, taking on the role of an adult. This leads to a situation where the parent-child relationship is disrupted and the authority of the latter is weakened. She also pointed out a number of psychological problems, especially among the children of refugees.

The second person who spoke at the conference was Mirjam Blumenthal, speech therapist and psychologist at the “Kentalis” Foundation. She started her lecture by asking whether the participants believed that learning a single language is a sufficient challenge for children and whether their parents speak Dutch with them. One of the teachers present in the room replied that this was not true, as children can learn two or even three languages at the same time without any issues. He added that he learned about it at previous conferences. The speaker explained that the opinion about the harmfulness of learning many languages at the same time is one of the obstacles faced by parents of bilingual and multilingual children. People often think that an additional language is too much for their child. Many misconceptions arose around the subject of bilingualism, which very often have nothing to do with reality. The participants learned that most bilingual children experience a period of silence, which means that they do not speak one of the languages for some time – usually their new language. Teachers and parents fear that this silence means that students will never learn Dutch, which is the most common reason why teachers advise parents to talk to their children exclusively in Dutch. They do not know that after some time, even after a few months, children naturally begin to use a second language as well; sometimes it might be even enough to talk with the child in a language they did not refuse to use and ask them to explain the reason for this silence. Children are able to explain the reason

for silence. The speaker referred to the case of a child who admitted that they did not like it in the Netherlands, did not intend to stay in the country and thus refused to learn Dutch. Another problem faced by parents of bilingual children is their poor vocabulary. This, of course, is just what it seems, since studies of vocabulary in one language do not show the real situation. Bilingual children know fewer words in one language than their monolingual peers; however, if we count the words in both languages, it turns out that they actually know far more.

After a break, the visitors attended a workshop by Dorine Verheijden-Lels began, who hosted a meeting on the role of parents in stimulating the development of children’s language in the context of multilingualism. Bożena Kopczyńska from the Amsterdam-based “Lokomotywa” Foundation presented scientists’, parents’ and teachers’ opinions regarding multilingualism. The participants expanded her lecture with their own thoughts based on their experience. This meeting was interactive and all participants liked it a lot.

### Summary

According to the opinions of the conference participants coming to The Hague, each meeting offers an unusual atmosphere, in which they can always learn something new or have the opportunity to look at an already known topic from a different perspective. We are, of course, very pleased with such feedback and this year we are planning yet another meeting with Dutch teachers, because we are convinced that the most important thing is to work at the grassroots level and to understand the needs of students and teachers in the best possible way.

Both organisers and volunteers who help to make these meetings a reality, consider the conversations with participants and their comments to be crucial for the event. Building a network of contacts and promoting Polish education is also another great value brought by the event.

The “Understanding Bilingualism” conferences resulted in publishing materials for working with students, collecting literature on bilingualism and multilingualism available in the Netherlands, as well as establishing many valuable contacts with people connected with institutions and organisations that take care of Polish children and youth. The results of these activities are manifold, including for example inviting mentors with presentations for parents and teachers to Dutch schools and keeping in touch with the “Kreda” Foundation in Lisse.

The example of the Hague conference inspired the Polish community in Rome and a year ago, in cooperation with the School Consultation Point at the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Rome, a methodological conference for Italian teachers was organised for the first time. Like in the Netherlands, it was met with great interest. A school in Prague would also like to organise such a meeting, and we will be happy to help them with the content.

“A common language is the hardest to master among all the languages” – this quotation is understandable to people who left their homeland and sometimes can sound even

bitter. However, we hope that after five years of cooperation with people involved in the education of Polish children in the Netherlands, we have managed to reach a common understanding with at least some of them and it is now easier for both our students and their teachers to learn and work together. And this is the most important goal of our actions.

### Bibliography

- Bouwend aan een toekomst in Nederland*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], [https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2018/Bouwend\\_aan\\_een\\_toekomst\\_in\\_Nederland](https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2018/Bouwend_aan_een_toekomst_in_Nederland)
- Een kwart miljoen Polen in Nederland*, Metro, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 23.08.2018], <https://www.metronieuws.nl/nieuws/binnenland/2018/04/een-kwart-miljoen-polen-in-nederland>
- Poolse pubers uit beeld, Lectoraat onderzoekt integratie Poolse gezinnen in Nederland*, Bron, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 23.08.2018], <https://bron.fontys.nl/poolse-pubers-uit-beeld/>
- Poolse winnares Haags Kinderdictee ontzettend blij en trots*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], <https://www.omroepwest.nl/nieuws/2599765/Poolse-winnares-Haags-Kinderdictee-ontzettend-blij-en-trots>
- Program MENTOR, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], <https://www.kreda.nl/index.php/pl/edukacja-informacje-i-porady/mentor-ogolnie>
- Situatie Poolse kinderen in Nederland dringend aan verbetering toe* [retrieved on: 23.08.2018], <http://www.childrightsfocus.org/nl/situatie-poolse-kinderen-in-nederland-dringend-aan-verbetering-toe/>
- STEUR, A., *Codzienna dwujęzyczność*, Den Haag 2016.
- VAN DER LINDEN, E., KUIKEN, F., *Het succes van tweetalig opvoeden*, Leeuwen/Den Haag, 2012.
- Veel Poolse migranten blijven in Nederland*, 24.04.2018 [retrieved on: 29.08.2018], [https://www.scp.nl/Nieuws/Veel\\_Poolse\\_migranten\\_blijven\\_in\\_Nederland](https://www.scp.nl/Nieuws/Veel_Poolse_migranten_blijven_in_Nederland)
- VOGELS, R., GIJSBERTS, M., DEN DRAAK, M., *Poolse, Bulgaarse en Roemeense kinderen in Nederland. Een verkenning van hun leefsituatie, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*, Den Haag 2018.