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Experienced Learners from Generation Z and the Traditional Vision of the Good Language Teacher: On The Issue of Teacher Authenticity

Different societies have their own perspectives on the definition of *a good language teacher*, as their members attach varying degrees of importance to the different skills and personal qualities required for effective teaching. While available studies have identified numerous desired language and pedagogical competencies among educators, the dynamic post-pandemic reality has brought increased attention to the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students. This process inevitably involves emotional engagement from both educators and students. Consequently, there is a growing call for both groups to accept their true selves and act authentically in their educational interactions.

In response to the promotion of these values in education, this article aims to present the results of a study that sought to examine how experienced language students, representing Generation Z in Poland, define and evaluate authentic behaviours of their foreign language teachers. The participants of the study were asked to complete an online questionnaire containing both open and closed questions about their perceptions of their teachers' authenticity. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed a one-sided, unequivocally positive



perception of authenticity, both in the general sense and in relation to the educational context. Numerous positive traits, such as sincerity, openness, sense of humour and didactic expertise were recognised as characteristics of authentic language teachers.

Keywords: authenticity, experienced learner, foreign language learning, Generation Z, good language teacher

Słowa kluczowe: autentyczność, dobry nauczyciel języka obcego, doświadczony uczeń języka obcego, Generacja Z, nauczanie języka obcego

1. Introduction

As underlined by Bialystok (2015: 313), not only has authenticity been recently promoted as one of the most highly desirable traits among educators, but also “across much literature, being authentic is sometimes conflated with being a good teacher”. A similar point is raised by Kreber *et al.* (2007: 24), who refer specifically to publications on post-secondary education in the American context:

Recent North American literature in adult and higher education has attached value to authenticity and highlighted the significance of authenticity in teaching. “Authenticity” is seen, for example, to make individuals more whole, more integrated, more fully human, more aware, more content with their personal and professional lives, their actions more clearly linked to purpose, “empowered,” better able to engage in community with others, and so forth.

Promotion of authentic behaviours among educators is not only limited to scholarly literature (cf. Palmer, 1998; Cranton, 2001; Chickering, 2004; Kreber *et al.*, 2007), as *authenticity* has recently become a buzzword repeated in numerous popular science articles and guides for teachers (cf. Rogers, 2018; Comegys, 2022; Kaczegowicz, 2023). As suggested by Plust, Murphy and Joseph (2020: 2), the rising prominence of the authenticity discourse over the last two decades appears to signify an effort to address “the dissonance between teacher training content, personal values, and the realities of contemporary education”. Still, despite its popularity, as pointed out by Kreber *et al.* (2007), rarely is this term sufficiently defined, leaving room for varying interpretations of its meaning and significance. Consequently, this lack of clarity presents methodological challenges for researchers and hurdles for educators at the practical level:

(...) authenticity appears to have been recognized as a significant construct with respect to learning and development and teachers and students. How-

ever, as long as authenticity remains only vaguely understood and ill defined, which we suggest is the case at present, it is, in a strict sense, not feasible to articulate a persuasive rationale for why we should be concerned with the phenomenon in the first place. Moreover, it is awkward to talk about it with those who have not yet encountered this idea in either the literature they read or in discussions with colleagues; it is impossible to really critically reflect on its meaning let alone fully understand its implications; and, perhaps most importantly, it is difficult to create environments that might encourage greater authenticity among teachers (and learners) (Kreber *et al.*, 2007: 25).

Educators are thus encouraged to be *authentic* and numerous positive effects stemming from their *authentic* behaviours are described in the available literature; however, one may ask what is meant by *authentic* in a specific socio-educational context and how its conceptualisation should be tangibly manifested in pedagogic practice. Therefore, as reflection on the actual interpretation of *authenticity* seems to be a necessary step in any research on this topic, the primary objective of this paper is to present results of a study conducted with a group of experienced Polish learners of English as a foreign language, investigating their understanding of *authenticity* in the educational context and its alignment with the prevalent definitions in the existing literature. Additionally, recognising the presence of the potential link between authenticity and valuable teaching practices, the study aimed to examine how their understanding of *authenticity* fits within the prevalent perception of a good language teacher, as documented in numerous studies spanning from the 1980s.

The first section of this paper offers a literature overview, starting with a presentation of the evolution of the common perception of *the good language teacher*, with particular emphasis on the expectations of Generation Z language learners. Subsequently, the notion of *authenticity* is defined, both in the general sense and in its application to education. The next sections outline the study methodology and results. The paper concludes with a discussion section, offering some final remarks, pointing to limitations of the study, and indicating directions for further research on the topic of authenticity in education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining the good language teacher

As pointed out by Nosidlak (2021: 208), looking back on our school years and evaluating the work of teachers, we tend to label them as either “good” or “bad”:

Our assessments often align with those of our former schoolmates, allowing us to assume that there might be some kind of “a recipe” for a good teacher. Teachers themselves delve into the components of this recipe, wanting to understand both the expectations placed upon them by their students and how to teach as effectively as possible. Enhancing teaching effectiveness by defining the desired qualities and behaviours of a teacher also interests researchers who attempt to define the ideal teacher model themselves.¹

Finding such a “recipe” is not an easy task, not only due to the multitude of variables that can influence educational processes (cf. McDonough and Shaw, 1993), but also because of the dynamically changing reality around us. These changing expectations are also reflected in the approach to foreign language teaching dominant at a given point of time in a specific socio-educational context (Nosidlak, 2021). Therefore, it may be stated that the definition of *the good language teacher* is under constant construction.

During the time of the dominance of the grammar-translation method, language teachers were mainly assessed based on their teaching competences and the consequent progress of their students (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 1986). However, with the advent of the communicative method, there was a clear shift to highlighting the importance of interaction in the language classroom, including that between the teacher and their students. Already in literature from the 1980s, there is a notable emphasis on the importance not only of the teacher’s methods and techniques but also on their individual characteristics and personality traits (Thompson, 2007). For instance, in his publication from 1980, Allen (1980 in Brown, 2001: 429), next to “competent preparation leading to a degree in TESL”, enumerates the following, less tangible qualities of a good English teacher: being passionate about the English language, exploiting critical thinking skills, the persistent urge for self-development, self-discipline, readiness to make a constant effort, cultural adaptability, professional citizenship, and a feeling of excitement about the job of teaching.

As one can observe from reviewing the results of studies from the 1990s, the insights of students, as those being directly involved in the educational process, were already considered especially valuable for researchers studying the impact of teacher traits and behaviours on the effectiveness of educational processes. An example of such research is the study by Brown and McIntyre from 1993, where high school students were asked to characterise the best teachers. Here, one can note an increasing emphasis on so-called “soft skills” and on the quality of relationship between the teacher and students – next to didactic competences (e.g. presenting lessons

¹ All the translations are mine, KN.

in an interesting and motivating manner, providing clear instructions and specifications of educational goals, manifesting the ability to use their personal talents in working with students). The following qualities of a good teacher were enumerated, among others, by the study participants: the ability to create a pleasant atmosphere during classes, understanding students' capabilities and limitations, the ability to develop a personal and mature relationship with students.

In a different study involving the same age group, Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996) underscored the significance of explicitly defined expectations and rules, along with the necessity of demonstrating mutual respect. The study participants also highlighted the importance of lesson preparation and dedication, emphasising that an effective teacher visibly enjoys their job and specifically took pleasure in working with them.

In the context of Polish education in twenty-first-century, research on the perceptions of the characteristics of good EFL teachers was conducted on a group of Polish adolescents by Nosidlak (2021). In her model of *the good language teacher*, sincerity and openness to acknowledge one's mistakes were accentuated. Additionally, the participants pointed to a number of desirable personality traits and their manifestations, including commitment, tolerance, self-confidence, creativity, passion, firmness, fairness, organisation skills, patience and respect. Some of the psychological competences of good language teachers, such as communicativeness, empathy, approachability, and authenticity, were also identified by Werbińska (2004), who, in her study, asked 290 teachers about their opinions on this matter.

Similar studies have been conducted in various educational contexts (cf., for example, Alzeebaree and Zebari 2021; Dinçer *et al.*; 2013, Vakili-fard and Keshavarz; 2024) and as can be inferred from their findings and the overview above, the latest research seems to confirm previous findings concerning students' expectations towards desirable skills, competences and behaviours in their teachers. However, while some of the ingredients of the student-composed recipe for *the good language teacher* remain constant over time, it is crucial to realise that this recipe is continually evolving. New competencies, personality traits, and teaching strategies are incessantly being integrated into the traditional framework.

2.1.1. Gen Z students and their expectations towards language teachers

As highlighted by Guçma (2012), the world around us and the dynamics of ongoing transformations significantly impact various areas of life, including education. In a similar vein, the constant evolution of *the good language*

teacher seems to be driven by the changing expectations of new generations entering educational institutions.

The current educational system is dominated by Generation Z, which, in the Polish context includes individuals born between the years 1995/1997 and 2012 (cf. Dąbrowska-Prokopowska and Nowacki, 2020; Łukasiński and Nigbor-Drożdż, 2022), so its representatives can be found in educational institutions ranging from primary schools to universities. As underlined by Dąbrowska-Prokopowska and Nowacki (2020), in Poland there may be several years of flexibility in establishing the starting point of this generation, related to the delay in the adaptation of information technologies in this country. Nevertheless, the authors believe that characteristic features of Generation Z in Poland are basically aligned with trends observed in the United States and Western European countries.

As outlined by Nosidlak (2021), Generation Z constitutes the first generation that has been familiarised with technology from birth. As digital natives, representatives of Generation Z handle smartphones and tablets with ease. They attach great importance to education and self-improvement. Nonetheless, school in the traditional sense is just one of many sources of information for them. They harbour ambitious aspirations, envisioning substantial accomplishments with a global influence, but they also prioritise their personal life over work, look for quick results and are characterised by a great deal of impatience. As pointed out by sociologists (cf. Ernst & Young, 2022), representatives of this generation assign importance to social relationships, manifest a strong need for contact with peers, and exhibit openness and directness in human interactions. On the other hand, “a significant part of their lives unfolds on the Internet – they are geared towards quick and efficient information retrieval, making virtual reality a source of knowledge and a platform for sharing that knowledge” (Nosidlak, 2021: 208).

Interestingly, the latest sociological research indicates that Generation Z, despite being submerged in the virtual world, highly values authenticity in their relationships. In 2021, Ernst & Young conducted a study aimed at determining the most important values for Generation Z. The survey involved 1,509 American representatives of this generation. According to the participants’ declarations, authenticity is the value they prized most highly. An astounding 92% of respondents considered being authentic and living in harmony with oneself as extremely or very important².

² It is essential to note here that this study was conducted in the United States, and, as demonstrated by Kokkoris and Kühnen (2014), the definition of *authenticity*, and consequently its perception, is influenced by a given cultural context.

2.2. On the notion of *authenticity*

The first challenge faced by those interested in research on the role of authenticity in teaching is the definition of the term itself (cf. Kreber *et al.*, 2007; Smuk, 2009). This challenge stems from its simultaneous presence in both academic and colloquial discourses, which result in a multitude of both scientific and individualised interpretations of authenticity. Therefore, similarly to *wisdom*, *intelligence* or *creativity*, *authenticity* belongs to the group of concepts that are measured or assessed differently, depending on their assumed conceptualisation (Kreber, 2013). As underlined by Bachmann (1991: 689), “[w]hen we try to define ‘authenticity’, however, we notice that it is one of these words like ‘real’ (as in ‘He’s really real’) that sounds good but leaves us wondering exactly what it means”.

In their respective literature reviews, both Bialystok (2015) and Kreber *et al.* (2007) highlight various perspectives – i.e., philosophical, ethical, social, and personal – on authenticity. These perspectives further contribute to a multitude of definitions of this concept, especially when understood as a characteristic of an individual. For instance, Bialystok (2015) highlights that establishing the authenticity of inanimate objects, such as a pearl, a Van Gogh painting, or Armani perfume, is a relatively straightforward task. However, challenges emerge when attempting to grasp how this characteristic translates to humans:

To be coherent, being an authentic person would have to mean ‘being myself’ in some way while imagining that it is possible for me to not ‘be myself.’ If we can’t be inauthentic, it is pointless to trumpet the value of being authentic. While we may have vague ideas about the differences here, when we subject our experience of personal identity to philosophical scrutiny, we find no bright lines (Bialystok, 2015: 314).

When applied to humans, authenticity is often intertwined with concepts such as identity (e.g. Cottingham, 2010), sincerity (e.g. Trilling, 1972), morality (Taylor, 1991), stability/coherence (Bialystok, 2015), and integrity (Palmer, 1998). Nevertheless, these associations provoke further profound philosophical and ethical inquiries, which prompt reflection on self-definition (*What/who am I? What defines me?*), aspirations and self-growth (*Who do I aspire to become, and what does that reveal about me? What if I want to be different than I am?*), the impact of external influences on one’s self-perception (*Am I who I am by choice, or is it shaped by external expectations?*), and the maintenance of authenticity amid life changes, flaws, and societal pressures (*In the presence of flaws and negative traits, should I still*

strive for authenticity? Should I deviate from my true self due to personal reluctance or societal pressures?). As emphasised by Bialystok (2015), while acknowledging that it is difficult to address these doubts fully, such contemplations enable us to expand our perception of authenticity, moving beyond the predominantly positive perspective often associated with this concept.

2.2.1. Authenticity in teaching

Similar terminological challenges emerge while discussing authenticity within the educational context (cf. Smuk, 2009). As underlined by De Bruyckere and Kirschner (2016: 1), authenticity is widely considered a cornerstone for effective learning and education:

Authenticity is seen by many as a key for good learning and education. There is talk of authentic instruction, authentic learning, authentic problems, authentic assessment, authentic tools and authentic teachers. The problem is that while authenticity is an often-used adjective describing almost all aspects of teaching and learning, the concept itself is not very well researched.

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the available literature reveals four primary trends in the application of the adjective *authentic* to describe teachers (cf. Bialystok, 2015; Kreber *et al.*, 2007; Kreber, 2013, Smuk, 2009). Firstly, authenticity tends to be linked to being a certified teacher with the right authority to teach a specific subject. Authenticity understood in this sense is similar to the authenticity assigned to inanimate objects, as it requires teachers to possess certain tangible attributes. In the educational context, authenticity involves the expertise required to teach a specific subject, validated by an appropriate diploma or certificate. Such standardisation, also believed to be characteristic of good language teachers (cf. Section 2.1.), is supposed to ensure that the teacher will adhere to established educational standards, possess pedagogical knowledge, and demonstrate proficiency in the subject matter.

The second perspective on the topic of authenticity in education may be linked to the application of specific, expert-endorsed “authentic” teaching methods. Bialystok claims (2015, p. 4):

For several decades, authenticity has been touted as an essential ingredient of good education: contemporary educators are expected to develop authentic learning environments, authentic assessments, and authentic pedagogy, not to mention cultivate authenticity in their students (Bonnett 1978; Mar-

tel 1989; Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran 1996; Palmer 1998; Splitter 2009; Ashton 2010; Kreber 2013).

Yet, as indicated by Bialystok (2015), the application of such “authentic methods” does not automatically make the teacher in question authentic³. Moreover, as already hinted, the incessant promotion of everything deemed *authentic* raises critical questions about the practical implications and effectiveness of such a pedagogy.

Another view on a teacher’s authenticity seems reflect the common perception of an authentic person, i.e., it emphasises alignment with one’s true self. While rooted in philosophy (cf. Varga and Guignon, 2023), this perception of the term is also prevalent in popular science, non-specialist discourse, and various online publications for teachers:

Authenticity means accepting who you are and what you do well, and having the courage and self-confidence to share that in the world (Lyons, 2021).

Being your true authentic self means what you say in life aligns with what your actions (Foust, n.d.).

The word authenticity is defined as real, genuine, true, accurate and original. So, at its most basic level, being an authentic person means being yourself – a complicated task, especially if you are a teacher (Fidler and Ramos, 2023).

These definitions frequently highlight diverse positive associations typically linked with the term, also within the context of educational practices. This inclination is evident in the systematic review of qualitative research on teacher authenticity conducted by Plust, Murphy and Joseph (2020). The review identifies numerous positive characteristics attributed to authentic educators, encompassing, among others, a caring and genuine approach toward students, openness in relationships, a sincere interest in getting to know their pupils, and the expression of trust.

Lastly, the most elusive perspective posits that an authentic teacher seamlessly integrates the role into their identity, viewing teaching as an inherent part of themselves (Kreber et al., 2007). In practical terms, this implies that an authentic teacher finds true fulfilment while following

³ In a similar vein, Smuk (2009) refers to “authentic materials”, which, within the context of foreign language pedagogy, encompass various materials in the target language used in a language classroom, but originally created for native speakers of this language.

their calling, i.e. teaching. This perspective on authenticity is frequently articulated through phrases such as “a teacher by calling” or “a born teacher”.

As we explore these perspectives, it becomes evident that the notion of *authenticity*, whether referring to the broader human experience or the specific role of a teacher, requires deeper reflection and defies a singular definition. This conclusion is also confirmed by Smuk (2009), who accentuates the fluidity and polysemy of *authenticity*, reflected likewise in the context of glottodidactic research.

3. Method

3.1. Research aims and questions

As hinted above, the way individuals perceive and evaluate authenticity can differ based on their cultural and social backgrounds. This observation paves the way for exploring this concept within various cultural contexts. Thus, this research project primarily aimed to gain an understanding of how *authenticity* is interpreted by experienced language learners from Generation Z, particularly within the context of Polish higher education. In accordance with the adopted research goals, the following research questions were posed:

- (1) How do experienced language learners representing Generation Z in the Polish educational context define authenticity/being authentic?
- (2) In their opinion, how does an authentic teacher behave? How is his/her authenticity manifested in a language classroom?
- (3) How does participants' perception of teachers' authenticity align with the set of characteristics commonly attributed to good language teachers?

3.2. Participants

To ensure participation of experienced and successful language learners, as those who, most likely, either have the longest and/or the most valuable learning experiences, invitations to partake in the study were sent via email to students of English Philology at a Polish university. Out of 24 participants, 23 represented Generation Z (i.e. fitted into the group of those born between 1995 and 2010), and their answers were selected for the analysis. Precisely, the age of the participants ranged from 19 to 24 and they represented

all five years of both full-time (52%) and extramural studies (48%). Most of them were women (78%), in comparison to 17% of men and 5% declaring a different gender.

3.3. Procedure

The whole research procedure was conducted in June 2023. The study participants were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire in Polish, which included both closed and open questions, resembling a written interview. Considering the complex nature of the topic, as pointed out by Kreber *et al.* (2007), in similar projects, researchers dealing with the concept of authenticity usually adopt two strategies – either they impose a single definition of authenticity on the study participants, or they allow them to interpret the term at their discretion. Naturally, both strategies have methodological implications. Given the research aims specified above, the study employed both of these strategies. Consequently, the questionnaire was divided into two parts – the first part aimed to examine how the participants defined *authenticity*, while the second provided a definition of *authenticity* for the students to refer to when answering the questions about its perception and importance. This definition was composed by the author herself in such a way that it reflects the most common understanding of the term, as presented in Section 2.2., and reads as follows:

The term “being authentic” can be defined as being true to oneself, living in accordance with one’s beliefs about what is most important in life, being the most genuine version of one’s self. On the other hand, “being an authentic teacher” is related to being such a person in a professional context, i.e., being oneself, showing one’s true self while conducting lessons, in contact with students, and with school/university staff.

By providing the participants with this description, a common understanding of the concept was ensured, which is especially important while exploring perceptions of a given phenomenon.

3.4. Analysis

To address the research questions specified above, a thematic content analysis of the responses provided by students to the open-ended prompts was conducted using NVivo Software. This type of analysis was selected, as it involves examining patterns within qualitative data to identify key themes (cf.

Krippendorff, 2003; Saldana, 2009). In addition, the responses to the closed questions were quantitatively summarised to establish the primary trends within the surveyed group of participants. However, it is important to note here that due to the limited number of participants, formulating statistically significant conclusions was not feasible.

4. Research findings

The following section presents the key research findings, organised according to the topics covered in the questionnaire and aligning with the research questions outlined above.

The first part of the questionnaire allowed for the collection of qualitative data, offering insight into participants' general understanding of the term *authenticity* and their perception of *authentic* behaviours of the (language) teacher. When analysing the answers to the first prompt (*Describe what you understand by "being authentic"/"being an authentic person"*), it was possible to notice a tendency, which is also visible in the literature – namely, that the students provided rather general, imprecise definitions of the term:

S[tudent]2: [Being authentic involves] not pretending to be someone else, just being oneself.

S7: Behaving in a way that's natural for oneself.

S12: I think that being authentic is based on being genuine.

S16: Being natural.

The choice of such broad, abstract concepts raises further questions about the participants' understanding of the terms like "true", "genuine", "natural" or "being yourself".

Another noticeable trend that emerged during analysis indicated that the majority of respondents attributed a range of positive traits to authentic individuals, with sincerity and truthfulness being most often mentioned.

S4: [Being authentic is about] being fair to others and oneself, being someone sincere.

S5: Honesty, openness, understanding, being open to experiences, the ability to adapt to a group while still maintaining one's own 'self' (not pretending to be someone one is not; pretending quickly burns a person out).

S9: In my opinion, an authentic person is someone who is not afraid to speak the truth or hear criticism, is aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and generally has a fixed mindset.

S12: I think that being authentic is based on being true, supportive, helpful, and someone you can rely on.

S15: [Such a person] display[s] sincere reactions and sincere facial expressions, speak[s] openly about what he/she thinks.

Furthermore, authentic individuals were even described as good and/or guided by moral principles:

S7: [Being authentic is about] following your moral principles.

S23: Being true to your ideals, showing your human side.

In addition to this, some respondents believed that being authentic entails a degree of rebellion, a refusal to submit, and/or an avoidance of imitation of others. Authentic individuals were described as those who refuse to wear a 'mask' and are open in expressing their emotions.

S9: By 'being authentic,' I understand expressing oneself, one's opinions, one's passions, and not hiding behind a mask created specifically for the audience, that is society.

S13: Not pretending or conforming to the expectations of others.

S18: They [authentic people] don't put on a 'mask' or play a role to conceal their true feelings. Being authentic means that a person doesn't hide their feelings and emotions they are experiencing at a given moment.

S20: Not pretending to be someone else just to gain someone's approval.

When analysing the definitions provided by the study participants, it became evident that an individual's authenticity was often evaluated based on their behaviours, which were also the main focus of the next prompt in the questionnaire (*In your opinion, how does an authentic teacher behave?*). Thematic analysis of the gathered descriptions enabled the identification of three groups of behaviours employed in the students' assessments of teachers' authenticity, namely: (1) behaviours reflecting teachers' attitude towards students; (2) teaching strategies and/or methods that are associated with authenticity; and finally, the most general group, namely (3) behaviours perceived as authentic and linked to a specific personality trait.

The first collection of quotations suggests that authenticity of a language teacher is manifested in the way they treat and approach their students. On the one hand, authentic teachers are believed to do this with genuineness and a touch of humour.

S2: A truly authentic teacher is devoid of pretension, exhibits the ability to jest with students and to engage in conversations on diverse topics with

them; [such a teacher] reveals their genuine self, fostering an environment where they are truly known for who they are.

On the other hand, they maintain boundaries, ensuring a professional and respectful demeanour while fostering an authentic connection with students.

S20: This authentic teacher doesn't pretend that everything is always okay but, importantly, upholds healthy boundaries.

The issue of "authenticity within certain boundaries" was also raised by other study participants:

S5: Such a teacher is open and can also admit if he/she is going through a tough time or having a bad day (this is important, as it lets the group/person know that the teacher's behaviour is not acting out but rather a [result of a certain] personal experience). He/she can express herself/himself while maintaining boundaries of good taste (...).

This view appears to clash with the opinions of other participants, who unconditionally linked teachers' authenticity to sincerity and naturalness.

S14: Such teachers behave naturally in the classroom and consistently show genuine reactions toward students.

S19: [He/she] maintains a natural connection with students, doesn't pretend or manipulate, shares a part of themselves, such as hobbies or passions; behaves authentically.

S22: [He/she] does not pretend to be "tough" to gain authority over students.

Interestingly enough, some specific overall positive behaviours towards students that appear unrelated to authenticity were ascribed to authentic teachers. These included being fair and treating students equally, not making promises without the intention of keeping them, recognising students' individuality and adjusting to their needs. These manifestations of authenticity are linked to the next group of quotations, illustrating how, in the participants' opinion, authentic educators approach their job of teaching. Here the participants mentioned using humour as a teaching tool (S10: [He/she] *inserts jokes, comments related to [...] the topic [of the lesson] and his/her approach to the issue [e.g., Shakespeare is boring]*); sharing their real interests and opinions with students for teaching purposes (S20: [He/she] *talks about his interests when appropriate and provides examples from life (...). If he/she asks about recommending something or writes down a title,*

he/she later checks and reads/watches it. [He/she] doesn't pretend to be interested in something.; S21: [He/she] is honest in how he/she conveys information. S22: [He/she] is open to conversation on various topics and can illustrate book examples with real situations.) and teaching with passion and enthusiasm (S5: [...] *it is also evident that he is genuinely passionate about what he does; S6: If someone is a teacher by vocation, they will undoubtedly share their passion with students, and this will be a manifestation of authenticity.*). This excitement for teaching was linked with one's potential for promoting authenticity and self-confidence among students, as illustrated in the following quotation by Student 9:

S9: An authentic teacher, through their enthusiastic approach to teaching, allows their students to express themselves and in this way teaches them to be authentic as well. Such a teacher is sincere and, although can sometimes change their mind, is generally stable in their beliefs, inspiring trust. An authentic teacher understands that making mistakes is a human trait and shares this view with their students. This makes them an inspiration for students who previously believed they should always be perfect.

Moreover, authentic teachers were also described as honest about their limitations (S20: [He/she] *does not pretend to know something.*) and faithful to their didactic beliefs and philosophy (S21: [He/she] *conducts lessons according to what he/she believes is the best way.*).

Finally, the last group of quotations refers to general behaviours perceived as characteristic of authentic language teachers. Once again, acting with sincerity and honesty was the most often mentioned behaviour.

S1: Based on his/her behaviour, I can read his mood; I recognise that his emotions are genuine, and he does not pretend his reactions.

S3: [He/she] expresses his opinion without hesitation.

S12: An authentic teacher is not falsely nice.

Other descriptions also pointed to assertiveness, being polite and being able to control emotions, as well as not considering oneself above others.

Looking at all these examples of positive traits and behaviours, the distribution of answers to the closed questions exploring students' general perception of authenticity and its role in education is not surprising. In the study, 78% of the participants regarded authenticity as a positive trait, with none expressing negative associations with the term. Likewise, 74% of the students held a positive view of teachers' authenticity, while the remaining 26% indicated that their perception may vary based on specific situations. Lastly, a substantial 91% of the respondents affirmed their definite

preference for an authentic English teacher (*I would definitely want my English teacher to be authentic*), with the remaining 9% indicating a probable inclination (*I would most likely want my English teacher to be authentic*).

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

The conclusions stemming from the above literature review and the qualitative analysis of the collected data have been divided in accordance with the research questions. Each question will be discussed in turn.

(1) How do experienced language learners representing Generation Z in the Polish educational context define authenticity/being authentic?

Generation Z language learners tend to employ abstract and vague terms while describing authenticity, prompting a need for further clarification and raising additional questions. This aligns with the philosophical nature of the term, as also evidenced in academic literature (cf. Kreber *et al.*, 2007; Bialystok 2015; Smuk, 2009). In the study, *authenticity* was defined through complimentary statements, and a range of unequivocally positive traits and behaviours was attributed to authentic individuals – a tendency also reflected in the commonly distributed discourse (cf. Section 2.2.1.). These individuals were believed to be characterised by their genuine and sincere self-expression, embodying commendable qualities such as truthfulness, supportiveness, and helpfulness. The association of authenticity with fairness, honesty, openness and adaptability further illustrates the positive attributes linked to this concept. Authentic individuals were perceived as guided by moral principles, rejecting conformity, and expressing emotions openly. Notably, authenticity was portrayed as a construct devoid of negative associations.

Overall, authenticity was conceptualised as a multifaceted construct encompassing, on the one hand, individual sincerity and adherence to ethical principles on the other. This positive, one-sided framing illustrates a rather simplified way of perceiving authenticity, ignoring the fact that authentic behaviours may, at times, involve the manifestation of both positive and negative traits, reflecting the inherent complexity of human nature.

(2) In their opinion, how does an authentic language teacher behave? How is his/her authenticity manifested in a language classroom?

The positive view of *authenticity* was also visible in the participants' perception of authentic behaviours in teaching, aligning with the findings observed by Plust, Murphy and Joseph (2020). These behaviours could be assigned to three distinct categories: attitudes towards students, implemented teaching strategies and behaviours linked to specific personality traits. In terms of their personal characteristics, authentic language teachers

were described as sincere, truthful, and guided by moral principles. They were reported to have a good sense of humour, as well as to be open and genuine in their interactions with students. These traits were believed not only to be manifested in the way in which such teachers treat and approach their students, but also in didactic choices and teaching styles. Authentic language teachers, in the participants' opinion, use humour as a teaching tool, share personal interests and opinions for teaching purposes and teach with passion and enthusiasm, fostering a positive learning environment and promoting authenticity among their learners.

(3) How does participants' perception of teachers' authenticity align with the set of characteristics commonly attributed to good language teachers?

Both qualitative and quantitative data suggests that the participants overwhelmingly recognise authenticity as a positive trait, both in general (being a good person) and specifically in the context of language teaching (being a good, effective teacher). The definitions and descriptions provided by the participants clearly show that they link authenticity to a number of traits assigned to good language teachers (cf. Table 1). Moreover, as indicated in Table 1, students from Generation Z continue to attribute value to qualities recognised as desirable for language teachers in studies dating back to the 1980s, 1990s, and the early 2000s. This suggests a sustained and enduring appreciation for some of the components of the traditionally established model of a good language teacher.

Table 1. The link between traits of a good (language) teacher and the participants' perceptions of authenticity in teaching – selected examples

The good (foreign language) teacher – characteristics identified in research	Perception of Authentic Teachers' Behaviours – quotes by the study participants
Being a passionate enthusiast of their job (Allen, 1980).	S5: (...) it is also evident that what he/she does genuinely excites him. S9: An authentic teacher, through their enthusiastic approach to teaching, allows their students to express themselves and in this way teaching them to be authentic as well.
Having continuous desire for self-improvement (Allen, 1980).	S13: [He/she] is open to development and reflection.
Manifesting ability to create a pleasant atmosphere during classes (Brown and McIntyre, 1993).	S5: It is definitely easier to communicate with an authentic teacher; the hierarchical boundary somewhat blurs, there is less fear in approaching such a teacher, communication is smoother, and the working atmosphere is more pleasant in this respect.

Table 1 – cont.

The good (foreign language) teacher – characteristics identified in research	Perception of Authentic Teachers' Behaviours – quotes by the study participants
Presenting lessons in an interesting and motivating manner (Brown and McIntyre, 1993).	S6: <i>An authentic teacher ,infects' students with their passion. This is the most motivating type of a teacher.</i>
Developing a personal and mature relationship with students (Brown and McIntyre, 1993).	S9: <i>A teacher who is authentic does not separate themselves from students by demanding unconditional respect and manners. An authentic teacher, through their demeanour, automatically gains students' respect, is confident, and knows that standing behind the desk, they look at individuals, not a mass.</i>
Having appropriate personality traits/psychological competencies towards students (communicativeness, empathy, approachability) (Nosidlak, 2021; Werbińska, 2004).	S13: <i>An authentic English teacher is characterised by authenticity, empathy, an individual approach to students, effective communication, as well as passion and commitment to teaching.</i>
Setting rational demands (Brown and McIntyre, 1993).	S5: <i>[He/she] can convey knowledge in an accessible way, without unnecessary complications, while maintaining realistic expectations.</i>
Manifesting a flexible approach to students, understanding the student's situation, and the ability to empathise with it (Thompson, 2007).	S16: <i>[He/she] understands that students are not robots and treats them like people.</i>
Being sincere and open to acknowledge one's mistakes (Nosidlak, 2021)	S9: <i>An authentic teacher, through their enthusiastic approach to teaching, allows their students to express themselves and in this way teaches them to be authentic as well. Such a teacher is sincere and, although can sometimes change their mind, is generally stable in their beliefs, inspiring trust. An authentic teacher understands that making mistakes is a human trait and shares this view with their students. This makes them an inspiration for students who previously believed they should always be perfect.</i>

To sum up, the author of this paper believes that the research findings presented above not only broaden our comprehension of how learners perceive *authenticity* in teaching but also allow for a better understanding of their expectations towards the behaviours and traits of good language teachers. These findings may be valuable for educational practitioners seeking to understand and promote authenticity in their teaching

practices. Further research could explore the impact of perceived teacher authenticity on student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall classroom dynamics.

It has to be acknowledged that the research project is not free from certain limitations. First, it was conducted in a specific setting which limits the generalisability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Secondly, the study included only 23 participants, and while thematic content analysis provides qualitative insights, the small sample size limits the statistical robustness of the findings. Additionally, thematic content analysis involves subjectivity in identifying patterns and themes which impacts the reliability and replicability of the analysis. Acknowledging these limitations, researchers and practitioners should interpret the findings cautiously when applying the results to other contexts, or when designing future studies.

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