

ARE CONTEMPORARY POLISH TEACHERS OF ENGLISH  
DEMOCRATIC OR AUTHORITARIAN – TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS: A SURVEY

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1. Introduction

Theoretically, contemporary foreign language teaching is in striking opposition to the so-called "traditional" audiolingual or grammar-translation methods. The differences can be observed not only in the way modern handbooks are organized, but also in the way that the teacher's and learner's roles in the process of L2 learning are perceived. Communicative Language Teaching, for example, one of the most advocated contemporary approaches, has completely broken with the idea of students' being passive recipients of external stimuli usually provided by the teacher. The learners are required to actively participate not only in activities assigned by the teacher, but, through a needs analysis procedure, they are also expected to contribute to the design of the syllabus. Evidently, the focus in the classroom should change from being teacher-centered to being learner-centered. However, the teacher's role is modified rather than diminished.

One aspect of the teacher's function which especially deserves investigation is called the *teaching or management style*. It refers specifically to the teacher's role as an organizer of classroom work, and can be critical in determining his or her adopted approach to teaching.

Traditionally, methodologists divide the organizational element into two general styles: *authoritarian* and *democratic*. The terms were initially applied in studies of children's club groups under various types of leaders. The investigators identified consistent differences in the behavior of the children depending on the form of leadership. Where the leader had established a democratic orga-

nization, the members had the highest morale, phrased their comments in terms of “we” rather than “I”, and generally there was a lot of friendly interaction among them. Under authoritarian leaders intergroup aggression was highest; and, although the children worked hard, they stopped working and disintegrated as soon as the leader left the clubroom (Havighurst – Neugarten 1967: 462). The distinction between the two styles was then transferred to other educational settings and became the basis for the investigation of management styles in different classrooms.

## 2. Definitions and categories

Numerous scholars have attempted to define the established teaching styles, some providing extended descriptions, others modifying the categories. According to Morrison and McIntyre, the *authoritarian* style implies a “teacher-centered classroom, with high teacher dominance, formal class teaching, convergent thinking, competitiveness, relatively high punitiveness, low pupil verbal and physical activity, and teacher-directed communication” (Morrison – McIntyre 1972: 133). *Democratic* teaching, on the other hand, is associated with learner-centeredness, “less teacher dominance, pupil participation in class decisions, stress on pupils’ ideas and divergent thinking, greater concern for individual needs for instruction, high pupil verbal and physical activity, co-operation, group structuring, and more open teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil communication” (Morrison – McIntyre 1972: 133).

Komorowska (1993) treats the two styles as extremes of a continuum along which other modes of teacher behavior exist. According to her description, an *authoritarian* teacher assumes full responsibility for the class; therefore, he or she formulates teaching aims and devises lesson plans. The teacher issues orders without consulting the class and, what’s more, requires obedience in carrying them out. On the one hand, this system ensures very good results as students are frightened and learn to avoid punishment. In the long run, however, they lose their motivation, feel constrained and stressed, which negatively affects their fluency. Moreover, because they are totally controlled by the teacher, they become lazy and dependent. As a result, when no longer forced to learn, they become rather helpless and are not ready to take responsibility for their learning (Komorowska 1993: 37).

The *democratic* teaching style consists in establishing very strict boundaries of the teacher’s requirements below which no student may step. Within the boundaries the instructor specifies the objectives learners are to achieve allowing for the negotiation of all the remaining issues. This approach is guaranteed to cover the basic material ensuring the learners’ freedom to choose the manner and pace of learning. Furthermore, if the teacher acts consistently and does not

cross the lower limits, the democratic style helps avoid conflicts with students (Komorowska 1993: 37).

Somewhere between the two extremes, but closer to the autocratic approach, is the *paternalistic* or *persuasive* style. Like the authoritarian, paternalistic teachers determine the objectives and rules of action; however, they make the effort to explain to students why these aims are valid and essential, why their means of achieving them are beneficial and effective. In other words, they do give orders and take decisions themselves, but justify them, making sure the learners understand their, in fact, authoritarian behavior (Komorowska 1993: 37).

*Consultative* teachers lean more towards the democratic style because they not only provide grounds for their decisions, but may consider changing them if pupils request it. Thus students are invited to participate in determining how much homework they are able to do or what day would suit them best to write a test. This kind of student participation is completely rejected by autocratic and paternalistic instructors as they would be afraid of losing their authority in the classroom (Komorowska 1993: 38).

Still more democratic-like style, *participatory*, is characterized by the teacher’s consulting the learners before taking significant decisions. Students’ suggestions may not always be congruent with the teacher’s ideas, but it is the teacher who finally decides. Many instructors, however, abandon this management style in favor of autocratic because they often feel obliged to fulfill their pupils’ expectations (Komorowska 1993: 38).

Some methodologists use a slightly different terminology when describing leadership styles. Anderson and Brewer (1946) approach the issue of teaching style from the perspective of teacher-students interaction in terms of small units of behavior. They distinguish two kinds of contacts made by the teacher, *dominative* and *integrative*, which to a degree correspond to authoritarian and democratic behavior, respectively. Dominative contacts by teachers include “calling to attention; giving warnings or reminders; making gratuitous judgements for a child; lecturing; refusing, denying, or contradicting ...; giving approval or disapproval of required work; and granting permission” (Anderson – Brewer 1946, after Havighurst – Neugarten 1967: 463). Integrative contacts entail “extending invitation to a child; helping to define, redefine, or advance a problem; giving approval of spontaneous or self-initiated behavior of child; questioning of possible, though not expressed, interest of child; admitting own responsibility for own act that is inconvenient, unjust, or unfair to another, or admitting own ignorance or incapacity” (Anderson – Brewer 1946, after Havighurst – Neugarten 1967: 464).

Similarly, Amidon and Flanders apply different terms to refer to what may seem autocratic or democratic behavior. According to their description, *direct*

teachers are those who use techniques restricting students' participation, e.g., lecturing, giving directions, criticizing, justifying authority. *Indirect* teachers, on the other hand, promote pupils' freedom of participation by accepting their feelings, praising and encouraging them, using their ideas, and asking questions expecting students to answer (Amidon – Flanders 1963, after Havighurst – Neugarten 1967: 465).

There are scholars, however, for whom the distinction between authoritarian and democratic teachers is vague and ill-defined. Ryans (1960) denies the idea of teacher types while concentrating on the patterns of the teachers' behavior that characterize their teaching. Through a systematic observation of a great number of teachers he specified three general ways in which the behavior may differ:

warm, understanding, friendly	vs.	aloof, egocentric, restricted behavior
responsible, businesslike, systematic	vs.	evading, unplanned, slipshod behavior
stimulating, imaginative	vs.	dull, routine behavior (after Ryans 1960: 77).

However, despite such attempts at abolishing the traditional division, when analyzing teacher management style, methodologists usually resort to the basic distinction between authoritarian, or autocratic, and democratic behavior. This contrast has also been used in the survey described below.

### 3. The survey

Having presented different viewpoints on the question of management style, we can now try to relate them to the existing situation at schools. Are contemporary Polish teachers of English democratic, as they presumably should be, or do they lean more towards the authoritarian type? How are they perceived by their pupils? How do they perceive themselves? Are the teachers' definitions of the two teaching styles congruent with those of the students'? Finally, which style is considered more effective? Finding answers to these questions has been the aim of a research project carried out among high school and academic teachers and learners. Twelve different instructors were interviewed (ranging from young college graduates to experienced lecturers at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań; teachers from public as well as private high schools; male and female instructors). All of them were asked three questions:

1. What is the difference between an authoritarian and democratic teacher?

2. Which type is more effective?
3. What kind of teacher are you?

The teachers had not been informed about the questions before the interview took place, so their answers were completely spontaneous.

Similarly, the same teachers' pupils aged 16-21 (ranging from absolute beginners, through intermediate to upper intermediate and advanced students) were asked to express their opinions by filling in a questionnaire in which they were to do the following tasks:

1. Decide whether your English teacher is authoritarian or democratic. If you can't be positive, think if he/she leans more towards the democratic or authoritarian type.<sup>1</sup>
2. Give three examples of your teacher's behavior that makes you consider him/her democratic/authoritarian.
3. What kind of behavior should your teacher exhibit in order to be the opposite type?
4. Which kind of teacher, authoritarian or democratic, is better able to help you learn English?

Like teachers, the pupils had not been told about the nature of the questions they were going to answer. Besides, they had been assured that the instructors would not see their responses, so we can assume that the students were truthful.

### 4. The teachers

The interviews with the teachers of English have revealed a number of interesting facts. First of all, out of 12 instructors only one admitted she was wholly authoritarian, four considered themselves entirely democratic, while as many as seven (that is 58%) claimed they could be both depending on the situation (students' level, behavior, attitude to L2 learning). This comes as a surprise because methodologists seem to suggest that teachers can normally be characterized by one style only, or if their behavior is a mixture of the two types, only one tends to predominate, regardless of the level students represent (Havighurst – Neugarten 1967: 464). In other words, the teaching types are related to personality. While it is believed that personality is relatively constant even over the various roles an individual plays (Morrison – McIntyre 1972: 35), the majority of the interviewees maintained they are rather flexible and adaptable.

<sup>1</sup> The two terms were purposefully not explained to the students. It was assumed that at the age of 16 they should already have an idea of what these terms generally refer to. Besides, the learners were to provide their own definitions of the two types of behavior, so they could not be directed by the researcher.

When describing the management styles, all the instructors agreed that authoritarian teachers take full responsibility for the organization of classes, impose materials and techniques of teaching and learning, and often their points of view on various issues. Some emphasized the big distance between such teachers and their pupils, with students being not infrequently treated in an inferior manner. Others pointed to the oppression introduced by autocratic principles, underlining the fact that learners may be mobilized to work hard, but they cannot be motivated by negative reinforcement. Authoritarian teachers were seen as relying heavily on pre-established lesson plans and syllabi, and as being preoccupied with regular testing. Still, the majority of the interviewees admitted that there also existed great advantages in this approach. Primarily, authoritarian teachers are strict, consistent, demanding, usually feel very self-confident and know their subject and methods well; therefore, they will, in most cases, achieve their aim (make students learn systematically and do their homework, and maintain discipline in class). As mentioned above, one teacher (a highly qualified instructor with over 20 years of practice) claimed to be truly authoritarian. She bravely called the whole discussion about democracy "rubbish". For her a student can never be a teacher's partner because he or she lacks knowledge and experience. Thus, the weak and inexperienced pupil needs the teacher's care and guidance. It is the teacher who knows best what learners really need and want to learn and what techniques work most effectively for them. At the same time, however, she did not deny the students' right to express their opinions and think independently. She considered herself as friendly and helpful, but firm and demanding.

Even though the teacher described above thought that democratic behavior supported irresponsibility, negligence and ignorance on the part of the teacher, all of the other informants unanimously regarded it as a distant and unattainable ideal. In other words, though most of them maintained that they are partly authoritarian, their ultimate aim was to become wholly democratic teachers. In their descriptions, they concentrated on the learner-centeredness of this approach, pointing out partnership relations between teachers and students based on mutual respect, understanding and responsibility. The instructor was seen as the one who listens rather than talks, the one who suggests things rather than imposes, motivates through his or her own materials rather than discourages through the constant use of the dull handbook, the one who motivates by rewarding not by punishing, finally, the one who tries to be among students not in front of them. Thus students are given a lot of freedom, they can choose, for example, what they would rather do during next class, they are invited to freely present and defend their opinions, no matter whether the teacher shares them or not. Some interviewees claimed that in contrast to the authoritarian, the democratic teachers are student-friendly, and that their lessons are characterized by a

lot of communication, variety, spontaneity, improvisation and creativity as learners are not restricted by stiff rules and lesson plans. Nevertheless, some teachers accentuated the potential drawbacks of this style, especially students' abusing their freedom, or teachers' becoming too lenient and inconsistent. Two informants, remembering their teachers at school, risked a claim that democratic teachers are not respected by their pupils. In fact, many years after leaving school, students highly value the methods and behavior of autocratic instructors, while the more democratic teachers are judged as nice but ineffective. Still another informant, in a way confirming this statement, admitted that there are certain learner types that can only work under pressure. Does it mean that if we apply the criterion of effectiveness the authoritarian style wins?

Logically, the answers to the second and third questions the teachers were asked are exactly the same. That is, all the instructors try to adopt the style they regard as most effective for a given group. Therefore, the informant who was highly in favor of the authoritarian approach followed her autocratic principles and called herself authoritarian. Similarly, considering the democratic style as more advantageous, four other teachers tried to adhere to what they considered to be a democratic system. Obviously, the problem became more complex for those interviewees who perceived themselves as exhibiting both kinds of behavior. Three of the seven teachers admitted they are rather autocratic with beginning students. As they get to know their pupils better (their learning aptitude and attitude, the degree of their motivation, the potential for independent decision taking), the instructors may gradually move towards the democratic style. Additionally, students' age seems to play a role: the older the learners, the more mature and responsible they are; and, thus the more freedom they can expect from the teachers. Another teacher usually starts out with the democratic approach (she establishes a minimum level of students' knowledge and regularly tests them, but she allows her pupils to select reports' topics, useful vocabulary items, ways of presenting the subject and leading a class discussion). If students prove immature and irresponsible, if, as she put it, they have no will, she feels obliged to impose her will on them. Still another teacher described her teaching techniques as totally authoritarian, but her attitude to students as democratic. In other words, she takes most of the decisions about the lesson organization, but she is student-friendly. Though demanding, she thinks she can also be tolerant.

In conclusion, the majority of the interviewed teachers have no pre-established opinions about what kind of teaching style is most beneficial. According to what they say, they are able to adopt their behavior to a given group, often emphasizing that though democracy is the more advocated approach, a teacher can never be wholly democratic. Being at least partly authoritarian seems not only indispensable, but also unavoidable in contemporary L2 teaching.

## 5. The learners

The students' answers to the questionnaire did not entirely correspond to the teachers' perceptions of themselves. Out of 150 learners only 14 (that is 9,3%) called their instructors' style authoritarian, which is very distant from 66% of teachers (8 out of 12) claiming to be at least to a certain degree autocratic.

In the second and third task pupils were to come up with examples of their teachers' democratic and authoritarian behavior, in other words, they were to provide their own definitions of the two styles. And here again the students' opinions slightly differed from those of their instructors'. Just like teachers, students associated democracy with being allowed to express their opinions (19.3%), and to decide about the lesson or even the syllabus, generally to have a choice (22.6%). However, what the greatest number of students emphasized, was the teacher's *willingness to listen* to these opinions and suggestions, take them into account, respect them (36%). Similarly, 10% of the learners considered the teacher's making lessons interesting and modern, bringing his or her own materials, in short, they considered *introducing variety* as democratic. Pupils also pointed out the following significant features of this teacher type that were not mentioned by the teachers interviewed: approximately 24% characterized a democratic teacher as the one who always *helps when students do not understand something*, which included the teacher being willing to explain a problematic issue more than once if necessary. The democratic teacher does not mock or punish for lack of knowledge, but eagerly answers any questions. Some pupils (21%) highlighted the democratic teacher's *fairness, objectivity*, which indicated that they evaluated students on the basis of students' knowledge (not appearance, for example). About 20% maintained that democratic teachers *treat all their students the same*, do not categorize them, do not have their favorite and less favorite pupils, do not show their dislike of some and fondness of others. According to 20% of the learners a democratic teacher is *understanding, sympathetic and tolerant* (when students are tired or overworked he or she does not interview them, or may postpone a test, for instance). Some 18% claimed that such a teacher *does not impose his or her opinions, techniques of teaching and learning*, does not force pupils to perform a task, do homework, etc. Among other features of the democratic style the students also enumerated *treating the pupils seriously*, as intelligent, not inferior, beings (6%), *adopting the level of teaching and requirements to students' abilities* (4%), being *sincere and nice*, not malicious (4%), as well as *willingly admitting making a mistake* (4%). A few learners mentioned the teacher's *smiling a lot* (1.3%), and *not stressing his or her pupils* (2.6%).

When describing the authoritarian style, the respondents to a certain degree corroborated their teachers' statements. For 48% of students an autocratic instructor *does not take into account the learners' suggestions*, ignores them, or

may even refuse to listen to them. Instead, he or she *imposes his or her pace and techniques of teaching, takes all decisions*, in short, conducts classes as he or she likes it. Additionally, what none of the interviewees mentioned, such teachers consider themselves to be *the cleverest, always right, and most important in the classroom* (14%). Like their instructors, the learners observed that the authoritarian type usually *sticks to his or her lesson plans and syllabi, is not flexible* even if students ask, his or her purpose consists in covering a given amount of material (12%). This teacher is, therefore, very *strict, demanding and consistent*, often introduces his or her own rules and makes pupils follow them (9.3%). Besides, the students also pointed out other characteristic behavior, especially *having one's favorite, chosen pupils* (15%), hence being sometimes *subjective or prejudiced* (14%), accepting no excuses or generally being *unsympathetic, uncompromising* (10.6%), as well as making students feel stressed and nervous owing to the *unpleasant atmosphere* created by the teacher in the classroom. Finally, some pupils (8%) mentioned that such teachers may *treat teaching only as their occupation*, not as a kind of special mission which is supposed to produce long-lasting results. Others (10%) accused them of *humiliating or treating the weaker students with contempt*, of being *conceited, self-centered, uncritical and ruthless* (6%). Single respondents even talked about autocratic teachers accepting bribes or blackmailing their pupils.

Table 1: Learners' perceptions of democratic behavior.

the teacher is willing to listen to students' opinions and takes them into account	36%
the teacher always helps when students do not understand, does not mock or punish for lack of knowledge	24%
students are given a choice	22.6%
the teacher is fair and objective in evaluation	21%
the teacher is understanding, sympathetic, tolerant	20%
the teacher treats all the students the same	19.9%
students are allowed to express their opinions	19.3%
the teacher does not impose his/her opinions, techniques of teaching and learning	18%
the teacher uses his/her own materials, makes lessons interesting	10%
the teacher treats students seriously, as intelligent beings	6%
the teacher adopts the level of teaching and requirements to students' abilities	4%

the teacher is sincere and nice	4%
the teacher willingly admits making a mistake	4%
the teacher does not stress students	2.6%
the teacher smiles a lot	1.3%

Table 2: Learners' perceptions of authoritarian behavior.

the teacher ignores students' suggestions	48%
the teacher has his/her favorite pupils	15%
the teacher considers him-/herself always right and most important in the classroom	14%
the teacher tends to be subjective and prejudiced	14%
the teacher sticks to lesson plans, is not flexible	12%
the teacher is unsympathetic, uncompromising, stresses the students	10%
the teacher humiliates the weaker pupils	10%
the teacher is strict, demanding, consistent	9.3%
the teacher treats teaching only as an occupation	8%
the teacher is conceited, self-centered, uncritical, ruthless	6%

In response to the question about the potential effectiveness of the two approaches, the students' feelings were again slightly different from their teachers' beliefs. As already mentioned, only one teacher appeared to be definitely in favor of the authoritarian style, whereas most teachers (7) admitted the effectiveness of this approach at least at some stages of students' development. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of the pupils (94.7%) positively indicated democracy as the more beneficial attitude, while only 5.3% valued the autocratic style.

## 5. Conclusions

From the above research it follows that teachers' and students' perceptions of the management style are not always congruent. First of all, while the majority of learners consider their instructors to be democratic, most instructors admit that their behavior is very often authoritarian. This discrepancy would not appear so extraordinary (after all, teachers are much more experienced, self-conscious and critical) if the pupils' and instructors' definitions of the two styles

were also incompatible. However, although the students emphasized many elements of their teachers' behavior that the teachers themselves never mentioned, the descriptions proved, at least to a degree, similar.

Secondly, despite the teachers' conviction that democracy is the preferable (though possibly abstract) approach, they seem to consider authoritarian teaching quite effective, especially as it mobilizes students to learn systematically. As opposed to that, almost all the learners value the democratic style much higher than authoritarian.

Furthermore, both the instructors and pupils characterized the democratic teacher as willing to listen to and respect his or her students' opinions and suggestions, and generally as allowing the learners to have a choice. However, the point that the teachers failed to highlight was the importance of *interpersonal relations*. For many students democratic teachers are primarily fair, objective, tolerant, and sympathetic. They treat their pupils as humans, and, what's more significant, as *individuals*. They are not biased in their evaluation of students and they abstain from showing pupils how much they like or dislike them. While the teachers concentrated on the strictly organizational side of the management style, the pupils emphasized the affective or interpersonal element.

The survey can also be viewed in a broader perspective. Much as the teachers may feel satisfied with their pupils' evaluation of them, if we assume that the students' responses were honest, there are also reasons to worry. We cannot ignore their descriptions of authoritarian instructors such as shouting without reason, being ruthless and indifferent to students' needs and preferences, or working only with the better learners. The respondents could not have taken these examples completely out of the blue; they must have witnessed such behavior. In other words, such teachers do exist. Therefore, the study can be very useful for those who never cease to improve their teaching and relations with students. Because most learners associate the democratic style with the behavior of a model teacher, and the authoritarian style with the opposite, the examples given by the learners are indicative of what they really like and dislike in their instructors. For instance, most teachers wished they were more consistent and less lenient, while a great number of students characterized the negative teacher type as strict, demanding, and systematic. If it is the contemporary teacher's aim to satisfy the needs of his or her pupils, reflecting upon the students' answers to the questionnaire may prove quite worthwhile.

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