Ways of Assessing Students' Progress in School Learning by Language Teachers during the Lockdown and Remote Learning in Poland

Prof. Dr. Hab. Małgorzata Przybysz-Zaremba, PUZ
State Vocational University, Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Sciences, Poland
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2542-5104
malgorzata.p_z@interia.pl

Prof. Dr. Hab. Krzysztof Polok, ATH
University of Bielsko-Biala in Bielsko Biała, Poland
Institute of Modern Languages
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0283-9665
sworntran@interia.pl

Abstract:

The aim of the study was to check how language teachers employed in Polish schools assessed students' progress in learning during the period of remote learning. This study used the original questionnaire, which consisted of 15 questions regarding the implementation of a specific research goal. 110 language teachers employed in state primary, secondary and vocational schools located in the central and northern part of Poland participated in the study. In assessing students' progress in school learning during the remote learning period, language teachers most often used: homework assigned to students; various types of oral and written assignments (essays, tests, oral class assignments); semester tests; short tests commencing the lesson; and partial grades to assess the class performance. Research shows that language teachers adopted various forms and methods of assessing students' progress in school learning during the distance learning period, but the dominant ones were the forms and methods of assessment that required the least amount of time from them.

Keywords: assessment, student, school, lockdown, distance learning.

طرق تقييم تقدم الطلاب في التعلم المدرسي بواسطة معلمي اللغة أثناء الإغلاق والتعلم عن بعد في بولندا

أ.د مالكورزاتا بزيابييز زاريميبا

الجامعة المهنية الحكومية / كلية العلوم الصحية والاجتماعية / بولندا
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2542-5104
malgorzata.p_z@interia.pl

د. كرزيستوف بولوك

جامعة بيلسكو بيالا / معهد اللغات الحديثة / بولندا
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0283-9665
sworntran@interia.pl

الملخص

كان الهدف من الدراسة هو التحقق من كيفية قيام معلمي اللغة المعينين في مدارس الدولة البولندية بتقييم تقدم الطلاب في التعلم خلال فترة التعلم عن بعد. استخدمت هذه الدراسة التجريبية الاستبيان الأصلي ، والذي يتكون من 15 سؤالاً بخصوص تنفيذ هدف البحث. شارك في الدراسة 110 مدرس لغة يعملون في مدارس حكومية ابتدائية وثانوية ومهنية تقع في الجزء الأوسط والشمالي من بولندا. عند تقييم تقدم الطلاب في التعلم المدرسي خلال فترة التعلم عن بعد ، استخدم مدرسو اللغة في أغلب الأحيان: الواجب المنزلي المخصص للطلاب ؛ أنواع مختلفة من المهام الشفوية والمكتوبة (المقالات والاختبارات والتعيينات الشفوية) ؛ اختبارات الفصل الدراسي اختبارات قصيرة تبدأ بدأ الدرس ؛ والدرجات الجزئية لتقييم أداء الفصل. اظهرت النتائج أن معلمي اللغة تبنوا أشكالاً وأساليب مختلفة لتقييم تقدم الطلاب في التعلم المدرسي خلال فترة التعلم عن بعد ، لكن السائدة كانت أشكال وطرق التقييم التي تتطلب أقل وقت منهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقييم ، الطالب ، المدرسة ، التأمين ، التعلم عن بعد.

Introduction

The importance of the function fulfilled by the knowledge of the correctness of specific actions of the student in the process of learning a language, has been noticed and appreciated at least since the times of Comenius; throughout the period of research on various forms of assistance that can be provided to a student while learning a foreign language, the evaluation system of their work remains an important information point, both for the student (and his parents), and for the language teacher, for whom one of the tasks was to organize the student's work in such a way that the progress in learning could as good as possible. Krashen (1981),while developing the entire system of work on learning a foreign language, during which - according to the author's assumption - the student should be subjected to the widest possible contact with the language being taught, points out

that the level of difficulty of the language provided to students (apart from a number of other important components), should be subject to evaluation of the student's current perceptive abilities; The result of this assessment will mainly depend on determining the possibility of effective contact of the students with the information provided to them, clearly activating the level of acquisition of the downloaded language content. Harmer (2003), the author of an interesting proposal for class work on a foreign language, called ESA (Engage - Study - Activate), also points out that both the general level of difficulty of the first (and each subsequent one) of the three mentioned elements of the teacher -student educational activity, as well as the level of thematic forms placed there should be based on the assessment of the current perceptual abilities of the student. In each of the above-mentioned cases, various methods and forms of assessment and information activity should be used, which should help both the students (who should know whether the methods of working on the language they use are actually the ones that will effectively help them master it), as well as their teachers (for whom this type of information is necessary in order to develop and apply those forms of FL educational activity that will introduce effective forms of activity to the language classroom, motivating and encouraging students to work on the language).

On the other hand, the very process of assessing is not an easy and uncomplicated matter. As Włodarski (1989) aptly points out, quite the opposite is often the case. Basing on the subjectively determined criteria for evaluating a particular form of linguistic activity, any form of evaluation may be assigned to it - from very positive to very negative. In order to standardize the forms and methods of activity assessing the progress of students' work on the language, and to prevent the occurrence of a variety of assessments, a whole range of additional information was introduced to the existing school grading system, on which the final assessment of the student's functioning in the language class should depend. According to the proposed interpretation, most convincingly offered by Bruner (1990/2002), the entire evaluation process should be subject to both intuitive and analytical factors. In this way, intuitive assessment depends on the teacher's belief that the range of knowledge presented as the final result of a given task by a particular student deserves a specific assessment assigned to a given level of knowledge (expressed in the form of a digital/descriptive degree). Analytical assessment, in turn, is based on previously developed findings (analyzes), as a result of which specific levels of knowledge have been assigned to strictly corresponding grades (or descriptive assessments).

Due to the fact that in accordance with the currently binding humanistic approach to the students' school work (Denek, 1997), one should take into account not only their strictly educational activity, but also various forms of holistic conduct (e.g. the general commitment of the students, their diligence in performing tasks, activity during language classes, etc.), many different meta-educational aspects should be assessed, influencing both the way each of them obtains the information (as well as the possibilities and conditions of their interpretation), and the way it is used later on. This means that the assessment of a student's progress should depend on a number of related factors that have a significant impact on the

quality and the final form of the information obtained. This scope includes not only information from the strictly (glotto) didactic sphere, but also –what was emphasized during the construction of the research hypotheses by Krashen (ibid.) - the entire mental structure of the student, and the way of learning the language that the teacher prefers.

The process based on confronting this type of very briefly presented theoretical assumptions with various additional hints on the forms and methods of assessing students during classes gives rise to a whole range of controversies at the outset and suggests either relying on their subjective feelings during the assessment by many language teachers, or strongly turning them towards the so-called 'testomania' (that is, the excessive use of various forms of testing based on a subjective feeling that this type of activity relieves them to some extent of the final responsibility for the degree). The existing, officially-approved, subject-based assessment system (hereinafter: GAS – general assessment system) quite clearly defines both the forms and the ways of the language teacher's conduct throughout the process of organizing FL conscious learning. The said system assumes that: /1/ each student, assessed in accordance with the principles of fairness, should receive a minimum of 6 grades during the semester; /2/ class work is obligatory and announced at least one week in advance, along with the information concerning the scope of the tested skills and knowledge; /3/ the student has the right to correct each unsatisfactory grade only once, within the time limit agreed with the teacher; and /4/ the student has the right to report not being prepared for the lesson twice a semester (this right does not apply to previously announced class assignments and tests). A very sketchy analysis of a number of principles presented above clearly shows the important function of intuitive assessment in the overall assessment of a student (e.g. already in item /1/ there is a reference to the "principles of justice", without information about what actually fits in them; similarly, in item /3/ it is assumed that the improvement of each failing grade is one-off, but it is not specified how such improvement should proceed). The entire GAS, in turn, assumes that the teacher plays the role of an expert in the classroom, i.e. that she knows what (and how) each of the language lessons organized by her will be about. Since this assumption also extends to the functions of assessing the student's progress in the course of language classes, there is quite a wide range here that allows the use of various forms of intuitive assessment by the language teacher.

Following the GAS regulations, teacher-based evaluation activities include, among others /1/ unannounced brief class-tests (regardless of their number); /2/ announced class works (in various forms); /3/ independent written assignments (their topics being freely determined by the teacher); /4/ individual student's homework; /5/ general semester-long activity of the student (i.e. assessment of the student's approach to the subject); /6/ various forms of long-term and medium-term work (e.g. projects etc. commissioned by the teacher) and /7/ general student's work during the classroom. In the case of p. /4/, the language teacher should take into account not only the degree of independence of the student while performing a specific task, but also the way in which s/he achieved a specific solution, participated in various types of practical exercises during language classes, and

provided oral answers to the questions asked. As one can see, the language teacher has ample opportunities to look at each of her students in some detail and then to evaluate them as a participant in a language course designed by her. One can easily also notice the intensity of the band of intuitive actions of the teacher when assessing the educational activity of her students.

GAS also accurately defines the behavior of the students and their parents in the course of learning a foreign language. While the students' profile is based on the assessment of the degree of their urgency and systematicity (which can be assessed by a language teacher using the so-called 'pluses' or 'minuses'), in relation to their parents, the GAS requires that they perform supervisory functions in relation to work of their children, provided them with good learning conditions (including the possibility of playing FL-forming CDs on a permanent basis, for example) and encouraged their children to learn the language (mainly English), emphasizing its (both internal and external) importance. In this case, the teacher's activity may be limited only to various monitoring functions (it is difficult to order parents to do anything), but undoubtedly, this knowledge will often (although in fact, should not) the teacher's substantive intuitive activity when assessing the progress of each with students. In line with the GAS framework, each language teacher is required to use a number of guidelines that can be found there, as well as apply them on a daily basis.

Methodological assumptions

The aim of the study was to check how language teachers employed in state-owned Polish schools assessed students' learning progress during the lockdown and distance learning. As part of the general objective, the following research problems were set:

1. What forms and ways of assessing students' learning progress did language teachers undertake during the lockdown and distance learning period, and what criteria did they use when assessing students at the end of the semester?
2. For what reasons did language teachers assess their students during lockdown and e-learning period?
3. What was the significance of, respectively, summative and formative assessment in assessing students' learning progress during lockdown and remote learning period?

The study used the proprietary questionnaire, which consisted of 15 questions about the ways of assessment by language teachers, the students' learning progress during the lockdown and remote learning period. The questions were also asked about ways and forms of assessing students' learning progress; apart from that, the respondents were requested to identify reasons used by them to evaluate their students, and the relevance paid by them to summative and formative (descriptive) assessments when assessing students' learning progress during lockdown and remote learning.

110 language teachers employed in state schools located in central and northern Poland participated in the study. The respondents included 84 (76.4%)

primary school teachers; 15 (13.6%) secondary school teachers and 11 (10%) vocational school teachers. Among the surveyed teachers there were 97 women (88.2%) and 13 men (11.8%). The age of the respondents was classified into particular groups: over 60 years old - 38 people (34.5%); 51 - 60 years old - 33 people (30%); 41-50 years old - 27 people (24.5%); 31-40 years old - 8 people (7.3%); 21-30 years old - 4 people (3.6%). The professional experience of language teachers was as follows: over 20 years - 68 people (61.8%); 16-20 years old - 22 people (20%); 11-15 years - 9 people (8.2%); 6-10 years old - 4 people (3.6%); 1-5 years - 7 people (6.4%).

The selection of the sample for the research was deliberate and consisted in sending the questionnaire by e-mail to language teachers employed in state schools. In the e-mail sent to the schools, a link to the questionnaire was attached and language teachers were asked to voluntarily complete the questionnaire; all respondents (FL teachers) were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that the research was anonymous. Statistical analysis was performed with the use of the Statistica 13.1 statistical package. The results of the research analysis are presented in the form of count tables and charts.

The research is only an outline of the problem and is to be recognized as a pilot project that will be continued and developed in the near future, as there is no such research in Poland. The study was conducted from September to the end of October 2021.

Research results and their analysis

Assessing the educational achievements of a student in the light of the Regulation on the Assessment, Classification and Promotion of Students in Public Schools of the Minister of National Education of February 22, 2019 (Journal of Laws 2019, item 373), consists in the teacher's recognition of the level and progress in mastering the knowledge and skills by the student in relation to the educational requirements, resulting from the core curriculum and curricula implemented at the school.

The analysis of the conducted research showed that language teachers chose various forms and methods when assessing students' learning progress during the lockdown and remote learning period. The most important forms and methods of assessing students' progress in language learning, indicated by the teachers, were: various forms of homework assigned to students to be performed - 98 responses (89.1%); various types of written work, such as: essays, tests, tests, class work; as well as oral answers - 97 responses (88.2%); semester tests - 75 responses (58.2%); short tests at the beginning of the lesson - 64 responses (58.2%) and partial grades after each class - 64 responses (58.2%). A detailed list of forms and methods of assessing students' progress in learning adopted by language teachers is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Forms and methods of assessing students' progress in learning adopted by language teachers during the lockdown and remote learning
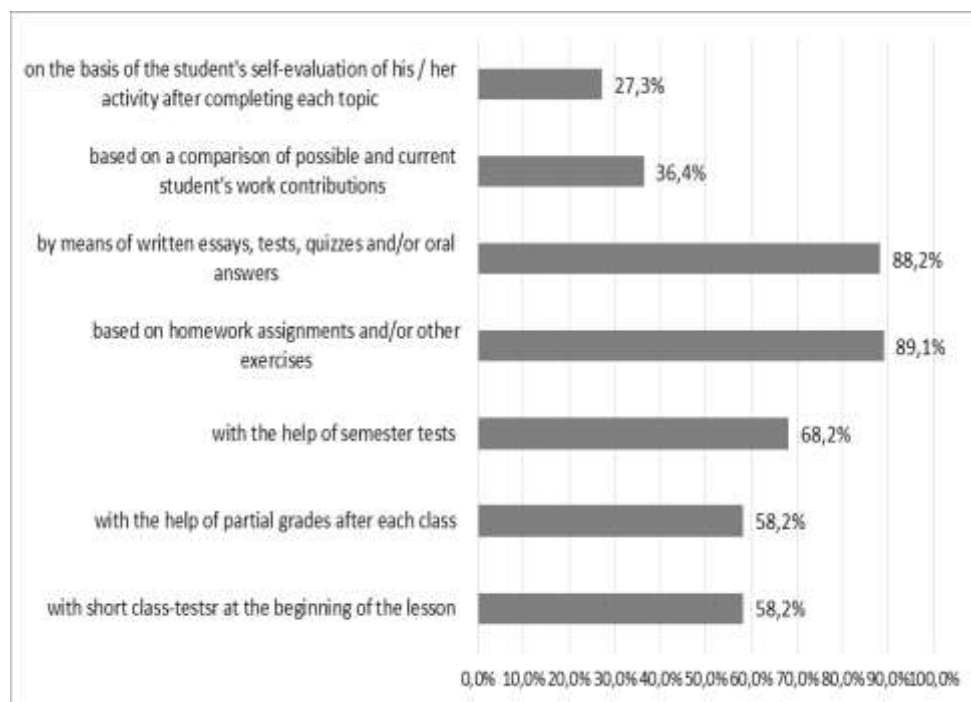
Source: Own elaboration

    The methods and forms of assessing students' learning progress, which language teachers chose less frequently, are also noteworthy. These include the learner's self-assessment of knowledge after completing each topic of language lessons and comparing the possible and current contributions of the learner's work (Figure 1). The low percentage of these forms and methods of assessing students' knowledge is related to the ways teachers conducted their teaching, which at the time of the lockdown was limited to remote learning (on-line) exclusively. During the lockdown, all schools in Poland switched to the distance learning system, which made it much more difficult for teachers to check their students' progress in learning each of the FL skills. The lack of direct contact between the teacher and the students made it much more difficult to conduct a proper conversation, because – following the researched teachers' complaints - not all students had a computer equipped with a camera while participating in the classes. It should be noted here that when a language teacher conducts educational activities remotely (on-line), her duty is to use a computer equipped with a camera (this is determined by the school's internal regulations). The student must see the teacher on the computer or other medium they are using. Meanwhile, there is no such obligation in relation to students. Thus, students are allowed to participate in remote (on-line) classes without a camera connected to a computer or other carrier, and even if they have one, they are not required to turn it on.

A question must arise at this point, how effectively the students participated in their language classes, in case they either did not have camera carriers or did not turn them on. Listening only to the teacher's voice during a language lesson not only significantly disturbs its organization, but also impoverishes it immeasurably. Due to the fact that the actions of a language teacher should be based on the various forms of interaction, the attitude of language teachers to the requirement to evaluate the student's behavior in relation to their activity in language classes seems to be interesting in this context. Therefore, it is necessary to find an answer to the question whether (and, if so, how) they assessed this attitude of their students to the classes they took part in. It is also necessary - due to the range of internships of the surveyed teachers and the schools in which they work - to examine whether this type of behavior took place in each of the surveyed schools, and how the surveyed teachers reacted to the above-described forms of behavior of their students.

Language teachers were asked to indicate the lowest possible number of grades that a student should receive in a semester in order to be able to pass a given subject (Figure 2). Research has shown that both before and during the lockdown period most teachers complied with the criteria set by the school's internal regulations, which indicated that in order to be able to obtain a final grade in a given subject (end-of-term grade), a student must have at least two grades. The research confirmed it fully - 78 respondents (70.91%) indicated that in order to obtain a grade in foreign language classes at the end of the semester, a student must have at least two grades. At the same time, many of the researched teachers also indicated that when assigning a semester grade in language term-long classes, their students should either have more than five grades or from two to five grades. Few of the teachers indicated that only one final test grade was enough (the rate for this answer was the lowest (3.6%). Detailed data can be found in Figure 2.

AS we remarked above this result, definitely differs from the previously indicated in the GAS the desired six (6) grades, on the basis of which the student's progress during the semester can be evaluated. If it is assumed theoretically that one of the grades was obtained with the obligatory semester test, it will mean that the second grade indicated by the majority of the surveyed teachers, important for obtaining a semester credit, was obtained using any of the methods of obtaining the degree indicated in the questionnaire. Additionally, if one takes into account the fact that teachers complain about conducting classes in a certain group of schools in an unnatural manner (e.g. to icons, instead of to students), the assumption that the second compulsory assessment included any part of the improvement of the student's communication skills becomes less and less likely.

Figure 2. Fewest possible numbers of grades (pass) a student should get during the term during the lockdown and online learning to be eligible for the final pass of the course
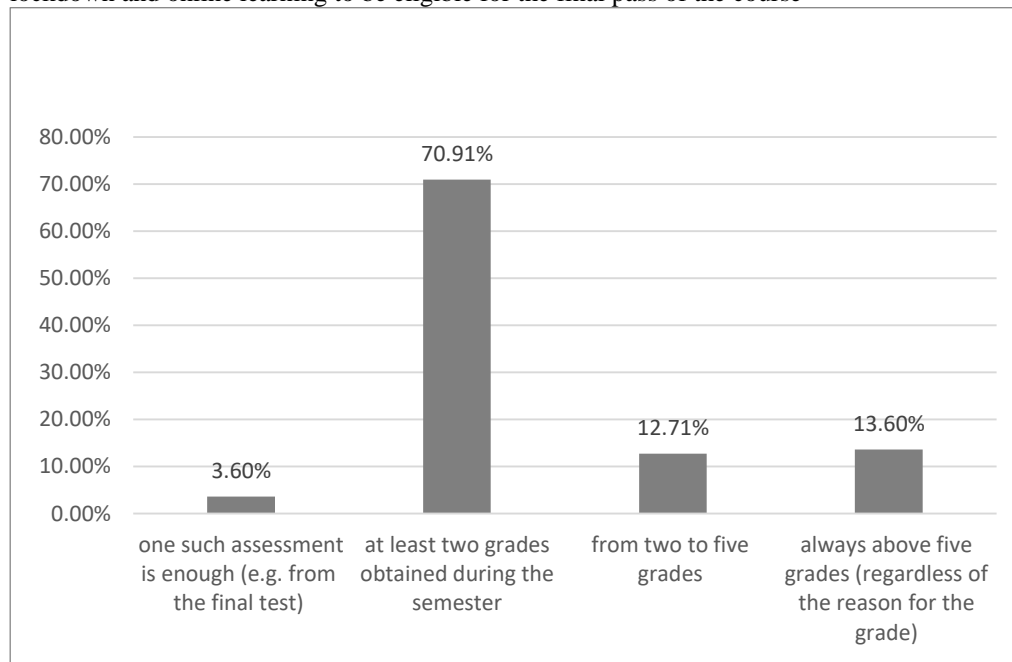
Source: Own elaboration

The grades given by language teachers to students during the lockdown and e-learning activities did not affect the worsening of the relationships with both students and their parents.

Assessing a student's educational achievement during the lockdown and distance learning period was used by language teachers for a variety of reasons. The research showed that the most important reasons - from the point of view of the researched FL teachers, were: rewarding the student for the work done - 102 indications (92.7%); fulfilling one's obligation towards school - 99 indications (90%); providing parents with information about the student's progress in working on the language taught to them - 77 indications (70%) and motivating students to work more hard on the language - 77 indications (70%). A detailed list of reasons for evaluating students' marks by language teachers is presented in Table 1.

In assessing a student's progress in fulfilling their learning duties, school assessment is of great importance; in the Polish system education it may have various types, e.g. it may be assume formative, summative, descriptive, numerical, analytical, etc. function/ In the lower classes of elementary schools (I - III) the only form of assessment officially permitted is descriptive assessment; in high schools, vocational schools, post-secondary schools and universities, teachers mostly use numerical assessment. At the same time, numerical assessment is required when assessing the knowledge and progress of students at the end of the semester, regardless of the type of school, what it is specified in the relevant provisions (Journal of Laws 2019, item 373).

Although - when analyzing the results included in Table 1 - the vast majority of the surveyed teachers indicate that the main impulse for issuing the grades was

the desire to reward their students for their work, the fact that the respondents placed the options related to both their position at school and the students' parents may indicate that the teachers value good relations both with the school authorities and with the parents of the students they teach. This situation shows the complexity of the position a language teacher is expected to be functioning; apart from the most important (at least in theory) component of her work, i.e. the student, when giving grades, the teacher must take into account (also, and - perhaps - above all) other components, i.e. the assessment of her work by the school authorities on the one hand and by the parents of the students on the other. In this context, both the method and the forms of grading determine in a quite clear way not only the image that the language teacher creates around her on the basis of her work, but also her attitude to the duties imposed on her. Although the questionnaire did not include a direct question regarding the assessment of the scale of the difficulty of the job that the language teacher suddenly faced at the time of closing schools and compulsorily switching to online learning, information one can obtain in a series of other questions (e.g. on the basis of graphs showing the number of grades sufficient for students to pass a semester) quite clearly indicate that the attitude of language teachers to their work has undergone quite significant transformations. In addition to the student component, with which a given part of the material still needs to be worked on, the teachers seriously concern the opinions the external factors, i.e. both the principal and the parents will think about their work. Since such judgments are easiest to make on the (often cursory) basis of the analysis of marks given by language teachers, it can be assumed that the desirable reduction of the number of marks to the minimum necessary on the one hand, and serious consideration of one's position during the assessment on the other, indicates very conscious behavior of language teachers; they do not want the external difficulties they encounter, as well as the increased pressure on them to prepare better and more thoroughly for classes, to be assessed in a less flattering way than the one they enjoyed in the pre-pandemic period.

Table 1. Reasons why language teachers graded students during lockdown and distance learning

Reasons why language teachers graded students during lockdown and distance learning	N	%
providing parents with information about the student's progress in working on the language	77	70%
motivating students to work harder on the language	77	70%
obliging the student to continue working on the language	71	64,50%
rewarding the student for the work done	**102**	**92,70%**
fulfilling one's duty to the school	**99**	**90%**
introducing discipline in the classroom	31	28,20%
the so-called 'learning obedience', i.e. making students dependent on their decisions	27	24,50%
implementation and efficiency of the functioning of the hierarchy of possibilities in the student's work	31	28,20%

Source: Own elaboration

The survey asked language teachers whether in case they had the option of giving their students only a descriptive grade instead of a numerical grade, they would have benefited from it The analysis of the research results shows that over 80% of language teachers would not take advantage of this opportunity, because preparing a descriptive assessment involves a lot of effort and remains highly time-consuming According to the teachers, it could not be possible to prepare a reliable descriptive assessment for a class counting normally up to 20-30 students. In school practice, language teachers usually conduct classes in several separate class groups (from four to six and sometimes more). Although language teachers evaluate students' knowledge and their learning progress using numerical assessment only, they still see the value of descriptive (formative) assessment. According to language teachers, such form of assessment covers the multilateral development of each of the student and their functioning; in this way, it is more complete, being an assessment that better motivates the student to continue working than in case of the numerical evaluation; it also reaches the awareness of the people who read it (mainly the student and his parents); finally, it belongs to the activities that highly influence the forms of the work of both a teacher and a student. The detailed data can be found in Figure 3.

These results are interesting not only in terms of the method and form of descriptive (formative) assessment, but mainly due to the fact that a large number of language teachers have noticed that such assessment, commonly used as a final grade in grades I - III, would also be recommended in other, age-higher, classes, as a more handy form of evaluation. Assessment of this type motivates the person who obtains it, pointing not only to the positive features of their educational activities to date, but also - by analyzing the person's shortcomings - indicates possible ways to overcome them. Such an assessment also acts - at least to some extent - as a defensive shield against - often factually unjustified - attacks by the student's parents or management, explaining the reasons for obtaining specific forms and judgments by the student. There is no such feature in the numerical grade system, where the real reasons for such a high (or low) evaluation of the student constitute its added value. According to language teachers, the formative assessment covers the multilateral development of the student and its functioning; it is more complete (15.5%); it is the assessment that motivates the student to continue FL learning more (21.8%) than the numerical assessment; it also reaches the awareness of people who can read it (mainly of the students and their parents) (33.6%); finally, it belongs to the activities forming the work of the teacher and the students (33.6% of the respondents gave such an answer). Detailed statements by teachers on the formative assessment are presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Opinions on language teachers on formative assessment
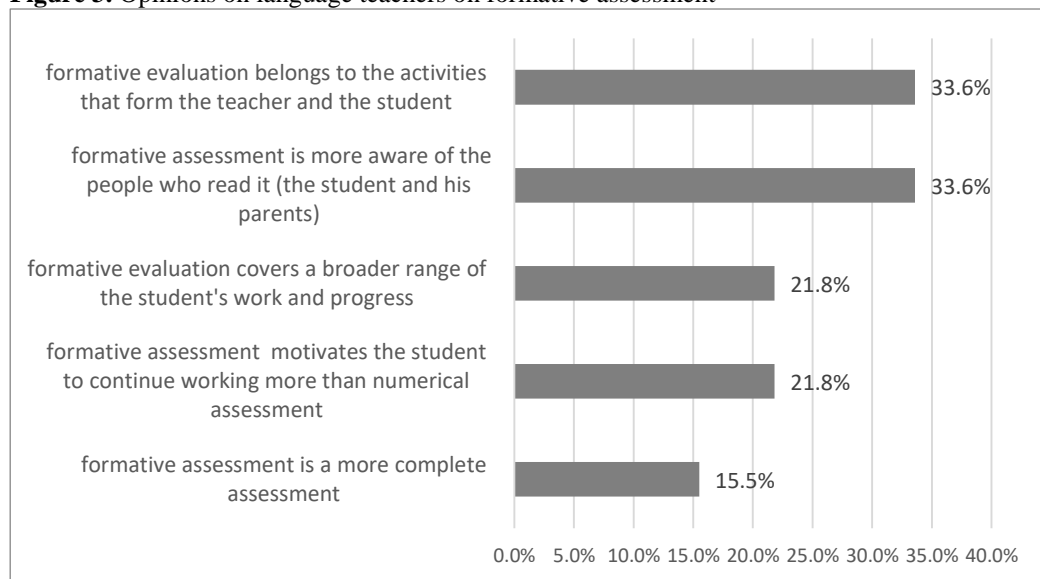
Source: Own elaboration

Conclusions

The analysis of the results of the conducted research showed that language teachers employed in state schools in Poland undertook various (mostly least time-consuming) activities in terms of assessing students' learning progress during the lockdown and distance learning period. The research shows the following conclusions:

- the most important ways and forms of assessing students' progress in FL learning, used by language teachers in their school practice included: homework assignments to be performed by students; various types of written assignments, such as: essays, tests, tests, class assignments; oral answers; semester tests; short tests at the beginning of the lesson; and giving partial grades after each class;
- due to lockdown and distance learning conditions, language teachers were less likely to use a form of learner self-assessment of the knowledge at the end of each language course unit and comparing possible and actual contributions to the student progress when assessing the progress of each of the learners;
- when assessing students' knowledge and their progress in school, language teachers have always followed the internal assessment rules - in order for a student to be credited at the end of the semester, a student was expected to have scored at least two positive grades in the class roll-call;
- the most important reasons for assessing the educational achievement of students during the lockdown and distance learning period were: rewarding the student for the work done; fulfilling the obligation of a language teacher to the school in which she is employed; providing parents with information

about the student's progress in working on the language; and, finally, motivating students to work harder on the language;

‒ when assessing students' learning progress, language teachers only use numerical assessment and would not like to replace it with descriptive assessment, which is much richer but takes more time to use. According to the respondents, descriptive assessment not only covers the multilateral development of the student and its functioning, but is also more complete, covers a wider range of the student's work and progress, better motivates the student to continue working on the language than numerical assessment, faster and better reaches the awareness of the text readers (mainly of the student and his parents) and belongs to the activities that create and define the work of the teacher and student;

The ways and forms of assessing students' learning progress during the lockdown and distance learning period have been difficult for language teachers. Teachers chose mainly those forms that made it easier for them to check their students' knowledge and progress in learning. Many tests and/or quizzes, which were most often used by language teachers when assessing students, are very easy to upload to the platform (educational activities were conducted mainly on the Teams or Moodle platforms), which was used to conduct remote learning. The teacher often does not check these works on their own, but with the appropriate construction of, for example, a test or quiz, done for her by the system through which remote education is carried out. Consequently, the teacher gained time. On the other hand, other forms and methods of assessing students, which were less often chosen by language teachers, such as self-assessment of knowledge after completing each topic of language classes, carried out by the student, or comparing the possible and current contributions of the student's work, most often require the teacher to spend far more time on the assessment processes and, due to distance learning conditions, was difficult to apply it. On the other hand, as the use of numerical (digital) evaluation when assessing the knowledge and progress of a student in school education resulted from specific ministerial regulations, hence the teachers employed in the indicated types of schools, first of all, paid attention to such procedures of assessment.

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