

In-Company Foreign Language Training: A Teacher's Perspective

Dorota Lipińska

Institute of English, University of Silesia, Poland

e-mail: dorota.lipinska@yahoo.com

Abstract:

Teaching languages in a company environment is a relatively new phenomenon which has appeared as a result of competition on a job market. Nowadays companies offer various fringe benefits to their best employees, free language courses among them. This is a completely new situation for language teachers who are faced with a challenge of working in a new environment, not resembling schools, universities or language schools. They need to adapt to new requirements and deal with new problems and difficulties they were not prepared or trained for (Scrivener, 2011; Chong, 2013). The aim of this paper is to check what kind of difficulties and problems arise while teaching an L2 in a company. A group of L2/foreign language (English, German and French) teachers filled in an anonymous questionnaire concerning their work environment. The subjects came from various areas of Poland. The obtained information was divided into thematic sections and showed that the scope of perceived difficulties is really vast. It suggests that the topic should be analysed and studied further and corporate teaching ought to be formally taught as a part of a teacher training programme.

Keywords: second language acquisition, foreign language teaching, in-company training

1. Introduction

Although Second/Foreign Language Acquisition seems to be a well-developed area and has been flourishing since the latter half of the twentieth century, the pace of the quickly developing and constantly changing world affects the aforementioned process to a large extent. A lot of research has been done on various aspects of SLA, yet new questions arise every day (Gass and Selinker, 2008).

One of the recent phenomena which appeared during the last decades is teaching and learning foreign languages in a company environment. This area of foreign language teaching has not been examined yet and the research on this matter is very scarce. The very phenomenon is the effect of new requirements on the job market, where even large international companies compete for the best prospective employees. By necessity it means not only offering competitive salaries, but also attractive fringe benefits. As vouchers to the gym or private health insurance have become a kind of a standard, HR departments were forced to find something new and in consequence more and more companies started offering free-of-charge language courses to their employees.

And this situation constitutes a considerable challenge that L2 teachers need to face. Only few businesses pay for L2 courses taking place in language schools, while the vast majority of firms decide to have foreign language classes organized within their own premises. The reason for this decision is quite simple. First of all, it is more convenient for the companies and the managers as the whole process of learning may be easily assessed and controlled by HR departments and learners' supervisors. Moreover, it is comfortable for the employees since the classes often take place during working hours and the staff do not "waste" their private time, they do not need to spend any time on commuting etc. Although it may sound very beneficial and reasonable at first, there is also the darker side of the coin. L2 teachers who are forced to work in such company environment are faced with a completely new situation and need to adjust their teaching methods to new requirements and new obstacles they may encounter (Scrivener, 2011; Chong, 2013).

Some people may think that it is simply teaching English for Specific Purposes. This area is considerably well developed, with a lot of research, teaching programmes and textbooks (e.g. Fiorito, 2005; Scrivener, 2011). But unfortunately, the situation is much more complex. The ESP classes are just a kind of classes with a particular language selection and can take place in the classroom as well, while teaching in a company means a wide variety of difficulties and challenges waiting for foreign language teachers.

2. Potential Problems and Difficulties Connected with Teaching a Foreign Language in a Company Environment

As Chong (2013) notices, future L2 teachers are trained during their studies or CELTA courses to work with various kinds of learners, but they are still limited to a school environment. If they want to teach a foreign language in a company or other large institution, they simply need to start doing it without any additional

preparation. They are faced with a wide scope of potential problems, difficulties or unexpected situations.

First of all, the time division is completely different than in schools. No more traditional working hours, two-month summer holidays and winter breaks. Company teachers rarely work in one place which means moving from one firm to another, a considerable amount of time spent on commuting and so on. Also the length of classes is different – not necessarily 45 minutes, but more often it is 90 minutes or even two hours (Chong, 2013). Moreover, in-company classes often take place very early in the morning as some employees start their work at six or seven o'clock.

Secondly, the facilities are often relatively scarce in comparison to those available at schools or language schools. Teachers frequently realise that in companies they teach in meeting rooms where there is a lack of CD-players, multimedia players, loudspeakers or laptops. Not all companies allow L2 teachers to use their projectors and other equipment. Most often there are no whiteboards – only flipcharts which make doing a lot of exercises (e.g. those requiring removing parts of a sentence or substituting words) virtually impossible. Sometimes teachers even have to bring their own markers. Another serious difficulty is no access to wifi. Most companies deny it because of security reasons – and nowadays teaching offline seems to be pretty difficult as teachers use various websites, online presentations etc (Chong, 2013).

As Komorowska (2011) notices, although adult learners are usually highly motivated to learn an L2, they often attend classes irregularly because of their professional duties. Moreover, they do not often do their homework which can be difficult for a teacher as they cannot plan classes based on it. This is especially true in a company environment. Chong (2013) stresses that it is a common situation when company learners rarely come to classes and one week there might be only two people out of a big group present at a language meeting, and next week – two completely different learners. It is almost impossible to plan effective classes in this case. However, course participants cannot be blamed – at the same time they may be attending a meeting with an important client or their boss, be on a business trip etc. It is similar when one takes doing homework into consideration. Some company learners are not willing to do any at all as they do not want to spend any more (spare) time on language learning, while others want to do exercises containing only the material relevant to their job.

What is more, even the very motivation can be disputable. While most adult learners decide to learn an L2 either because they want to or because the ability to speak another language may help them get a better job or keep their position (Komorowska, 2011), company learners can be in a different situation. Some of them need new skills in order to communicate with their clients or business partners and are really motivated to learn a new language, but others on the other hand, are forced by the management to participate in language classes and do not see any point learning an L2 and hence are not motivated at all (especially as it is their company that pays for the language course). It seems obvious that they will be very difficult learners. But the worst situation to face is the one when some learners in

one group are motivated to learn a new language and others are not and they torpedo almost all activities prepared by a teacher. Furthermore, the classroom etiquette may be virtually non-existent as learners do not switch off their mobile devices, answer the phones, talk to each other about contracts, meetings and other topics important for the company or even leave the classroom in the middle of a lesson to do something in their office (Chong, 2013).

Another problem is what to teach. As Scrivener (2011) notices, some learners will want to learn some kind of ESP (English for Specific Purposes – e.g. for accountants, secretaries or rather wide title of business English) or any other foreign language for specific purposes, while others will be willing to learn a general language (there is even an interesting acronym for it – LENOR which means Learning English for No Obvious Reason). But a language teacher may even face a situation in which particular learners will demand practising only one skill. For instance some workers communicate with other companies only via e-mail and will want to improve merely their writing skills. Or somebody may mainly meet their clients personally and needs better speaking skills (Chong, 2013).

Last but not least, even commuting to a company or finding and booking a room for classes may be problematic for a teacher. They usually visit more than one company, have to find its premises, a place to park a car and sometimes need to have a visitor's pass in order to enter the building. It requires good time planning and foreseeing potential traffic jams and other obstacles. Then it often happens that the room which is usually used for language classes has been already booked for a business meeting and a teacher has to deal with the situation. The list of this kind of surprises is practically endless (Chong, 2013).

3. Current Study

3.1 Rationale and Aims

First of all, it has to be mentioned that this paper is a part of a bigger study whose main aim is to develop our knowledge of in-company foreign language teaching. In order to do so, it is necessary to analyse various aspects of this phenomenon. The aim of this paper is to examine what kind of difficulties and problems L2 teachers are faced with when they start teaching an L2 in a company environment.

The study was inspired by the author's own practice as an in-company teacher. She has been working as an English and German teacher in a few international companies for over five years and has made numerous observations. Although personally the author experienced mainly technical and organizational difficulties, she noticed that her colleagues often faced other kinds of obstacles, had problems adjusting to a new situation, left the new job relatively quickly and that the general rotation among in-company teachers was considerably higher than in, for instance, language schools. This lead to the idea of asking a larger number of in-company language teachers about their experiences and improving the situation by adding a new module to teacher training programmes.

3.2 Study Participants

The group of study participants consisted of L2/foreign language teachers who work in a company environment. As one can see in Figure 1, they specialised in English (twenty-nine subjects), German (twelve subjects) and French (six subjects). There were forty-seven informants, all of them female. They came from and worked in various regions of Poland. Most of them (thirty-one subjects) lived and worked in the south of Poland (the regions of Upper and Lower Silesia, as well as Zagłębie). Fourteen study participants came from central Poland (the cities of Łódź and Warsaw) and the remaining two informants were from the northern part of Poland (the city of Gdańsk). This proportion can be seen in Figure 2. It is not surprising since the south of Poland is a traditionally industrial region and a lot of international companies have their headquarters or branches there.

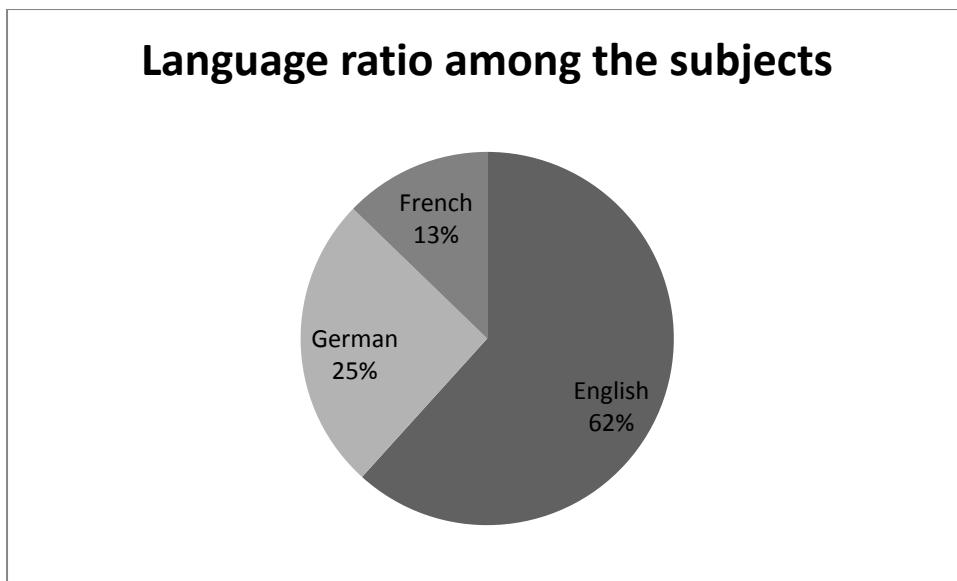


Figure 1
The language ratio among the teachers who participated in the study

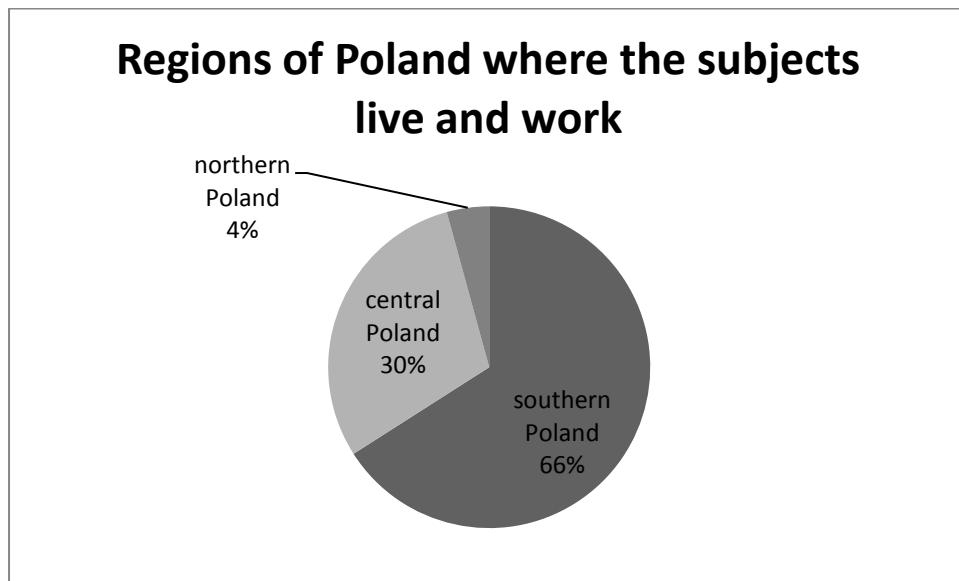


Figure 2
The ratio of the regions the subjects came from

The study participants were between 28 and 44 years old (mean: 36). They had been teaching a foreign language for 6-20 years prior to the study (most of them between 11 and 15 years). It means they were quite experienced teachers, but not necessarily in the field of in-company teaching as here they were asked to provide the researcher with an exact number and those numbers were much lower (between 1 and 7 years; mean 3.4 years).

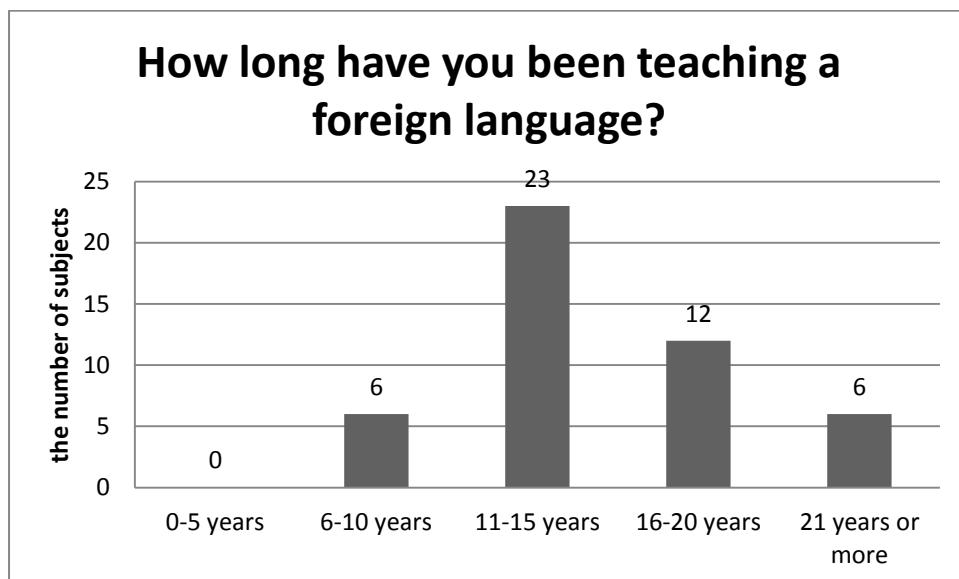


Figure 3
The number of years the subjects had been teaching a foreign language prior to the study



Figure 4
The number of years the subjects had been teaching a foreign language in a company

All subjects filled in an anonymous online questionnaire concerning their work environment. The questions included multiple choice questions, closed-ended questions, open-ended questions and a lot of space for writing one's own comments. The obtained information was divided into thematic sections and showed that the scope of perceived difficulties is really vast.

3.3 Results

The following part of the paper presents the results obtained from the questionnaire mentioned above. Each section consists of the answers chosen by the study participants together with the comments they provided.

3.3.1 Technical Difficulties

The first question analysed here was: *Have you ever encountered any 'technical' difficulties while teaching an L2 in companies?* The informants could choose only YES/NO option, however were encouraged to provide further comments on the topic and write as many technical difficulties they have ever encountered.

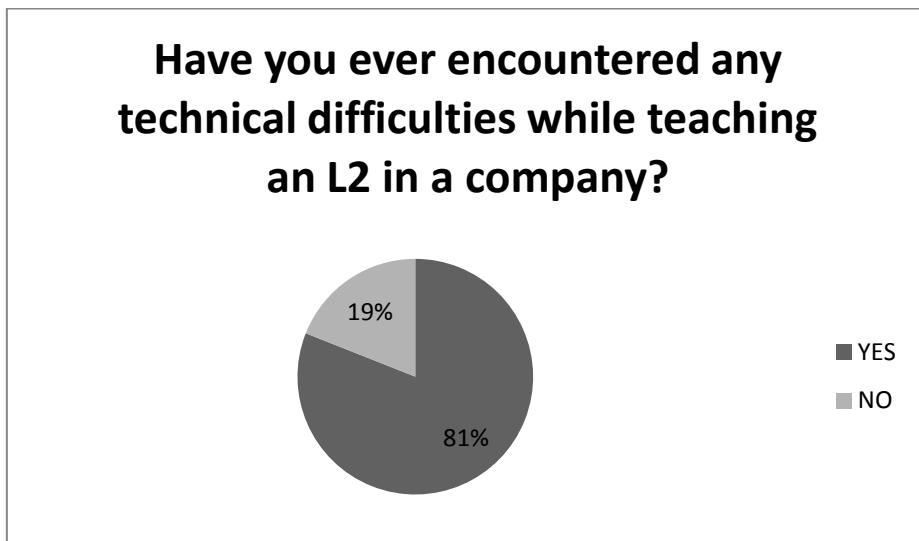


Figure 5

The percentage of subjects who had/ had not experienced technical difficulties while teaching a foreign language in a company

As one can see in Figure 5, the vast majority of subjects encountered technical difficulties while teaching an L2 in a company environment. Only nine informants (19%) did not notice any instances of this problem. The technical difficulties mentioned by the study participants in the comments were as follows (quoted):

- *lack of OHPs and laptops*
- *lack of CD-players (I need to bring mine)*
- *lack of loudspeakers*
- *lack of a whiteboard*
- *lack of any board*
- *no colourful markers*
- *lack of available rooms*
- *the rooms are not comfortable*
- *the rooms are too small for the whole group*
- *the tables are too small*
- *lack of car parks*
- *a toll car park*
- *inconvenient location*
- *inconvenient working hours (6.45 am!)*
- *no wifi*

A lot of aforementioned comments were written by more than one subject. The most popular problems were the lack of available rooms, laptops, projectors, loudspeakers and boards, as well as parking bays. Also quite a few informants complained about very early working hours. It all shows that in-company teachers cannot count on the company they work for in terms of providing them with necessary facilities and

have to carry their own equipment. It may be surprising to some extent if someone has worked only in schools where such things are treated as a standard.

3.3.2 Problems with the company's management

Another problematic issue for language teachers may be the lack of mutual understanding with the company's management, divergent expectations concerning a given language course etc. That is why the next questions presented to subjects was: *Have you ever encountered any difficulties connected with the company's management while teaching an L2 in companies? (e.g. the lack of mutual understanding with the management, HR department etc.)* Again, the informants could choose only YES/NO option, but also in this case they were encouraged to provide further comments on the topic.

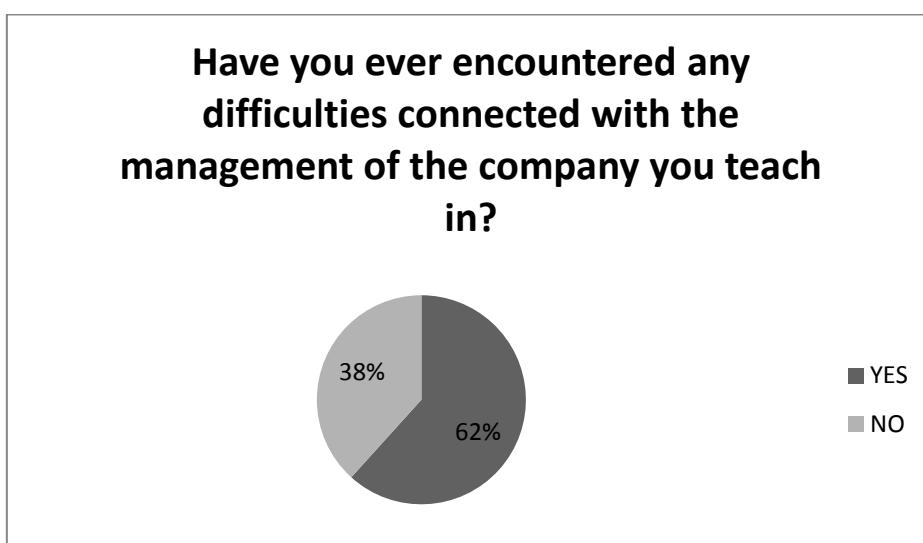


Figure 6
The percentage of subjects who had/ had not experienced difficulties connected with the company's management

Also in this case the majority of the study participants experienced some difficulties. Although the number of informants (18) who did not face any problems connected with the company managers was higher than in the case of the previous question, the number of teachers who encountered some difficulties was still considerably high (29). The difficulties or disagreements described by the subjects were as follows (quoted):

- *The managers try to affect my teaching methods.*
- *The managers think they know better how my classes should look like because they "also learnt English".*
- *The manager is French and thinks I can make his subordinates speak French after 10 classes.*
- *The management influences the number of tests I have to prepare for the learners.*

- *The head of HR wants me to have at least two tests monthly. It is completely unrealistic, especially when my students come to classes really rarely (sometimes I do not see some people for over three weeks).*
- *HR department requires unrealistic progress.*
- *The boss wants A1 learners to be able to speak German to guests from Germany (show them around, negotiate and so on).*
- *They want me to teach the way they think is good (and it isn't, of course).*

A lot of comments were similar, so they were not mentioned twice. They mainly concerned unrealistic expectations regarding learners' progress, the number of tests to be administered or the very teaching methods. What is important is the fact that those problems were not language-bound, but the same situations happened while teaching English, German or French. It may be really frustrating to language teachers who do their best and are subsequently criticised by non-experts in teaching, for example by HR managers.

3.3.3 In-company learners

As it has been mentioned in chapter 2, also the learners themselves may pose serious difficulties for L2 teachers. Their behaviour or expectations may be problematic and that is why the third question analysed in this section was: *Have you ever encountered any difficulties connected directly to your learners?* The informants could chose either YES or NO answer and were asked to write further comments on this topic on their own. This method was chosen in order not to suggest any ready answers and to provoke teachers' reflection on their language classes.

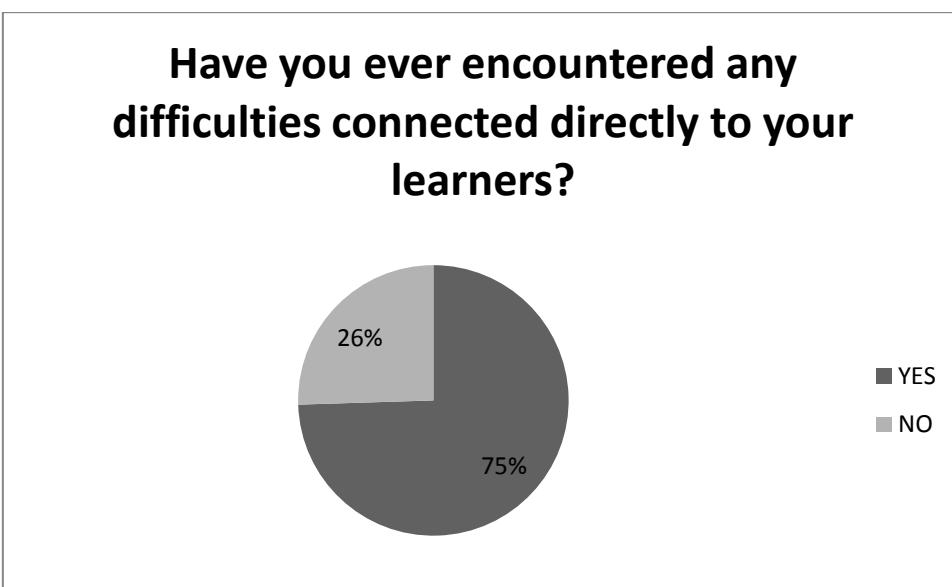


Figure 7
The percentage of subjects who had/ had not experienced difficulties connected with their in-company learners

Similarly to the previous questions, most teachers have, unfortunately, experienced some difficulties connected to their learners. Only twelve subjects have never had such a situation. The remaining thirty-five mentioned the following problems (quoted):

- *They don't do their homework.*
- *They never do their homework.*
- *They don't revise.*
- *If they are absent, they never make up (although their colleagues take spare copies for them).*
- *They don't care because they don't pay for the course.*
- *They treat language classes as an additional break at work.*
- *The group is not homogenous (A1-B1!!!).*
- *They vary according to their age (too much!)*
- *They rarely come to my classes.*
- *Some people hardly ever take part in the classes.*
- *They are not concentrated.*
- *They answer their phone instead of learning.*
- *Some of them care, some do not (it's hard to work with such a group).*
- *They prefer gossiping to learning.*
- *They are ready to do anything but learning.*
- *Some students ask about technical vocabulary to prove that I don't speak English.*

This also confirms the suggestions from chapter 2. Most comments repeated themselves and gave the impression that for many learners free language classes constitute just some time off their duties and a social occasion. Of course, one must not generalize, as even in the same groups there are learners who lack any motivation and those who really care. Such groups are especially difficult for teachers, as there surely will be somebody dissatisfied with the classes.

3.3.4 Miscellaneous

Finally, the study participants were asked to write any additional comments or remarks they had (*Do you have any additional comments?*). They could write about any situation or a problem connected with the subject of the study. Not all informants provided additional comments, but most of them did. Their responses are following (quoted):

- *This kind of environment is completely new to me and I don't really know what to do.*
- *Nobody taught me how to deal with such groups.*
- *I had to invent everything on my own.*
- *When my language school employed me, they didn't prepare me for this kind of teaching.*
- *My boss didn't even tell me what kind of clothing I should wear! I came for my first class wearing too casual clothes and I felt like an idiot.*

- *My employer is the biggest problem.*
- *The managers are real pain.*
- *Sometimes I don't know what to teach.*
- *It's awkward because I'm much younger than my students.*
- *When they ask me about technical vocabulary I am not familiar with, I feel really stupid.*

Having read the comments above, one can get an impression that a lot of teachers feel not prepared for the in-company classes. Sometimes even the simplest instruction concerning basic things could help. In other cases a longer training how to deal with difficult situations would be advisable. However, not all teachers were negative about the in-company teaching context. One of them wrote:

I am really satisfied – my job is effective and rewarding. The students learn an L2 because they want to or because they can get promoted etc. They are serious and the teacher does not have to discipline them (it happens when you teach children or teenagers).

She was very positive in most of her responses and comments, but also was one of the most experienced teachers.

4. Conclusions

Summing up, it is easy to notice that the scope of difficulties noticed by the teachers who teach foreign languages in a company environment is relatively vast. It comprises both purely technical problems such as the lack of appropriate facilities, as well as interpersonal misunderstandings between the teachers and the company managers or the lack of motivation shown by some learners.

It may be especially problematic for young teachers who lack experience, but also older teachers can find the situation difficult if they had not taught an L2 in a company before. However, if someone knows what to do and how to do it, this kind of job may be really rewarding and some instructors find it even easier than e.g. teaching children at school.

The study described in this paper is preliminary and constitutes an introduction to the topic. Nevertheless, the results suggest that this topic should be analysed and studied further and *in-company teaching* ought to be considered to be formally taught as a part of a teacher training programme. It is especially important in the light of a current job market situation when one can easily expect that this kind of language classes will be becoming more and more popular and there will be a great demand for in-company foreign language teachers. In order to do their job well, they will have to be formally trained for it and the traditional programmes lack this very important language teaching context.

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