

An existential-ontological approach to education with special attention paid to language education¹

AGNIESZKA RUMIANOWSKA

The State University of Applied Sciences in Płock*

The article discusses the ontological foundations of language education with special attention paid to the essence of language in human existence. After briefly defining what existential philosophy means, the following issues are considered in detail: the concept of existence, being authentic or inauthentic, the problem of choice, ambiguity, curiosity and idle talk as opposed to critical, reflective thinking and finding one's own voice. In the further part of the article, pedagogical implications arising from the ontological assumptions concerning human existence and language are presented. The guiding idea of the article is the assumption that ignoring fundamental ontological issues in the process of language education deepens the pervasive feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness of existence and reduces thinking about education to instrumental and pragmatic issues associated with obtaining qualifications and developing language skills.

KEYWORDS: language; existentialism, education, authenticity, dialogue.

“Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me” (Beckett, 1999, p. 22). Beckett's words seem to be very interesting and inspirational in the context of language education. Beckett appears to persuade us that the task of human beings is to move towards their possibilities and to gain their own existence. From this perspective, existence can be identified with valuable life, meaning, freedom, responsibility and having a sense of control over one's life.

One can exist only through self-invention, self-interpretation and self-projection.

Therefore, one can question and take possibilities of being or being oneself, being authentic or inauthentic. Moreover, one can choose either genuine or false modes of existence. Indeed, there is no other option but to choose between fleeing from oneself and being oneself. A similar view of human existence is striking in Heidegger's thought. According to Heidegger ([1927] 2010), being is a task, which means not simply existing, but existing fully and authentically. Thus, one can choose a typical pattern of human life, anonymous public identity, idle talk or a kind of conformism, however, at the same time one can make oneself authentic. In other words,

*E-mail: arumianowska@pwszplock.pl

¹ This paper was financed by the City of Płock through a competition of the Mayor of the City of Płock for research grants implemented by the task „Cooperation with higher education”.

each human being can lose or gain oneself and become more independent. Authenticity means nothing else than the ability to find personal truthfulness with oneself and openness to being. Heidegger claims that most people are inauthentic because they are absorbed and concealed in the life and world of Everyman, which is narrow-minded and *clichéd*. One tries to be like other people, to speak like others or to have the same ideas, beliefs or ways of thinking. The choice of average values or anonymous and conventional existence means nothing beyond the fact, that “everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (Heidegger, [1927] 2010, p. 124).

There is general consensus that an individual is situated in socially and culturally determined contexts, however, it should be also noted that one always has more or less the ability to define one’s life on the basis of this social and cultural background. Thus, the assumption is that each human being is *not only* biologically or environmentally determined but is capable of taking a stand toward conditions, making decisions, accepting responsibility and *choosing values*. In other words, every human being is thrown into the world and wrapped up in different, social and cultural structures, but at the same time is to a certain extent free to project one’s life in harmony with oneself. The significant point here is to recognise one’s personal truth. Accordingly, as Kierkegaard ([1843]1959, p.181) suggests, “even the richest personality is nothing before he has chosen himself, and on the other hand even what one might call the poorest personality is everything when he has chosen himself; for the great thing is not to be this or that but to be oneself, and this everyone can be if he wills it.” All this shows why it is so utterly unhelpful and flawed to view, measure, and assess other human beings merely in the context of their skills, knowledge and proficiency.

Returning to Beckett, it can be stated that regardless of whether one can choose oneself, whether one has a voice or not, whether one speaks as oneself, or repeats foreign sentences, one thing is certain: one cannot stop asking about oneself. And yet, the question about oneself should be seen as a central issue that must be considered key in education, with special attention paid to language education. In addition, it can happen that one does not see any sensible and relevant aim in one’s life, it can happen that one encounters some existential problems or that one has nothing to say, but it is completely impossible that one does not question, does not think about oneself or does not confront oneself.

The existential perspective on education

It is difficult to speak about language education and language development without determining what education is. Therefore, before discussing the language conception in education, I want briefly to indicate what is meant by this term and propose a theoretical perspective from which this term can be considered. A special position of thinking about education is occupied by existentialism, which is defined as a theory of human development, a philosophy of being, of the nature of human existence or life. In general, existentialism is understood as a protest against traditional metaphysics, the modern *mechanized* world and its dehumanization, conformism and calculative thought, which contributes to *existential* anxieties, language-alienation and loneliness (Tillich, [1952] 2014). Many *existentialist* thinkers emphasise that each human being is a creator whose task is to define oneself, to create a sense of meaning and to develop one’s own potential of being. In an obvious way, this raises the question of the extent to which existentialism can

be taken into account by the problem of education.

Kierkegaard asks as well as suggests: “What, then, is education? I believe it is the course the individual goes through in order to catch up with himself” (Kierkegaard, [1843]1983, p. 46). He believes that the most important issue of education is the ability to be a person, to be a self which relates to the spiritual development of human beings. He points to the best in individuals that can be brought out in the process of education. The question is to make students aware of what is already in them, to inspire them to develop their uniqueness, their intellectual, spiritual, social and emotional potential. In this sense, education is connected with personal engagement and self-consciousness. What counts is future-oriented self-actualization, self-discovery and self-development. Obviously, this development does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, it goes on in relation to the world, others and oneself. This is why the ethical and moral aspects of human life with others must be stressed and taken into account in an educational context. Because from an ontological point of view, a being is consistently a being with and cannot be a self without others, special attention must be paid to dialogic education.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, it can be concluded that the aim of education from an existential perspective is to encourage individuals to develop their uniqueness, to become more self-aware and to be creative and critical thinkers. It is a matter of acting in a new way, changing one’s life and taking responsibility for oneself. Students should expand horizons and *develop* a sense of being in ways that neither they nor their teachers can foresee. All this shows why it does not make any sense to treat individuals merely as human resources or human capital. It is simply not sufficient to reduce education to measuring proficiency

or developing basic skills and literacy. In this light, education is not just a question of how to transmit knowledge or how to provide students with professional skills, but also how to prepare them for life in humanity (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 9).

On the essence of language

Language plays *an essential role* in the process of *becoming human*. It involves the whole *person* and constitutes a human being. Heidegger stresses that “it is language that speaks”, not us (Heidegger, [1951]1971, p. 216). Therefore, language primarily belongs to being, not to us. It can also be stated that being speaks to one through language. According to Heidegger, language is the “house of Being”. To put it differently, we live in language as in the “house of Being”. Heidegger emphasises that our experience to language as well as our experience to being is not “of our own making”. He explains this as follows: “Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language. *This responding* is a hearing. It hears because it listens to the command of *stillness*” (Heidegger, [1951]1971, p. 207). Thus, the idea is to follow, to be guided and to hearken. Language speaks as itself not when we speak on a formal level, not when we use previously prepared words, but rather when we *express ourselves authentically*, when we look for words, and finally when we have a voice. In other words, language speaks as itself when we face critical or extreme situations, when we think creatively and ultimately when the situation brings meaning to us. Each time we encounter new situations, unique and unusual problems or enter into dialogic relations with others, language speaks as itself and speaks by saying. Heidegger ([1959], 1971, p. 122) suggests that saying and speaking do not mean the same and therefore, both terms are not identical because “a man *may speak, speak endlessly, and all the time say*

nothing. Another man *may* remain *silent*, *not speak at all* and yet, *without speaking*, *say a great deal*.” According to Heidegger, to “say” something means “to show, to let something appear, let it be seen and heard”. When one treats other people and situations in this way, they become part of one’s inner spiritual world. On the contrary, when this does not happen, one repeats sentences or words by heart and is not able to express ideas in one’s own words. Therefore, the question is to look for words and not merely for “suitable” and “appropriate” phrases.

In summary, from an ontological perspective, the essence of language cannot be seen only as an expression of internal feelings, experiences or as an activity of humankind. Heidegger says that it can no longer be considered “general notions like energy, activity, labour, force of spirit, view upon the world or expression, under which we might subsume language as a particular instance of this or that universal. Instead of explaining language as this or that, and thus fleeing from it, the way to language wants to let language be experienced as language” (Heidegger, [1964] 1993, p. 406). When language is defined only as an instrument, as a means of expression and communication, this interpretation is correct in logical and psychological terms, but is not true in the ontological sense because it does not capture the essence of language. This conception is not false, but it does not take into account the essence of language, which should be analysed as a means by which being discloses itself. In its shortest formula, the approach of Heidegger calls into question many traditional assumptions underlying the understanding of language and therefore language education.

What is common for Heidegger and Jaspers is making a clear distinction between the public language, idle talk or “sign language” and the so called “word language”, which itself is authentic. Sign-language is

generally understandable, logical and communicable, however, it is at the same time often obscured by the public realm. Idle talk, the term coined by Heidegger, expresses the same meaning and relates to a shallow understanding of oneself. Instead of genuine communication, being oneself and critical thinking, one falls into idle talk, curiosity, gossip and ambiguity (Heidegger, [1927] 2010). There are established principles, strict roles about what counts, what is possible and what is not. In other words, idle talk relates to what must be known in order to be what is today called “in”.

At this point special attention should be also paid to the role of the mother tongue in the process of self-forming. There are numerous definitions of mother tongue and none are universally accepted. The language of origin, community language, quasi native language and first language are often used interchangeably. I limit my emphasis to the assumption that first, mother tongue is acquired at home as the first language, second, there is a personal, historical connection to the language through family or also educational interactions, third, linguistic proficiency in the language is achieved, and fourth, one is strongly dominant in this language. It is important to point out that mother tongue is part “of learners’ life-worlds, integral to the framework of the interpretive resources that they bring to learning” (Scarino, 2014, p. 75). In this language, prayers are said and childhood poems are recited, books are read, academic papers are prepared or jokes are told².

² The role of the first language in the process of self-forming and self-development has been confirmed in psychological studies as well. Several researchers suggest that the first language is perceived as more emotional because emotional words in the first language are stored more deeply than emotional words in the second language. The emotionality of the first language is experienced more strongly than the emotionality connected with the second language (Pavlenko 2006, 20–23).

Jaspers suggests that mother tongue is the source and the second language is a communicative experience. In his opinion, one lives definitely only in one language. The mother tongue touches the deepest structures of our existence. Of course, if one limits oneself willingly only to one language, it is not beneficial because he/she is not aware enough of one's own mother tongue. However, Jaspers emphasises that speaking other languages does not yet mean that an individual understands the substance of the original language. Arendt makes a similar point by arguing that there is no substitution for mother tongue. When she was in exile, she said: "We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. In German I know a large part of German poetry by heart; the poems are always in the back of my mind. I can never do that again. I do things in German that I would not permit myself to do in English. The German language is the essential thing that has remained and that I have always consciously preserved" (Arendt, [1964], 2005, p. 59). Furthermore, she adds that she speaks English proficiently, but she finds it the language in which one cliché chases another and in which she is not able to speak and write so idiomatically as in German.

Between the self and the other

It seems that among several thinkers, such as Levinas, Buber or Jaspers, there is a presumption that one genuinely becomes a person only by entering into a relationship with another person. In particular, Levinas (1969, p. 134) critiques Heidegger's concept, which states that humans are interested only in their own being. He points out metaphorically that "Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry". What Levinas shares with

Heidegger's approach is the contention that it is the language that speaks. However, in his opinion the use of language almost always relates to others. The face-to-face relationship is realised through language, which "originates" in dialogue with others. What counts here is the deeply ethical encounter between the self and the other as well as the question of responsibility. Levinas (1969, p. 76) claims that "to speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common [...] It is what I give, the communicable, the thought, the communication." Genuine communication can be achieved when one puts his/her world into words and offers it to the other. The fundamental principle underlying such communication is, of course, the equality of the communicative partners. Therefore, if one makes the other play roles in which he/she does not recognise oneself, communication turns into violence.

Jaspers makes a similar point when he suggests that self-being is only real in communication with another self-being. This means that a human being cannot be oneself merely by oneself. The only way of achieving self-realisation is communication, in which an individual wants to be manifested and transparent. Jaspers ([1941], 1975, p. 174) explains this as follows: "Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation, only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery." The point is to discover oneself as separate by entering into a relationship with others. In this context, Jaspers distinguishes two types of communication: social, objective, pure functional communication and existential communication. In the first case, "everyday" communication is caused by physical needs, spontaneous emotions and characterised by logical and pragmatic thinking. All this has nothing to do

with existential communication, which is reached when two humans reveal themselves to each other in their individuality (Jaspers, 1969, p. 48). Such communication is based on authentic personal relationship, trust and deep mutual understanding, which deepens the relationship and contributes to personal growth. Moreover, each person maintains his/her uniqueness and retains his/her own potential. Jaspers (1969, p. 52) emphasises that "I cannot be myself unless the other wants to be himself; I cannot be free unless he is free; I cannot be sure of myself unless I am sure of him. In [existential] communication, I feel responsible not only for myself but for the other, as if he were I and I were he; I do not feel it set in until he meets me half-way." This way of understanding the relationship between self and others has been articulated by Buber as well. He argues that it is a dialogue in which the entities recognise each other as equal, have in mind the others in their present and particular being and turn to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between themselves and the other participant (Buber, [1947], 1961, p. 37). In this light dialogue occurs not merely in the psychological, emotional or physical realm, but rather in the spiritual dimension.

Most that has been written on language and communication from an existential point of view tends to highlight and confirm that the most appropriate space to have a voice and to speak as oneself is the dialogic, inter-human relationship that encourages the authentic existence of each partner. The question now is whether such a dialogue and existential communication are possible in the context of education. Of course, the idea may sound *idealistic* and it is not easy to translate ideals into action, but what really counts are tolerance and patience, the need to *preserve self-respect* and respect for the

otherness of others, the capacity to listen and the willingness to understand other people. Even during broken communication, common understanding is still possible – says Gadamer (2001, p. 533).

Language education

All the issues highlighted above are deeply relevant to language education. The question now is the meaning of these issues for language education. Without a doubt, the foregoing considerations put forward several arguments against mechanical and objective language education. All this explains why developing only communicative skills, grammar or vocabulary is so completely insufficient. Surprisingly, the quest for supporting personal development, self-reflection and self-formation in the process of language education is in fact not new. In particular, Pestalozzi emphasised the crucial role of language for self-development and contended: "All science-teaching that is dictated, explained, analysed by men, who have not learnt to think and to speak in accordance with the laws of Nature... must necessarily sink into a miserable burlesque of education". (Pestalozzi, [1857], 1946, p. 48). Gadamer (2001, p. 537) repeats a similar thought about a hundred fifty years later, arguing that "human capabilities are the ones to stress if one is to educate and to cultivate oneself". This means that emotional, cognitive and social abilities as well as life experiences should have a *higher relevance* in language education.

According to Essen (2002, p. 35-42) – a 20th century German teacher and researcher – *the objective* of language education is essentially to facilitate learners to increase their self-understanding, to encourage them to realize and project themselves in relationship to the world, themselves and other people. The aim is to reveal their linguistic and natural potential

and to strengthen their own resources. Everything is already in the pupil. What the teacher has to do is to encourage them to form it and to inspire them to have the courage to be and to develop their uniqueness. What the entity needs on the one hand is reflection and self-consciousness and on the other hand dialogic, genuine, authentic participation in the education process. In this regard, it seems *appropriate* to work with literature, poems, drama, music, pictures or lyrics. Special attention *needs to be paid* to creative writing. The necessity to transform visual, emotional, spiritual impressions, feelings and experiences into different linguistic forms makes students think creatively and as a result, produce subjective texts and their own individual statements (Hellwig, 1997, p. 109). The next appropriate way to problematize one's own existential situation, to enable students to discover who they really are and to help them gain their own voice in the world is to use popular culture in language education (Rumianowska, 2009). Today, popular culture is the most important window through which young people view the world and the dominant sphere on whose basis they construct their identity. The aim is certainly neither to assess nor to glorify popular culture. The significant point is to help the entity answer the main and most important *question*: "who am I" and therefore to become more aware of themselves (Freire, Giroux, 1989). In this respect, everyday life provides an opportunity to write, speak and read in a creative, constructive as well as deconstructive way. The role of reflection, creativity and self-consciousness should also be indicated.

Many contemporary researchers argue that the capability to learn and use language depends on the level of cognitive ability attained during the education process (Carroll, 1993, p. 193, Cummins,

2008). Cognitive growth is connected with the level of academic skills in writing and reading. Therefore, lingual proficiency and fluency are not the same as producing complex language sentences and structures, understanding complex, abstract concepts or using complex idioms. In order to strengthen language potential and develop higher level thinking in language, students need to learn in a rich literary environment and in a meaningful context. Moreover, because the cognitive ability in the mother tongue is transferred into the second language, it is particularly beneficial to continue education in the first language, especially when learners move to another country (Cummins, 1981).

It is important to note that the existential-ontological turn in language education is not possible without activating the whole individual, his/her mind and spirit, his/her intellectual, spiritual and emotional potential. To engage the whole human being means to relate to what he/she knows, how he/she acts with others, who he/she is and what he/she says. Buber ([1947], 1961) reminds us that our aim as teachers is not merely to eliminate negative behaviour, students' mistakes and other obstacles or to see the worst in a person, but rather to see the best in the other. The role of the teacher consists of "letting students learn" by creating space and opportunities for learning, by being open to students' needs and helping them to come into their own. At this point, it should also be indicated that such language education can be accomplished only in a personal, dialogic relationship between the students and the teacher. Dialogue here means the total rejection of manipulation, prejudices or playing any roles. In general, it is a call for meaning, dialogic self and authenticity and at the same time a protest against categorisation, empty rationality and the technical, pragmatic conception of language education.

Concluding Remarks

From an existential point of view, being is never finished, complete and static. Quite the contrary, one permanently develops oneself in relation with oneself, the world and through dialogue with others. The significant point is to recognize that a being is “being possible”, which means that he/she has not only limitations but also possibilities. Therefore, one can follow the crowd and blindly accept public conceptions or search for his/her own voice and own spirituality. In this light, particular attention must be given to language, especially the mother tongue, which is strictly connected with the problem of being. Language gives one insight into being and constitutes the way one relates to the world. Therefore, it cannot be understood instrumentally or interpreted merely as a means of pragmatic communication or the transmission of information. In the face of this assumption, it becomes clear that language education must be connected with existential questions, self-development and self-formation, which is fused with creativity, risk, self-consciousness, dialogue with others and choice. The point is, after all, to make a person think not only about what he/she says but also why he/she says it. It is not a question of filling the gap between oneself and others with random words or using language in an abstract way without reference to concrete experiences. This type of speech does not have anything to do with the essence of language and does not make it easy to look at the world in an alternative way or to live a meaningful and authentic life.

References

- Arendt, H. (2005). Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus. In U. Ludz (Ed.), *Ich will verstehen: Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk* (pp. 9–25). München: Piper Verlag.
- Beckett, S. (1999). *Texts for nothing*. London: John Calder.
- Buber, M. (1961). *Between Man and Man*. (R.G. Smith, Trans.). London: Collins.
- Carroll, J. B. (1993). *Human Cognitive Abilities. A Survey of Factor-Analytic Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collier, V. P., Thomas, W. P. (2002). Reforming education policies for English learners means better schools for all. *The State Education Standard*, 3(1), 30–36.
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and Language Minority Students: A Theoretical Framework* (pp. 3–49). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center California State University.
- Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and Theoretical Status of the Distinction. In B. V. Street and N. Hornberger (Ed.s), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education, Volume 2: Literacy* (pp. 71–83). New York: Springer Science + Business Media LLC.
- Dall’Alba, G., Barnacle, R. (2007). An ontological turn for higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(6), 679–691.
- Essen, E. (2002). *Bildung durch Sprachbewusstsein und sprachliches Gestalten*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Freire, P. Giroux, H. (1989). Pedagogy, Popular Culture and Public Life: An Introduction. In H. Giroux and R. Simon (Eds.), *Popular Culture, Schooling and Everyday Life (Critical Studies in Education)* (199–212). Toronto: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2006). The Incapacity for Conversation. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39, 351–359.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (2001). Education is Self-Education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35(4), 519–538.
- Heidegger, M. (1971). *On the way to language*. (P. Hertz and J. Stambaugh, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row. (Original work published 1959).
- Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). New York: Harper and Row. (Original work published 1951).
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and Time*. (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). New York: State University of New York Press. (Original work published 1927).

- Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic writings: From Being and time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*. (D. F. Krell, Trans.). San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Hellwig, K. (1997). Sprachlich handeln- von Medium zu Medium. Prozessorientiert-kreatives Lernen im Englischunterricht durch Sprach-, Bild- und Musik-Texte. In J. Iluk (Ed.), *Probleme der Schreibentwicklung im Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Jaspers, K. (1969). *Philosophy*. (E.B. Ashton, Trans.). Chicago: University Press.
- Jaspers, K. (1951). *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*. (R. Mannheim, Trans.). New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Jaspers, K. (1975). On My Philosophy. (F. Kaufmann, Trans.). In W. Kaufmann (Ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. New York: Meridian. (Original work published 1941).
- Kierkegaard, S. (1959). *Either-Or*. (W. Lowrie, Trans.). New York: Doubleday. (Original work published 1843).
- Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*. (H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Trans.). New Jersey: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843).
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. (A. Lingis, Trans.). Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.
- Michelman, S. (2010). *The A to Z of Existentialism*. Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: Scarecrow Press.
- Nussbaum, M. (2016). *Not For Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Pavlenko, A. (2006). Bilingual Selves. In A. Pavlenko (Ed.), *Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression, and Representation* (pp. 1–33). Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters LTD.
- Pestalozzi, H. (1946). *Schriften zur Menschenbildung*. Basel: Birkhäuser (Original work published 1857).
- Reynolds, J. (2014). *Understanding Existentialism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rumianowska, A. (2009). Der Einsatz der Populärkultur im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Eine empirische Untersuchung am Beispiel von Musikvideoclips. *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 46(1), 38–44.
- Samway, K. McKeon, D. (1999). *Myths and Realities. Best Practices for English Language Learners*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Scarino, A. (2014). The Place of Heritage Languages in Languages Education in Australia. A Conceptual Challenge. In P. Pericles Trifonas and T. Aravossitas (Eds.), *Rethinking Heritage Language Education* (pp. 66–87). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tillich, P. (2014). *The Courage to Be*. Yale: Yale University Press.