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Hopeless Cases or Just Hard Nuts to Crack? Stories of "Difficult" Foreign Language Learners

Abstract

In accordance with the assumptions of the sociologically grounded labelling theory, an individual's self-perception and, consequently, their actions, might be influenced by words used to describe them. Also, in the context of education, including the field of foreign language learning, such a process of defining learners in a simplified way, has been proven to have profound consequences of psychological nature. The main purpose of the article is to outline the results of a study in which 37 teachers of English shared the stories of their most "difficult" students. The qualitative analysis of the gathered descriptions allowed the identification of some common features characteristic of, so-called, hopeless cases, among which motivation-related problems are the most often enumerated ones. Additionally, many teachers wrote about their struggles while teaching students with special educational needs. The views expressed by the participants of the study might help understand the way in which opinions about students are formulated as well as point to the need for significant changes to be made in the area of foreign language teacher education and training.

Keywords: difficult/problematic student, foreign language learner, formal labelling, informal labelling, labelling theory, teacher training

While reading posts published on different forums and online groups for foreign language teachers, on numerous occasions one might notice hashtags labelling students in a negative way. For example, the tags "problematic student," "difficult student," and "hopeless case" have occurred in 53 posts written since 2014 on one of the biggest groups for Polish teachers of English. Such hashtags are usually accompanied by more or less detailed descriptions of specific students who constitute some kind of a pedagogical challenge for their teachers. The teachers finish their posts with requests for help and advice. It is important to note here that such groups can be easily accessed by students and their parents and, what is more, the teachers publish these posts under their own names,

and they provide a lot of details about a particular case, so a given individual can easily identify himself or herself. This may be potentially problematic for those students.

Psychologists underline the importance of messages we receive about ourselves from people around us and point to their crucial role in the process of self-construction. The aim of this paper is exploring the reasons behind such choices of words to describe students. To do that, the paper outlines the results of a study in which 37 teachers of English decided to share the stories of their most "difficult" students.

In terms of structure, in the first section of this paper, the notion of *a label* is defined and the main assumption of the labelling theory in relation to the educational context are presented. Then, the study design and its methodology are described, followed by a section discussing the obtained results and suggesting further directions of research on the topic of labelling in the field of foreign language education. The paper closes with an appendix containing the translated version of a questionnaire for Polish teachers of English used in the presented study.

Labelling in Education

The belief that our self-concept is created in the process of recognising how other people perceive us has been reflected in the sociologically-grounded labelling theory, developed and popularised in the 1960s and 1970s. As pointed out by Matsueda (2014), the initial statements reflected in this theory include the ideas of George Herbert Mead, Frank Tannenbaum, Edwin Lemert, Émile Durkheim, Kai Erikson, and Howard Becker, who is recognised as the main creator of the labelling theory.

From the sociological point of view, *a label* might be defined as a particular word choice used to describe, or define, a given person. A label is not neutral, as it "contains an evaluation of the person to whom it is applied," as pointed out by Haralambos and Heald (1985, p. 430). Thompson (2017) underlines that in the process of labelling, a given person or a group is defined in a simplified way. Through such categorisation, often based on first impressions, the complexity of the whole person is ignored, and individuals are simply assigned into broad categories. In education, the labelling theory may be applied to situations when teachers choose to (or are obliged to) use particular labels for their students in relation to their behaviour, ability and intellectual potential. The application of labels might lead to the occurrence of new problems that result from the reactions of others and the individual themselves to negative

stereotypes (stigma) attached to a given negative label (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Bernburg 2009).

Although in his paper, Bernburg (2009) focuses on the issue of labelling in the context of criminal behaviours, he underlines the importance of the distinction between "formal" and "informal" labelling, significant also from the educational perspective. As the name suggests, formal labels come from various officially regulated institutions, such as courts, police, corrections, etc., and usually involve some kind of legal consequences imposed on an individual and/or their surroundings. In turn, informally assigned labels are attached to a given person in an unofficial way, usually by parents, peers, educators, etc. In education, formal labelling would mostly involve the application of different medical/diagnostic labels ("dyslexic," "hyperactive," etc.), whereas informal one might actually come from very different sources, including one's teachers, classmates or parents, commenting, for example, on the intellectual abilities of a given student (cf. Boyle, 2020).

Both risks and values of diagnostic labelling in education are extensively discussed by Lauchlan and Boyle (2020). They underline that the educational system makes it necessary to diagnose students and, consequently, attach some formal labels to them, in order to get official support for the learner (for example, the help of a teacher assistant or additional hours of classes). Moreover, for some students, teachers, and parents, identification of a problem in the form of a medical label might come as a relief—from now on they know what to do and where to look for help. Still, diagnostic labels might also bring a number of negative consequences, including: (1) the risk of misdiagnosis or incorrect, subjective interpretation of a label; (2) inability to recognise variability within individuals sharing the same label; (3) inadequate lowering of the expectations by educators, sometimes in the areas not requiring special treatment; (4) influencing teachers' sense of competence concerning their perceived lack of (sufficient) qualifications to teach a diagnosed child; (5) attachment of a lifelong label, in some cases, incorrect one (cf. Lauchlan & Boyle, 2020).

As already hinted, the concept of informal labelling may be applied to situations when teachers choose to use particular labels for their students in relation to their behaviour, ability, and intellectual potential. Teachers tend to make judgements about their students over a period of time, and, as pointed out by Thomson (2017), they base their opinions on students' behaviour in class, their attitudes to learning, previous school reports, interactions with them, and even encounters with their parents. Unfortunately, the labels given to students in the educational context are sometimes grounded in stereotypes, as some educators base their opinions not on students' behaviour and performance but on a number of preconceived ideas developed on an individual's ethnicity, gender or social class background. Browne (2005) states that even children's way of dressing or speaking might be taken into account in this process. As a result

of these more or less correct observations, students are eventually classified as high or low ability, hard working or lazy, naughty or well-behaved, bright or slow, promising or hopeless, etc. Still, as underlined by Thompson (2017), it is debatable whether contemporary, highly trained and competent teachers still label students along the same criteria—for example, whether they assume the existence of the correlation between students' social backgrounds and their intelligence.

Both Browne (2005) and Thompson (2017) highlight that the labelling procedure might exert adverse effects of psychological nature because, as several studies show (cf. Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rist, 1970; Hargreaves et al., 1975), if a teacher labels a student a certain way, there are chances that they will accept this label as true and will act in accordance with the prediction. The labels, which might be treated by students as sources of valid self-knowledge, can influence the construction and development of their identities by shaping their self-concepts. Informal labels attached by teachers may influence not only the way how students see and define themselves but also the dynamics and nature of interactions with others (cf. Triplett & Jarjoura, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1997). This, in turn, can affect their attitudes towards school, their in-class behaviour, and eventually might be reflected in their general level of educational achievement (cf. Thompson, 2017). Interestingly enough, as suggested by Baudson and Preckel (2016), also the positive label of *giftedness* might prove harmful, as it puts students under excessive pressure.

The process of labelling resulting in a situation when a given student behaves and performs in the particular way that was predicted by the teacher constitutes an example of the self-fulfilling prophecy. As defined by Nomi and Pong (2010, p. 531), "the self-fulfilling prophecy is the process by which one's expectations of other people lead those people to behave in ways that confirm those expectations." This phenomenon is also known as *the Pygmalion effect* after the title of the publication by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). The mechanisms behind the self-fulfilling prophecy are outlined by Thompson (2017), who explains that teachers tend to expect more from students they think are more intelligent, and do not expect as much from the ones seen as less gifted. Consequently, a student with a positive label is more likely to be placed in a higher band, and the opposite is true for a student pre-judged to be less able. Thus, it should not be surprising that students labelled in a positive way are more likely to adopt a favourable vision of studying, whereas their negatively labelled peers might even develop an anti-school attitude. On top of that, these mechanisms can be further reinforced by peer-group identification. Therefore, accepting the assumptions proposed in the labelling theory, it might be stated after Thompson (2017) that "the students attainment level is, at least to some degree, a result of the interaction between the teacher and the student, rather than just being about their ability."

Interestingly, negative labelling can sometimes have the opposite effect, which was proven, for example, in Fuller's (1984) research conducted in a London comprehensive school on black girls labelled as low-achievers. Fuller (1984) found out that, although the girls were labelled as less gifted, their response to this negative label was to work diligently on their educational success to prove their teachers and the school wrong (cf. Thompson, 2017). Therefore, it may be hypothesised that the nature of the influence of a particular label on an individual or group will depend on a number of different factors, including, for example, teaching contexts, group dynamics, and students' personalities.

As any other theory, also the labelling theory has been questioned and criticised. For example, as stated by Thompson (2017), it has been suggested that it attributes too much importance to teacher agency, defined by Biesta et al. (2015) as active contribution of teachers to shape their work and its conditions. What is more, as pointed out by Thompson (2017), structural sociologists emphasise that schools themselves make teachers label students—in many cases students are obliged to write entry tests, over which teachers have no control. The results of such tests influence grouping of students and assigning them into ability groups. Additionally, acting in good faith and striving to assist students in need, the school requires teachers to provide some extra support for those labelled as "low ability," even before such a need occurs.

The school system of separating students into groups in accordance with their previous attainment or predicted ability is referred to as *binding* or *streaming* and, as underlined by Browne (2005, p. 292), it has been proven "to be unfair and harmful to the self-esteem and educational performance of bottom-stream pupils, as teachers expect less from children in lower streams and give them less encouragement than those in higher streams."

Nowadays, the procedure of streaming seems to be especially common in the field of foreign language education, as big classes are often divided into smaller language groups. For example, in the Polish educational context, secondary school and university students are often grouped accordingly to their expected level. In some cases, placement tests are implemented for this particular purpose.

To sum up, despite the criticism, mechanisms similar to the ones described in the labelling theory have been identified by psychologists and sociologists. Related phenomena include, for example, the already described Pygmalion Effect or the Golem Effect, which refers to a situation in which low expectations placed upon an individual lead to their poor performance (cf. Rowe & O'Brien, 2002).

Method

Recognising the potentially harmful effect negative labels might have on students, I decided to analyse the reasons behind the procedure of labelling in the context of foreign language teaching. Special emphasis has been placed on the hashtag "hopeless case," as it indirectly suggests the existence of individuals incapable of acquiring a given foreign language and, consequently, seems to be especially stigmatising.

Research Aim and Questions

Striving to explore the issue of negative labelling in the context of foreign language education, the following research questions have been posed:
1. Do foreign language teachers label their students as "hopeless cases"?
    — What is their perception of "a hopeless case"?
    — Are there any characteristics shared by the students described by them as "hopeless cases?
2. What are the teachers' recommendations for those working with such students?
3. What gaps in teachers' knowledge and training might be indicated by the application of such a label in relation to their students?

Research Tool, Data Collection, and Participants

In order to answer the above questions, a link to a questionnaire (in Polish) was published on two Facebook groups for foreign language teachers (cf. Appendix). The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. The first set concerned the issue of teachers' background, then the teachers were inquired about their perception of the hopeless case, their experience when it comes to working with students described in this way and, finally, they were asked to describe one such case in more detail.

The data was collected at the turn of 2019 and 2020. Although I used voluntary sampling method, the teachers who participated in the study represented a variety of backgrounds and were characterised by different personal variables and professional experiences. In total, 37 answers were submitted—36 from female teachers and one from a male teacher. This unequal gender distribution seems to be the result of the dominance of female teachers in the Polish educational system. All study participants were teachers of English as a foreign language, but some also taught other languages, including German

(one person), Spanish (two people), and Italian (one person). As one can see in Figure 1, they constituted quite a diversified sample when it comes to their teaching experience. Their length of service ranged from less than a year to over 20 years in two cases.

Figure 1

The Length of Teaching Experience of the Study Participants
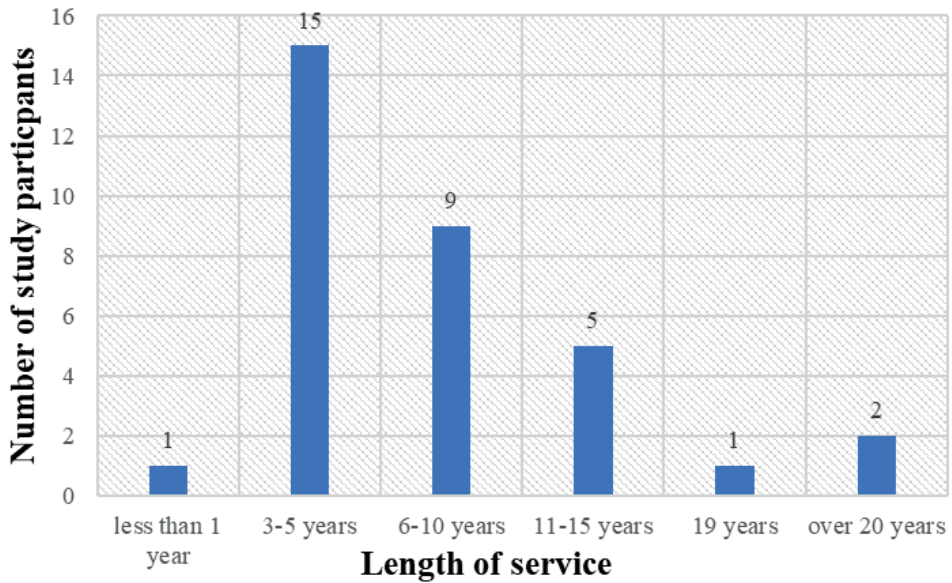
The teachers conducted classes for students of different ages (from toddlers—seven people, to adults—12 respondents; with the biggest number of teachers (28) working with younger teenagers, that is, students aged from 11 to 15), worked in a variety of places and taught both larger groups and individuals. Most of them worked in the private sector, including 26 respondents tutoring individual students and 16 declaring experience of teaching in private schools. The details concerning the workplace of the study participants are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Place of Work Declared by the Respondents (Multiple Answers Accepted)
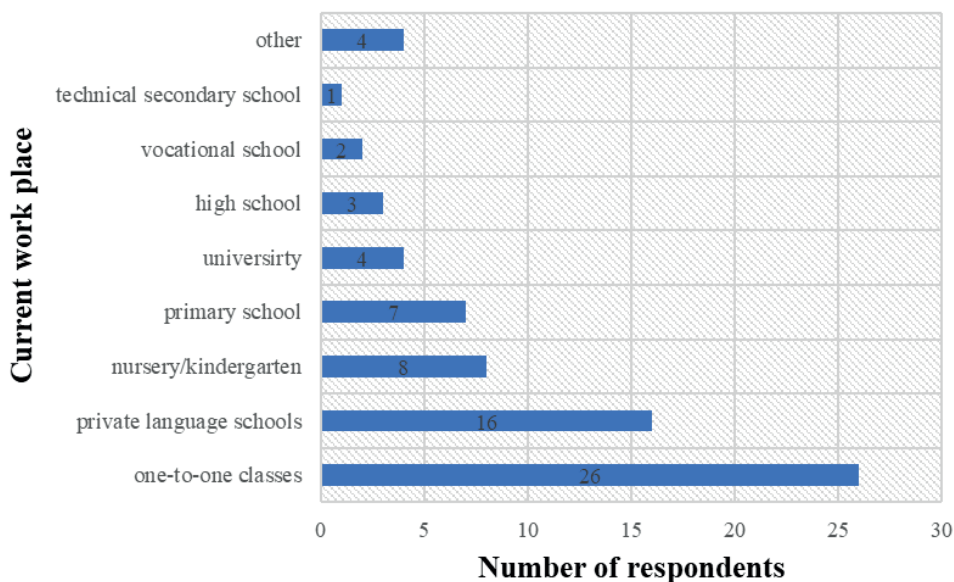
Analysis

After collecting background information, the respondents were asked a number of open-ended questions related directly to the topic of the "hopeless cases" in the context of foreign language education (cf. Appendix). In order to specify the frequency of occurrence of such students, the participants were questioned about the precise number of the ones they could recall.

Then, to better understand the reasons for nicknaming a student as "hopeless," I asked the respondents to write detailed descriptions of students with whom they had worked and who, in their opinion, constituted a perfect example of such a case. In other words, the purpose of the next query was to identify points of similarity between the labelled learners:

Imagine that you are writing an essay entitled "My #hopeless case." Please describe the student whom you consider to be the best illustration for the hashtag "hopeless case" in the context of teaching/learning a foreign language (do not include personal details—still, you can use the first name, specify age/gender/language level and learning context). Why does this person deserve such a "tag"?

When interpreting the teachers' descriptions, content analysis was carried out, as it allows for the identification of prevailing themes in given qualitative data (cf. David & Sutton, 2004). The collected answers were analysed with the help of the NVivo software in order to identify some patterns or, in other words, some features shared by those described as "hopeless cases." The provided answers were carefully read in order to identify key codes, which corresponded to the main themes emerging from the students' descriptions. The coded fragments of answers (single words, phrases, or sentences) could be assigned to more than one theme. Coding consistency was ensured by the fact that the whole process was conducted by one person only (the author herself). In the process of data analysis, eight codes emerged. The codes corresponding to the main areas (or themes) in which problems of the described "hopeless" cases were reported include: (1) motivation-related problems, (2) special educational needs/mental disfunctions, (3) disruptive behaviours, (4) lack of cooperation with the teacher, (5) family/parent-related issues, (6) student's emotional issues, (7) problems with the choice/application of learning strategies, (8) negative attitude towards the subject/teacher.

Finally, the teachers were also asked about their ways of dealing with "hopeless cases" and were invited to share some practical tips for those who will face a similar didactic challenge in the future. The collected suggestions were analysed and grouped in accordance with their prevailing didactic overtones, leading to the identification of the following categories of hints: (1) general teaching methods and techniques, (2) general learning philosophy, (3) ways of approaching the individual student, (4) teacher training and wellbeing.

Results

The purpose of the following section is to present the results of the conducted qualitative analysis, described in accordance with the defined codes corresponding to the problematic areas linked to the perception of "hopeless" students. Then, the study participants' recommendations stemming from their experience of working with problematic students will be outlined.

Teachers' Perceptions of "Hopeless" Cases

As stated above, this subsection describes the identified categories of "hopeless" language learners. In order to better illustrate the identified issues,

some of the descriptions provided by the respondents and translated from Polish are also presented.

Motivation-related Problems [13 References Described by Eight Teachers]

The most often repeated characteristic was students' unwillingness to learn a given foreign language, mentioned 13 times by eight respondents. In this context, teachers talked about students being forced to study by their parents or educational system and about students who do not understand the importance of foreign language knowledge. The descriptions provided by the study participants and quoted below clearly illustrate the importance of one's motivation, especially the inner one:

> Teacher 19: During each quiz or test, he marked his own paper as failed and gave back an empty page, as "English is of no use to him." Each attempt to motivate the student was unsuccessful.

> Teacher 29: The boy has no interest in learning English, because, as he says, he will never go abroad.

Then, the case described by Teacher 14 further illustrates the importance of attitude and motivation. There is also a visible clash in the perception of this boy—his mother considers him to be especially gifted, whereas the teacher seems to have a different opinion:

> Teacher 14: The student, described by his mum as a "genius reading books till 4 am," demonstrates a totally disrespectful approach to the process of English learning and the teacher. His average grade in English doesn't exceed 2.5… Still, when asked why hasn't even had a glance at the material from previous classes […], he responds that it is of no use to him.

Special Educational Needs or Presumed Mental Disfunctions [11 References Provided by 11 Teachers]

The second most often reported source of teachers' problems (11 references by 11 participants) is the need to work with students with special educational needs (SENs) of various natures. In this context, the respondents mentioned both diagnosed and presumed disfunctions, for example, dyslexia, aphasia, Asperger's syndrome, or concentration problems. Here are some quotes illustrating the broad range of issues in this area:

Teacher 2: I'll describe an 8th grade student with "opinion" and learning difficulties in each and every subject…

Teacher 4: I have a student who can't concentrate on the lesson, she prefers drawing instead […]. Even her parents can't help her focus.

Teacher 7: He has tremendous problems with concentration.

Teacher 9: Currently, I'm teaching a boy who is dyslexic and who believes he can make mistakes freely—his mum states that teachers have no right to evaluate him negatively, as they are obliged to follow the recommendations [of the psychological-pedagogic clinic]. So, he has adopted the attitude of his mother… He is so unambitious and insecure that he does nothing to get better results. […] Unfortunately, he constitutes another example of a student who does not study, does not revise at home and, at the same time, does not have any support from parents, who can't help and boost his self-esteem.

Teacher 20: Julia suffers from aphasia; she has huge problems with language learning—even with tasks requiring matching a picture with a description.

Teacher 32: He was a high-school student with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dysorthographia.

Teacher 33: The boy, fourth grade, primary school, dyslexic. My work, additional materials, strategy training—all these didn't influence his language level. He was really motivated and hard-working, but he had "a tag" attached—"I'm dyslexic, I can't learn new words."

An especially complex case was described by Teacher 9. As can be concluded from her description, there is a clash in the perception of dyslexia by the teacher herself and by the student's parents. She suggests that the problem may be tracked down to the parents' understanding of this learning difficulty, and, at the same time, their lack of support. The student is categorised as unambitious, insecure, and not doing anything. While reading this description, one might be a bit confused about the excerpt concerning the recommendations of the psychological-pedagogical clinic—the criticising tone (of the phrase "as they are obliged to follow the recommendations") can be interpreted as a suggestion that these recommendations should not be followed, and/or that they are excessive. Currently, a lot of people, including even teachers and specialists,

talk about different learning difficulties as a way of avoiding effort by lazy students (cf. Suchecka, 2013).

Out of the descriptions provided above, the one presented by Teacher 33 seems to fully illustrate potentially harmful influence of labels used to describe students. In this case the label, which is in fact a medical diagnosis, paired with the lack of knowledge concerning this learning difficulty, clipped the student's wings, and/or gave him an excuse not to make an effort.

Disruptive Behaviours of Students [Nine References by Eight Teachers]

Another didactic challenge which prompted teachers to apply the "hopeless" label was related to cases of students manifesting disruptive behaviours during classes:

Teacher 8: The student sits during the classes doing nothing and disturbing everyone else for 45 minutes.

Teacher 16: Out of 60-minute lesson, 45 minutes is wasted on pointless discussions, reprimanding, and looking for xerox copies or books.

Teacher 17: The student does everything, except for studying.

Teacher 37: S., 23 years old (he hadn't been promoted a few times), 4th grade of technical secondary school. During our first lesson, after my short introduction in English, he said [in Polish]: "Common, Ania, cut the crap!"—and it was of course a reason for joy for the rest of the group. At times when I wore a skirt to work, he used to throw a pen under my desk and used it as an excuse to go under it. He didn't participate even in a single lesson; he never did his homework… When he failed the semester, the headmaster came to me and said: "Just give him the lowest grade to pass and to get rid of him from the school. After all, he won't pass the Matura [high school] exam anyway." I didn't teach him anything during the whole year.

As illustrated in the quotations provided by Teacher 8 and 37, such disruptive behaviours are especially problematic when happening in the context of group teaching, as in such cases misbehaving students ruin the learning opportunity not only for themselves, but also for their peers. Then, the description given by Teacher 37 is especially alarming as it illustrates two examples of pathology, that is, the behaviour of the student, which can be classified as verbal or even sexual harassment of the teacher, and the comment (or even order)

by the headmaster, which prompted the teacher to give the difficult student an inadequate grade, just to get rid of the problem.

Unwillingness to Cooperate with the Teacher [Seven References by Seven Teachers]

The next category of "hopeless" students encompasses individuals who are not willing to cooperate. In contrast to the misbehaving students described above, these individuals do not actively disturb the flow of the lesson for others. Instead, due to their inaction, they seem to waste their time and the time of their teachers trying to encourage such students to cooperate:

Teacher 5: I ask him to open his notebook, note things down, focus on the exercise in the book. Usually, he doesn't reply. He never has his homework.

Teacher 10: The student doesn't react in any way to my instructions, neither to gestures nor to verbal commands in a foreign language.

Teacher 15: The boy refuses to cooperate in any way.

Family-/Parent-related Issues [Seven References by Four Teachers]

This subgroup of problems involves, apart from teachers and students, the third party, that is, the family of a given learner. In some of the cases, the teacher is just aware of the difficult situation of a given learner (Teachers 7 and 8); in others, there are more open clashes between teachers and parents (Teacher 33).

Teacher 7: He has some emotional problems resulting from his personal situation […] He seems to look for attention.

Teacher 8: In my opinion, this is one of the cases of individuals who don't revise, don't study at home, but also don't receive any support from parents who would be able to help and build a child's self-esteem.

Teacher 33: The father of the girl didn't allow her to attend additional classes, although he is aware of her dramatic situation.

The case mentioned by Teacher 33 illustrates the issue of the parents' lack of cooperation and his (probably unintentional) acting to the detriment of the child.

Other Emotional Problems of the Student [Five References by Five Teachers]

Another established code relates to students manifesting emotional problems of unidentified origin. Especially striking case was described by Teacher 3, who mentioned an adult language learner characterised, in the teacher's opinion, by a low self-esteem:

> Teacher 3: Despite the fact of having a wide array of vocabulary and good comprehension skills, the lady was so stressed about speaking, resulting from a really low self-esteem that she resigned overnight.

In turn, Teacher 15 described a boy vividly enacting his emotions and negative attitude towards the learning situation:

> Teacher 15: Sometimes when I ask him to do something, he reacts in an aggressive way, or he cries. It looks as if his parents forced him to enrol at our language school "as a punishment," despite his intense resentment.

Problems with the Choice and/or Application of Learning Strategies [Five References by Five Teachers]

The problem of inadequate (or even lack of) learning strategies, mentioned by five respondents, concerns different aspects of foreign language education. For example, Teacher 14 describes a simple case of an eight-year-old boy who regularly does not do his homework:

> Teacher 14: He copies homework from his classmates—and even this, he does it only when he feels like doing it.

Still, the issue is usually more complex and related to other categories of identified problems. The eight-year-old described above is also an example of a student unwilling to cooperate, who "shows no initiative." In turn, Teacher 17 mentions another inactive learner, unwilling to apply any language learning strategies, even the high-technology-related ones:

> Teacher 17: In his case, there is no progress, but it results from his lack of work on the development of skills, his lack of willingness to listen or read in a foreign language. He even doesn't want to use computer applications at home.

A completely different case of a "hopeless" student was provided by Teacher 24. Here, the girl seems to concentrate on less relevant aspects of the educational process, that is, colourful entries in her notebook, and tries to distract the teacher's attention from her general lack of competence by her excessive focus on vocabulary acquisition:

> Teacher 24: Her attention is brought to a beautiful notebook with topics underlined with a glitter pen and highlighted new vocabulary. Most often, however, it is surprising that the selection of these "new" words is, to put it mildly, random. Anyway, words are like a lifeline for her—after a few lessons on a given unit, she asks about a textbook glossary and wants to know when she'll write the vocabulary quiz. There is nothing wrong with that, but... it soon turns out that with this student, learning vocabulary is not a medium for effective use of language, but an end in itself. The beginning and the end. A mask that is supposed to cover the lack of competence.

Negative Attitude towards the Subject and/or the Teacher [Four References by Three Teachers]

Finally, the last category of problems encompasses cases of students characterised by their negative attitude, either towards the teacher or the subject itself. The student described by Teacher 5 manifest his dissatisfaction in an open and emotional way:

> Teacher 5: The moment he hears the word "English," some kind of resistance appears, and he starts acting as he wants to escape. He cries when I sit down and try to study with him.

Then, Teacher 6 mentioned a case of an unmotivated boy for whom English classes are just a burden and painful obligation:

> Teacher 6: English classes are a waste of time for him—he even perceives them as a punishment.

Finally, from the description provided by Teacher 10, it might be assumed that there was a teacher-student type of a problem, probably involving communication issues:

> Teacher 10: He just doesn't know what this "mean woman" wants from him.

A Mixture of Different Problems

As can be concluded from the above quotes, most of the teachers described cases of students with multiple potentially challenging features. For example, Teacher 5 mentions both the student's negative attitude towards the subject and his unwillingness to cooperate. The description provided by Teacher 6 points, next to the students' bad attitude, to the issue of lack of motivation. Teacher 8 describes a boy who simply does not study but, at the same time, he does not receive any support from his parents and might be characterised by low self-esteem. Teacher 15 refers to a boy with emotional problems, who seems to dislike English and struggles to communicate with his parents. In turn, Teacher 7 describes an especially complex example:

> Teacher 7: This boy is a first-year high school student. He has tremendous problems with concentration and motivation. He also has some emotional problems related to his family situation… There is no progress because of his lack of abilities to work, lack of interest (to listen, read or use some applications to study the language outside the classroom). During classes, he acts against himself, probably looking for attention.

Teacher 7 mentions here a number of different behaviour- and performance-related issues which influenced her perception of this individual. Precisely, the teacher points here to some alleged mental limitations of the person ("tremendous problems with concentration"), emotional problems and behaviours related to them and, on top of that, motivational issues. This description additionally highlights the influence of the student's family environment on his performance at school, but also on the teacher's opinion about this boy.

Teachers' Recommendations

Finally, the teachers who completed the questionnaire were asked about their recommendations for ways of working with a "difficult" student. The gathered suggestions were analysed and grouped into four main categories, including pieces of advice concerning: (1) teaching methods and techniques, (2) general learning philosophy, (3) ways of approaching the individual student, (4) teacher training and wellbeing. Some of recommendations given by the respondents are general in nature, whereas others constitute examples of precise teaching techniques and/or strategies.

The first group of tips encompasses very specific methodological instructions, such as dividing the teaching content into smaller units; focusing on the minimum needed, for example, to pass an obligatory exam; presenting learn-

ing strategies to the student; finding common interests shared by the teacher and student and using them while preparing classroom materials; allowing the student to prepare before performing in front of others. When it comes to the second area of suggestions, that is, the ones related to teaching philosophy (understood here as some general statements about the nature of the teaching-learning processes), the participants recommended that, when working with "difficult" students, even the tiniest progress should be highlighted, and such students should be aware of the fact that it is natural to make mistakes. The third category involves pieces of advice related to the ways in which one should approach a "difficult student"—here the following hints were given: try to boost the student's self-esteem, self-confidence, and motivation; pay attention, show that you care; make the student feel safe around you; adopt individual approach; express empathy, patience, and kindness. Finally, the last set of recommendation refers to the topics of teacher training and wellbeing—the respondents believe that in order to work effectively with "problematic" students, it is important for a teacher to develop one's psychological knowledge and look for the causes of the problem; additionally, teachers should not take such situations personally and, if needed, they should not hesitate to ask other professionals for help and advice. There were also voices advocating resignation from further cooperation and recommending another teacher for a particular learner.

In the light of the presented theoretical background, I believe that it is important to finish the presentation of the study results by underlining here that only one participant stated that "there are no hopeless cases." Another one has also doubts concerning the usage of such a phrase to describe a student. Interestingly enough, the length of teaching service did not translate itself into a bigger number of recalled "problematic" students—the biggest number of "hopeless" learners were given by two novice teachers, including a lady who had been teaching for three months and claimed to have three such cases and the second teacher who stated that 70% of the students in general are actually "hopeless cases." This particular teacher defines "hopeless cases" as those who do not want to study and are forced by their parents to attend classes. What is especially interesting in this case is the fact that this is an opinion expressed by the only one male respondent who had worked as an English teacher only for 20 months and, at the time of the survey, was not an active teacher. What is more, five teachers with different length of teaching experience (ranging from three to 25 years) stated that they had never had such a student, but most of the respondents could recall at least a few such cases.

Discussion

The conclusions stemming from the above literature review and the qualitative analysis of the collected data have been divided in accordance with the research questions posed.

Do Foreign Language Teachers Label Their Students as "Hopeless Cases"?

As hinted by Liberman, Woodward, and Kinzler (2017), categorising the elements of reality around us is a part of human nature—in the contemporary world this tendency is also visible in the procedure of hash-tagging. The online posts by foreign language teachers who describe the cases of students perceived by them as difficult, or even hopeless, show that negative labelling in education is a permanently vivid problem. As might be also concluded from the data presented in this article, on their professional way many teachers, regardless of the length of their teaching experience, meet students who constitute some kind of a pedagogic challenge for them, including even individuals who, in their opinion, can be labelled as "hopeless."

The discrepancy in the number of "hopeless" language learners recalled by the participants of the study might result from different perceptions of such cases or, in other words, subjective understanding of the label, or from the teachers' different work-related experiences. It is also important to note here that the vast majority of the respondents expressed the belief that such students existed and were able to provide their descriptions.

What Is the Teachers' Perception of "a Hopeless Case"? Are There Any Characteristics Shared by the Students Described by Them as "Hopeless Cases?

The reasons behind the procedure of informal labelling a given language learner as "hopeless" differ. The students perceived in this way usually manifest insufficient levels of intrinsic motivation. What is more, extrinsic pressure supposed to encourage such individuals to learn a foreign language seems to bring counterproductive results. Other features often recognised as those characterising students described as "hopeless" include: being labelled, both formally and presumably, as a student with learning difficulties and/or special educational needs; having family-related and/or overall emotional problems; manifesting disruptive behaviours, inaction or lack of cooperation; inability

to choose and apply appropriate learning strategies; noticeable aversion to the subject, learning situation and/or the teacher.

As pointed out by Becker (1963), Lemert (1967), and Bernburg (2009), labelling a student in an unfavourable way might lead to occurrence of other problems. This dependence seems also to be reflected in the provided descriptions, as most of the mentioned students were sources of multiple didactic challenges for their teachers. For example, formally labelled learners seem to constitute as especially challenging group to be taught, as they were often enumerated among individuals further labelled as "hopeless cases."

What Are the Teachers' Recommendations for Those Working with Such Students?

Although most of the teachers who participated in the study expressed the belief that there are some hopeless cases when it comes to foreign language learning, they were also ready to share some pieces of advice for those who struggle with problematic students. I believe that this fact gives some room for optimism—if the teachers continue to make an effort, maybe the label "hopeless case" is just a hashtag reflecting their struggles and drawing the attention of those who can help them with their challenges.

The recommendations provided by the study participants illustrate the complexity of the teacher's work. When dealing with "difficult" students, one needs to start with adjusting their philosophy of teaching, as with such learners, special adapted didactic methods and techniques might be needed. Apart from the constant control of the teaching-learning processes, teachers should also take care of teacher-student-parent relationships. Finally, as working with "problematic" students is mentally burdensome, educators need to take care of their own mental health and wellbeing. On top of that, in some cases, resignation from further cooperation might be the only solution—still, such a comfort is usually granted to teachers working in private schools or the ones dealing with individual learners. This final piece of advice shows teachers' understanding of the importance of teacher-student relationships and seems to suggest that the "hopelessness" of a given language learner can be unique to a given learning context.

What Gaps in Teachers' Knowledge and Training Might Be Indicated by the Application of Such a Label in Relation to Their Students?

I would like to underline here that the descriptions provided by the teachers, including the ones presented in this article, might help us understand the way

in which opinions about students are formulated, but also point to the areas in which teachers may need assistance and training. The areas identified in the study as the ones in which teachers seem to struggle highlight the need of more extensive psychological and pedagogic training. Consequently, as also suggested by Rymarz (2004) and Lauchlan and Boyle (2020), teacher training courses, including the ones for foreign language teachers, should also focus on the selected issues from the fields of developmental psychology (in order to know how to motivate students of different ages, to know how the self-concept and identity are formed); social/socio-educational psychology (to know how to deal with students' emotions, disruptive behaviours or aggression; to be able to communicate with parents and supervisors) and special pedagogy (in order to pre-diagnose students and work with the already diagnosed ones).

To sum up, it is important to underline after Guichard and Dumora (2008) that the role of teachers in the process of students' self-construction cannot be undervalued. Constituting an important source of self-knowledge for their students, educators not only shape the educational process itself, but also influence students' growth and the development of their individual dispositions and self-perceptions. Therefore, in the light of the assumptions of the labelling theory, teachers should be particularly careful when making and expressing judgements about their students' intellectual abilities and potential.

I believe that this study can serve as an inspiration for further research on the issue of labelling in the context of foreign language education, especially the one conducted on the boundaries of discourse analysis, applied linguistics and psychology. As pointed out by Bernburg (2009), there is a pressing need to investigate the phenomenon of informal labelling—the issues worth addressing include, for example, the exploration of the potential link between informal labelling in the school context and life chances; or the experience of being labelled from the student's perspective. Simultaneously, I am aware of the study's shortcomings resulting, among others, from my inability to analyse greater number of cases, which would allow for taking into consideration such individual variables as students' gender, age or even length of contact with a foreign language.

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Katarzyna Nosidlak

Ein hoffnungsloser Fall oder eine harte Nuss zum Knacken? Über „schwierige" Schüler im Fremdsprachenunterricht

Z u s a m m e n f a s s u n g

Nach der Etikettierungstheorie kann die verbale Etikettierung einer Person erhebliche Auswirkungen auf ihr Selbstwertgefühl haben, was wiederum häufig das menschliche Verhalten bestimmt. Auch im Bildungskontext kann ein solcher Prozess der vereinfachenden Etikettierung von Schülern tiefgreifende Konsequenzen psychologischer Natur haben. Im vorliegenden Artikel werden in erster Linie die Ergebnisse einer Studie dargestellt, in der 37 Englischlehrer über Schüler berichteten, welche sie als die schwierigsten Fälle in ihrer bisherigen Laufbahn bezeichneten. Eine qualitative Analyse der gesammelten Berichte ermöglichte es, einige gemeinsame Merkmale der so genannten hoffnungslosen Fälle zu identifizieren. Die Schüler wurden häufig als Personen ohne Lernmotivation charakterisiert. Außerdem hielten die Studienteilnehmer in vielen Fällen Schüler mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf für besonders „schwierig". Die Berichte der Studienteilnehmer können dabei behilflich sein nachzuvollziehen, wie Meinungen über Schüler gebildet werden, und weisen auf die Notwendigkeit wesentlicher Änderungen im Bereich der Aus- und Weiterbildung von Sprachlehrern hin.

Schlüsselwörter: Lehrerbildung, Etikettierung, Fremdsprachenunterricht, Bildungssoziologie, Etikettierungstheorie, schwierige Schüler

A p p e n d i x

The Hopeless Case—Translated Version of the Questionnaire for Polish Teachers of Foreign Languages

1. I am…
– female
– male
– not listed
– prefer not to answer

2. I teach… (You can mark more than one answer)
– English
– German
– French
– Spanish
– Russian
– Other(s): …………………

3. How long have you been working as a foreign language teacher?

 .……….…………………………………………………………..

4. Where are you working currently? (You can mark more than one answer)
– at a nursery or kindergarten
– at a state primary school
– at a state secondary school
– at a private language school
– at a university/college
– with individual students
– other(s): …………….….….…

5. How old are your students? (You can mark more than one answer)
– 0–3 years old
– 4–6 years old
– 7–10 years old
– 11–15 years old
– 16–19 years old
– I work with university/college students
– I work with adults (i.e., those who finished their education)
– other(s): …………….….……….

6. How do you understand the phrase "hopeless case" in the context of foreign
    language education?
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7. How often do you deal with such cases? How many "hopeless cases" can
    you recall?
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8. Imagine that you are writing an essay entitled "My hopeless case." Please
    describe the student whom you consider to be the best illustration for the
    hashtag "hopeless case" in the context of teaching/learning a foreign lan-
    guage (do not include personal details – still, you can use the first name,
    specify age/gender/language level and learning context). Why does this
    person deserve such a "tag"?

Ps. You can also write—"I have not had such a case."

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9. Have you finally found a way to work with your "hopeless case"? How did your cooperation end? Or is it still going on?

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10. In the context of the topic under discussion, do you have any pieces of advice for teachers who are currently working with "hopeless cases"?

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11. Have you noticed any individual traits (personality, character) common for "hopeless cases"?

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Write your comments, remarks, or reflections here:

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