Teaching foreign languages in higher education during the corona crisis

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Abstract

The paper investigates conceptual and operational levels of methods applied by foreign language teachers at Polish universities under pandemic constraints. In a stable state, a method of teaching, determined by institutional standards, was characterised by the dominance of the behavioural ingredient at the conceptual level, the prominence of obligatory operational-level components, and a limited space for bottom-up influences and individual teachers' voices to be heard. We posit that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic reversed the hierarchy and as a result, teachers have been able to exercise a significant degree of agency. To assess the potential for such a change, we conducted a voluntary survey among Polish language teachers at a tertiary level. A statistical analysis of the results demonstrated that the opportunity for insider self-reflection, offered by the crisis, may affect the conceptual focus of a teaching method as a complex system and eventually penetrate the operational level.

Key words: teaching method, foreign languages, complex systems theory, Covid-19 pandemic, higher education

Introduction

Language teachers make decisions all the time - they need to choose, for instance, what textbook to use, which role to adopt, or how to treat their learners. Obviously, the more informed the teachers, the better their decisions and the more effective the way they teach. Teachers' choices are supported by a multitude of resources, both on-line and printed, such as manuals, guides or seminars. These materials provide information about language teaching methods in general as well as a variety of factors influencing educators' decisions, e.g. students' age or level of proficiency. While teachers are definitely not "mere conveyor belts delivering language through inflexible prescribed and proscribed behaviors" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000), having a recipe to follow or at least resort to does help, particularly in times of crisis.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in spring 2020, no manual was ready to tell the teachers how to behave when the classroom not only stopped being a safe place but in fact stopped existing. The reality we knew as teachers and students is gone but teaching and learning continue to be fundamental social practices which, to be felicitously conducted, need a method, i.e. a foundation upon which educators can build.

Foreign language teachers in various national and educational contexts have tried to come to terms with the new reality. Now, after the first phase of the epidemic, the time is right to share reflections, solutions and simply ways of dealing with the unknown.

This article offers a chapter in the emerging manual on methods of teaching foreign languages during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first part discusses a teaching method as a complex system, comprising three levels: the conceptual (general language teaching theories, such as constructivism), the operational (basic components involved in instruction, such as course aims), and the observable (actual classroom-level phenomena).

The second part of the article identifies a control parameter among the three levels of such a system. In the context of Polish higher education, superordinate-level policies and practices, ranging from syllabus structure to class observation reports, form

feedback loops that guide teachers' actions in selecting their language teaching methods.

All of these standard feedback channels, however, have been recently jammed by the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, discussed in the third part of the article as a destabilizing event that shifted the burden of responsibility for finding effective teaching methods onto individual teachers to a much greater extent than was the case in the stable state.

Relying on qualitative and quantitative input from an online survey, in its fourth part the article strives to portray the teaching methods that emerge from this temporary state of chaos. The survey's open question allowed Polish teachers of modern foreign languages to comment on the operational level of their teaching (whether subjectively effective or ineffective), while closed, multiple-choice questions allowed the conceptual level of their methods to be outlined and examined. The analysis focuses on identifying the dominant conceptual approaches, their interrelations, and their potential links to a teacher's perception of a given method as effective.

A method of teaching a foreign language as a complex system

A method of teaching foreign languages is a tripartite complex system composed of conceptual, operational and observable elements (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008).

The conceptual level encompasses "the systematic principles" (Richards, 1990), or an approach to language teaching, emanating from four major learning theories, i.e. behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism and humanism (Schunk, 2012). However, as K. Illeris (2019) observes, learning theories are themselves comprehensive frameworks of processes and ideas, which means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to posit discrete boundaries between them. Instead, learning theories should be placed along a continuum where shared regions, e.g. neo-behaviourism or cognitive constructivism, are to be expected. Still, for practical purposes, such as describing a teaching method, complex learning frameworks need to be simplified into an idealised but manageable picture built on critical features. In this way, fuzziness can be diminished and variation highlighted. Following this line of thought, P.A. Ertmer and T.J. Newby (2013: 54-63) list explicit aims and objectives, measurable outcomes, criterion-referenced assessment, sequencing of instructional presentation, mastery learning and simple to complex sequencing of practice among the key features of behavioural instruction. A cognitive teaching method, in turn, is characterised by learners' active involvement in the teaching-learning process, which is regulated by individual differences and aided by mental strategies used to facilitate optimal processing and to encourage students to make connections with previously learned content. Next, instruction driven by constructivist principles anchors learning in meaningful contexts where students can actively use what has been learnt for a number of purposes and from a variety of perspectives. Problem-solving skills are therefore supported and these allow learners to go beyond that which is given and explore conditions often dramatically different from the safe environment of initial instruction. Finally, the essence of the humanistic approach is catering for the students' feelings so that knowledge can be acquired (Moskovitz, 1978). This involves granting learners considerable freedom in the classroom, such as when students decide which portion of the content would be most useful to them or select a discussion topic that seems particularly appealing. Learners thus choose activities that enhance their interest in learning and consequently boost their motivation. As a result, "meaningful learning" (Patterson, 1977) occurs, where students can draw on their personal life and hold personal relevance. It is students and their teachers that matter in the humanistic approach since the needs of the former ought to be catered for by the latter. Educators are to assist learners in achieving self-actualisation, acting as

approachable facilitators and friends who enable students to learn in accordance with personal abilities and interests. In this way learners can develop basic survival skills that reach beyond grammar, vocabulary and the competences of reading, writing, speaking and listening considered the most elementary "components of a traditionally designed curriculum, which the world [generally views as] what learners ought to learn in a formal setting" (Ling et al., 2014: 8).

The conceptual level of a language teaching method, derived from four partly overlapping learning theories, i.e. behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism and humanism, can be difficult to identify even if only critical features are considered. Therefore, general principles should be viewed as mere "ingredients" of a teaching method which are transformed via "components involved in instruction" (Guey et al., 2010: 105), such as aims, materials, teacher and student roles, or assessment, in order to make differences between teaching methods maximally salient (Larsen-Freeman, 2010: 7-8).

The operational level of a language teaching method is where ingredients evolve into components and a dynamic relationship between the two levels emerges. The first type of link can be established between the components themselves since they naturally fall into at least three two-member categories, i.e. objective-assessment, material-technique and teacher and student (Guey et al. 2010: 106), all of which need to be taken interdependently. For instance, objectives and materials should be established considering students' individual differences. Another correspondence is among behavioural, cognitive, constructivist and humanistic ingredients in each component. As already stated above, ingredients evolve from non-discrete learning theories and thus can be viewed as inclusive of one another in different proportions. For example, organizing learning material from easy to difficult is apparently behavioural but it can also be taken as humanistic since such an arrangement of content "is designed to be learner-friendly, and in that way can better help learners achieve initial success, thus arousing learners' positive affects" (Guey et al., 2010: 114). As D. Larsen-Freeman (2000: 4-5) observes, techniques constitute a particularly flexible component and thus easily adapt to various ingredients. Even when teaching students a dialogue using a picture to provide a context, an educator can move between behavioural and constructivist approaches, depending how the technique is managed, i.e. whether, for instance, the students are asked to look at the picture, then close their eyes and repeat the dialogue after the teacher or whether they are (also) allowed to create their own exchanges prompted by the visual (Stevick, 1993). On the other hand, there are components which are particularly tied to certain ingredients. For instance, discrete-point evaluation is characteristic of the behavioural approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 47), while friendly relations between teachers and students are critical for the humanistic approach (Amini, Amini, 2012).

The observable level of a teaching method is where theoretical ingredients consolidated into more tangible components become "thought-in-action" in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). In other words, if a teacher believes that language is made up of distinct modules resting on universal parameters, i.e. if he or she is a firm supporter of cognitivism, it makes perfect sense for them to teach pre-defined sets of grammatical constructions or arrange students' vocabulary into neatly-organised lexicons. This is not to say, however, that educators take a particular conceptual stance and keep it throughout the class. In fact, as was the case with the other two levels of a language teaching method, the observable plain should also be taken as an idealization. As D. Larsen-Freeman (2000: 7) puts it, "[i]n the real world students do not always catch on quickly and teachers have to contend with many other social and classroom management matters" than predicted at conceptual and/or operational levels. Hence, on the one hand, a method cannot be fully inferred from students' and teachers' actions and on the other hand, "a method does not reflect everything that is transpiring in the classroom".

A method of teaching a foreign language is a coherent set of links between conceptual, operational and observable levels. According to the complex systems theory, these levels do not necessarily stand in a hierarchical relation to each other, where those at the top constrain those underneath. In fact, influences can work in various directions (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 30). Nevertheless, teaching methods are often imposed on those implementing them. Obviously, teachers "may be able to resist, or at least argue against, the imposition of a particular method by authorities" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: ix). At the same time, though, educators need to be aware that "[…] deviation from the accepted institutional order is costly in some way, and the more highly institutionalised a particular pattern becomes, the more costly such deviations are" (Lawrence et al., 2001, quoted in Phillips et al., 2004: 637). Apparently, higher education is one of the most institutionalised contexts in which language education can be conducted.

A method of teaching a foreign language as a complex system
As many other contemporary educational institutions, universities are determined by a number of national documents and some inner arrangements characteristic of each institution and shaped by various international legal acts and regulations. These documents convey a coherent set of ideas underlying, among others, the way foreign languages are taught, i.e. they form the conceptual level of a teaching method. In the Polish context, the conceptual level is shaped by a network of three meta-systems:

1. the Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF), which developed from the European Qualifications Framework (EQF),
2. the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE), embedded in the PQF and related to the quality standards of the Polish accreditation committee for the enhancement of the quality of higher education (PKA);
3. the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

The Polish Qualifications Framework, which emerged as "an answer to the call of the Council of Europe's policy resulting from long and interrelated historical processes and changes in the field of education" (Nosidlak, 2018: 145), is a part of the Integrated Qualifications System in Poland - an eight-level system of qualifications which has been in use since January 2016. The PQF facilitates the formulation of formal descriptions and specifications of qualifications, as well as their quality assurance. The way these descriptors are rendered suggests that three ingredients: cognitive, constructivist and humanistic, have been integrated. To illustrate, knowledge is defined as "a set of descriptions of facts, principles, theories and practices assimilated during the learning process, relating to a field of learning or professional activity" (Slawinski et al., 2014: 29). In turn, skills correspond to various abilities "to carry out tasks and solve problems relevant to a field of learning or professional activity" (Slawinski et al., 2014: 29). Finally, social competences are also defined in terms of abilities which allow the shaping of students' development, and their autonomous and responsible participation in professional life and society (Slawinski et al., 2014: 28). Importantly, and in consonance with the complex systems' perspective,

[...] modernising the qualifications system [in Poland] is occurring simultaneously in a "top-down" and "bottom-up" manner. On one hand, the education system is being changed by public authorities, while on the other, it is also being changed by organisations and sectoral institutions (Slawinski et al., 2014: 25).

Consequently, individual teachers' voices can only be heard if reinforced by institutional affiliations.

As stated above, the PQF contains descriptions of qualifications for higher education. Consequently, levels 6, 7 and 8 of the PQF correspond to the levels of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE), which provides a detailed description of the educational system at the higher level and contains specifications of learning outcomes and qualifications obtained in the Polish higher education system. On 1 October 2011, a new Act on Higher Education (AHE) in Poland came into force, introducing the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (Zasada, Gruchala, 2012: 20). Since then, all new programmes have had to follow the regulations specified in the NQF-HE. On 29 February 2019, the Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA) introduced new quality standards which delineated two areas: design and compliance with the standards of education as well as procedures and stages of implementation, with reference to which study programmes have since then been evaluated. Within the first area detailed learning outcomes have become most prominent while quantitative descriptors, e.g. duration of studies, students' estimated workload, the number of teacher-student contact hours and the sequence of the learning material, have dominated the second domain of the programme. Thus, when viewed from the perspective of quality standards, the NQF-HE seems to display a behavioural ingredient.

As stated by W. Martyniuk (2006: 18), the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), is a descriptive meta-framework for learning, teaching and assessment in the case of foreign language education in Europe. With reference to conceptual ingredients, the CEFR is a multifaceted system. On the one hand, the approach promoted in the document corresponds to the ideas of cognitivism since, for instance, linguistic competence is viewed as composed of separate modules, e.g. lexical, phonological and syntactic (Council of Europe, 2001: 13). On the other hand, the notional-functional approach (Wilkins, 1972), firmly rooted in the ideas of constructivism and humanism, is advanced, with a syllabus encompassing specified language units characteristic of various communicative situations reflecting learners' social and vocational needs.

In the context of Polish higher education the CEFR is received as either

[an] important describing tool, which may be used while analysing the needs of a student, when specifying learning goals, designing curricula and educational materials and evaluating the results of the educational process (Pawlak, Fisiak, 2007: 5),

or as a rather fashionable trend discussed during conferences and workshops (Nosidlak, 2018: 161). Consequently, the CEFR's assumptions are often treated as superficial or even misinterpreted (Poszytek, 2012: 99), for example, when it comes to defining components at the operational level of the teaching method.

The conceptual level of a method of teaching foreign languages at Polish state universities appears to encompass four ingredients: behavioural, cognitive, constructivist and humanistic, and thus makes it possible to think of a method in a fairly unconstrained way. At the same time, though, it can be observed that some philosophies, e.g. the cognitive-constructivist stance of the CEFR, are perhaps less critical for developing contemporary language education in Poland. Still, to uncover the most salient element(s) at the level of the approach, components of a teaching method need to be recovered at a lower, operational level.

The operational level of a method of teaching foreign languages emerges from syllabi of two types of classes conducted at Polish state universities: courses developing language skills as an integral part of the major programme, which is typical of modern language studies, or philologies; and foreign language courses where instruction is only loosely related to the study programme in, for instance, biology or law. In both

cases, though, the format of a syllabus is similar in that the following obligatory components can be discerned: measurable learning outcomes, sequenced content or an obligatory reading list, numbers of hours and ECTS credits, the amount of student workload and assessment methods and criteria (https://www.pka.edu.pl/ocena/baza-uczelni-jednostek-i-kierunkow-ocenionych/). Clearly, then, the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education filtered through the quality standards of the Polish accreditation committee has had a major impact on the operational level of a teaching method. To put it differently, when viewed from the perspective of method components, the behavioural ingredient comes to the fore while others, especially the humanistic element, become backgrounded. In fact, the humanistic ingredient is non-prominent in two ways. Firstly, components characteristic of the humanistic approach are treated as facultative and thus, for instance, patterns of classroom interaction or types of activities through which student and teacher roles could be highlighted are not a mandatory element of the syllabus.[1]

Secondly, the section of the syllabus in which learning outcomes are described and categorised into knowledge, skills and social competences contains fewer outcomes in the social skills category than in the other sets. Since the category of social competences is where personal and affective dimensions, i.e. traits of the humanistic approach, reside, it can be inferred that the humanistic ingredient is not prominent in foreign language teaching from the vantage point of the operational level. Still, it should prove discoverable at the even lower observable level of classroom interactions.

The observable level of a method is the actions and behaviours of teachers and students during the actual class which can be seen from either outsiders' or insiders' perspective. In the case of the former, it is usually senior colleagues who visit selected classes in order to evaluate those conducting them. A typical evaluation sheet looks at the teacher from a number of angles and includes a host of ingredients: behavioural, e.g. checking whether the teacher starts the lesson on time, keeps the register or whether he or she can efficiently control the class; cognitive, verifying the instructor's level of knowledge and expertise; constructivist, e.g. asking whether the educator encourages the learners to suggest their own solutions; and humanistic, e.g. evaluating the teacher's ability to create a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Though fairly comprehensive, an outsider's observation is nevertheless dominated by the operational level, i.e. the behavioural ingredient, since questions concerning the degree to which the class adheres to the syllabus typically constitute most of the evaluation criteria. The insider's view upon what is actually happening during teacher-students encounters are the instructors' own observations and reflections which help them recognise the thinking that underlies their actions. In this way teachers not only realise their fundamental assumptions and values but also discover whether their beliefs conform to those propagated at the higher level. For instance, an instructor may come to realise that his or her actions in the classroom include more constructivist or humanist ingredients than prescribed by the syllabus. In fact, though, little is known about teachers' actual reflections since these are not recorded. Thus, the observable level of a language teaching method at Polish universities is indeed invisible since, on the one hand, outside observations are conducted too infrequently, usually every four or even six years, to be of significance, and on the other hand, there is no efficient channel through which teachers' insights could be promoted. Naturally, university lecturers - internal stakeholders in the system of quality assurance - can express their opinions and recommendations concerning the syllabus but such initiatives are infrequent. After all, universities are institutions characterised by the existence of mechanisms which link nonconformity with increased costs: economic, cognitive and social (Phillips et al. 2000: 28). Therefore, by making certain ways of thinking impossible or costly, a certain view upon a teaching method can be

promoted, together with some opinions concerning the present and future social roles of the modern teacher. These social roles, by definition (see Long-Crowell 2016), specify sets of behaviour expected of those holding the status of university teachers: putative rather than de facto designers of a teaching method. Still, established conceptual patterns and comfortable roles characterise a complex system, such as a language teaching method, only in its attractor state. In other words, a system may "prefer a certain mode of behaviour [or] a state that it keeps returning to" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 49). When the attractor state is a very "deep well with steep sides", as in the case of highly institutionalised settings, it may be difficult for the system to escape and thus it will remain in "a fixed and stable state" for a long time (Larsen-Freeman,Cameron, 2008: 50).

A method of teaching foreign languages at Polish state universities appears to have rested at the bottom of this "steep well" for about a decade when in March 2020 the system was pushed out of its safe attractor basin onto the edge of chaos.

Teaching foreign languages at Polish state universities in the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (March - September 2020): in search of a method

In its stable and fixed state, a method of teaching foreign languages at Polish universities can be described as a three-level complex system. The superordinate (conceptual) plane is composed of non-discrete ingredients: behavioural, cognitive, constructivist and humanistic. The basic (operational) level, embodied by the syllabus, concretises the fuzzy ingredients into more clearly-delineated components. In this way ingredients are crystallised, links between them become prominent, and a dominant approach, i.e. behaviourism, can be discerned. The subordinate (observable) level is where less prototypical information about the system resides, e.g. its humanistic traits. There are top-down and bottom-up communication among the levels of the method, with the former more influential than the latter, which is only to be expected in a highly-institutionalised context, controlled by quality standards set by the Polish accreditation committee within the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (NQF-HE).

This idealised picture was changed in March 2020, when the Ministry of Science and Higher Education issued a set of guidelines for universities to consider when designing teaching methods and procedures during the Covid-19 pandemic (https://studia.gov.pl/aktualnosci/ksztalcenie-zdalne-na-uczelniach/). These recommendations shifted responsibility for constructing the teaching-learning process from the top, i.e. the authorities, to the bottom - the teachers themselves, who were now to design learning outcomes and methods of their verification as well as sequenced course materials and deliver them to the students. In other words, the only component which needed to be preserved was the number of ECTS points: educators were granted increased agency and allowed to alter the syllabus to a significant extent and in this way express their "hidden" values and beliefs, i.e. the ingredients of the conceptual level.

In order to assess what conceptual and possibly operational elements might be emerging from teachers' reflections following the reconfiguration, an online survey of Polish university teachers of foreign languages will be analysed. Initially designed as a feedback and quality assurance tool, it was launched on the last working day of the summer semester of 2019/2020 (September 18) and went offline at the start of the new academic year (midnight of September 30). That the period was indeed one of a seismic shift is illustrated by some of the answers to the sole open question which concluded the survey and invited comments on the pandemic teaching experience as a whole. Some of the answers allude to the initial absence of clear or consistent institutional guidelines at the operational level, which transformed the whole semester into "a great test", with teachers "expected to sink or swim, and cope as they might, with no lifelines at first". As a result, one respondent stated they had spent the

semester looking for an effective method and learning from their mistakes. Others admitted their methods were "not consciously selected or coherent", or "quite chaotic and selected ad hoc", depending on how the situation developed, given the lack of "pre-designed, tested procedures".

As these quotations indicate, the period was a window of opportunity in which to examine one's teaching methods, and possibly forge new ones in response to the altered and unbalanced state of the system. The identity of these resulting methods was what the survey intended to assess by means of closed questions, which constituted its main part. The survey's double purpose, as a quality assurance and a research tool, made it admittedly imperfect and its brief span limited the number of respondents, so that they cannot be treated as a representative sample of the target group; however, this very timing allowed us to capture the unstable situation following the first unexpected lockdown of Polish universities, when teachers became de facto rather than putative designers of their teaching methods.

Survey research

In Poland, all 18 state universities feature departments where modern language studies are taught; the link to the online survey was sent to the deans of all these departments, and to the heads of all these universities' foreign language centres, to be sent on to the intended respondents: Polish teachers who taught foreign language courses in the winter semester of 2019/2020. Teachers of Polish as a foreign language were not included in the target group and, as the survey was in Polish, neither were native speakers of foreign languages teaching at Polish universities. State universities were targeted, since they offer free-access to their syllabi, structured in the uniform way described before, and are subject to the same external evaluation by the Polish accreditation committee. The population of such teachers at the researchers' own, mid-sized university was calculated to be 124, and thus can be expected to be of the order of 2300 when all 18 universities are considered. The total of 197 respondents yields a 5% margin of error, but a confidence level of only 85%; as already stated, the sample cannot be considered representative, and the answers should be treated as an illustration rather than a reliable depiction of the teacher population.

The multiple-choice questions with multi-select answers which constituted the body of the survey allowed all or none of the answers to be ticked. Each question concerned an operational-level component, whether obligatory (course aims, assessment, and materials) or facultative (teacher roles, student roles, and class structure), and offered the respondent four answers, corresponding to behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, and constructivist conceptual-level ingredients. An undecided answer, "unable to tell", was also available in all cases except for the two questions concerning assessment, since to choose such an option in relation to the most manifestly obligatory of all components could be perceived as unprofessional and face-threatening. Aside from these undecided answers, each option was mapped onto a single ingredient, as in the sample question concerning the role of the teacher (a facultative component of a teaching method) depicted below:

Table 1: A sample survey question in Polish and its English translation, the available options representing four possible ingredients of the method.

During the pandemic, you made sure that… (multiple answers possible)	
Option 1: interpreted as indicating a **constructivist** ingredient	the students were interested in the classes
Option 2: interpreted as indicating a **behavioural** ingredient	the classes comprised varied linguistic exercises
Option 3: interpreted as indicating a **humanistic** ingredient	the classes allowed the students to express their emotions
Option 4: interpreted as indicating a **cognitive** ingredient	the students understood the topic
Option 5: undecided	I am unable to tell

Although the four learning theories form a continuum with shared regions, to facilitate analysis, the survey not only highlighted their most distinctive aspects in how it phrased the available options but, to make the answers more specific, asked the respondents to focus on a single course where they had taught the most online classes, and interpret all questions as pertaining to that group alone. The survey attempted to thread a fine line: on the one hand, the multiple-choice questions concerned critical, contrastive aspects of the four conceptual stances; on the other, the survey's ostensible purpose as a quality assurance tool allowed us to keep this variation and the associations between particular options comparatively covert. Ideally, our respondents, though familiar with the four major learning theories, were expected to indirectly point out the main ingredients of their teaching method by consistently selecting answers of a particular type without realizing this objective of the survey.

The last closed question in the survey concerned the respondents' subjective view on the effectiveness of the teaching method they applied, with "yes", "no" and "don't know" options available. A full list of the questions referred to in the following sections is provided in the Appendix. As the data collected diverged from a normal distribution, nonparametric statistical tests were used both to examine correlations between particular dimensions and to compare various sub-groups.

Ingredients emerging at the conceptual level

As noted before, control parameters of the system (PQF, NQF-HE / PKA, CEFR) exert cognitive, constructivist, behavioural or - to a lesser extent - humanistic influences on the conceptual level, but the actual impact and relative strengths of these influences are hard to gauge by examining that plane alone; however, they might be noticed on the level of operational components. The insight offered by the survey, which links conceptual and operational-level elements, allows their relative proportions to be rated on the basis of the 13 ingredient-related questions subjected to a statistical analysis. Each respondent was awarded a 0-13 score on each of the four scales (behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, and constructivist). Of these scores, 0-7 reflected choices pertaining to obligatory components of the method, i.e. those typically included in the syllabus, and 0-6 came from questions related to facultative components, i.e. those typically missing from the syllabus. The fact that the scales were based on multiple-choice questions allowed us to depict each teacher's educational stance in four technically separate though possibly related dimensions, which correspond to assumed ingredients of a respondent's teaching method. At first, only the total 0-13 scores on each scale will be examined; later, the 0-7 and 0-6 portions of each score will also be examined separately.

First, the average scores on each of the scales were simply compared, and the cognitive approach emerged as the most prominent one. However, it is noteworthy that all the other conceptual stances also marked their presence, including humanistic ones, even though, as noted before, these are backgrounded by national institutions.

Table 2: Average number of answers corresponding to particular ingredients: BEH - behavioural, COG - cognitive, HUM - humanistic, CONS - constructivist (multiple answers allowed, "unable to tell" answers disregarded). Answers corresponding to the cognitivist dimension (in bold) were the most frequent, with elements of other dimensions consistently present.

Conceptual-level ingredient indicated by the answers	Average no. of answers to the 7 questions related to obligatory operational-level components	Average no. of answers to the 6 questions related to facultative operational-level components	Average no. of answers to all questions
BEH	2.09	2.57	4.65
COG	5.30	4.66	**9.97**
HUM	2.45	2.99	5.45
CONS	3.24	3.38	6.62

The data also confirm that both at the level of particular questions and in general, over the course of the whole survey, ingredients were likely to mix rather than appear in isolation, i.e. respondents selected different answers both within and between questions. While by allowing multiple answers the survey might have elicited them to some extent, it is interesting to note that, in the 13 questions, on average, a survey participant checked over 26 answers, excluding undecided ones. In other words, in those questions where they chose any non-undecided options, respondents on average checked answers indicating two different ingredients rather than opting for a single answer alone. This readiness to combine various approaches was slightly higher in questions related to facultative components (2.29), such as the roles assigned to teachers and students, than in those focusing on obligatory ones (1.93), such as materials or assessment. In general, over the course of the whole survey, out of 197 respondents only 4 gave answers in which one of the four potential dimensions was *not* represented at all. This initial observation determined the direction of further analysis, as it appeared crucial to investigate the existence of any connections between the four ingredients and the significance and strength of these potential interrelations.

Mutual attraction between ingredients of different types
Survey data analysis not only revealed the relative prominence of particular dimensions, but also their potential relations, another feature that remains invisible at a purely conceptual level. The analysis of correlations between respondents' scores on the four scales (behavioural, cognitive, humanistic, and constructivist) showed some pairs to be interrelated. A moderate positive correlation was detected between the respective number of humanistic and constructivist answers; statistically significant positive correlations also existed for cognitivism/constructivism and cognitivism/humanism. The number of behavioural answers, however, was only weakly related to the number of cognitivist ones, and not related in any statistically significant way to any other score.

Table 3: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between a respondent's number of answers corresponding to particular dimensions: BEH - behavioural, COG - cognitive, HUM - humanistic, CONS - constructivist. Only results significant at the 0.01 level are included in the table. The strongest connections

were detected between the number of answers corresponding to the humanistic dimension and those corresponding to the constructivist dimension (in bold). The behavioural dimension is virtually independent of the other dimensions, while the other dimensions reinforce one another. "Unable to tell" answers were disregarded.

|	BEH	COG	HUM	CONS
BEH		0.254	---	---
COG	0.254		0.333	0.310
HUM	---	0.333		**0.563**
CONS	---	0.310	**0.563**	

When, rather than being compared in pairs, individual scores were juxtaposed with all the other choices made by a particular respondent (save undecided answers), what resulted could be described as the average measure of each dimension's relative propensity to bond. The measure might be interpreted as the degree to which the conceptual-level dimensions overlap, attract or complement each other (without any indication as to the direction or mutuality of such adhesion). The propensity to bond is, again, the greatest in the case of humanism and constructivism, while a respondent's behavioural score proves unrelated to the others.

Table 4: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between a respondent's number of answers corresponding to a particular dimension and all their answers representing other dimensions (BEH - behavioural, COG - cognitive, HUM - humanistic, CONS - constructivist). Only results significant at the 0.01 level are included in the table.

	Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between the number of answers in a given dimension and the number of all other answers (excluding "unable to tell")
BEH	-
COG	0.388
HUM	**0.486**
CONS	**0.438**

The connection was the strongest in the case of humanistic and constructivist dimensions: although neither of the two approaches was the most popular in absolute numbers, those with a high score in one of them were also willing to check more options outside that paradigm, or conversely: those who checked many options tended to include many humanistic or constructivist ones among them. Again, a high behavioural score did not consistently correspond to a higher or lower score in other dimensions. "Unable to tell" answers were disregarded.

The data offers another proof that the respondents' approaches to language teaching are characterised by syncretism as regards the choice of ingredients, both within particular components and between them. This allows a map of the system to be created: cognitivism, which achieved the highest individual prominence, occupies the central position, with the synergic pair of humanism and constructivism on one side, and a weaker connection to behaviourism on the other. The greater individual scores of both humanism and constructivism, and the strength of their bond, mean the balance of the system may be expected to gravitate toward them rather than behavioural influences.
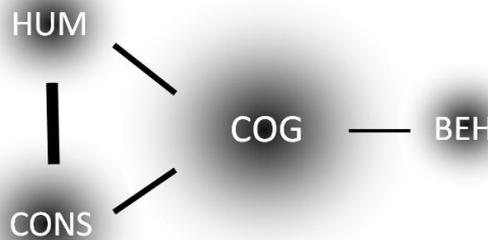
Figure 1: A map of the system as revealed by the variety of ingredients selected, whether within or between various components. The size of the fuzzy regions represents their relative individual prominence, and the thickness of the lines - the strength of their respective bonds.

Finally, after the four dimensions have been examined in isolation and in relationship to each other, they were juxtaposed with respondents' answers to the last question of the survey, where those surveyed were asked to gauge the perceived effectiveness of their teaching method. The answers were mostly optimistic: out of 197 respondents, 124 answered "yes" to whether they thought the method described by means of the multiple-choice questions had been a success, while only 5 answered "no" and 69 professed they did not know. Rather than these absolute numbers, however, aimed at establishing whether the positive ("yes") or non-positive ("no" or "don't know") answers correlated with any of the four dimensions or, if any such correlations surfaced, with any particular operational components (facultative or obligatory) which made up these dimensions.

In fact, differences were detected between those respondents who gave positive and non-positive answers in terms of two dimensions: humanistic and constructivist. In both cases, higher scores on these two scales were more common among respondents who believed themselves to have been successful.

Table 5: Mann-Whitney's U test shows there is a small but statistically significant difference in terms of the number of humanistic and constructivist answers (in bold) between the respondents who did not believe their method had been successful and those confident it had proved effective. Those who believed their method was successful on average scored higher in these two dimensions. There is no such difference involving the other dimensions if they are analysed as a whole.

	Rank in the group not convinced the method had been effective ("no" and "don't know" answers)	Rank in the group convinced the method had been effective ("yes" answers)
BEH	98.09	99.54
COG	93.79	102.13
HUM	**84.99**	**107.43**
CONS	**83.95**	**108.05**

As stated before, each respondent's scores on the four scales were made up of scores awarded for answers to questions on obligatory (aims, assessment and materials) and facultative components (teacher and student roles, class dynamics). On closer inspection, these scores were analysed separately. This time, a sense of effectiveness also proved to correlate positively in a statistically significant way with the prominence of the cognitive dimension in their answers to questions about facultative components, an effect small enough to have been below the 0.01 threshold of significance at the previous stage. While the behavioural dimension never showed any statistically significant differences between the two groups of respondents, the previously visible effects in the humanistic and constructivist dimensions naturally stayed visible on this level as well; interestingly, these effects also proved to be particularly significant for questions related to facultative components.

The data show that the less quantifiable and less institutionally reinforced facultative components related to humanistic and constructivist dimensions are bound with the self-assessed effectiveness of the teaching method to a greater extent than the obligatory ones, highlighted by institutional evaluation and quality standards. It is tempting to interpret the data as evidence of effective teaching engendered by a mixture of humanistic or constructivist ingredients, and conclude that facultative components in particular are the key to success, although in a stable attractor state it is the more quantifiable obligatory elements that are supposed to predict the effectiveness of a method. However, again, the data do not indicate the direction of causality: the teachers who included more facultative humanistic or constructivist components in their courses might believe their method was effective because these components indeed seemed to have contributed to its success; but it is also possible those teachers who felt their method had succeeded also believed, buoyed by their sense of accomplishment, they had done more than others and thus checked more answers, usually of the types that seemed to go well together. In such a case options related to the two approaches might have been selected as the best all-encompassing categories available rather than because of any specific humanistic or constructivist underpinnings of the teaching methods perceived as successful. What is also worthy of note, and perhaps of further study, is that it is not clear whether this discrepancy had already existed in the system and simply remained invisible or difficult to address from a purely conceptual vantage point, or whether it is an anomaly emerging in the unstable period portrayed by the survey. In the latter case, a stress on facultative, non-quantifiable elements of the humanistic and constructivist dimensions might be a product of the respondents' greater agency as designers of their teaching method in a state of emergency. Either way, there remains a certain discrepancy between what was

predominantly controlled in the stable state and what subjectively accompanies a sense of effective teaching as diagnosed by the survey in a state of instability.

That the link between a teacher's sense of effective teaching and tangible aspects of their teaching experience is more than a simple effect of generalised optimism is indirectly (and purely qualitatively) corroborated by remarks contributed by those surveyed in response to the final, open question. While understandably many of the unstructured comments concerned technical issues in online teaching, both respondents convinced and unconvinced of their teaching success often focused on the emotions and motivation of both students and teachers, and the teacher-student relationship. Comments highlighted the paramount importance of "contact with a student", or regretted the anonymity of online teaching, discussed students' increased or decreased commitment to online teaching, praised their autonomy or its deficits, noticed students' individualised responses to the new situation, or invoked their appreciation of the classes. One respondent emphasised that online classes required teachers and students "to work together to discover various possibilities" of the diverse models of online teaching; another was glad to have trusted students; yet another professed a sense of responsibility for the students and a need for dedication and honesty on the part of the teacher. Whether negative or positive, comments in this group highlight the facultative components of the teaching method, especially patterns of interpersonal interaction largely invisible at the level of syllabi and institutions. Again, because the survey only offers a pandemic-era outlook on higher education, it is not clear whether effectiveness has been redefined, or whether the survey has just allowed a view of the system to be refocused, since attention has been brought to the teachers in their state of increased agency. Moreover, it is not clear whether a focus on facultative components (excluding the behavioural dimension) and their role in establishing criteria of success/failure is likely to cause any further changes in the system that would become noticeable at a conceptual level, or whether its oscillations will settle back into a familiar pattern reinforced by institutional recommendations. Apart from teachers admitting that the Covid-19 pandemic opened a window of opportunity allowing them to reassess their students and develop a teaching method together, there were also comments on pandemic-era teaching as a harrowing "experience that hopefully never repeats" or cautious remarks on the effectiveness of the method still having to be tested, even if the experience itself was interesting and invigorating.

Discussion

The results of our research refer to the behaviour of (complex) systems under crisis and, specifically, the effect of the corona crisis on teaching practices - including the composition of teaching methods - and on national educational systems. Complexity theory describes the dynamics of existing systems, but also identifies and recommends mechanisms to help control and exploit perturbations. An educational system that embraces complexity, both within and without, acknowledges that "[e]mergence and self-organization require room for development" rather than "programmed and controlled curricula and formats for teaching and learning, and standardised rates of progression"; in fact, such a system facilitates "a movement towards bottom-up development and change", "a rejection of tight prescription" or, in the specific case of teaching methods, the recognition of "anarchistic epistemologies" (Morrison, 2008: 21-23). All these features may define a system's performance under abnormal conditions and mark the difference between systems that are simply complicated but static to the point of petrification and those that prove adaptive (Even-Zohar, 2005: 10) by allowing "spontaneous self-organisation" (Mason, 2008: 40) when faced with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

The functioning of educational institutions as complex systems faced with the crisis has been studied from various national and international perspectives (see: Flores and Gago, 2020; Van Nuland et al., 2020; Bao, 2020), to which our paper adds the specific context of tertiary language education in Poland. Previous studies note that "there is no contradiction between the ideas of devolved power and effective national networks" (Snyder, 2013: 6), though a "tension" is natural "between practicum as a 'real practice' or as 'an ideal(ised) practice'" (Flores, Gago, 2020). If an educational system is to prove adaptive, these tensions should be allowed to generate forces reaching to its upper levels, "in a direction opposite to the neatly stated, over-determined, tidy, traditional, externally mandated and regulated prescriptions of governments for the aims, content, pedagogy and assessment of learning and education" (Morrison, 2008: 21). As we note, the corona crisis seems to have inadvertently brought about such an opportunity since "[w]e have […] been reminded of the essential role of teachers" (UNESCO, 2020: 2), whose opinions, while "still not consistently heard when it comes to decisions about schooling" (Judd et al., 2020), were audible enough to let teachers play "a critical role in the response to the Covid-19 crisis and [take] additional responsibilities in uncharted territories", "often without sufficient guidance, training, or resources" (UNESCO, 2020: 22, 14), as also attested by responses to our survey's open questions. Our research suggests that, when left largely to their own devices (Judd et al., 2020), teachers tended to fall back on values advocated by complexity theory: their notions of effective teaching proved to be linked to "connections with others" in "both cognitive and affective aspects" (Morrison, 2008: 22) and a variety of approaches with a marked humanistic and constructivist component. As a result, rather than "continue with 'business as usual'" (Judd et al., 2020), some of them could be "moving from the role as an expert and transmitter to a facilitator, co-learner and co-constructer of meaning" (Morrison, 2008: 22). In the context of complexity theory, allowing these perturbations to ripple through the system rather than extinguishing them should be advocated, as "[e]ngaging these stakeholders can enhance the education system's resilience" (UNESCO, 2003: 22). In fact, empowering teachers (OECD, 2020), "[c]onsultation and communication with all education actors", "decentralization", "promoting information sharing and communication" and "real-time evaluation" are consistently mentioned among recommendations for educational institutions in times of crises (UNESCO, 2003: 22). The effect of unblocking feedback channels in the system is seen in "counteracting prevailing models […], especially if the willingness to try new approaches and to experiment with different strategies […] is maintained in the post-COVID-19 times" (Flores, Gago, 2020).

Conclusion
A method of teaching foreign languages is a complex system encompassing conceptual, operational and observable levels. The system usually occupies a safe attractor space enabling its stable existence and/or sustained development. In the context of Polish state universities, this established niche seems to have been critically shaped by the NQF-HE / PKA standards, which caused the behavioural ingredient to stand out of the conceptual blend, the obligatory components to gain prominence within the syllabus, and the observable level to remain implicitly present in the complex system.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic turned the hierarchy upside-down and those at the subordinate levels, i.e. foreign language teachers, were granted increased agency. The shift, as shown by the results of the quantitative-qualitative study presented above, coincides with a re-configuration at the conceptual level of a language teaching method, where the central ingredient, cognitivism, seems likely to gravitate towards humanism and constructivism rather than the outlier, behaviourism. This tendency, though, needs to be further observed in order for reliable conclusions

to be drawn. Clearly, it is not impossible for the system, after a period of instability, to come back to its safe, largely behavioural institutional niche.

While the conceptual level of a language teaching method has been fairly dependably outlined by the data from the quantitative part of the online survey, the qualitative part allowed us to only signal certain tendencies at the operational level, such as a link between a method's effectiveness, as perceived by the respondents, and the facultative, in particular humanistic, components of the syllabus. There is thus an evident need for quantitative research to verify these initial observations. Finally, with reference to the subordinate (observable) level of a method of teaching foreign languages, the insiders' perspective adopted in the study requires corroboration from an outside angle, for instance via virtual observations of online classes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the way foreign languages are taught at Polish state universities. What remains to be seen is how its trajectory will develop in the semesters to come. This research opportunity seems to constitute a bright element in the altogether gloomy landscape painted by the virus.

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Appendix
Presented below is the survey form. Parts of the survey not pertinent to the research described in the article have been omitted.

Teaching methods used in Polish higher education during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (March – June 2020)

Dear Colleagues,
Through the following survey we would like to learn your opinions and experiences of teaching a foreign language under pandemic constraints. It is dedicated to collecting data for the purpose of discovering what teaching methods were used during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e. from March to June 2020.
The survey is fully anonymous and its results will be used solely for research and quality-assurance processes.
The survey comprises three parts. Completing it will take approximately 10 minutes.

What were your main teaching aims during the Covid-19 pandemic? (multiple answers possible)
    ☐ to teach students the language
    ☐ to offer students expert support in their individual process of learning the language
    ☐ to provide psychological support
    ☐ to encourage students to cooperate with one another and/or with the teacher
    ☐ I am unable to tell

What types of tasks predominated in your classes during the Covid-19 pandemic? (multiple answers possible)
    ☐ practical language tasks (e.g. filling in dialogues, answering reading comprehension questions)
    ☐ tasks systematizing knowledge (e.g. comparing, categorizing, creating conceptual maps)
    ☐ tasks stimulating reflection (e.g. a blog, a discussion)
    ☐ problem-solving tasks (e.g. a project)
    ☐ I am unable to tell

During the Covid-19 pandemic, your teaching aims were: (multiple answers possible)
    ☐ established in advance (e.g. by the syllabus)
    ☐ adjusted to the needs of all students (e.g. visual and auditory learners or students with and without Internet access)
    ☐ individually determined (the students declared their lack of interest in a given topic and could omit it)
    ☐ negotiated with the group (some topics were text-book based and some were proposed by the students)
    ☐ I am unable to tell

During the Covid-19 pandemic, you made sure that: (multiple answers possible)
    ☐ the classes comprised varied linguistic exercises
    ☐ the students understood the topic
    ☐ the classes allowed the students to express their emotions
    ☐ the students were interested in the classes
    ☐ I am unable to tell

The materials you used during the Covid-19 pandemic: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ were pre-prepared (e.g. text-book, e-notes)
- ☐ were created according to the students' needs (e.g. accounting for differences in access to technology)
- ☐ came from the environment (any resource could be used during the classes)
- ☐ were provided by the students (e.g. favourite YouTube videos)
- ☐ I am unable to tell

During the Covid-19 pandemic, as a teacher you were: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ passive
- ☐ active
- ☐ reflective
- ☐ interactive
- ☐ I am unable to tell

Your classes during the Covid-19 pandemic proceeded: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ from easy to difficult examples
- ☐ from known facts to new information
- ☐ from students' needs to their satisfaction
- ☐ from problems to solutions
- ☐ I am unable to tell

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was crucial that students: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ be able to acquire information
- ☐ be able to process information
- ☐ be able to express their needs
- ☐ be able to build up their knowledge
- ☐ I am unable to tell

In teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic it is important that a student be able to: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ complete tasks perfectly
- ☐ explain their answers
- ☐ decide to complete a task
- ☐ negotiate a solution
- ☐ I am unable to tell

The materials you used during the Covid-19 pandemic: (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ included various types of language exercises
- ☐ contained texts, images, videos, audio recordings
- ☐ were authentic
- ☐ presented various points of view
- ☐ I am unable to tell

What did you do as a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic? (multiple answers possible)
- ☐ I controlled
- ☐ I explained
- ☐ I inspired
- ☐ I learned
- ☐ I am unable to tell

How did you verify students' progress during the Covid-19 pandemic? (multiple answers possible)

☐ through scored tests
☐ through structured written/oral assignments
☐ through unstructured written/oral assignments
☐ through group presentations/projects

Evaluating students during the Covid-19 pandemic I rewarded: (multiple answers possible)

☐ perfect performance
☐ progress
☐ I tried not to evaluate students
☐ engagement

Do you consider the method you applied during the Covid-19 pandemic effective?

☐ yes
☐ no
☐ don't know

Any remarks/comments concerning the teaching method you used during the Covid-19 pandemic:

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[1] See e.g.:
https://usosweb.uwb.edu.pl/kontroler.php?_action=katalog2/przedmioty/pokazPrzedmiot&prz_kod=0400-AR1-2PGR&lang=en; https://iso.uni.lodz.pl/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/English-studies-2018-2019.pdf