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# The English language learning experience and its impact on the future English language teachers` career

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## Abstract

Abstract: The paper researches the first experiences of learning English in the official and unofficial setting of the future ELT teachers, current 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students at the Faculty taking the subject of methodology. The ability to reflect and analyze their experience objectively can help them evaluate and embrace the most suitable approaches, methods and techniques for teaching English instead of following in the footsteps of their learning experience. The gathered data and information will be incorporated into the future classes at the University.

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## 1. Introduction

It is believed that methods of teaching a foreign language represent a foil for reflection that can help teachers become conscious and aware of the thinking that underlies their actions. This is especially important for the teachers- to be who come to methodology classes to be taught how to teach. As we know they come to teacher training with some ideas about the teaching / learning process formed during the years they have spent as students themselves. (Lotrie, 1975: 22) It is also believed that the major purpose of teacher education is “to help the teachers make the tacit explicit” (Schulman, 1987: 17; Larsen-Freeman, 1998: 7, Larsen-Freeman, 2000: ix) It is hoped that when teachers are exposed to different methods and asked to reflect on their principles and actively engage with their techniques, they can become clear about their reasons for doing something or believing in something. As they become aware of their own fundamental assumptions, values and beliefs, the teachers-to be can choose to teach differently from the way they were taught. (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: ix)

## 2. The Research Problem

This research was designed to gather data on what the experiences of the students of English at the Department of English at the Faculty of Philology and Arts (University of Kragujevac, Serbia) are concerning their learning English in both the official and unofficial settings were. The researcher noticed over the course of time that these future teachers came to classes with assumptions about how the foreign language is learnt and what the best ways of teaching it are. Although they were shown other possible approaches, methods and techniques (Antony, 1963:

63-67; Richards and Rodgers, 2003: 25) of teaching English during their university education (methodology classes), when the researcher met them at work in schools later in their lives, she found that most of them when they became teachers went back to teaching as they had experienced it. Bearing in mind all of the above, the researcher set out to establish what the experience of learning English was like for these students as important information and a good starting point for future methodology classes.

### 3. The Research Design and Methodology

The total of 87 students took part in the research and they were divided into 3 groups. The researcher decided to gather the data by using questions which were considered to be the most fundamental ones for finding out about the teaching / learning process of individuals. The questions were taken and adapted from Larsen-Freeman (2000: 7) and included the following information:

1. the age the students got in touch with the English language both in the formal and informal setting,
2. the characteristics of the teaching and learning process in both settings,
3. the forms of assessment,
4. the role of the mother tongue in the classroom,
5. the types of reading, listening, speaking and writing which were typically present during their English classes,
6. The characteristics of the student-teacher and student-student interaction.
7. The elements of foreign language culture that were introduced
8. The roles of teachers and students in such a classroom
9. The approach, method and techniques that were used and
10. The aims / goals of such methods.

The students were divided into three groups. One group answered the questionnaire containing the above mentioned research questions in the form of a questionnaire; the second group answered the questions in the form of an essay and the third group discussed the research questions orally in the discussion format during classes. The results given below show no difference as to the way in which the data was gathered respectively.

### 4. The Results

Out of 87 students who took part in the research, 19 were male and 68 were female and there was no significant difference in their answers which would indicate that their sex played an important factor in this research. 84 students came into contact with English in the official setting in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school and only 6 students were introduced to English in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. All students came into contact with English in an unofficial setting at an early and earlier age.

#### 4.1. The Official Setting

As for the official setting English language experience, the teaching / learning process characteristics, as the data from all the three sources shows, tend to represent the same recurrent pattern. In both situations –in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade context- the students experienced a similar lesson outline- the teacher would introduce a text to be read aloud and translated and the words were written on the board with their Serbian translation. In most cases, this was followed by explicit grammar presentation, reading comprehension questions and / or grammar exercises. The texts were first made of short dialogues which were to be read aloud, translated and sometimes learnt by heart and / or acted out as role plays. In the senior grades the texts also included narrative texts of different kinds.

The vocabulary was sometimes introduced through pictures and stories, but more often, after reading the dialogues the teacher would write down the new words on the board and their translation. The students were then asked to copy them and learn by heart at home.

The language of the classroom was mainly the mother tongue- the Serbian language and many students believe that it should have been so “because we had just started learning English” and “many children did not understand what the teacher was saying” There is no evidence of longer stretches of speech / conversation in English and “there

was not much direct interaction and conversation with the teacher in English.” Some students (about 5 of them) remember doing a kind of debate once or twice in the senior years of elementary school.

The homework included copying the texts from the textbook a couple of times with or without translation, answering reading comprehension questions or doing grammar exercises and looking the unknown words up in the dictionary and writing them with translation in the notebooks. Some pupils had a variation of this to be done in the activity book. In the official setting there was rarely any personalization of homework and seldom any essays. In fact, 6 out of all students commented that their first essays in English were written no sooner than at University. About 10 of the students rarely had any homework.

The vocabulary was introduced by teacher writing it on the board with the translation and in most cases the pronunciation. More than three fourths (68) of students also had to copy the words and learn them by heart at home. The comment of most students about the drawbacks of their experience (73 of them) refers to the limited vocabulary and not learning chunks of language and different expressions. Only 3 of them mention ever doing vocabulary exercises including synonyms and antonyms.

The typical evaluation was achieved through grammar fill-in the gaps exercises, translating the sentences from and into English which cover a certain point in grammar, dictations and reading aloud and translating.

As for listening exercises, there is no evidence that the listening exercises were actually done in order to practise just the listening skill. The students would mostly read the texts / dialogues as they were played on the tape and in some cases repeat them or just read and listen without any task at all. About 20 students commented that they rarely or not at all had any listening exercises.

As for songs, quizzes and games, only one third of students commented on having experienced these. A few remember only the song about alphabet or just one song from elementary school years.

The culture was introduced through teacher telling students about their visit to an English speaking country (in 4 cases) or talking about some interesting place in Great Britain or America (for example: Big Ben, Stonehenge, Tower of London, Houses of Parliament, Washington, New York and similar), its significance and role in history (17 teachers) or from the textbook with teacher's comments. And only two students mention doing an activity in groups and only on two or three occasions.

#### *4.2. The Unofficial Setting*

As opposed to this situation, the pupils came into contact with English in an unofficial setting through cartoons, films, older brother / sister / a parent being their first teacher and going to classes in a pre-school or a private school or a combination of the previous cases at a rather early age. The basic difference between this way of learning and the one in state schools is that the experience was fun and enjoyable, had the element of challenge, surprise and all the students stated that they liked learning English. For some this pleasant experience, liking it and liking English “was the reason why I decided to study English despite the boring elementary school”. Not all the students consider the elementary school experience as a bad and a negative one, but they all state that the unofficial setting experience which preceded it was much more enjoyable.

Within this unofficial experience there are actually two different situations: the one of the private school and the one of home. Both situations were vital for their decision that they liked the experience and liked English in general. As for home environment of learning English, what is obvious is that with cartoons, films and music it brought the uncontrolled exposure to English in respect of time and vocabulary as compared with the official setting of elementary school. There was no need to do tests and only 2 students comment on being in the need of asking for clarification and/or translation from others. As for correction, the researcher can conclude that, what students acquired during that time was set firm in their mind even if it was a matter of a false analogy in pronunciation or similar with the possibility of fossilization.

The skills which were mainly developed during the private school lessons were listening in context and vocabulary and later basic reading and writing skills. Games, songs, quizzes, drawing and colouring were a part of a typical lesson. 25 out of 30 pupils who took private classes as young learners (age 5 or older) state that there was a great emphasis on listening activities within this context. These include listening to the cartoons from the textbooks, dialogues, songs from a CD or learning songs with the help of the teacher. If there was any writing it included copying the letters of the alphabet or words in English. There is no mentioning of writing short texts. 11 pupils continued with private lessons all throughout elementary school. As they grew older the lesson outline changed and

half of them state that it became similar to the state school ones: “As we grew we learned more complicated things...the lessons became like those at school- reading, translation and grammar.”

None of the students reflected more deeply as to which elements and what kind of their presentation and organization in this private school experience contributed to their feeling that this way of learning was more effective. They state that “I acquired more knowledge in a far interesting way in a smaller group” and “during these classes I fell in love with English” without stepping back and reflecting why. Some contribute this solely to the fewer number of students than at the state school and the fact that “it was easier to work in a smaller group”. For a few students although initially being fun, game-like and enjoyable, even the private lessons as they grew older turned into the same boring type of lessons of the state elementary school. A few students mention doing pair work and group work activities in their private school and only two did this on regular basis.

## 5. The conclusion

Taking into consideration all of the above the researcher can conclude that the English language students at the English Department and teachers- to be have had an almost the same experience of learning English which is typically being taught by a Grammar-translation method. Although the students stated clearly that the official setting experience lacked being interesting, had too much grammar emphasis and offered limited vocabulary learning, they were unable to reflect on their experience in terms of methods and techniques which were its part and the possibility to evaluate them and make possible changes. It is interesting to note the great difference in the official state school experience and the one of the first contact with English. The latter was much more enjoyable partly because some communicative activities were present and it was more adequately contextualized but partly because it was a more relaxed setting of home or private school with lesser need to correct and be given a grade. Despite stating the experience being enjoyable students failed to more clearly and deeply reflect on what contributed to it being such. Their information about this experience was less precise in general than that about the elementary school one. Furthermore, the quality of English language presented during the research (in questionnaires, discussions and essays) is such that it to some extent lacks the qualities of good academic English and imposes the need for expanding the scope of vocabulary used.

All in all, this research has given the researcher a deeper insight into and enough valid information as to what the standing point is for her at the University methodology course. It is now clear what elements contribute to the notions, beliefs, viewpoints and sentiments of the future English language teachers and what layers of experience there are behind these. The research is significant not only for the researcher but also for the education policy makers, future teachers and all teachers in the country and the region as guidelines for possible reflection on their own teaching and possible future actions.

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