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The Classroom Learning Environment and Its Influence on Selected Aspects of Foreign Language Attainment—Insights from Students

Abstract

The twenty-first-century learning environment, the classroom in particular, is believed to create conditions for a language learner to engage in autonomous and cooperative learning activities. It is also believed to develop and sustain motivation, to foster self-regulation and—last but not least—to facilitate the learning process. The learning environment is composed of the learner, other students, the teacher and the physical environment, that is, the furniture and equipment. The research presents students' opinions concerning the positive and negative influences of selected aspects of the classroom environment on their language learning process, motivation, ability to self-assess, self-confidence and attitudes to the target language and culture. As seen from data analysis, it is the teachers whose knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes appear to have the biggest influence on students' learning process. The opinions are collected from students' written guided interviews and may become an inspiration for teacher educators at the university level.

Keywords: learning environment, classroom environment, students' opinions, foreign language learning process, attitudes to learning, target language culture

Introduction

When it comes to the relationship between the learning environment and an individual learner, researchers often argue about the degree and direction of adaptation. The debate concentrates on whether it should be the environment that adapts to the learner or the learner who should adapt to the environment, as

well as to what extent. However, in twenty-first-century education, the question could perhaps be formulated differently, for example "How can the learning environment influence the learner and in what possible ways can the learner shape the environment?" (Lippman, 2010). In this regard, there appears to be some progress from the idea of adaptation to that of influence or shaping, as the former entails submission whereas the latter accepts change without submission.

The inspiration for this paper came from a comment made by an undergraduate student about her school teacher's influence on her pronunciation and how she personally discovered the nature of fossilised errors. Thus, the paper focuses on the classroom environment and its impact on students' beliefs and opinions related to selected aspects of the foreign language learning process. It will concentrate on the influence of the environment on an individual. It is possible, however, that subsequent to data analysis, some tentative suggestions can be made to reshape selected aspects of the learning environment in order to create more facilitative conditions for the language learning process.

The paper consists of five sections. First, definitions and characteristic features of the learning environment in general and of the formal classroom environment in particular are presented and commented on. These will be followed by the description of the study group, the data collection procedure and instrument, the results of the research and discussion. In the conclusion the paper aims to offer some tentative implications for future teacher training and development at the university level. The detailed aim of the research is to collect university students' opinions on the influence of some selected aspects of the classroom learning environment during their primary and secondary education and their influence on their individual language development, their attitudes to foreign language learning and their attitudes to the foreign language culture and community. It should be mentioned that the participants in the research were second year undergraduate university students who had completed their formal compulsory school education two years prior to taking part in the study.

Learning Environment

This part begins by defining the *learning environment* as a general construct. "Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts and cultures in which students learn" (Bates, n.d.). Students may, in fact, learn in different settings: in a school building that contains classrooms, at home while browsing the Internet, during a school trip or during family travels, while talking to friends and acquaintances, while watching television, or listening to audiobooks. There may also be numerous other opportunities for learning

which remain beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to say that the rapid development of mobile information technology has created extremely favourable conditions for learning, provided the process is properly channelled.

The term learning environment may also denote the prevailing ethos and characteristics of a school or class—how individual members of the group relate to one another, how they interact and in what ways the teachers create a positive classroom atmosphere to facilitate the learning process (Bates, n.d.).

In the case of language attainment, we frequently make a distinction between the *formal learning environment* and the *naturalistic learning environment*. The former will be referred to in the next section as the research summarised in this paper concerns students' opinions formulated in contact with formal classroom instruction. The latter, in contrast, refers to learning the language outside the classroom and resembles, to some extent, the process of language acquisition. In contact with the target language community, individuals implicitly attain the language without concentrating on its formal features. It is frequently claimed (e.g., Krashen & Terrell, 1983) that people acquire languages more efficiently in naturalistic settings and that formal classroom learning does not facilitate language attainment. We return to this discussion in the Section: Anvantages and Disadvantages of the Classroom Learning Environment (p. 61 of this paper). A different viewpoint is adopted by other specialists (e.g., Ryan & Mercer, 2011, pp. 160–162; Michońska-Stadnik, 2013, p. 76). They claim that cultivating strong beliefs about the advantages of naturalistic settings over formal settings may weaken students' motivation to learn, make them less active and less willing to accept challenges. Many individuals believe then that a mere visit to a target language country will miraculously trigger language development and guarantee success. It seems advisable to ascertain that such a visit may appear profitable for students, but that contact with the target language in a formal setting may strengthen their strategic competence and academic learning skills and develop learner autonomy.

As Wolff (2011, p. 8) claims, various learner features may be affected by the two types of learning environment. The first characteristic trait that comes to mind in this context is motivation. Some learners will be more motivated while interacting in the naturalistic setting, whereas others will thrive in the formal classroom environment in which they may be able to make effective use of their academic abilities. Students' use of learning and communication strategies will also undergo change due to exposure to different learning contexts. Learning beliefs, attitudes, affective states and willingness to communicate may also be influenced by the environment. As young people are usually subject to institutionalised schooling for around 12 years during their most sensitive developmental period, it seems reasonable to assume that this form of learning environment may have a profound influence on their beliefs, opinions and attitudes. Let us now concentrate on the classroom environment

and its characteristic features following Wolff's (2011, p. 10) point that "[in] my understanding, a *learning environment* encompasses the classroom and the activities that take place there." To conclude, even though the term learning environment covers different educational settings, it is traditionally associated, even by specialists, with formal education in the classroom.

Classroom Learning Environment

General Characteristics of the Classroom Environment

Long (2000, pp. 131–134) agrees with the statement expressed above that institutionalized forms of education may shape learners' attitudes, beliefs, and even personality. He refers to the educational context in general when he writes that students' school experience "will have important effects on their development" (Long, 2000, p. 131). In his opinion, school organization plays an important role. By school organization Long means, among other features, the size of the school, classroom size and the number of students in a group. Classroom size and layout will clearly depend on the students' age and the school subject being taught. A chemistry laboratory will look different from a language classroom and a primary classroom will scarcely resemble a secondary one. In the distant past, however, educational authorities did not really put much effort into adjusting classrooms to students' age and needs—there seemed to be no interest in creating a learner-friendly atmosphere.

School organization also involves different forms of ability grouping, which is a procedure frequently criticized by parents and other social groups. The critics often claim that once a learner is classified into a lower ability group, no matter how hard they try later and achieve better results in tests, they may remain in that group till the end of their school education. This may result in lower motivation, unwillingness to attend school and even truancy. In a language classroom, however, it seems more natural to group students according to their proficiency level—which may have little to do with their general academic learning abilities—and students may be moved to higher level groups when they make noticeable progress.

Long (2000) also mentions that school organization may sometimes have political significance. Discussing that issue, however, remains beyond the scope of this paper.

Determinants of an Effective Classroom Learning Environment

In his further description of the classroom environment, Long (2000, pp. 133–134) proposes some conditions favoring academic achievement. First, he emphasizes an orderly and favorable school climate, in which learners may feel safe and secure. This is much easier to achieve if the school and classes are smaller. In densely populated neighborhoods, unfortunately, schools are usually overcrowded and young learners may feel lost, insecure and deprived of the teacher's appropriate attention.

Another condition necessary for academic achievement is agreement and co-operation between teachers, which also includes effective school administration and the head teacher's supportive leadership. This leadership should involve, for example, appropriate lesson scheduling, adjusted to learners' and teachers' needs, departure from fixed lesson times and the appropriate distribution of recess periods. The most important aspect, however, is the quality of the school curriculum and the coordination of that curriculum with methods of instruction.

Other favorable conditions for academic achievement include the degree of parental involvement, effective monitoring of students' progress and—last but not least—high expectations and strong beliefs in learners' abilities.

This set of conditions proposed by Long (2000) is focused mostly on school as an institution, on its organization and cooperative mood within the school community. Another approach can be observed in Heick (2014), who also proposes a collection of the characteristics of a highly effective classroom learning environment. These characteristics concentrate on students' attitudes, behavior and the relationship between classroom learning and the world outside. First of all, in an effective learning environment students are encouraged to ask questions and such questions are valued more than the answers. Students ask questions not because the teacher directs them to do so, but because they genuinely want to know and display authentic curiosity. By asking questions, students direct the teacher towards explaining things they really want to understand, which makes the whole teaching process worthwhile. That is why good questions are more important than answers. Heick (2014) also emphasizes the fact that in effective learning, ideas for lessons do not all come from the teacher or from the course book—they may derive from different sources, for example, the students themselves, their families, the Internet, or the outside world, to name just a few. This variety of learning sources may motivate the students to pursue authentic, real-life knowledge. As Heick (2014, n.p.) claims, "[c]lassroom learning 'empties' into a connected community—learning starts from the real world and ends there."

In an effective learning environment different learning models are employed. The learners develop awareness of their own learning style preferences and they are encouraged to make use of their individual learning strategies. The

teacher's role involves, inter alia, the presentation of different learning habits so that the learners can personally assess their effectiveness in various learning contexts. When it comes to assessment, according to Heick (2014), it should be regular, persistent, authentic and transparent. It should never be treated as a punishment for lack of knowledge or for misbehavior. The assessment criteria should also be clear and transparent. Last but not least, in an effective learning environment constant opportunities for practice should be created.

Effective Learning Environments in Relation to Different Approaches to Learning

Different learning theories developed over the last 60 years show diverse understandings of the effective classroom learning environment. This effectiveness is determined by the role of the teacher, the treatment of learners, the attitude to the learning process itself and—last but not least—by the classroom layout (Guney & Al, 2012). Guney and Al discuss six different learning theories with respect to how each of them understands the conditions for effective education: behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, experiential learning, humanistic learning, and social-situational learning theory.

For behaviourists, learning consists of creating new habits, the stimulus for learning comes from the environment and it is an observable process, with the learner being a passive participant. "[K]nowledge is viewed as objective, factual and absolute" (Guney & Al, 2012, p. 2335). The teacher is the center of attention because he or she is the only source of knowledge available to the students. That is why the teacher's desk occupies the central position in the classroom and students sit in rows, all facing the teacher. Effective teaching and learning consists of inspiring new but predictable behavior and the teacher is responsible for this.

From the cognitivist perspective, learning is a mental process which requires attention and focus. This process involves noticing, storage, the retrieval of new information and finally its use. The teacher still remains at the center of students' attention, but favorable conditions for stimulating curiosity and exploration are also created, for example by arranging space for both individual learning and group work. Learning is supposed to be meaningful and the learners are encouraged to experiment and explore on their own rather than only listen to the teacher's instructions.

For constructivist theorists, learning involves constructing knowledge through individual experience. This experience is the result of one's social, cultural and environmental interactions, which help to interpret new information and reflect on it (Guney & Al, 2012, p. 2335). The effective learning environment should create conditions for individual learning and group discussions

as both are equally important for acquiring knowledge. The teacher circulates within the classroom learning space and facilitates the learning process. Both the teacher and students must take part in the organization of an efficient learning space and learners must become aware that they are also responsible for their success or failure. The usefulness of the learning content must constantly be stressed and learning styles should be respected (Wolff, 2011, p. 12).

Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) is similar to constructivism in understanding learning as a combination of experiences, perceptions, behavior, and cognitive processing. The classroom environment should encourage reflection on activities, feelings, and thoughts. There should be space for social interaction to gain experience and create better group relationships. Experiential learning can take place both in the classroom and outside it.

Humanists emphasize learners' needs in learning and treat them holistically, which means that education should cater for students' mental, physical, and emotional development. Knowledge develops gradually and lifelong learning is a natural process. Therefore, the learning environment should first of all cater to learners' safety and sense of belonging, which are basic physiological needs according to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy. This seems to be of the utmost importance in a primary classroom as young children's safety and security are especially essential for the learning process to take place. What is more, learners will need to personalize their learning space to attain the maximum amount of independence and realize their goals.

Finally, social-situational learning theory emphasizes "that learning takes place in social relationships" (Guney & Al, 2012, p. 2337). People learn by observation, contact with others and modeling the behavior of others. Consequently, group and pair work will mostly be used to create an effective learning environment.

Each of these learning theories favors a different type of effective classroom environment. Generally, however, cooperation between various elements of the environment is necessary to achieve success. Thus, we need to look into such aspects of the environment as the relationship between the learners and the teacher, relations within the group itself, the teaching materials and the preferred classroom layout. Only then will it be possible to observe the extent to which the environment may shape learners' opinions, attitudes and beliefs.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Classroom Learning Environment in Foreign Language Attainment

The opinions in research reports on classroom language learning, instructed language learning or formal instruction related to successful foreign or second language development are diverse. There is no agreement on the extent to which

this form of language attainment is beneficial for learners, or whether it is perhaps more profitable to replace formal instruction with some form of naturalistic language acquisition. The opinions of second language acquisition specialists are generally divided into two groups: there are those who believe that formal instruction should be abandoned (the zero option, e.g., Krashen, 1982) and those who treat formal instruction as a facilitator of the language learning process (e.g., Sharwood-Smith, 1981). Among those scholars who believe in the facilitative effect of classroom instruction, four distinct positions may be distinguished: the interface hypothesis (Sharwood-Smith, 1981), the variability hypothesis (e.g., Tarone, 1983), the teachability hypothesis (e.g., Pienemann, 1984) and the selective attention hypothesis (e.g., Seliger, 1979). According to the first hypothesis, instruction facilitates language acquisition by providing conscious rules and by supplying the learner with numerous opportunities for practice. Practice is needed to make conscious knowledge automatic. The variability hypothesis, on the other hand, claims that teaching new structures consciously will only affect the learners' careful, planned but not spontaneous language performance. The teachability hypothesis concentrates on the fact that the learners will not automatize certain language structures until there are no maturational constraints on attainment based on the natural order of acquisition. Finally, the selective attention hypothesis argues that formal instruction acts as an aid to learners in helping them concentrate their attention on salient language structures.

Theoretical considerations seem to confirm the facilitative effects of formal instruction on language development. Formal instruction takes place primarily under classroom conditions. Even though the facilitative effects of the classroom environment itself are not unconditionally supported by research, from the practical point of view, formal learning conditions seem to hold more advantages than disadvantages (Hendricks, n.d.). From the positive viewpoint, the classroom environment offers opportunities for face-to face interaction with the teacher, who is a proficient user of the foreign language, as well as with peers. In the classroom, friendships and relations are formed, which sometimes continue for a lifetime. What is more, in the classroom, students are encouraged to ask questions and to discuss issues, which may enhance their cognitive development. On the other hand, there is no flexibility in the classroom—there is a fixed curriculum, a nationally established core syllabus and mandatory course books. Opportunities for individual and autonomous learning are also limited. In the study presented below, the participants comment on both the positive and negative features of the classroom environment.

The Study

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

As already stated in the introduction, the purpose of this study was to explore students' opinions and beliefs concerning the influence of different aspects of the classroom learning environment on their language development and attitudes to the target language culture and community. The aspects of the classroom environment taken into consideration were: the teacher, the group, the school, the course book and the classroom layout. In addition, some other influential factors were also remarked on by the students themselves. The following five research questions were addressed:

1. In what way did different elements of the school environment influence students' language development?
2. In what way did they influence students' general attitudes to learning a foreign language?
3. In what way did they influence students' attitudes to the target language culture and community?
4. Which opinions prevailed, positive or negative?
5. Which aspect(s) of the classroom environment appeared to be the most influential in shaping students' language development and attitudes?

Group Characteristics, Research Procedure and Instrument

The research used a data collection instrument appropriate for the qualitative methodology adopted. The participants in the research were second-year undergraduate students at the Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław ($N = 56$). Their level of English approached B+ or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). They had completed their standard primary and secondary education two years prior to taking part in the research. It may thus be assumed that the students would still remember their school experience quite well, but at the same time would be ready to evaluate it from a certain distance. In April 2017 they were asked to give written answers, in English, to three open-ended questions on questionnaire sheets. Students answered each question extensively, which may mean that all three questions were relevant to them and the answers were based on their genuine experience.

The questionnaire was formulated as follows:

> **The influence of the learning environment on selected aspects of language attainment**
>
> Try to remember your formal language education in English in the school environment. Which elements of that environment (e.g., the teacher, the group, the classroom layout, the school, the course book, etc.) influenced positively or negatively:
>
> a) your language development;
> b) your general attitude to learning a foreign language;
> c) your attitude to the target language culture and community?

Results

The quantitative data referring to the number of opinions expressed are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 and examples of students' comments are then provided.

Table 1

Question 1—Influences on students' language development

Type of comment	Teacher	Group	School	Course book	Classroom layout	Other	Total
Positive	40	13	5	14	3	3	78
Negative	23	17	3	9	1	7	60
Total	63	30	8	23	4	10	138

Altogether the students provided 138 responses to question one, which asked about the perceived influence of different aspects of the learning environment on their language development. There were 78 positive and 60 negative opinions, which on the whole is rather concerning because of the relatively high percentage of critical comments (43%). The teacher appears to be the most influential element in the classroom environment with regard to students' language attainment. Students gave 40 positive and 23 negative opinions concerning the teacher's role in building their language confidence. The peer group influence rendered more negative (17) than positive (13) comments, which was again quite disturbing. The school itself appeared not to have much impact: five positive and three negative opinions. The course book influence was quite favorably evaluated: 14 positive and nine negative comments. Classroom layout seemed not to have much influence on students' language development, but the participants mentioned other factors which unfortunately had mostly a negative impact. A few examples of students' comments are presented below.

Positive: "Enthusiastic teacher," "the teacher had a very good accent," "the teacher was demanding but friendly and well-organised," "the group—we talked in English so I could see my mistakes and strong points," "the teacher developed vocabulary awareness," "the teacher was devoted to her subject," "the classroom was cosy and tidy."

Negative: "…if groups are streamed according to language level, weaker students have no chance to improve," "the school—lessons were frequently cancelled and there was no replacement," "the group wasn't interested in English," "the teacher looked bored all the time," "the teacher couldn't make the class quiet and it was disruptive all the time," "the course book was not inspiring," "the teacher's language level was really poor and she couldn't understand what I was saying."

Other: "…learning the same things for many years," "the program was not inspiring."

Table 2

Question 2—Influences on students' attitudes to learning foreign languages

Type of comment	Teacher	Group	School	Course book	Classroom layout	Other	Total
Positive	29	5	4	4	2	7	51
Negative	13	7	10	7	–	6	43
Total	42	12	14	11	2	13	94

Examining the responses to question two, which concerned the influence of selected aspects of the classroom environment on students' attitudes to learning foreign languages, the picture is not particularly optimistic. Students offered 94 comments altogether, out of which 51 were positive and as many as 43 negative. Similar to the comments covering question one, in this context also the teacher seems to have the strongest influence, with 29 positive and 13 negative opinions. The influence of school as an institution was in most cases negatively evaluated (only four positive in contrast to ten negative opinions). Also the group, the course book and classroom layout gathered more negative than positive answers. The influence of classroom layout seems to be insignificant. There also appeared other influential factors, not mentioned in the questionnaire. A few examples of students' comments are presented below.

Positive: "The teacher—she really loved her job and inspired me to learn," "the teacher told us that learning a foreign language is really important," "the school events organised for us to have contact with the foreign language," "the group—because it was advanced and had a motivating influence."

Negative: "Even bad teachers couldn't make me lose interest in learning a foreign language," "pathetic dialogues and stories were discouraging,"

"nothing in my formal education had a positive influence," "school—learning a foreign language was just an obligation."

Other: "Not school—music and film were influential," "a visit to England with my mum," "tests were too easy—no challenge," "private lessons."

Table 3

Question 3—Influences on students' attitudes to foreign language culture and community

Type of comment	Teacher	Group	School	Course book	Classroom layout	Other	Total
Positive	25	5	12	11	8	13	74
Negative	2	3	11	3	-	1	20
Total	27	8	23	14	8	14	94

When it comes to the influence on students' attitudes to foreign language culture and community, 94 opinions were expressed, out of which 74 were positive and only 20 negative. The positive opinions significantly outnumbered the negative ones, which gives hope that at least in this respect the classroom environment plays a more constructive role. Again, the teacher's influence appears to be the most important, with as many as 25 positive comments from the students. The school and the course book also seem to exert quite a significant influence, even though the students' opinions on the role of the former in affecting their attitudes are distributed almost equally between the positive and the negative impact. There were also 14 other factors, not mentioned in the questionnaire, which contributed to students' formation of attitudes. A few examples of their opinions appear below.

Positive: "The teacher was excited about culture," "school competitions I took part in," "classroom layout—maps, flags, pictures," "some colleagues from the group travelled to England and told us about their experience," "school language open days," "the teacher who didn't think that by teaching about culture she would lose precious time."

Negative: "Teachers didn't encourage us to look for information," "none of the formal language education elements made me actually think anything of the English-speaking part of humanity," "only grammar was discussed."

Other: "Meeting with guests from different countries," "private lessons," "books, films, not school."

Discussion

In light of the findings presented in section Results, it can be confirmed that the students' opinions expressed in the questionnaires provided an extremely rich set of authentic data. It must be observed, though, that the participants in the research, who all studied in the English department, were exceptionally gifted individuals whose language level was definitely above average. They expressed their opinions in English without any constraint. There is much fascinating material in the students' answers, which clearly needs further analysis and categorization to relate students' comments to various factors, such as conditions favoring academic achievement in the classroom environment. The following are just a few comments based on the preliminary analysis of the data. At the same time, they include answers to the first three research questions.

Students voiced as many as 326 opinions altogether, which gives an average of almost six opinions expressed by one student. In all, 203 (62%) were positive and 123 (38%) negative. These numbers, even though the percentage of critical comments seems to be rather high (see comments to question 1, Table 1), offer a relatively optimistic image of the classroom environment and its role in influencing students' attitudes to the three selected aspects of their language development. The teacher appeared to be the most influential element of the classroom context. Students gave 94 positive comments about the teachers' attitudes and behavior and 38 (around 29%) negative. The participants appreciated teachers' involvement, creativity, enthusiasm and professionalism, for example: "The teacher was really demanding but as a result I could develop my language"; "he was the one who made me think about learning as an interesting process, made me see the perspectives for the future"; "I think it was the teacher who made me fall in love with English. All my teachers were very creative, funny and I always wanted to be just like them"; "brilliant guy, made the group feel special"; "she always seemed to be interested in what she was doing"; "the teacher had a very good accent." Unfortunately, there were also critical comments, for example: "I've had many different teachers. Mostly they weren't educated enough to do the job properly, which I noticed even at that time"; "I used to argue with my teachers to the point that people laughed. I was better than them"; "Secondary school was only about the course book, most often without any teacher's help or involvement"; "we had only theory; the teacher didn't speak English to us"; "they always made even the most interesting topic dull"; "every teacher I have met during my education made some pronunciation mistakes."

As far as the group's influence is concerned, students expressed 50 opinions altogether, out of which 23 were positive and 27—negative (54%). This situation seems to be rather disturbing because the process of foreign language learning in the classroom requires, among others, effective group cooperation. Those

students who gave positive comments about the group's influence wrote, for example: "because of the students who grew up in English-speaking countries I was always motivated to study harder in order to catch up with them"; "it was an advanced group and it was motivating"; "conversations within the group had shown my strong and weak points." The negative comments predominantly stressed the group's indifferent attitudes to English lessons and the low language level, for example: "the group treated English very lightly and didn't pay much attention to it"; "the group was never really that interested in language"; "my class in the middle school did not like English lessons so it was hard for me to work in groups sometimes"; "the level of the group was also rather low and I think I would have benefited much more if the level had been higher."

There were 45 comments on the influence of the school as an institution, out of which 21 were positive and 24 (53%) negative. Positive opinions mostly stressed the many school events organized to provide contact with foreign languages, for example meeting foreigners, exchange programs, competitions, workshops and virtual lesson projects with a partner group abroad. Negative opinions mostly concerned the attitude to foreign language lessons, for example: "maths, chemistry—these were really important subjects, not English, so it was a little bit discouraging"; "elementary school … didn't want to allow us to learn English and therefore I started learning when I was in the 4th grade"; "often cancelled classes, no replacement teachers."

There were 48 comments concerning the influence of the course book on students' attitudes. Most of them (29) were positive and 19 (39%) were negative. Students praised the course books for their interesting activities, additional materials offered and for information about the culture associated with the foreign language, for example: "the course books made use of excerpts from books, videos, radio talks—it all showed me that I have to know the language in order to be able to function in everyday life"; "the [course book was a] help needed to expand knowledge and developed some aspects of language." Students were also critical of course books, for example: "course books are rarely amusing and entertaining"; " the course book was so chaotic and disorganised"; "English teachers in my school relied heavily on the course books and hardly ever looked beyond them, which made the classes boring and not very useful."

Students expressed only 14 opinions regarding the role of the classroom layout, of which only one was negative. It seems that students do not pay much attention to this factor of the classroom environment. Positive remarks mostly concerned posters on walls, colorful pictures and the use of interactive boards.

Apart from the five aspects of the classroom environment which appeared in the questionnaire, students also mentioned other factors that could have a positive or negative influence on their attitudes. These were mentioned 37 times: 23 were positive comments and 14 (38%) were negative. Students listed the influence of parents, media, the Internet, private lessons, television, films

and oral and written interactions with foreigners. Some experiences were not entirely encouraging, for example private lessons were sometimes inappropriately planned and the core curriculum was not sufficiently challenging.

In response to question number four, positive opinions (62%) prevailed. Students generally seemed to appreciate the influence of the classroom environment on their language development, attitude to language learning and attitude to the target language culture and community. Research question number five referred to which of the classroom elements, in students' opinions, exerted the greatest influence. In turn, these were first of all the teacher, then the group and the course book.

As demonstrated with respect to all the factors in question, the evidence offers substantial amount of insight into the contribution of all these variables of the classroom learning environment to the quality of the learning process itself. As it appears, none of the factors which determine the integrity of the environment can be completely ignored.

Implications for Teacher Education
and Suggestions for Further Research

The influence of the teacher on different aspects of learning a foreign language in the classroom environment is enormous. Pre-service teachers must be made aware of how much influence they possess.

What seems to be one of the most essential problems is the teacher's pronunciation. Higher proficiency students notice pronunciation errors very quickly and comment on them. As a consequence, pre-service teachers must not neglect to work on their pronunciation, word stress and intonation because they are more salient than grammatical accuracy. Future teachers should also be instructed to devote time to developing their own enthusiasm and group motivation.

They should also take care to develop background knowledge and collect information about the target language culture and community. It is best to avoid "I don't know" answers to students' questions.

Teachers must show good group management. This skill must be acquired during teaching practice under the careful guidance of a mentor teacher. The organization of contests, quizzes, and meetings with native speakers is appreciated by students. Teachers and schools should devote time to these aspects.

As already mentioned, the participants in the study were English students (philology), that is, they were all genuinely interested in the target language and culture. It would be interesting to compare their opinions with those of students from different university departments. The research could also be advanced by investigating the influence of other elements of the classroom environment

(e.g., classroom interaction patterns, type of school) on students' attitudes to a different set of language development variables, for example pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar learning.

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Das Schulumfeld und dessen Einfluss auf manche Aspekte des Fremdspracherwerbs. Studentenbemerkungen

Zusammenfassung

Die Unterrichtsumgebung und namentlich eine Schulklasse sollen entsprechende Bedingungen für autonomes und zur Zusammenarbeit bewegendes Agieren schaffen. Hier sollen die Motivation der Schüler und deren Fähigkeit zur Selbstregulierung entwickelt und aufrechterhalten als auch vor allem der Fremdsprachenunterricht begünstigt werden. Die Unterrichtsumgebung bilden: Schüler, Schulklasse, Lehrer und Lehrbedingungen, z.B.: Ausstattung der Schulklasse. Die Inspirationsquelle der vorliegenden Studie waren Meinungen der Studenten zum positiven und negativen Einfluss der ausgewählten Elemente der Schulklasseumgebung auf Prozess der Erlernung der englischen Sprache, auf ihre Motivation, Selbsteinschätzung, Selbstsicherheit und Einstellung zur Zielsprache und deren Kultur. Die mittels gesteuerter schriftlicher Befragung gesammelten Studentenbemerkungen können eine Inspiration für die an Hochschulen tätigen Sprachlehrer werden.

Schlüsselwörter: Unterrichtsumgebung, Schulklasseumgebung, Studentenmeinungen, Prozess des Fremdsprachenunterrichts, Einstellung zum Unterricht, Kultur des Zielsprachelandes