

THE IMPACT OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT ON ESL STUDENTS' LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

ВПЛИВ НАВЧАЛЬНОГО СЕРЕДОВИЩА НА ОПАНУВАННЯ СТУДЕНТАМИ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ

The article reveals the issues related to the language learning environment as one of the main factors of successful and effective studying of ESL students. ESL students are focusing on acquiring knowledge that will meet the demands of modern society. Thus, teachers should provide students with an environment where they feel comfortable and safe. Moreover, such a positive environment should guarantee ESL students the opportunity for developing language skills and learning English without the challenges of an uncomfortable environment. The literature review showed that the conditions in which students learn the English language were the subject of numerous studies conducted by scientists from different countries. This article paves the way for expanding research on English language learning environments by analyzing the results of previous research in English classrooms and arranging a new study on English learning environments among students of the technical university in Ukraine. The study aimed to investigate the opinions of ESL students, who mostly have B1 level, on the impact of the learning environment on their achievements in language acquisition. 110 students of the technical university of Ukraine "KPI by I. Sikorsky" took part in the survey and gave responses on 12 questions of a survey. A positive learning environment is considered very important by most ESL students. The significance of modern technologies application in English lessons was proved and its influence on the perception of language by ESL students were discussed. Watching movies or DVDs were chosen by students as tools that should improve their language skills. The results of the study demonstrated the fact that ESL teachers should take into account the learning preferences of students which will provide much closer teacher-student interaction during the lesson that allows students to achieve their educational goals easily and faster. The vast majority of ESL students defined social interaction and motivation as the main factors which facilitate their learning of a foreign language.

Key words: language acquisition, language environment, ESL students' engagement, positive atmosphere, classroom climate, attitudes, English language education.

У статті розглядаються питання середовища навчання іноземної мови, яке висту-

пає одним із головних факторів успішного та ефективного навчання студентів. При вивченні іноземної мови студенти зосереджуються на отриманні знань, які відповідають вимогам сучасного суспільства. Таким чином, викладачі повинні забезпечити студентам середовище, де вони почуватимуться комфортно та безпечно. Крім того, таке сприятливе середовище повинно гарантувати студентам можливість розвивати мовні навички та вивчати англійську мову уникаючи проблем некомфортного середовища. Огляд літератури показав, що умови, в яких студенти вивчають англійську мову, були предметом численних досліджень, проведених вченими з різних країн. Дана стаття створює підґрунтя для розширення досліджень щодо середовища навчання іноземної мови через аналіз результатів попередніх досліджень та організацію нового дослідження серед студентів технічного університету України. Метою дослідження було вивчити думку студентів, які переважно мають рівень B1, щодо впливу навчального середовища на їхні досягнення в оволодінні мовою. В опитуванні взяли участь 110 студентів технічного університету України «КПІ ім. І. Сікорського», які дали відповіді на 12 запитань опитування. Більшість студентів вважають позитивне навчальне середовище дуже важливим. Доведено важливість застосування сучасних технологій на заняттях з іноземної мови та обговорено їх вплив на сприйняття студентами іноземної мови. Перегляд фільмів або DVD були обрані студентами як інструменти, які повинні покращити їхні мовні навички. Результати дослідження продемонстрували той факт, що викладачі іноземної мови повинні враховувати навчальні уподобання та цілі студентів, що забезпечить тісну взаємодію викладача та студента під час заняття і дозволить їм легко та швидко досягати певних навчальних цілей. Переважна більшість студентів визначили соціальну взаємодію та мотивацію як головні фактори, які полегшують їхнє вивчення іноземної мови.

Ключові слова: опанування мови, мовне середовище, залучення студентів до вивчення іноземної мови, позитивна атмосфера, клімат у класі, ставлення, навчання англійської мови.

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Problem statement in general and its connection with important scientific and practical tasks.

It has become more obvious nowadays that young people who graduate from university with a degree in a particular field of study are aware of the necessity to learn a foreign language. Knowledge of a foreign language opens far wider opportunities and perspectives for graduates to find a better job and thus succeed in a career. That's why more and more students attempt to use various ways to acquire a second language.

As English has become a global language of business and scientific communication throughout the civilized world, it demands from ESL teachers to pay more attention to the methods and techniques they use in their English lessons to support and promote students' engagement and motivation to learn English. One of the main targets for an ESL teacher is to create a positive learning environment, which should stimulate students to gain new knowledge, communicate and develop their language skills. Nunan, D.

(2004) noticed that students of a second and foreign language are considered successful if they can communicate effectively in the target language [5].

The language environment includes everything that ESL students can accept from their senses during the process of language acquisition. However, we should realize that these are not just sounds they hear while listening to other students or audio files, pictures they see on the walls in the classroom, or films that they watch to improve their listening skills. In addition, it is the ability of an ESL teacher to create a positive atmosphere in the lesson, where students feel physically and emotionally safe, respected, supported, and motivated to learn English, and where there is a positive relationship between the teacher and students and among students in the class. The learning environment is a complex of external factors, that will contribute significantly to enabling second language learning. It goes in line with Fraser's (2014) words about the learning environment that encompasses social, psychological, and pedagogical contexts where learning occurs and which affects student achievement and attitudes [2].

It is very important for teachers and also for educational establishments to be able to provide ESL students with better learning opportunities that should allow them to achieve their educational goals and meet the language needs of today's English language learners. The language environment should be well organized to serve the realization of these targets. It becomes certain why the main aim of a number of scientific researches that have been conducted and will continue to be conducted is to study the impact of the learning environment on the teaching and learning process and further offer new suggestions how to increase the motivation of ESL students for learning a foreign language and their engagement through the creation of a positive learning environment.

Formulation of the goals of the study. The quality of education depends on a variety of elements and features. This paper aims to examine the impact of the learning environment on ESL students' language acquisition. It is important to outline the role of the language atmosphere in the ESL classroom that should contribute to the development of students' language skills. The authors suggest that if ESL teachers know how to create an appropriate and stimulating learning environment, the learning and teaching process will be more effective and productive. Thus, it should enhance and influence students' attention, motivation, and academic achievements of ESL students. The purpose of the contribution is to investigate the opinion of ESL students on the elements for creating an environment where they will feel more immersed in English. The results of the study will have a lot of benefits for both ESL teachers and students because it will give the opportunity to analyze the effectiveness of the existing learning environment and if it is

necessary to make some correlations to meet the demands of modern society.

To achieve this aim, the following targets are developed:

- to study ESL students' opinions on the role of the learning environment and its key elements employed by ESL teachers in the classroom.

- to develop strategies and recommendations for students and teachers for implementing different methods that will be useful for the creation of an environment in the ESL lessons that will increase students' engagement in learning English and motivate them for further personal development.

In this study, we hypothesize that the effectiveness of teaching English language learners is directly linked to the approaches, principles, and techniques applied by teachers in the classroom and will significantly increase when it becomes possible to create a positive learning environment.

The analyses of recent research and publications. The learning environment has been a question in dispute for a long period of time due to its significance for teaching staff as an instrument to increase the level of motivation of students and ensure their safety and support during performing various activities at the lessons.

Gülderen Sağlam, Pınar Salı (2013) in their study investigated the learners' and teachers' perceptions of the learning environment, which should provide teacher educators with valuable feedback about pre-service EFL teachers' awareness and knowledge of the various aspects of the foreign language learning environment [6]. The authors have formulated "suggestions for implementing an intervention to develop student teachers' understanding of the foreign language learning environment and can thus lead to improvements in their future classroom learning environments". They underlined the importance of developing a positive language learning environment by ESL teachers who will be encouraged to look for more productive and effective methods and approaches to teach ESL students.

The results of the study conducted by Valona Softa (2011) revealed that the learning environment in the form of language labs rather than traditional classrooms affected the students' cooperative skills, interpersonal attitudes of the respondents and also the level of motivation in learning English [7]. It scientifically proved the significant impact the language learning environment (in particular, technical equipment in the classroom) has on the feelings of ESL students when they are participating in different activities during the lesson. They feel more relaxed and not so anxious when they are surrounded by a positive environment.

P. Kiatkheeree (2018) investigated key components that were able to promote a second language acquisition with a focus on the language learning

environment [3]. The study found that the learning environment was affected by three aspects, namely physical environment, academic environment, and psychological environment.

The study by Muhammad Ali Agung Baroto (2017) also had an aim to investigate factors that have an influence on second language acquisition [4]. They are language input, learning environment, and motivation. This study discovered that each of them has some effects on language learning, specifically in English speaking proficiency, in terms of fluency and accuracy.

Yuri Konovalenko et al. (2020) in their work aimed to study the readiness of the existing e-learning environment for the organization of English-language learning among Ukrainian and international students on the example of a technical university in Ukraine [1]. The results of the study showed the existing high demand for English language education and confirmed that the demand for English-language teaching is supported by a reasonably high level of language proficiency. Thus, both ESL teachers and educational establishments must be ready to meet new requirements for the organization of the learning environment.

The results of a lot of studies related to the investigation of the learning environment in general and language learning enviro, in particular, prove the importance of learning conditions and their influence on different aspects of the learning process: the level of language acquisition by ESL students, motivation and ability to improve their language skills.

Presentation of the main research materials.

In order to study the issues concerning the learning environment with the main focus on how important it is for ESL students to be immersed in the appropriate learning environment and what strategies for building a positive and productive learning environment are employed by ESL teachers in the classroom, the opinions of ESL students were gathered and further analyzed. The questionnaire with open-ended questions

was designed and included 12 questions. Experiences and comments were gathered from 110 students of the National Technical University of Ukraine “Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute”.

The overall results were summarized in Tables I, II, III, IV. A mixed-method research design was utilized in the study to gather, analyze, compare and contrast quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings obtained from the survey. The participants were 110 ESL students who were able to give their responses to 12 questions of the survey. Three types of prompts were used in a survey: multiple choice (prompts 1, 10, 11, 12), ranging (prompt 6) and a Likert scale (prompts 2,3,4,5,7,8,9) with its varied set of responses to find out responders’ attitudes, indicate the level of the agreement and likelihood.

The survey was conducted with the help of Google forms service. The responders were proposed to choose from the suggested variants or range values from the smallest (minimum) to the largest (maximum) ones. To display the distribution of responses on the Likert scale we used a bar chart and calculated the median (Mdn) and the Interquartile Range (IQR) with the aim of measuring a central tendency.

Presentation of the basic research material.

After evaluating the students’ level of English we can notice that the majority of respondents have B1 Intermediate level (61%) and by far the least number have a higher level B2 Upper-Intermediate (15%), C1 Advanced (12%) and C2 Proficient (5%) and only 7% of respondents identified their level of English as low (A1 Beginner – 3%, A2 Elementary – 4%) (Figure1).

We can draw the conclusion that we are dealing with students with an average level of English proficiency, which allows students to feel comfortable in an English-speaking environment and they are ready for further development of their language skills.

The suggestion was proved by the results of students’ responses to Question 2 of the survey, where most students (48%) responded that they probably

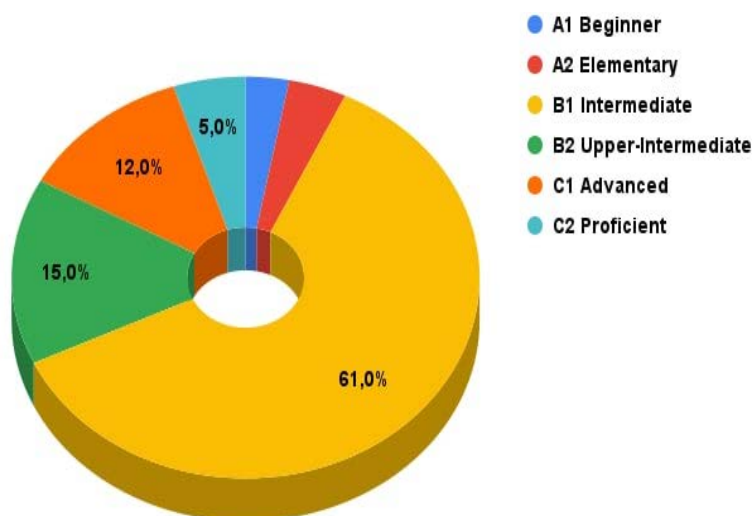


Figure 1. Students’ evaluation of their English level

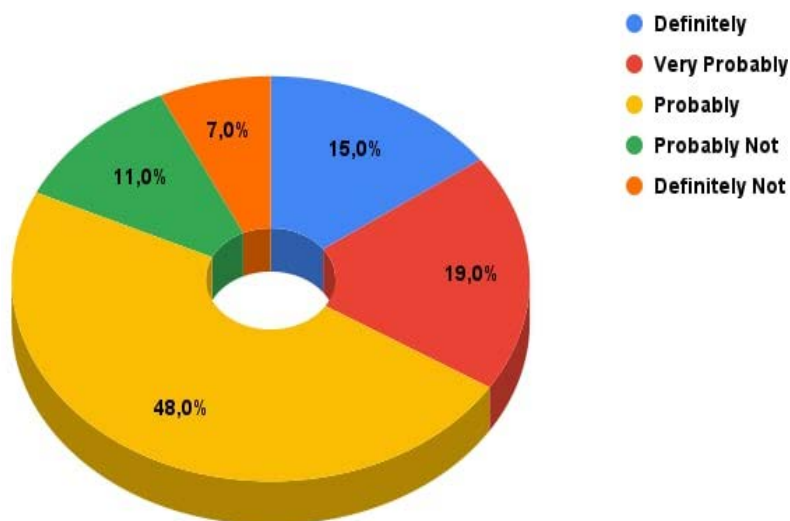


Figure 2. The responders' opinions about their possession of the required level of English

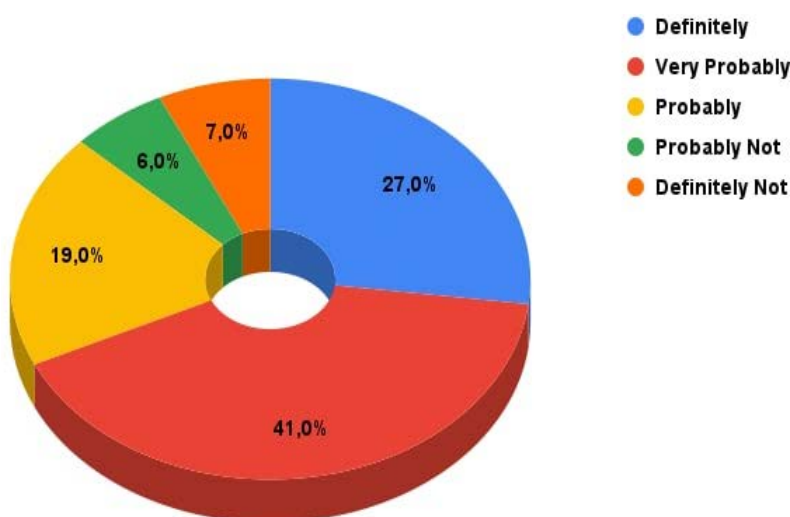


Figure 3. The respondents' opinions on the importance of the learning environment in ESL classes

have the required level of preparation for English language training (Figure 2).

The calculation of the median (Mdn) and the interquartile Range (IQR) shows that most respondents agreed that their learning preferences are taken into account in their ESL lessons (Mdn=2, IQR=1) (See table 1).

The results of the study showed that the majority (41%) of ESL students considered the learning environment in English classes an important component for language acquisition (Figure 3).

In addition, most respondents agreed that the classroom facilities are to support communicative activities (Mdn=2, IQR=2). It is in line with our suggestion that if ESL students are in comfortable conditions, it will encourage them to communicate and develop their communicative skills which are of urgent importance in modern society. (See Table 2).

Figure 4 demonstrates the range of the importance of elements of classroom arrangement and learning environment in the English class from less important

Table 1

Responders' opinions about to what extent the learning preferences of ESL students are taking into consideration

Survey prompts	Strongly agree	Agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree	Median	IQR
Question 3. Do you agree that your learning preferences are taken into account in your ESL lessons?	19	45	17	12	7	2	1

Table 2

Responders' opinions about the possibility of classroom facilities to support communicative activities

Survey prompts	definitely	Very probably	probably	Probably not	Definitely not	Mevdian	IQR
Question 5. In your opinion, the classroom facilities are to support communicative activities?	30	25	29	10	6	2	2

Table 3

Responders' opinions on questions 7, 8 of the survey

Survey prompts	Very important	important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important	Median	IQR
Question 7. In your opinion, how important is the creation of a positive classroom climate for learning a foreign language?	51	19	17	9	4	1	2
Question 8. How important is the use of technology in an ESL class for you?	39	31	16	11	3	2	2

Table 4

Survey prompts	Strongly agree	Agree	undecided	disagree	Strongly disagree	Median	IQR
Question 9. Do you agree that the learning environment in your ESL class allows the use of e-learning resources?	4	16	20	39	21	4	1

to most important according to the students' opinions. We can observe that face-to-face communication (31% of responders' voices) and English-speaking visitors (30% of responders' voices) in the class are the most effective and important attributes of successful language acquisition. ESL teachers should take the results of the study into consideration to achieve positive results from their teaching practices (Figure 4).

The results of the study showed that half of the responders (51%) acknowledged the importance

of creating a positive climate and most of them are positive about using technology in the ESL classroom (for 39% it is very important and for 31% it is important) for learning a foreign language. The findings were confirmed with the indicators of the Likert scale. The interquartile Range (IQR) in both cases equals 2 (See table 3).

Difficulties in the creation of a positive learning environment were noticed while analyzing the responses of students to the question about the possibility of using

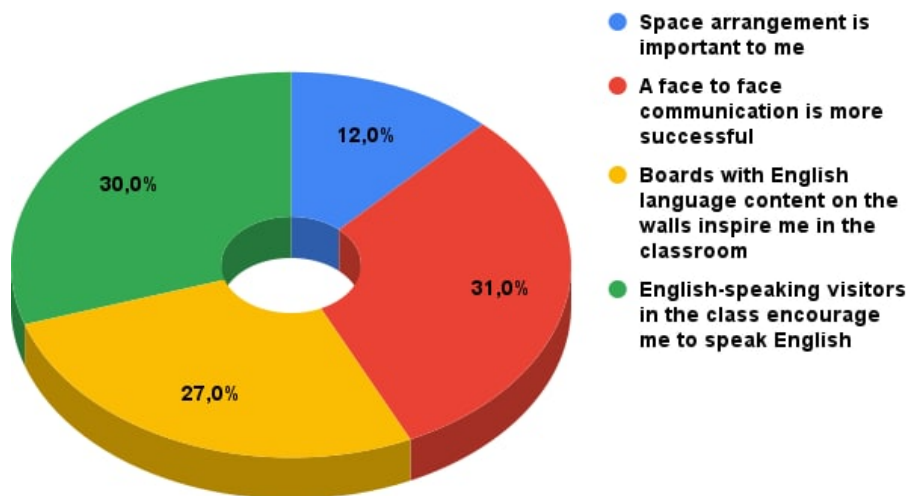


Figure 4. The respondents' opinions on the importance of classroom arrangement and learning environment in the English class

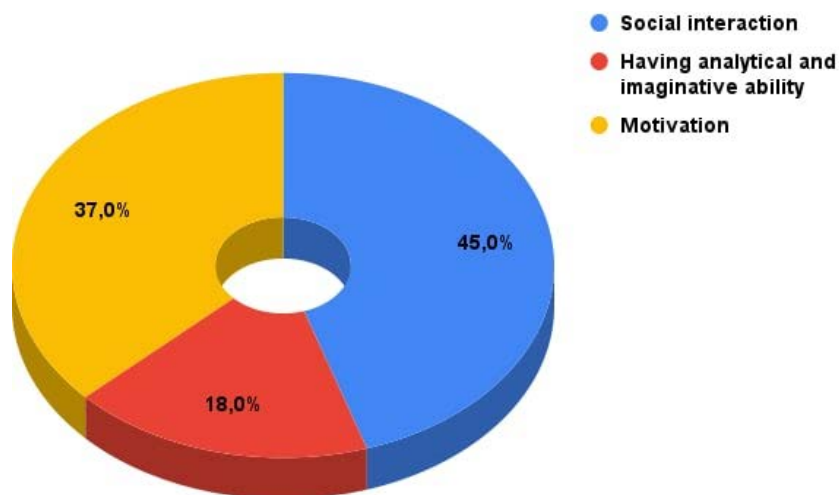


Figure 5. The respondents' opinions about the importance of factors that should facilitate their learning of a foreign language

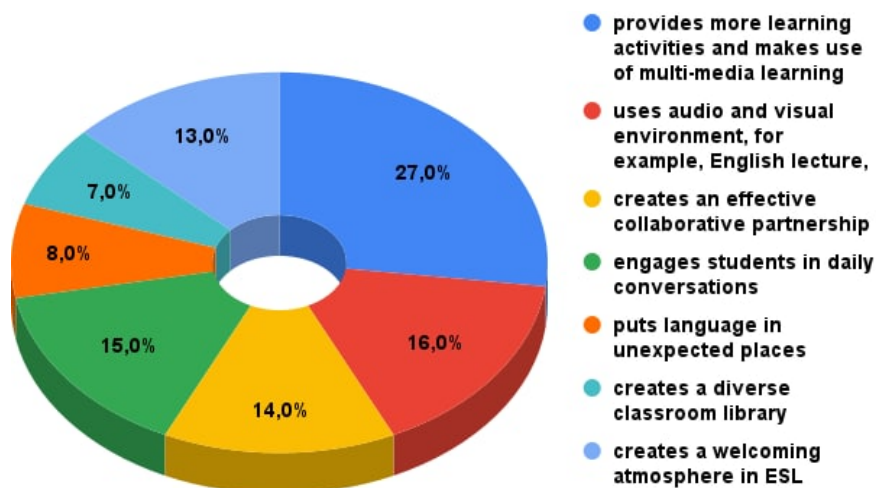


Figure 6. The respondents' opinions about the frequency of use of different approaches to enhance language acquisition

e-learning resources in their ESL classes. The median (Mdn) and the interquartile Range (IQR) shows that most respondents disagreed that the learning environment in the ESL class allows the use of e-learning resources (Mdn=4, IQR=1) (See table 4).

Students ranked the importance of using high technology in the ESL class from less important to most important in improving their language skills: creating a pleasant feeling when English lessons in the English lab – 11% of students; the use of computers in English classes is very motivating – 16% of students; it is useful to listen to passages in English with headphones – 17% of students; watching DVD-s in the English class is so great – 25% of students; watching a movie in an English class with English subtitles – 37% of students.

According to students' responses, the factor of social interaction in learning a foreign language is the most significant – 45% of respondents admitted this. Moreover, ESL students recognized motivation as

an equally important factor in learning a foreign language – 37% of ESL students accepted this (Figure 5).

Considering approaches that ESL teachers use to improve students' language learning, the respondents admitted practicing more learning activities and making use of multimedia learning and teaching resources (27% of responders) and audio and visual environment (16% of responders) as more often implemented by teachers in English classes (Figure 6). Fortunately, modern technologies allow teachers to create new forms of digital interaction with students. Thus the results of the study prove the necessity of using new up-to-date approaches while teaching and learning language.

Conclusions. After conducting a study, the authors made conclusions about the environment for teaching a foreign language, which is one of the main factors for successful and effective student learning. The main task of ESL teachers is to provide students with an environment in which they will feel

comfortable and safe. In addition, such a supportive environment should provide students with the opportunity to develop language skills and learn English, while avoiding the problems of an uncomfortable environment. Most students consider a positive learning environment very important. The importance of using modern technologies in foreign language classes is proved and their influence on students' perception of a foreign language is discussed. The results of the study demonstrated the fact that foreign language teachers should take into account the learning preferences and goals of students, which will ensure close interaction between the teacher and the student during the lesson and allow them to easily and quickly achieve certain learning goals. The vast majority of students identified social interaction and motivation as the main factors contributing to the study of a foreign language.

The authors of the article analyzed the results of previous studies, conducted a new study among students, and studied the opinion of students about the influence of the learning environment on their achievements in mastering the language, obtaining new knowledge that will meet the requirements of modern society.

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