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# Learners' personal narratives on their way to EFL competence:
# The impact of teachers on learners' development

ABSTRACT. In this paper, the authors present an analysis of students' narratives on their way to becoming competent English as a foreign language (EFL) users. Before presenting our study we refer to the ecological perspective on language learning/teaching, which may show the important impact of the learners' environment for EFL development. We refer to studies which point to the importance of the environment for language learning and which used various methods of research. In our study, we apply a narrative approach. The collected corpus of narratives is analysed following the grounded theory within the psychological model of well-being, i.e. the PERMA model. Eventually, we decided to concentrate on the impact teachers have on learners' emotions, engagement, meaning, relationships and accomplishment.

KEYWORDS: ecological perspective on EFL learning, narratives on language learning, the grounded theory, the PERMA model.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an essay on restoring balance in glottodidactics[1] (language education), Pfeiffer (2010) regrets that there is a lack of debates of a wide and general

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[1] Language Education (one of the domains of Applied Linguistics) is called Glottodidactics (Pol. *Glottodydaktyka*) in Poland.

character in the recent glottodidactic discourse; focus on selected elements of the system or some techniques of developing a skill or fostering autonomy. He postulates that the value of such studies can be fully appreciated if the findings are incorporated into a general glottodidactic knowledge. What he sees as missing is a different than linguistic, pragmalinguistic or psycholinguistic basis of language teaching resulting in ignoring important influences, as for example, learners' personality or the impact of the family and school environment on the process and the effectiveness of language learning and teaching. Studies of such issues, notes the author, appear in the sociological and psychological discourse in pedagogy. He makes a plea for a holistic theory of glottodidactics which would give foundation to specific language methodology (2010: 75–77). In our view such a holistic theory refers to the ecological perspective on one's development, where the learning process is seen as part of the ecosystem where time, space, actors, emotions and actions are seen as important elements of all human activity, language acquisition/learning included. Larsen-Freeman (2015: 16) rightly pinpoints: "with the coupling of the learner and the environment, neither the learner nor the environment is seen independent".

Eco perspective is adopted by many language related fields of enquiry concerned with multilingual realities. Kramsch and Steffensen (2008: 18–29), for example, explain the genesis of ecolinguistics referring to the early work of Haugen and emphasising the impact of AILA conferences where linguists as Halliday introduced this perspective to applied linguistics. They differentiate between micro-ecology, which assumes a psychological perspective on language, and macro-ecology pertaining to sociological perspective, explaining that it is a widespread approach within the fields of second language acquisition, multilingualism, death and revitalization of languages etc. They also discuss the ecolinguistic approach in the field of second language acquisition from the historical perspective, pointing to most prominent works and emphasising the shift from the concentration on language use in communicative contexts (typical of the 1980s) to one that assumes a multilingual and multicultural perspective and combines second language acquisition with second language socialization (since 1990s). They also refer to some recent studies, as well as to problems (historical, cognitive, methodological, ethical) that eco perspective brings about.

However, in our article we concentrate on foreign language education and the context of foreign language learning and teaching. Following Williams and Burden (1997), we define what is understood here as the *ecosystem* of language learning and teaching, discuss various studies referring to the ecological perspective in studying foreign language education (Bielak 2016; De Wilde & Eyckmans 2017; Ishihara 2012; Oxford & Cuéllar 2014; Oxford

2014), and report on our own study to identify the impact of the immediate environment (i.e. learner's micro- and mesosystems) on the involvement in and motivation for EFL learning. We find the teacher as an important factor having a positive or negative influence on the learner's development.

We have chosen personal narratives as the method of collecting data from students of the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University on their way to English competence. As noted by Oxford and Cuéllar (2014: 179), "narratives are pervasive, sense-making tools to help us understand our experience".

## 2. ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EFL TEACHING

Van Lier (2010: 3) explains:

> An ecological approach aims to look at the learning process, the actions and activities of teachers and learners, the multilayered nature of interaction and language use, in all their complexity and as a network of interdependencies among all the elements in the setting, not only at the social level, but also at the physical and symbolic level. (Van Lier 2010: 3)

Williams and Burden (1997: 189–190) refer to the social and clinical psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner who distinguished four levels of influences on a person's development, ranging from the closest (the *microsystem*) through more distant contexts (the *mesosystem* and the *exosystem*) to the level of the whole society (the *macrosystem*). The authors explain that the closest level contains the developing child's more important relationships with parents, teachers, siblings and peers; next comes the *mesosystem* which means a broader range of interactions of significant people in one's life, e.g. home school relationships. Still further is the *exosystem*, meaning the interactions of others who will have an indirect rather than a direct effect on the learner. Finally, the *macrosystem* involves the whole culture of the society in which people live, which in the school context refers, for example, to the national curriculum or cultural customs.

General pedagogy has identified the values of the eco perspective for understanding and refining educational influences on individuals. An analysis of pedagogy based on the ecological model of humans is undertaken by Francuz (1999), who warns about the pitfalls of such a perspective, but at the same time he emphasises that one cannot be separated from the context of one's life. Instead, we should bear in mind one's primary, pre-discursive phenomenon of being in a particular community, the world of meaning and the natural environment, all of which have an impact on the process of con-

struing of one's identity. Thus, for him ecological education is regional, one which takes into consideration real conditions and contexts of human life (Francuz 1999: 195). This means including the entire system in which one develops and functions.

Lemke (2002, after Kramsch & Steffensen 2008: 23) sees a need to "distinguish between the biological time of the child, the sociological time of the institution, and the ideological time of society", which needs to be anticipated by teachers who do not teach an actual adolescent, but the former child and also should have a view of its future, its perceptions, expectations and potentialities.

Much has been done to make the macrosystem explored and made friendly to language learning through various Council of Europe's language-related projects, such as for example defining language and culture policy, designing the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (henceforth CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) – a document which serves as a point of reference for member countries' language and educational policies. What we needed is a better insight into the micro-, meso- and exosystem of learner and teacher, which, as emphasised by Francuz, is always local in its character. McCallum and Price (2016) refer to the vignette of their article written by a 9-year-old student which shows that even young learners are aware that "life satisfaction and happiness is achievable if we feel we belong and work together as a community heading towards the same life goals, whatever they might be" (McCallum & Price 2016: 22). Thus, the impact of the community cannot be ignored.

There are many studies that assume the eco perspective on the process of language learning with the use of various methods. For example, Bielak (2016 following Fromm 1956) juxtaposed the space of the Polish high school classroom with the spatial category of home full of conditional and unconditional love coming from father and mother, and interviewed 30 high school learners of English to find differences between the two environments, such as lack of the motherly type of love, full of positive attitude, in the classroom context. However, as the researcher notes, both attitudes (of conditional love from father and unconditional from mother) are considered to be important for shaping a person as a communicator. She postulates that English foreign language (EFL) education "should be held in the space of the classroom that is communicatively navigated with reference to selected elements of the space navigation category of home" (Bielak 2016: 3), which in her opinion will lead to improving communicative skills in the foreign language.

In their mix-method research, De Wilde and Eyckmans (2017) studied the impact of incidental language learning of English prior to instruction in the Flemish context. Thirty children of the last year of primary school

(11-year-olds) took part in the study; they were of a multilingual background where Dutch was the native/official language. The researchers used a test of language competence composed of varied tasks to be performed in English to identify the participants' level of English. Additionally, they distributed questionnaires designed with the help of teachers for parents and children to gather information about "exposure to English through different media, contact with speakers of English, use of English, attitude towards English, children's and parents' language background and parents' educational level and current job" (De Wilde & Eyckmans 2017: 679). The researchers found various levels of the four language skills development. Relating to the impact of the prior exposure, they identified two distinct profiles: those who obtained low scores on the test and those with high scores who could communicate at the A2 level (CEFR) before the formal instruction. What seemed to have an impact on the children's EFL competence were the variables related to media use and time spent on computer gaming; whereas the number of hours the children reported watching TV with subtitles in the first language or listening to music did not seem to matter. Almost all the children from both groups had a positive attitude towards English. Some also reported using English for fun, to communicate with their parents or peers. The authors point out that the Flemish teachers should take into account the fact that Flemish children enter EFL education at different starting points, and as a result should include tasks of varied language levels in their teaching practice to deal with the heterogeneous English proficiency levels in the classroom.

Some studies have applied personal narration to get a deeper insight into the process of foreign language competence development. It is assumed that unlike third person observation of the process of learning and teaching, narratives offer richer and more complex and contextualized data on the educational microsystem leading to a better understanding of the connections between the learner, the process and the context of learning. For that reason there is a growing body of narrative research in teacher education and language learning as the researchers claim that teacher and learner narratives have potentially a significant role to play in language learning research (e.g. Benson & Nunan 2004; Ishihara 2012; Oxford & Cuéllar 2014; Oxford 2014).

For example, Ishihara (2012), an MA TESOL educator, used teachers' stories to raise pragmatic awareness of students taking part in different programmes on teaching culture and/or pragmatics in the USA and in Japan. First, the teacher-educator shared with her students her experiences and discussed questions targeting critical examination of pragmatic variation in different cultures. Then, student-teachers were invited to reflect on their own cross-cultural experiences, compile a story and prepare questions refer-

ring to pragmatic variation in the way "that the story would not invoke stereotypes of the target culture" (Ishihara 2012: 8). The stories were then posted in the discussion forum on the course website. She presented three examples of teacher-stories and analysed them from the point of view of raising teachers' awareness of discourse and socio-pragmatics. She postulates that narratives give voice to both teacher and learner identities and have a potential to serve as a mediation tool to develop a complex and sophisticated understanding of pragmatic variation, resulting, in consequence, in redefining personal experiences in a larger sociocultural framework leading to the promotion of cultural diversity. Like Johnson and Golombek (2002), Ishihara sees value in using this approach for teacher development.

Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) analysed five cross-cultural narratives of students from different academic areas and interests learning Chinese in Mexico, some of whom also had had some experience of learning in China. They used a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2007) for the analysis of the collected data. The procedure followed three coding stages: i. the open coding stage when phenomena were identified in the narratives and categorised into some undefined preliminary themes; ii. the axial coding stage when conceptual axes was recognised showing connections between categories; and iii. the selective coding when the most important and encompassing theme was identified using the constant comparison technique to ensure "the best fit" (Oxford & Cuéllar 2014: 181). After the translation and professional analysis of the stories, one of the authors additionally contacted the participants to verify the analysis. The researchers found that the PERMA model (Seligman 2011), which after some modifications could be used for the axial coding stage, offered a good understanding of the learners' narratives. They conclude that "language learning can be a major journey in self-discovery, rich in positive emotions tied to experiences of engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment" and they recommend the model for narrative studies in second language acquisition (Oxford & Cuéllar 2014: 196)[2].

In another study, Oxford (2014) collected narratives from twelve international graduate students (MA or PhD) studying English in the USA, and selected two distinct profiles for comparison. The learners were Chinese and represented both genders but came from two different backgrounds (Hong Kong and Mainland China). They also had different experiences in learning English, as well as different memory of the dominating emotions accompanying their English learning process. She plotted their narratives and her

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[2] The PERMA model was also found useful for the analysis of EFL learning in the context of applying ludic techniques in the classroom (Siek-Piskozub 2016).

own reflections onto the modified PERMA model. Her study shows a complexity of the language learning understood as a set of interconnected components which are continuously evolving over time.

## 3. METHOD OF THE STUDY

### 3.1. Personal narrations

We decided to use the narrative method for getting a better insight into the EFL learning process of Polish students studying English in a BA programme at the Faculty of English of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Although their EFL competence could be evaluated as B2/C1 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe 2001), we asked for the narratives to be written in the students' native language (Polish) to avoid miscomprehension. The participants were given a short instruction in their native language to write their stories of learning English, where anything that was important to them in terms of emotions, experiences, people, actions etc. would be included. We have translated their narratives into English, occasionally using square brackets for words we added in order to clarify the intended meaning.

### 3.2. Participants

Nine participants took part in the study: eight females and one male, which is typical of philology studies in Poland (see the table below). They were students in the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań; thus, we can consider them to be 'good language learners'. They all were in the BA programme and agreed to write (during their free time) the story of their English learning. Their participation was voluntary, and they knew that the narratives would be used for research purposes. Some of them were in their second, while others in their third year of EFL studies at the university. Their age was between 21 and 24. They all plan to become EFL experts (e.g. EFL teachers, translators etc.). To ensure anonymity, we have coded the narratives (S21–S29).

In the BA programme, students have intensive practical English courses, as well as lectures and classes devoted to the British and American literatures and cultures, descriptive linguistics, and modules related to vocational education (psychology, pedagogy, and EFL methodology). The lectures and classes, with the exception of psychology and pedagogy, are held in English.

**Table 1.** General participants' data

| Student's code | Age of the first contact with English | Institutions or context where EFL was learnt/used |
|---|---|---|
| 21 | 5 | kindergarten, primary school and private classes, middle school, the Internet, secondary school, university |
| 22 | 4 | kindergarten, primary school, middle school, secondary school, university |
| 23 | 6 | kindergarten, language school: International House, primary school, middle school, international camp, secondary school, university, visit to the USA |
| 24 | 6 | kindergarten, private teacher, primary school, middle school, language course in London, secondary school, university |
| 25 | 8/9 | private lessons, middle school, secondary school, university |
| 26 | 7 | primary school, private conversation classes with NS, middle school, the Internet, secondary school, travels abroad, university |
| 27 | 10 | primary school, middle school, language school (Callan method), secondary school, university |
| 28 | 10 | private classes, secondary school, the Internet, university, teaches EFL to children |
| 29 | not specified | kindergarten, primary school, middle school, the Internet, secondary school, university |

## 3.3. Method of data collection and analysis

We have received nine essays under the title "My way to English", which offered us a rich corpus for analysis. One of the weaknesses of the corpus-based studies is a potential subjectivity of the analysers (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen & Walker 2014). To avoid this, two researchers scrutinised the same narratives to remove that problem. In our analysis of the collected stories, we referred to the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss 2007). Each story was read independently by both researchers to identify important phenomena, and to categorize them into some preliminary schemes. The fact that each narrative was read by both researchers independently and then discussed together was to verify appropriateness of the open coding. As a result, several tables were created with general themes in the English language, and the participants codes were linked to them.

In the open coding stage, we identified the following general themes: i. participant's age; ii. the first contact with EFL; iii. influential people; iv. institutions in which EFL took place; v. positive and negative emotions; vi. events and activities which the students found meaningful (in both nega-

tive and positive sense); vii. motivation; and viii. reflection on the process and the outcome.

In the axial coding stage, we decided to use the PERMA model (Seligman 2011) for plotting the data as its basic components reappeared in all the stories. PERMA is an acronym composed of the first letters of the components which are: **P**ositive emotions (feeling good), **E**ngagement in the activities (finding flow), **R**elationship (authentic connections), **M**eaning (purposefulness) and **A**chievement (a sense of accomplishment). The data for this coding will be discussed in the result section (see Section 4). However, we have decided to combine the engagement and meaning components as sometimes it was difficult to separate the two.

For the selective coding, one theme is identified as encompassing and the most important and referred to in the discussion (Corbin & Strauss 2007). We decided to concentrate on TEACHER as an influential person in both positive and negative sense, as all the participants included their opinions on their teachers, and links could be seen with teacher and the components of the PERMA model (see Section 5).

## 4. RESULTS OF THE AXIAL CODING

### 4.1. (Positive) emotions

The stories refer to many emotions not all of which, however, were positive. Sometimes one type, whether positive or negative, was dominant in a setting (e.g. a type of school), or in a rapport with a particular teacher. Nevertheless, towards the end of the educational process, positive emotions seemed to overtake the negative ones.

The feeling of *pride, confidence* and/or *satisfaction* associated with being good in English or even better than other students, in general or within a particular skill, was mentioned by some students. For example, S22 mentions feeling proud when she was moved to a higher level after some classes in the kindergarten setting. As a child S23 admired her mother whom she saw communicating with a native speaker who visited them, and she felt satisfaction when in middle school she could communicate with the native speakers herself. S25 was proud of her writing skill and was eager to write extra assignments while in primary school. S26 felt first proud when her elder sister taught her two words in English (*yes, no*) when she was only four. After many experiences in the following years, some of which were negative, she mentions that she was proud that all her efforts were awarded when she was able to enrol in the BA programme at the university which

had an opinion of being the best in English Philology in Poland. S29 liked to give presentations in English and felt self-confident while doing so, although he felt he was much poorer at giving presentations in his native language.

Positive feelings associated with the process of learning or using English, such as *joy*, *happiness*, *enthusiasm* and/or *love* were mentioned by others. S21 had classes in the kindergarten based on play, although she does not mention any emotions connected with this stage of learning. However, she liked her lessons with a private tutor in the primary school and later the possibility to use the Internet. What she found particularly enjoyable was listening to pop-songs in English. S22 evaluates the course run by the International House as "the best ever" and was happy they had a native speaker (NS) teacher and a Polish assistant, who served as a translator. S23 liked English classes in secondary school with the exception of those devoted to grammar. She enjoyed learning English, and was happy when native speakers admired her competence in English. S24 was enthusiastic about her visit to London. She enjoyed staying with a British family and liked everything she saw there. S26 mentions that nothing makes her more happy than the possibility to communicate in English in real life situations. She also felt enthusiastic about using the British YouTube when she was 13. For her, learning English was not a duty (like learning other subjects) but fun. S27 (who grew up in a village and went to a school which had no multimedia) notes that despite that English classes were fun for her, and "something special". S28 enjoyed classes with a private tutor: she liked the teacher and the activities she had to complete. For S29 the middle school was his "golden age" for English learning because he enjoyed learning English and was enthusiastic about the possibility of using the Internet in English, which stimulated the development of his language competence. Now that he is at the university, he still likes using English and loves the speaking classes.

All the students experienced some negative emotions as well, of which *boredom* and *monotony* were mentioned most often related to poor adjustment to the language level and having a teacher who would not cater for the learners' individual needs, and the feeling of not making any progress. For example, S21 who learnt to communicate in English with a private tutor was placed in a class with beginners. She was one of the best students in class despite doing little to further develop her competence. S22 learnt some English in the kindergarten and was better than her colleagues in the primary school, for which she was disliked by her peers. She was not interested in the activities which were too easy for her.

The feeling of *wasting time* was mentioned by some. S22 expressed an opinion that her teacher in the middle school used too much Polish and had problems with maintaining discipline. S25 felt she was forced by her parents

to learn English privately when she was young as in her hometown English was offered only in middle school. She would rather use this time to have fun, yet, at the same time she mentions she liked the activities. However, in the primary school the feeling of a real waste of time accompanied her throughout the EFL education process because of being in a group with real beginners. Similarly, S29 had the feeling that not only was he not making any progress in the secondary school but in fact he was even regressing in his EFL competence because his teacher was not systematic and lacked organization skills.

Some students felt strong negative emotions such as *stress, shock* or *high anxiety* connected with learning EFL. S22 and S23 were afraid to speak for fear of being evaluated while at the university; also S21 and S24 felt over-whelmed by the high standards expected at the university. S26 who had private conversation classes with a native speaker was initially afraid she would be laughed at by him because of her poor language. However, soon she found the fear was unwarranted. Yet the fact that her native speaker teacher could not explain grammar problems was stressful to her. S28 was shocked when after middle school, where she was learning German at the advanced level and was very successful in it, and English at the beginner level, she was placed in a beginner programme for German and more advanced programme for English in the secondary school. She was afraid to speak English.

## 4.2. Engagement and meaning

Like Oxford and Cuéllar (2014), we sometimes find it difficult to separate 'engagement' and 'meaning' as very little can be learnt about activities used in the formal education. The participants either comment that these were boring or that they were not learning anything new between the stages. Most probably the teachers were just following the coursebook, and when the level of language was not properly adjusted to individual needs, the good students usually were the victims. They did what was expected of them, and the goal was to get a good grade and not to develop any further. However, students mention their own involvement in getting to know the language, and the Internet seems to be most motivating and mentioned by many. Some watched films in English and listened to and memorised English pop-songs. Still others found traveling an effective way of learning and testing their EFL competence. It is because of this extra effort that they have found satisfaction and have plans to use English in their future under-takings.

We saw connections between meaning (i.e. a clear purpose for learning English) and the learners' intrinsic motivation and individual efforts to develop their competence so that they can use it for future life, whether professional or just for travelling. Almost out of all the stories, meaning coming from the learners' interests and purpose for the future could be extracted. For example, S21 liked using the Internet and searching for pop-songs, as she was interested in Karaoke. She believes that her own efforts and private lessons during which she learnt the basics of grammar and vocabulary resulted in her good knowledge of English; nevertheless, initially she was not interested in studying EFL at college. She had many options as she was a very good student, also at science. However, it was the English Faculty that offered her a place, and now she believes that it was a good decision to accept the offer. Although initially she was weaker than the other students, her individual efforts allowed her to get to the top and she even received the Rector's Award. She does not specify her future plans but she is certain that her future will be connected with English.

S22 has known since middle school that she is going to be professionally involved in English. She enjoyed her school classes during which the pupils would watch films and discuss culture. To enhance her language development she opened a social media account and communicated with other users in English. S23 once observed her mother communicate with a NS and heard from her that it was a fascinating experience. Many years later, when she herself could freely communicate in EFL, she thought communicating in EFL in real contexts was the most rewarding experience worth all the efforts. While at school she liked to watch English films with subtitles and listen to pop-songs and to sing them. She tried to translate the lyrics herself so that she would avoid vulgar songs.

S24 took part in a language course in London, and it was after this experience (sightseeing, contacts with landlords) that she decided to get more involved in learning English because it was useful for travelling and getting to know people. After observing the work of a cultural animator during her vacations abroad, she decided to become one herself, and knew that a good knowledge of English would be instrumental in her achieving that goal.

For S25 the first contact with English was at the age eight or nine when she attended private lessons with her cousin, because there was no English in the state school. She liked learning from play activities and songs. However, it was the second private EFL teacher that made her aware of the intricacies of knowing the English language and influenced her later decisions to study that language. She had to practice vocabulary, do reading activities and write letters. Although at that time she was not happy that she had to attend private lessons, now she is grateful for that to her parents. She also

appreciates the teaching approach of her second private teacher: concentration not only on communication but on the system as well. She has decided that her future will be connected with English. She reads a lot in English, watches English language films and even speaks to herself in English. She makes an extra effort to improve her grammar and increase her vocabulary.

S26 did not like play activities in her early learning as she expected something more systematic. However, soon she discovered the Internet and was fascinated with the British YouTube; she tried to follow its short videos on a daily basis spending much time on trying to understand as much as she could. She observed that subconsciously she was acquiring English. At some point she decided she would like to become a translator, which motivated her to study English harder. Her experiences with learning in school were fluctuating; some teachers were involved in their teaching trying to make it interesting, while others were not, but she was determined to develop her language skills working independently, e.g. she took private lessons from a native speaker with whom she communicated in English. She also travelled abroad and was fascinated by contacts with other people using EFL. At the university, initially she was disappointed with a stressful atmosphere there, but when she survived the first year, she decided to become an English teacher herself, because interpersonal communication was the most important and motivating experience to her. To test herself in that context she began to teach EFL in an English club and found this quite rewarding.

S27 had to struggle to develop her EFL competence due to bad luck (coming from a village where there were no multimedia in school, a "good teacher" resigned, went to a convent and was replaced by a "bad teacher", the school headmaster did not believe that even a very good student from their village could succeed at the best English Faculty, failing practical English during the first year at the University in the first term, etc.). But all that only strengthened her determination and she tried to show everyone she would achieve her goals. While in middle school, she enrolled on a course following the Callan Method, which in her opinion helped her develop fluency and learn useful functions; she also read graded readers and watched English language films. In secondary school their teacher used a coursebook which was to prepare them for the final exam, however, she did not feel that she had enough opportunities to talk in class. Yet, success with the final exam motivated her to work even harder by studying grammar from a course book preparing for the Cambridge First Certificate Exam. Admittance to the university, as well as encouragement from her secondary school teacher to have trust in herself, helped her to overcome the first problems at college with the course in practical English which she had failed in the first term,

but succeeded in the second. Eventually, she believes that English is her "destiny".

S28 first had to learn from a coursebook designed for the upper level as she was wrongly streamed at her state secondary school; her first L2 was German which she had been learning from the beginning of her education (she liked it and was good in it), while she had had little English before. To help her catch up with the other students, she had a private teacher, with whom she communicated in English and they often watched short Internet films. She also studied grammar by herself. Now, apart from studying, she teaches English to small children to catch up with child language materials such as songs, rhymes, and play.

S29 was first fascinated with the opportunities that the Internet offered and the usefulness of English for that purpose. In the earlier stages of his education learning English was fun for him but at the university he decided it would become the language of his profession.

## 4.3. Relationship

Our participants usually mention their teachers, close relatives, and occasionally some NSs with whom they had successful contacts, some of whom were their private teachers. If they mention their classmates, it is usually in a competitive context – how their competence relates to the competence of the others.

S21 had the first contact with English in the kindergarten, but does not comment on her teacher or other learners. Initially, in primary school when she was in grades 1–3, she had a private teacher who taught "effectively"; it was her parents' decision to hire the teacher they knew to be good. In her later education, prior to college studies, she mentions that although her teachers made efforts to motivate students, they concentrated more on the weak students, so her memory of that period is bad; however, she liked English. At the university, she saw that other students were better, which she believed to be the effect of better education offered in their respective schools and private lessons, which, in her case, were limited only to three years in primary school.

For S22 her parents had an important impact on her English. First, they enrolled her on a course in the kindergarten. Then, in the first year of primary school they sent her to a private English school. Her memories of her English teachers are varied. The first, a kindergarten teacher, recognised her language aptitude and moved her to an upper level, which made her feel proud. She has bad memories of the teacher in primary school who was very

nervous and could not adjust her teaching to the beginners, e.g. she spoke English only, shouted at those who could not understand, did not allow the children to ask questions. However, half a year before S22 completed her education in that school, the teacher was replaced with one whom the student evaluates better, one "who taught [her] more" than she had learnt in previous years. She has mixed opinions about the teacher from her secondary school who was very enthusiastic about her teaching, but was challenged by having to teach a mixed-ability class, and had problems with maintaining discipline. However, she feels she owes a lot to the teacher: she made her interested in English culture, expected systematic work on English by giving a lot of homework. All this had a positive impact on the student's EFL competence. At the university, the teachers make her feel stressed for fear of making errors; however, it motivates her to work even harder, but she is of the opinion that if the teachers offered emotional support, it would be more effective. S22 mentions the other learners in negative contexts: when she was praised for being a good EFL learner in primary school, her classmates mocked her and called her names. Throughout her middle and secondary school education she felt she was better than other students. What she finds important are the Internet contacts with foreigners whom she got to know through social media. It has helped her to "open to others" and overcome her "introversion" while communicating in English.

S23 is of the opinion that her contacts with NSs had the biggest impact on her competence. First, at the age of 8, she was impressed with how her parents were communicating with an American pastor who visited them. When she was in middle school, she participated in international vacation camps and communicated with the American participants, which made her "happy". She also believes that these contacts, and her interest in films and pop-songs, resulted in good scores on the final middle-school test. After the first year at the university she visited the USA, and any approval of her EFL competence by NSs was appreciated by her. However, she was not happy with her teachers in primary and middle school as they kept changing constantly; the new teachers would introduce new coursebooks – all that meant complete chaos. Only the teacher from her secondary school is mentioned as important. She taught interesting classes, with the exception of grammar tasks, which S23 did not like.

For S24 parents played an important role. They enrolled her on an English course in the kindergarten. When she was seven, her mother hired a private English teacher because there was no English in grades 1–3. Her formal instruction began when she was in grade four. Her parents were proud of her that she had the highest grades in EFL, which, however, changed after a year when the teacher died. Grammar became the target in

the following years and she was not so good in it; she felt she was disappointing her parents. But after the second year in the middle school her parents agreed to send her to a language course in London. This changed her attitude to learning English and developed her competence. To achieve good scores on the final secondary school Matura exam, they again hired the same private teacher, so that she would help their daughter prepare well. Most probably they (sub)financed her trips abroad where she could practice her communication skills, however she does not state this directly. She sees value in communicating in English with foreigners, first, with NSs during the visit to London, and later with acquaintances she made during her trips abroad. These experiences influenced her decision to become a cultural animator abroad. She is also the only one who mentions an impact of a school friend who motivated her to take part in a language course in London. There is not much that she writes about her teachers. The one from kindergarten is not mentioned at all. She comments that the first teacher who taught her "something" was the private one – she learnt from her many useful phrases, which helped her in primary school in grade four. She also appreciated the teacher who taught there because she felt appraised for her competence (result of the previous study). However, she was less fond of the other teachers who replaced him when he died; they kept changing every semester. In middle school the situation was better, but there is nothing on her relationship with the teacher there. However, she praises her first private teacher who again began to work with her when she was at the end of secondary school to prepare her for the final exam.

S25 emphasises the impact, both negative and positive, her teachers had on her learning English. Her first two teachers were hired by her parents because the state school in her village did not offer language courses. At that time she was not happy to attend extra lessons, although she liked the teacher and the fact that her aptitude for languages was recognised and appreciated. She liked the second teacher even more because of her systematic teaching in a bigger group, showing interest in the students' progress, assigning demanding tasks as, for example, letter writing, which S25 liked to do. With time, she appreciates this teacher's effort to explain the intricacies of English even more, and still remembers many examples she learnt from her. Her first teacher in middle school is not remembered well by her because she did not care to adjust work (tasks, demands) to the students' varied language levels. She also disliked the teacher for trying to change her American accent to British, which at the time she considered to be "awful". In secondary school, the first teacher was giving "boring classes" so she did not learn much, and was happy that the teacher was replaced with a new, male, teacher after a year. S25 notes, the new teacher kept a distance with the

students at first, but he was fair and demanding, corrected their pronunciation, and with time became more friendly and eager to chat and tell jokes. For S25 also the family played an important role in her language development. Her parents enrolled her on private courses because there was no English in the state school she attended. She attended the first course with her cousin. She had support from her grandmother who was checking on her English lessons; and even now she [the grandmother] is eager to examine her when asked to, if there is no one more competent around to do so. S25 mentions her classmates only in the context of how she relates to their competences at different schools.

For S26 her family also played an important role. Observing with envy (when she was only four) her elder sister learning English, she asked her to teach her some too. She learnt to say 'Yes' and 'No' and was proud that she could answer most of the questions (most probably asked in Polish). Then, her parents decided to finance her private lessons before and alongside learning English in the state school. Her father, who knew English well, seeing progress she was making, began to communicate with her in English on a daily basis. It was then that she decided that in the future she would like to do something connected with using English. Becoming a translator was her first decision. Contacts with foreigners is also what she finds particularly stimulating to her language development. When in middle school, she began to use the British YouTube and tried to understand everything she could. While being in secondary school, she found a NS (a young British male married to a Polish woman) who agreed to give her conversation classes. He helped her to develop her interaction skills well, but she was disappointed that he could not explain grammar. She visited the United Kingdom during vacations after completing the first year at the university and enjoyed communication with NSs there; she was happy when they complimented her on her English competence. S26 is very critical of her EFL teachers and sees weakness in almost everyone, although for different reasons. However, it seems that this critical awareness motivated her to struggle on her own. Her first two private teachers used play activities, which was appreciated by most of the students in class but not by S26. She wanted to study English more systematically. Her teachers in the primary and middle schools were chaotic in teaching, and she had a feeling of not making any progress, although she began to like learning English with the second teacher and began to look for other options of mastering the language. Her secondary school teacher was disappointing too; she had good language competence, but for some reasons chose to spend much time discussing behavioural and organisational problems in L1. She also criticises teachers at the university for no affective support and high demands. She believes that students could

do better if, apart from high expectations, they would be offered some emotional support.

S27 mentions only teachers as the ones who had a negative or positive impact on her development. The first primary school teacher was loved by all her students; she spoke to them in English and taught them basic functions, gave extra assignments to those who were willing to do them. However, after a year, she resigned and entered a convent. Still, she kept writing letters in English to her former class. The teacher who replaced her was not liked by S27, as in her opinion, she was "unfair", did not like "good students" or questions from them, did not expect nor appreciate additional work. All this demotivated S27 from learning English. She is, however, aware that perhaps this criticism was caused by the disappointment of having lost the previous teacher. The teacher in middle school was appreciated by her even less; she did not have proper competence for teaching English, which initially she had admitted herself, for she was in fact a maths teacher. Still, she insisted that students learn her erroneous English (poor pronunciation, grammatical errors), and if not, punished students with bad grades. This motivated S27 to enrol on a Callan Method course, and as a result follow "two roads" to English. Luckily, her secondary school teacher was fully competent, still she was not perfect either. She was very chaotic, kept forgetting to bring promised extra materials (like texts or tests), concentrated mainly on preparing them for the final exam tasks. However, S27 appreciates that she showed interest when informed about her plans to study English; she lent her extra materials, encouraged her to have trust in her capabilities. She benefitted from the encouragement when first, the school headmaster doubted if even the best student from a village school could be admitted to such a good university, and then, when she failed her practical English exam at the end of the first year there. She remembered what her teacher had said, to have trust in herself.

S28 did not have English classes as a child; German was her first L2 and she was good at it (received awards). She began learning English in middle school (while continuing to learn German). In secondary school, due to bad streaming, she was placed in a group continuing English language learning and in a beginners group for German. She is very grateful to her parents who arranged for a private English teacher for her as the teacher was excellent. The teacher insisted on developing communication skills, used the task-based approach, often used the Internet, gave her a lot of homework. As a result, she observed a very quick progress she was making.

The only male participant in our sample (S29) mentions teachers only in a positive context as having an important impact on his English competence. Two teachers were particularly important to him: a kindergarten male NS

teacher who communicated with his pupils in English and used a lot of gestures, and the secondary school teacher whom he calls "the best teacher ever"; she was also very expressive and also used body language. For S29 kinesthetics is important and he appreciated such an approach from his teachers. This and an opportunity to do extra presentations based on the Internet assigned to him by his secondary school teacher helped him to develop: first, listening comprehension in the kindergarten, so that he could follow fairy-tales in English, and then in the secondary school he learnt to speak in public. He does not mention his middle school teacher directly but emphasises that he learnt a lot from the lessons there. He also appreciates interactive tasks from his university teachers.

## 4.4. Achievement

Obviously, all the participants have objectively succeeded in EFL learning as they have become students of the English Faculty and have passed their exams in English. In their stories they also comment on their feeling of accomplishment, or lack of it, at different stages of their EFL education. The feeling of accomplishment motivated them to work on their English, whereas the feeling of making no progress demotivated them. Naturally, they all feel they have achieved their goals connected with English learning because of getting to the university, and of surviving the first difficulties connected with the need to use English in their studies. They also see that they can use their communication skills in English. However, also at lower levels some had a feeling of accomplishment.

S21 emphasises she learnt a wide range of vocabulary and the basics of grammar with her private teacher; as a result, she was the best in class when her formal language study was offered in the 4th grade of primary school. Because she was rather a talented student with wide interests, she could not decide what disciplines to choose for studying, and English was her second choice. Still, it was the Faculty of English which accepted her. Initially, she did not feel she was as good as the other students there, however the hard work she put into surviving was rewarded; and now she has the feeling she has accomplished her goals.

S22 appreciates that in the secondary school she learnt not only the language but also some facts about the culture of the English-speaking countries. What is more, she is aware that communicating via social media in English has helped her to become more open and more effective in communicating in EFL.

Both S23 and S26 had the feeling they succeeded in English when they passed their Matura exam at the advanced level with high scores. Additionally, S23 felt she had truly learnt English when she could communicate successfully with NSs and was complimented by them.

S24 had a feeling of accomplishment of her early English language learning because she received good grades in primary school and knew basic words and phrases, while other students had yet to reach that level. She also felt she had learnt to communicate in English as a result of her participation in a language course in London.

S25 acknowledged that the development of her writing skills in primary school was due to some additional efforts in this direction. However, she notes no achievement in middle school. In secondary school she was forced to change her accent from American to British because of the change of teacher, which she disliked. But now that she is in a group specialising in American English, she wished she had learnt the British accent and plans to do so in the future.

S27 feels that thanks to the Callan Method in a private course she has developed her speaking skills; although at times she was sceptical about that because she could not fully understand films in English with no subtitles. S28 felt she had developed her basic English competence due to private lessons with a teacher who had been hired by her parents to compensate for the poor teaching in the secondary school she attended. However, now that she is at the university, she feels there is much she needs to do to catch up with the other students.

Finally, S29 had the feeling of achievement when he realised he had no problems with using the Internet in English. The ability to exploit the Internet was later used by one of his teachers who gave him extra assignments in the form of presentations on various topics, and he had a feeling he was good at it.

## 5. SELECTIVE CODING – EFL TEACHER

After the analysis of all the narratives and plotting the data on the modified PERMA components, we decided to look at the impact EFL teachers had on the participants' process of learning, and on its effectiveness. Our decision is motivated by the fact that we both are EFL teacher educators, and also because EFL teachers were referred to in all the narratives as having negative or positive impact on the participants emotions related to language learning, engagement (or the lack of it), achievement and sometimes also meaning.

In the course of many years of studying English, each of the participants had contacts with "good" teachers who evoked positive emotions to them-

selves and to the process of English language learning, as well as "bad" teachers who were not favoured by them, and who demotivated them from language learning. Sometimes negative and positive emotions intertwined. For example, a student who was not happy that her parents enrolled her on an EFL course in kindergarten writes:

> Despite the reluctance [to attend the EFL course], I rather liked the classes because the teacher was kind and smiling, and at the beginning of [language] learning there were plenty of songs, colourful books and cartoons; so after all I was willing to learn. (S25).

Another student who expresses an enthusiastic opinion on her secondary school explains:

> The teacher – a wonderful person, interested not only in teaching us [language] rules, but most of all wanted to transfer to us all the knowledge related to culture of the English speaking countries: we watched films frequently, participated in many lectures on the English language. The only negative aspect was very elaborate homework, which initially was very difficult; however after some time I had no problems completing it. What I appreciate is that the English language teacher from the secondary school always motivated us to constant learning; she would not allow us to slow down even for a moment because she knew how important learning and a permanent contact with English were for us. (S22)

However, when a teacher evoked only negative emotions, this had a detrimental effect on the students. For example, a student who considered one of her teachers to be "unfair" writes:

> …[she] favoured 'no-problem' students, i.e. those who sat nicely during class, did what they were expected to do and nothing more. The teacher did not like 'good students', did not praise them for their additional work. And probably because of the lack of the positive feedback for a moment I lost my initial engagement in [English language] learning. (S27)

We decided to look at how the participants characterize their teachers' personality and their teaching skills. Personality traits of teachers are mentioned by several of the respondents, however, this appears to be less important than their teaching skills.

## 5.1. Teacher's personality

Our respondents elaborated more on the teachers to whom they had a positive attitude, although not without some dose of criticism.

S28 writes that her teacher was "nice" but not really engaged in her work, while S26 states that although the teacher "liked the students" and was competent, she was not very effective as she spent most of the class time talking, in Polish, about her private life. S22 describes her teacher as a "wonderful person" who taught them not only English but also elements of culture of the English speaking countries, while S25 declared that the fact that her teacher "smiled a lot" motivated her to apply herself, despite the fact that she perceived having extra classes in English to be an unnecessary burden preventing her from spending more time playing and doing her homework. S27 also describes her teacher as "very nice and helpful". The teacher lent her CFCE books to practice grammar during the holidays to help her prepare for studies at the university, and encouraged her, before the beginning of the academic year, by telling she would succeed at the university, which gave S27 "energy and optimism".

## 5.2. Teaching skills

The participants often describe their teachers and their methods of teaching as "effective", meaning engaging or leading to achievement (S21, S22, S27). Unfortunately, they do not justify their opinions with examples. S27 appreciates the fact that her primary school teacher introduced a lot of short conversations and useful phrases, and her secondary school teacher was able to explain grammar well. S28 describes her private tutor's method of teaching as Task Based Learning with a focus on speaking, and the teacher assigning tasks and diagnosing language problems on the basis of the student's performance, which she approved of.

It seems that our respondents valued teachers who did not just follow the coursebook, but, in addition to that, provided them with extra activities to help them develop their language competence (S22, S29), and felt disappointed when the lessons were reduced to completing tasks from their coursebooks (S28) or to doing only those types of task which are included in the Matura exam (S27). They also appreciated the use of ICT during lessons pointing to the Internet with special emphasis on YouTube and podcasts as examples (S28).

The participants often mention that the classes were "monotonous" and "boring" and additionally give the following examples of what they consider to be "bad teaching": teacher talking in English all the time, not explaining problematic areas, and even shouting when asked for an explanation (S22, primary school), teacher not being able to control the class, speaking Polish all the time (S22), talking about topics not related to the curriculum, not providing feedback on errors or guidelines on how to avoid them (S26).

Some respondents describe their reaction to those practices as "feeling helpless" (S26). One respondent (S25), while generally happy with her private English classes, felt that the teacher did not spend enough time explaining theory of the English language. Similarly, S26 thought that, although the lessons were fun, she was missing something as the language did not seem to be building into a coherent whole. Two respondents refer to their teachers' general attitude to the students manifesting itself in their preference for "no-problem" students, who sat quietly and only did what they were told, and not rewarding those who wanted to learn more and were ready to make an extra effort.

A rather extreme case is described by S27, whose teacher did not have proper competence for teaching English, which she had initially admitted herself, for she was a maths teacher. Despite her poor EFL competence, she corrected the students' utterances even when they were correct. The student did not trust the teacher, and felt frustrated having to "make her English fit the English of the teacher" if she wanted to get a good grade.

The learners valued their private native-speaker-teachers usually more than the school teachers. Three of them had classes with native speakers of English, one in kindergarten (S29), one in the International House (S22) and one had private classes with a NS who had moved to her hometown (S26). They all valued the experience as extremely useful. S22 describes her classes at IH as the best in her life, unfortunately she does not elaborate and does not explain why. She only emphasises that she liked the fact that the classes were run by two teachers: a NS and a Polish teacher who served as a translator. S26 felt really excited about her classes seeing them as an opportunity to use English in real communication, but she worried that the fact that her tutor could not explain the intricacies of English grammar could lead to problems during the Matura exam.

In general, classes with private teachers were valued more than the ones in school. Three of the respondents mention having lessons with private tutors and they all describe their experiences as very positive (S24, S25, S28) stressing the variety of techniques and materials used, and the opportunity to use language in spontaneous communication. S25 in particular credits her private tutor with her success in teaching English describing her as having the "soul of a teacher" and loving what she did. The fact that possibilities of real communication were emphasised by those who had private teachers, and that communication with other students (relationship) in the school teaching was mentioned in the context of comparing other students' achievements, may mean that a rather traditional teacher-centred approach is still used with emphasis on individual work of students with little emphasis on interactive activities.

Only three participants mention their university teachers, and even then they do so indirectly and in general terms. This can be explained by the fact that during each year of their university education they had classes with a number of different teachers and, as a result, it is difficult for them to generalize. What is worrying is the fact that two of the three comments are rather negative: S22 expresses a wish for a more relaxed, friendly atmosphere during classes as the feeling of being constantly evaluated by her teachers led to a loss of spontaneity in speaking, while S26 complains about the lack of emotional support from her university teachers. On a more positive note, S29 appreciates all the opportunities to practice speaking created by the teachers.

Some of the negative remarks on teaching are related to the lack of proper streaming of students depending on their language proficiency level, and the lack of willingness of EFL teachers to cope with the challenge of having a mixed-ability class. For example, several of the respondents who had started learning English early in their childhood complained about the fact that, at later stages of their education, they were not provided with opportunities to further develop their language proficiency, as the level of classes aimed at those of their peers who were just beginning to learn English (e.g. S25). As a result, they often found the classes boring, despite the teachers' efforts. In some cases provisions were made to accommodate their learning needs, and such attempts by the teachers were appreciated, but often it was not enough, and the students felt that they were not learning anything new (e.g. S29), and were disappointed with the situation. Another complaint raised by the respondents related to the school administration rather than to individual teachers; the teachers changed very often (e.g. S23) and this did not allow for continuity; although one cannot understand why the new teachers had to change coursebooks, as was reported by students.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Our study implies that foreign language learning is a dynamic system where different factors interplay with each other and, as a result, also influence each other. The ecological perspective may help us understand the intricacies of foreign language learning better than the analysis of selected phenomena. We also can confirm some of the observations from other studies where this approach was used. For example, one can notice the lack of what Bielak (2016) calls 'home space' in the 'educational space' due to the lack of emotional support (unconditional love of mothers) from the teachers, but full of demands and expectations, (conditional love of fathers) at all stages of education.

As observed by De Wilde and Eyckmans (2017), students enter foreign language education with different levels of language competence, because of their prior experiences. In Poland it is true not only because of the prior exposure to the Internet and other multimedia, but also because of attending private courses, as knowing a foreign language (particularly English) is considered by parents to be important for future success of their children. Contrary to De Wilde and Eyckmans's observation, some of our participants emphasised the impact of pop-songs on their EFL competence. However, it was not mere exposure to songs but translation and/or memorisation of the lyrics, meaning active involvement in the songs interpretation. Yet, EFL teachers in Poland usually do not take it into consideration, as a result often demotivating their students to further develop their EFL competence, and wasting their and their parents' earlier efforts. As teacher educators we should place more emphasis on the need to identify learners' earlier experience and potentials to individualize instruction, and show the teachers ways to do this.

We found the narrative approach useful for observing factors which were often passed unnoticed or analysed in isolation. Like Oxford and Cuéllar (2014) and Oxford (2014), we used the PERMA model and agree that it may be successfully used for the study of language acquisition and education, but some modifications need to be applied, as for example considering negative emotions evoked by some situations or integrating engagement and meaning. However, in the latter case we would be cautious in calling this "meaningful engagement" (Oxford 2014: 596) as sometimes the meaning comes after some time, as a reflection on the past engagement, rather than a motivating factor at a given moment.

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