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## **COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: A POLISH-TURKISH COMPARATIVE STUDY**

### **Abstract**

The term learning environment is a construct perceived by researchers as embracing different aspects of the teaching-learning continuum. It can be described as the physical location where learning occurs: learning in class versus learning beyond it, learning in a home country (with focus on the effects of a learning environment on outcomes of teaching) versus learning abroad (Dewey, 2004, Diaz-Campos, 2004), the latter constituting a fast-growing area of study. Learning environment also means the physical space where formal instruction is carried out (Gabryś-Barker, 2010). But above all, learning environment studies focus on interactions between adults (teachers, parents) and students and show how these relations can affect the latter's achievement and more generally well-being at school and outside. Thus, it can be seen as mostly affective. This chapter aims to comment on the perceptions pre-service teachers have of a foreign language learning environment, as expressed in their narrative texts on the topic. The data obtained in this study will be compared with the result of a similar study carried out with a group of pre-service EFL teachers in a different cultural setting, in Turkey (Sağlam, Sali, 2013). This should shed some light on whether the trainees' perceptions are in some way culture-specific and therefore grounded in the educational policies of a given country. The conclusions drawn from the study will hopefully contribute to the ongoing discussion on how to improve FL teachers' training programmes.

**Keywords:** learning environment, affectivity, cognitive dimension, narrative texts, Polish trainees, Turkish trainees

**Słowa kluczowe:** otoczenie ucznia, afektywność, wymiar kognitywny, teksty narracyjne, polscy nauczyciele studenci, tureccy nauczyciele studenci

## **1. Introduction: Rationale for studying a FL learning environment**

Even though the concept of learning environment has been researched and discussed quite extensively, there are hardly any studies that look at FL pre-service teachers' awareness of this important construct. Thus, receiving feedback from our trainees and diagnosing their awareness of the above issue, we as teacher trainers and curriculum planners can amend our training programmes to expand our students' and future teachers' knowledge. We can also observe what their attitude to their future professions is by diagnosing their understandings of such a fundamental aspect of successful (FL) teaching as a learning environment. Finally, we can understand more about trainees' beliefs and preferences.

## **2. Defining learning environment: perspectives and research overview (an outline)**

Various researchers take different perspectives when defining a learning environment (LE). Schmuck and Schmuck (1978) see it as interpersonal relationships expressed by teacher-student and student-student interactions, emotional aspects of teaching, teachers' attitudes towards students and expectations of them, but also as disciplinary problems that occur in and beyond the classroom. Additionally, they perceive personal profiles of the teacher and learners, their age and gender, as constitutive factors of the LE. For Entwistle and Tait (1995), LE is a more traditional concept relating to a course itself (lectures, assignments, tests) and its available and actually used learning resources. Entwistle, McCune and Entwistle (2003) combine the former and the latter views in describing LE as a course's design and its organization, teacher-students' relationships and student cultures. In other studies, the focus is on an ideal LE, which brings about maximum learning and achievement (Byrne, Hattie, Fraser, 1986) and on what is a desirable one, that is, "supportive, egalitarian, democratic and organized according to pre-determined rules and regulations" (Zedan, 2010: 76). Another perspective is offered by Miller, Ferguson and Byrne (2000), who discuss LE in relation to difficult classroom behavior and the strict and fair regime of a class.

Research on learning environments embraces not only these studies which try to conceptualize the construct of LE and contextualize it, but also

those which look at constructing different LEs and the influences they have on learners and their motivation. Additionally, for some researchers the construct becomes an important issue in teacher training and the professional development of FL teachers (Table 1).

Dimension	Focus	Study
Defining learning environment	Approaches to studying and perceptions of learning environment across disciplines Conceptualizing classroom space as learning environment	Entwistle and Tait (1995) Gabryś-Barker (2010)
Perceptions of learning environment	Student perceptions of preferred classroom learning environment Students' perceptions of a FL learning environment Investigating ways of enhancing university teaching-learning environments: measuring students' approaches to studying and perceptions of teaching	Byrne, Hattie and Fraser (1986) Sağlam and Sali (2013) Entwistle, McCune and Entwistle (2003)
Learning environment as context	Learning environment as context	Freed, Segalowitz and Dewey (2004)
	A comparison of reading development by learners of Japanese in intensive domestic immersion and study abroad contexts	Dewey (2004)
	Context of learning in the acquisition of Spanish second language phonology	Diaz-Campos (2004)
	Learning environment as context of FL learning	Collentine and Freed (2004)
Constructing effective learning environment	Linguistic and non-linguistic paradigms in constructing FL learning and teaching environments	Lian (2016)
	The need for both teacher and learner centred classroom – students' views	Elen, Clarebout, Léonard and Lowyck (2007)
Influence of learning environment	Role of learning environment for development of pragmatic comprehension	Taguchi (2008)
	The effects of different learning environments on students' motivation and their achievement.	Baeten, Dochy and Struyven (2012)
	The influence of learning environment and its dynamics on classroom interaction	Czekaj (2008)

Learning environment in teacher training	Incorporating classroom and school environment ideas into teacher education programs	Fraser (1993)
	Classroom climate as a dimension of learning environment in teacher training	Gabryś-Barker (2015)

Table 1: Selected studies on learning environment in FL instruction.

### 3. Present study: methodology

#### 3.1. Research focus

This article looks at the results of two studies, that of Sağlam and Sali (2013) and my own study, carried out as a partial replication of the former. The major focus of the original study, as well as the present one, is on identification of varied perceptions of a FL learning environment in its different dimensions (cognitive and affective) both from qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

#### 3.2. Participants in the study

Both groups of subjects taking part in the study were pretty homogenous in their profiles. All the subjects were between 22 and 24 years old and they were university students, future teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In the original study of Sağlam and Sali (2013), a sample of 50 pre-service teachers of EFL in their final fourth year of studies (an undergraduate teacher education programme) at a Turkish university participated in the research. During the course of their studies, they covered courses in methodology of foreign language teaching, teaching language skills and partially completed their practicum at schools. At the moment of data collection, the students were still in the middle of their school placement at secondary schools teaching English as a foreign language to Turkish teenagers.

In the present study, a sample of 40 pre-service teachers of EFL in their final year of M.A. studies to be EFL teachers was selected. They had completed their teaching practice the previous year (the 4<sup>th</sup> year of their studies). Like their Turkish counterparts, their programme of studies offered them extensive access to FL teaching methodology, linguistics and language courses. They were all enthusiastic teachers-to-be with some experience of teaching and a very strong sense of the need for further professional development. Thus, they were quite motivated to participate in the study as it was perceived by them as an important step in developing their professional awareness (personal communication).

### 3.3. Data collection tools and method of analysis

The original study used an open-ended questionnaire in Turkish which was administered at the end of the studies. It aimed to elicit students' ideas about "what constituted the elements of the foreign language learning environment" (Sağlam, Sali, 2013: 1123). The comments were to be based on students' "individual observations and understandings earned in their theoretical and teaching practice classes" (Sağlam, Sali, 2013: 1123). It has to be pointed out, however, that the term *questionnaire* was used by the researchers in a rather loose sense, as in fact, the subjects were to make an open-ended comment on their understanding of LE and not to respond to a set of defined questions, the traditional understanding of a questionnaire as a tool of data collection.

The categorical-content method of analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zibler, 1998) was employed in data presentation and interpretation. The procedure consists in analysing all the written accounts (here subjects' open-ended comments) by eliciting the narrow sub-categories repeatedly occurring in the texts and conceptualizing them into more general and more specific categories (sub-categories). Sağlam and Sali (2003) identified seven major dimensions and 26 reoccurring sub-categories. For the purposes of analysis, the emerging subcategories were colour-coded, labeled and conceptualized as belonging to a larger category (dimension).

In the present study the data was collected by means of a narrative of 450 words entitled *The role of foreign learning environment in FL learners' achievement*. The students were asked first of all to comment in English (L2) on their own understanding(s) of what a learning environment stands for. Also in this study the categorical-content method of analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, Zibler, 1998) was used for the purposes of data presentation and its interpretation, in which first, the categories were elicited from the narratives and then, they were quantified in percentages against the total number of responses extracted from the narratives.

It turned out that the categorization Sağlam and Sali (2013) came up in their data analysis was similar to the categorization in the present study. However, some additional sub-categories absent in the original study emerged. As such, they are discussed separately. Only the first part of the comments made by my students, that is those focusing on their LE perceptions, is commented on in the present discussion as it aims to replicate the focus of the study by Sağlam and Sali (2013).

### 4. Data presentation

As mentioned above, the general categories identified on the basis of the open-ended questionnaire (the original study) and narratives (this study) in the main

categories generated overlapped in both studies. One of the Polish trainees stated that a learning environment “is the intersection of the physical surroundings, classroom layout, décor, additional materials, the feeling it gives to the students” (subject 2), thus (as mentioned by another subject), it embraces “the place and the people who create it” (s. 18). These perceptions are reflected in the main categories and sub-categories of a FL learning environment identified in both studies. They are:

- **PHYSICAL ASPECTS:** the physical environment of the classroom (classroom seating arrangements, decorations, colouring, light, etc)
- **SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS:** positive classroom climate, collaboration, rapport, learner-centredness/learner needs, learner attitudes and feelings, teacher attitudes and feelings
- **INSTRUCTIONAL APPROCHES & METHODS:** instructional approaches, lesson content and delivery, instructional methods and techniques, language teaching materials
- **LEARNER INVOLVEMENT:** learner readiness, student learning, motivation
- **PARENTAL SUPPORT/HOME**
- **LINGUISTIC ASPECTS**
- **ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES**

Table 2 shows the results for both studies. Table 3 shows additional categories which in the Turkish study were individual responses and which were not observed in the Polish set of data, as well as additional categories in the Polish study, which were absent in the Turkish data. These additional categories from the Polish study brought about quite high scores and thus, they may be considered significant for discussion of the perceptions of learning environment in the latter study group.

<b>FL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (categories and subcategories)</b>	<b>Turkish data (No 50)</b>	<b>Polish data (No 40)</b>
<b>PHYSICAL ASPECTS</b>	22%	<b>69%</b>
<b>Physical environment of the classroom</b>		
<b>SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS</b>		
Positive classroom climate	19%	<b>68%</b>
Collaboration	4%	40%
Rapport	8%	41%
Learner-centredness/learner needs	4%	24%
Learner attitudes and feelings	23%	20%
Teacher attitudes and feelings	22%	20%
<b>Mean values</b>	13%	35%
<b>INSTRUCTIONAL APPROCHES &amp; METHODS</b>		
Instructional approaches	22%	24%
Lesson content & delivery	22%	12%
Instructional methods and techniques	<b>70%</b>	41%

Cognitive and affective dimensions of foreign language learning environments...

Language teaching materials	<b>71%</b>	<b>69%</b>
Mean values	<b>46%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>LEARNER INVOLVEMENT</b>		
Learner readiness	6%	0
Student learning	5%	0
Motivation	19%	12%
Mean values	<b>10%</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>PARENTAL SUPPORT/HOME</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>LINGUISTIC ASPECTS</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>4%</b>

Table 2: Major categories and subcategories in the Turkish and Polish studies (bold indicates the highest scores in both groups).

<b>ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES: Turkish responses (22%)</b>	<b>ADDITIONAL CATEGORIES: Polish responses (80%)</b>
Teachers' physical features	Security 36%
Cooperation between school administration and teachers/learners,	Other contexts/locations 30%
Teacher knowledge	Culture 24%
Qualified teachers	Teacher's fairness 12%
Learners' aptitude	
Learners' previous learning activities	
Stimuli in the learning environment	
Learners' physical features	
Rewards	

Table 3: Additional categories in both studies.

## 5. Turkish versus Polish pre-service FL teachers: discussion

As specified above, the main categories and subcategories elicited overlapped in Turkish and Polish responses in the majority of cases (Table 2) but additional categories emerged as significant ones in the case of Polish responses (Table 3). Great importance is attributed to learning environments for learner FL achievement by the subjects in both groups and both physical and psychological dimensions are evoked. However, the perceptions of individual aspects of a learning environment seen as physical and psychological are strikingly different in both groups. Turkish pre-service EFL teachers point to the direct influence of learning environment on learner achievement, whereas Polish trainees see it as an indirect influence on learners and their language achievements.

### 5.1. Physical aspects: Physical environment of the classroom

Both Turkish and Polish subjects consider the physical dimension as a significant aspect of a learning environment (22% and 69% respectively), however

Polish respondents see it as one of the major constitutive factors of learning environment compared with much less significance attached to it by the Turkish students. This was also the case in my previous study, which looked at trainees' perceptions of classroom space (Gabryś-Barker, 2010) expressed in the form of associations such as: seating arrangement, walls, posters, A-V aids, equipment, air, smell, cleanness, general appearance, size, windows, the building, outside the building, working area, functionality. Table 4 shows all the dimensions of classroom space, demonstrating a fairly homogenous picture of the central aspects of classroom space in its purely physical dimension (Gabryś-Barker, 2010). But the subjects in the previous study also emphasized a relation between the physical and mental spaces: here mental space described as the interaction between the teacher and learners and between learners themselves, individual autonomy - "space to breathe", classroom atmosphere. The study aimed at raising pre-service teachers' awareness of the complexity of the issue of classroom space in its physicality and its direct significance for psychological (affective) aspects of classroom instruction, in other words, its contribution to the effectiveness of teaching/learning processes in a given classroom context (Table 4).

Dimension	Examples
Physicality of the room	a. general appearance (architectural): walls, windows, lamps b. desk arrangement c. didactic objects: a-v aids/equipment, posters d. size (e.g. physical space between people) e. non-object qualities: air, smell. colour, cleanness
Pedagogical	a. spreading knowledge b. functionality (e.g. ease of movement) c. practicality (e.g. availability of aids)
Interactive/mental	a. feeling of ease b. classroom atmosphere c. silence d. breaking barriers e. "individual space to breathe" f. mental space between people g. opportunity to express oneself

Table 4: Dimensions of classroom space (based on Gabryś-Barker, 2010).

In another study (Czekaj, 2008), learner questionnaire data showed that 92% of the learners see the importance of physical classroom space and express their territoriality "In my territory I feel safe". Also, lesson observations carried out by Czekaj (2008) in her study show that the questionnaire data was verified. The changes introduced in seating arrangements were one of the most influential factors in introducing variety in a lesson. Also, the physicality of the teacher confirms the questionnaire data: "a sitting teacher = unnoticed teacher" (Czekaj,

2008), whereas constant movement around the class seemed to reinforce the teacher's authority and to decrease the amount of misbehaviour observed. Czekaj (2008) also saw the need for constant control of one's movement, which should be geared to the needs of learners and task requirements. Her subjects showed appreciation of eye contact and teacher gestures as a form of interaction and feedback. She observed that these non-verbal aspects of communication (interaction) can be used affectively as reward and punishment mechanisms, depending on the context. They were also seen as variables adding to the naturalness of communication in the classroom. Czekaj (2008) also rightly emphasized that movement, or motor activity of the body, contributes to the physical well-being of learners in the sense that it provides oxygen to help mental activation.

The Polish trainees in this study remember their own learning and their own classrooms at the times when school conditions were much more severe and less facilitative in terms of their surroundings. One of them recalls: "I remember that our classroom was very gloomy, placed in the basement of the school" (s. 21). However, with time, when the school was reorganised on entering the European Innovation Program, the student observed to her surprise "I was shocked when I came back to school after the summer break. The same classroom underwent a total transformation. They painted the walls orange and bought new furniture (...) such a change changed the atmosphere" (s. 12)

In this study, one of the trainees remembering her teaching experiences in kindergarten, describes two different rooms and the effects they had on her learners. The observation led her to the conclusion: "(...) to keep students active and motivated, and therefore high achieving, we need spacious rooms with enough light and a right colour-scheme, preferably such colours as blues and greens" (s. 9).

## 5.2. Socio-psychological aspects

The social aspect of this category is seen as expressed by collaboration (cooperation) and rapport, whereas the psychological aspect reflects the affectivity of teachers and learners. The socio-psychological dimension seems more significant in the eyes of Polish students (35%) than in the Turkish responses (13%). Whereas both groups point to learners' and teachers' feelings and attitudes, it is the Polish students who believe that a positive classroom climate is the most significant player in creating an effective FL learning environment (68%). This is well-expressed by one of the subjects:

*A key to success is in positive psychology in the classroom. The un-stressful conditions of learning and the feeling of safety are an integral part of a successful teaching/learning (...) the positive classroom climate has the impact on cognitive*

*and affective aspects of learning (...) If the learning environment is negative, it has a detrimental effect on the students' achievement. Thus, it should be in the teachers' competences to take care of the appropriate atmosphere and conditions for the students to be able to benefit from FL lessons (s. 1).*

This is also expressed in the much higher values attributed to collaboration and rapport (40% and 41% in the Polish responses versus 4% and 8% in the Turkish data). All in all, these three categories, social, psychological and physical, present what Ambrose *et al.* (2010) consider to constitute classroom climate:

(...) the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn. Climate is determined by a constellation of interacting factors that include faculty-student interaction, the tone instructors set, instances of stereotyping or tokenism, the course demographics (for example, relative size of racial and other social groups enrolled in the course), student-student interaction, and the range of perspectives represented in the course content and materials (Ambrose *et al.*, 2010: 170).

Like Ambrose *et al.* (2010), these trainees are aware of the complexity of classroom climate and emphasise its defining qualities as “prevailing mood, attitudes, standards and what the teacher and the students feel when they are in the classroom” (s. 14).

In the previous study on classroom climate (Gabryś-Barker, 2015) hardly any comment was made on the role of student cohesiveness (group dynamics), satisfaction (enjoyment), innovation or individualization (learner decisions, autonomy). Here, reflection on the degree of connectedness between the students (bonds, common ground, *caring and sharing*), a key aspect of classroom dynamics is assessed as significant by 40% of the Polish subjects but only by 4% of the Turkish respondents. A similar result can be observed in the rapport category of responses (41% versus 8%). Comparing both groups, it seems evident that it is the Polish students for whom the affective dimension of a learning environment is a more important contributor to effective learning and achievement. At the same time, the attitudes and feelings of teachers and learners are also quite significant in the Turkish responses. However, it can be assumed that affectivity in the latter is more oriented towards an individual and not a class, functioning as a group, cooperating and establishing conducive to learning (and teaching). The Polish students acknowledge how important establishing appropriate rapport within a learning group is:

*It is relatively easy to build a school, but it is not so easy to build a good rapport with the students. In order to do it, the teacher should encourage his students to form a supportive learning community based on trust and assistance (s. 6).*

*The role of a teacher is to create a friendly and supportive atmosphere within the classroom, making sure that all students cooperate. The teacher may encourage students to form learning groups, in which they will not only have an opportunity to learn but also to make friendships (s. 22).*

### 5.3. Instructional approaches and methods

A significant aspect of any teacher's professional competence, among others, is his/her knowledge about and competence in using appropriate approaches, for example, making a choice between focusing more on teaching itself in a teacher-centred classroom or on learning in learner-centred classrooms, the ability to deliver lesson content, specific techniques and teaching materials. These aspects of teacher expertise were elicited in both studies as fairly significant elements in a learning environment. For the Turkish students in fact, language teaching materials (71%) and the instructional methods and techniques used (70%) constitute the highest categories. Sağlam and Sali (2013) comment on the above high scores for teaching materials by saying

The prevalence of language teaching materials in participants' accounts might be due to the existing physical conditions of the learning environments in the context of the present study where lack of materials and equipment remains a huge concern in the educational system. (Sağlam, Sali, 2013: 1124)

As far as the Polish pre-service teachers' responses are concerned, there is a strong emphasis on the value of teaching materials (69%), but not so much on the instructional methods and techniques, as is in the case with the Turkish trainees. This is interpreted in the original study as "a rather teacher-centred view of the foreign language learning environment" (Sağlam, Sali, 2013: 1125).

The importance of teaching materials is expressed by this short reflection by one of the Polish trainees on her learning experiences: "When I look back in time, I think of a great variety of didactic materials which I could see and touch in a language school and the scarcity of such teaching aids in the state school" (s. 1). Another trainee recalls her teaching in a primary school:

*The classroom is full of pictures of plants, bugs, animals. We name them. Sometimes, when I ask my students to recall vocabulary they have learnt so far, they always look at those pictures and try to guess the names, or they simply point to the door, window or a chalkboard and say those words (s. 18).*

#### 5.4. Learner involvement

Learner involvement as a dimension of a learning environment is surprisingly not seen as a major category and even learner motivation is not considered vital for establishing a successful FL learning environment. The latter is cited in 19% of Turkish students' responses and 12% for Polish trainees. Additionally, learner readiness and learning itself, which can be interpreted as seeing learners as decisive agents in their achievement and success, do not score high in the Turkish group (6% and 5% respectively), whereas these categories do not appear in the Polish answers at all.

At the same time, the Polish trainees do see the role of learner involvement expressed as their autonomy as reflected in these words "The students should also feel independent as it is the teacher's role to make them proud of their own actions and success" (s. 20).

#### 5.5. Parental support/home, linguistic aspects

Of the two remaining variables, parental support/home and linguistic aspects (target language input and exposure to language), parental support presents a value to Polish subjects of 30% but only 7% in the case of the Turks. The attitude of Polish trainees expresses the growing interest and involvement of Polish parents in the education of their children at all levels. Evidently, it comes from a fast-growing private sector in Polish education, in which parents have a major say in the way school functions not only on the organisational level but also to some extent in terms of its programmes. This is also apparent in parents' engagement in the process of educational reforms in the Polish system at the moment or in the recent past. In relation to foreign language instruction, it has always been parents' desire and belief that learning foreign languages was good for the future of their children. The latter would often have to enrol in FL courses at language schools, quite often against their wills. Both the positive and negative role of home context is reflected upon by this trainee:

*(..) learner's situation at home plays a significant role in in learner's achievement. It is important for a learner to have a family support and good atmosphere at home because it enhances learner's motivation. (on the other hand) if a learner has problems at home, he or she may not pay any attention to language learning (s. 4).*

#### 5.6. Other categories

The Polish data includes other contexts and locations as possible environments of language learning, which are surprisingly absent in the responses of

the Turkish group. It may be assumed then that Turkish trainees perceive learning environments as traditionally occurring in the classroom with its all traditional connotations concerning the physicality of the room - desks, usually arranged in rows, and a blackboard with a piece of chalk as the main teaching aids.

The Polish trainees (30%) point to other locations in which foreign language learning processes take place, locations with different characteristics and which put different demands on learners. One-to-one tutorials and language schools are very popular forms of foreign language instruction among Poles, and which also seems to be strongly reflected in this study. A study abroad period and the FL acquisition possibilities study abroad offers in various forms (e.g. by participating in ERASMUS programme) make the subjects emphasize them as significant and effective learning environments. All these contexts come up in the narratives. Just to quote an example:

*This notion is usually applied as a more appropriate alternative to classroom, which has traditional and less informal character.[sic] The above definition suggests that the students learn in many various contexts which may influence not only their passion for foreign languages but also their own achievement (s. 19).*

In this context, Poles can be described as being more autonomous in searching beyond formal classroom instruction to develop their FL competence(s) than their Turkish counterparts.

One of the issues discussed by educationalists in Poland today is the different forms of learner abuse at school, such as bullying. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that security is singled out by the Polish students (EFL teachers to be), who already seem to feel anxious about such issues and fear they will have to face situations they will not be prepared to deal with (also personal communication). One of the more significant descriptive terms used by the trainees is safety, as in "the feeling of predictability and safety is also a part of a learning environment" (s. 7), "I always try to create an encouraging atmosphere where students feel safe" (s.15), "First of all, the learners' should be provided with a certain sense of security and stability" (s. 5) or in the words "School should definitely provide security for students (...) learners should feel welcome there" (s. 23).

The aim of this article has been to point out the differences in perceptions of FL learning environments by two fairly homogenous groups of trainees also with respect to possible cultural differences and how they are reflected in their respective educational contexts. However, culture as a variable in a learning environment in itself only emerges in the Polish responses (24%). The trainees see it, among other things, as

*the role of the country in which the language is taught and learnt, namely its influence on learners' motivation and achievement (...). There is nothing more motivating than the possibility of using the language immediately after leaving the classroom (s. 25).*

The same subject assumes that a major factor in learner language achievement also derives from a “general reception of the target language culture (e.g. due to tragic historical war experiences)” (s. 25). It can be assumed that young Poles see the educational system in Poland as embedded in a broader cultural context of the country, and not existing in its own right. This culture prescribes the role of school and other educational institutions. It determines the roles of the teacher, learners and parents alike. Following the recommendations of the European Union, combined with more individualistic attitudes of the Polish people, we can observe here a strong shift from a teacher-centred classroom to a learner-centred classroom - with focus on autonomy, reflectivity and crossing the classroom borders to gain learning experiences beyond it. School remains the mainstay of education, thus it should still be regarded as an enabling institution. Peterson (2006: 286) describes a profile of a school which is a truly enabling institution as being able to “decrease impersonality (of the school) and increase contact between students and teachers, which in turn increase(s) students' feelings of belonging and connectedness”. This can be done also by, as one of the trainees said, offering more than what is prescribed in the programme: “(...) school should encourage students to learn by organising some extra projects, contests and activities” (s. 23). Thus, the essence of school should be in its *purpose, safety, fairness, humanity and dignity*:

The basic unit of school, a class, is an administrative entity but first and foremost, it is a social group of pupils- learners and their teachers, who build, maintain and develop an intricate network of relationships in their daily interactions. These interactions establish a unique climate that governs the life of the group – a class. (Gabryś-Barker, 2015: 157)

## **6. The main findings: Turkish *versus* Polish pre-service FL teachers**

Unanimously, future teachers ascribe great importance to learning environments for learner FL achievement. As expressed by one of the Polish students, “The learning environment is the key factor in achievement as it can either motivate the students and make them feel comfortable or it can discourage them completely in learning” (s. 5) and it is for the teacher “to provide a positive learning experience” (s. 13). The data obtained in both studies is hardly surprising as the expected understandings of the trainees of what a learning environment is is duly

registered. The physical and psychological dimensions of this construct are present in the responses, however, what it is important to look more closely at is how significant each of the individual aspects of a learning environment appears to be for Polish and Turkish pre-service FL teachers (Table 5).

Aspect	Turkish trainees	Polish trainees
Approach	Teacher-centred, Group-focus	Learner-centred Individual learners
Teacher expertise	Knowledge and teaching competence	Knowledge and teaching competence Management skills/psycholinguistic competence in relation to interaction and rapport
Affectivity	Individual feelings of teachers and learners	Individual feelings of teachers and learners Collaboration, rapport Group functioning (group dynamics)
Resources	Didactic materials Classroom language input	Didactic materials Classroom language input
Physical dimension	Classroom arrangement	Classroom arrangement Security at school
Contexts of learning	Classroom	Classroom, study abroad, home, one-to-one tutorials Culture of the country

Table 5: Inter-group comparison: Turkish versus Polish trainees.

One of the Polish trainees in the present study expressed his belief that “learning environment has a very profound effect on students’ achievement either more directly by providing them with knowledge of language or indirectly by enhancing their motivation and willingness to learn” (s. 9). This statement expresses the difference between Turkish and Polish pre-service EFL teachers, in which the former emphasizes this direct influence of learning environment on learner achievement, whereas the latter point to what was called by one trainee (s.9) an indirect influence. What comes as a surprise in the responses of both groups is that although all the subjects are (or will be) teachers of English as a foreign language, they do not see that teaching a foreign language is not like teaching any other school subject. Teaching it gives them the powerful tool (that language is) to create a communicative, friendly and thus facilitative learning environment, but in the comments registered here, a foreign language is only perceived as a resource (knowledge input). In the conclusion of their study, Sağlam and Sali (2013: 1125) state:

One of the major findings of the present study was the overemphasis in data on the physical and instructional aspects of the foreign language learning environment, when compared to the socio-psychological and learner-related aspects.

It seems that a traditional approach to the teaching-learning process, focus on teaching and group learning as well as FL learning seen as limited to formal instruction in classroom settings, are the dominant perceptions of the Turkish trainees participating in the study. This leads Sağlam and Sali (2013) to the conclusion that what is needed in teacher-training programmes in Turkey is awareness-raising and reflectivity on socio-psychological aspects of the learning environment, which will create different understandings among trainees to facilitate a development of a more learner-centered classroom.

In the case of Polish trainees, their attitudes evolved from a more teacher-centred approach mainly focused on instruction and methods (Gabryś-Barker, 2012) to more learner-centred perceptions of the FL teaching-learning process with emphasis on cognitive aspects assuming the dominant role of socio-psychological features of the learning environment(s). This includes an understanding of a strongly affective dimension to the teaching-learning continuum. The evolution of Polish trainees' perceptions on teaching a FL observed by me over a long period of over thirty years points to a variety of both external and internal influences on teacher training and as a result, trainees' evolution. These external influences undoubtedly include:

- the European Union educational policies and recommendations in relation to FL teacher training such as for example, implementation in training courses of language portfolios or EPOSTL (European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages),
- mobility programmes of the European Union as an example of learning in other than state school contexts, often labelled as Study Abroad Periods, for example, TEMUS or ERASMUS, and
- development and promotion of private language schools and one-to-one tuition
- opportunities offered by educational programmes and technology.

The internal influences on trainees' evolution derive from the changes introduced in university and college programmes of studies such as:

- introduction of a new focus on socio-psychology, e.g. affectivity in FL didactic contexts, autonomy and individual needs, cooperation,
- introduction of reflectivity, action research, journal writing,
- focus on reflective teaching and reflective learning,
- emphasis not only on the cognitive but also the affective dimension in learning contexts,
- focus on learning and individual learner differences and a learner as an individual but functioning in a group; the significance of group dynamics, and
- FL education as a broader issue: the culture of school, or a country.

As can be seen, the evolution of the trainees' perceptions stems from very deep changes in the content focus of training programmes. However, it needs to be emphasized that it also derives from the changes in thinking about teaching from a more constructivist perspective, less authoritarian and more inclined to give space and autonomy to the trained, to give both the teacher and the trainee more of a voice.

## 7. Conclusions and a way forward

The observations derived from both studies bear out what was stated in the introduction to this article, that there is a need to continue questioning how our trainees, future foreign language teachers, perceive their prospective profession as their teaching environment and thus, also learning environments. These perceptions need to change and evolve with the changing demands put on teachers and we as teacher trainers and mentors need to be aware of this necessary process.

The challenges of a modern school are much greater now, not only in respect of the knowledge and abilities needed but also relating to the wider social aspects of teachers' and students' functioning at school and beyond. As has been correctly pointed out by the Polish subjects, some urgent issues do not seem to have found their ways into methodology syllabuses. The missing topics embrace questions of physical and mental security and the frequent cases of bullying observed at schools, more inclusive attitudes to special educational needs learners (SEN) and the multifaceted role of home and family. Clearly, steadfast and continuous support should be given to various mobility programmes through which both learners and teachers can open up to new cultures, keep up their language competence, to mention just a few of the advantages of exchange and mobility programmes.

Finally and most significantly, it is important to understand that it is the school that is the most powerful enabling institution creating a healthy learning environment by providing and guaranteeing the conditions in which learners can feel:

- Safe - That emotions are acknowledged and impacting how they (staff and students- addition mine) think.
- Accepted – How much individuals are allowed to “be themselves,” as opposed to simply complying with expectations.
- Included - Encouraged to find a distinctive and a valid role for themselves.
- Listened to - That people can say what they think or feel knowing that this will have an impact on others and stimulate change.
- Competent – That there is a genuine interest in enabling them to realise their potential in whatever field they choose.

(Killick, 2006: 62)

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