# University students' preferences on English teachers' nationality and teaching style: Gender based differences

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Inspiration dynamics between students and teachers have great impact on learners' perceptions, attitudes and psychological well-being in the ESL classroom. Gender-based differences in opinions about foreign-language acquisition often shape students' approaches and learning structures. Nowadays, great emphasis is placed on the presence of native English-speaker teachers in English language teaching institutions. However, such teachers may struggle to understand local students' attitudes. Seventy-four university students were asked about their perceptions and preferences on English teachers' nationality and teaching-style in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. The data were analysed according to gender-based differences in opinions. The findings reveal that, in general, students have no preference for native or non-native teachers, yet prefer educators who teach exclusively through the medium of English. Female students expressed less self-confidence, more need for continuous reinforcement and social interaction in the classroom, while male students displayed more self-confidence, more autonomy and the need for practical knowledge-focused learning content and strategies.

**Keywords:** ESL, gender differences, teaching style, learning preferences, native versus non-native teachers

## 1. Introduction

For foreign language education to be successful, several factors are vital to be considered. Motivation is a quintessential factor to engage, nurture and advance students' interest and developing their language skills. Learners' attitudes and motivation towards acquiring a foreign language and successful classroom performance are among decisive factors predicting positive outcome (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011, p. 994). Nowadays, foreign language learning has become a worldwide experience, attracting millions of all ages to attend foreign language classes at all levels. According to the British Council, during the last 75 years, they have educated more than 100 million people in 100 countries to start, develop and polish their English language knowledge (British Council, 2018). However, this number is only a tiny fraction of the countless university programmes, alongside traditional and online language schools of all size offering yearlong or intensive courses. The creation of diverse foreign language institutions addresses the needs of individuals expecting to use their language knowledge for obtaining better jobs, expanded educational opportunities, moving abroad and/or higher social status (Komlosi, 2017, p. 23). With a flourishing English

language teaching industry, a new wish has emerged. Both companies and individuals agree on the importance of having native English teachers ensuring the successful acquisition of native-like proficiency and accent while gaining knowledge about sociocultural and psychological features of the language. Although there are a variety of reasons students wish to learn English, the presence of a native English teacher has become almost compulsory in most institutions. Therefore, during the last decades, two very clearly segregated categories have emerged: native and non-native English language educators. Although traditionally, native-speakers are often preferred as opposed to non-native teachers, lately this view came under attack by academics devoted to this field as well as by students who experienced both teaching styles (Medgyes, 2017, p. 87-88; Braine, 2009, p. xvii; Thomas, 2009, pp. 6–7; Canagarajah, 2009, p. 80; Kamhi-Stein, 2009, p. 147; Liu, 2009, pp. 159–160).

Training effective language teaching professionals has been thoroughly studied in various countries (Doró & T. Balla, 2014, p. 52; Phillips, 2008, p. 37; Woodbury, 2017, p. 80). Already in 2005, Bell (p. 259) stated that, while there is little consensus on specific behaviours forming the most advantageous educational strategies, the following five points are generally accepted as crucial for teachers to maintain (or even to develop) motivation in the ESL classroom:

- enthusiasm
- expressiveness (verbal and non-verbal)
- clarity of explanation (proper to the learners' knowledge/level)
- rapport (according to the students' needs)
- encouraging interaction

The above-mentioned teaching qualities are supposed to be required and indispensable for all educators and practised at all teaching environments. However, students' perceptions on foreign-language teachers' teaching style and motivational strategies may be at odds, particularly if the teacher is from a different nationality and not familiar with the host country's educational practices. Unconventional behaviours from foreign teachers may be easily misunderstood, or even perceived as disrespectful and/or defying for local students. However, the growing concern about native English speaking teachers often mismatches the demands for their presence (Moores-Abdool, Yahya, & Unzueta, 2009, p. 2).

Besides culture and previous educational and social experiences, another factor that inevitably influences learners' behaviour is gender. This topic has lately gained much attention, as female students' perceptions, attitudes and motivations may significantly differ from their male peers. As insinuated, from early childhood, females are more likely to acquire soft skills via social interaction, while males' problem-solving and communication skills are more based on independent action and strategical exploration (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, in the crossroads of the

complex paths determining motivation to learn English as a foreign language, students' view on the matter is of key importance.

Komlosi-Ferdinand's (2018, pp. 44–45) previous study on Bulgarian university students' learning style preferences in the four main domains, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, shed light on the (often lack of) clear learning strategies and (lack of) self-awareness of the participants. Although the students' opinions appeared on a very wide range of spectrum, some interesting differences were found between female and male learners' attitudes. The present study expands the same participants' perceptions and preferences on the teachers' nationality, age, gender, teaching and classroom management style. The participants' viewpoints were analysed according their gender, to discover patterns that enhance and maintain motivation in Bulgarian ESL classrooms.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 English teaching in Bulgaria

The Republic of Bulgaria is a country situated in south-eastern Europe, in the Balkan peninsula. Since 2007, it has been a member of the European Union. The modern-day Bulgaria is one of the oldest inhabited places in Europe, looking back to a history full of invasions. Greeks, Persians, Slavs and Ottomans left observable cultural and linguistic traces on the present day Bulgarian society. Bulgarian is the only language with official status spoken as a first or second language by almost all Bulgarian nationals. Moreover, according to the 2011 Census, Turkish, Romani and several minor languages and dialects are spoken by the 11 officially recognised ethnic groups. According to the Independent Balkan News Agency (2017), nearly 99 percent of Bulgarian children are learning a foreign language. Amongst the foreign languages studied, the one with most learners is English with 83 percent of the students, followed by Russian, with 17 percent. Moreover, almost 17 percent of these learners are simultaneously studying two or more languages.

### 2.2 Gender differences in attitudes in ESL classrooms

"Gender plays no significant role in the role in the rate of language learning or acquisition among male and female students...each group is as good or bad as the other. Disparity in performance becomes discernible when an individual or a group puts extra effort which is always needed for academic excellence" (Agu, 2014, p. 77).

The above-mentioned statement offers the author's view exclusively on intellectual capability. However, regardless their ethnic and cultural background, female and male students' world-view, social behaviour, attitudes and motivation may differ in several ways. Even in the 21$^{st}$ century, societal and traditional views and opinions

suggest, if not force to accept, what is appropriate for male and female individuals according to their culture (Kissau, 2006, p. 85). Foreign language classrooms may present a scenario, where abilities traditionally attributed to females, such as social interaction skills, facilitate language acquisition. Additionally, research shows that females' conduct, perspectives and attitudes towards language learning situations differ from male students' (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2007, p. 3). Moreover, gender has a notable effect on the degree and frequency of strategy use. Female students use learning strategies, memory and cognitive and social strategies more often than their male counterparts (Bozinovic & Sindik, 2011, p.11). This view is reinforced by Shakouri, & Saligheh (2012), who declare that females usually score higher at tests based on the material covered during the course. Also, female learners have better developed verbal abilities, start express themselves earlier and use longer and grammatically more accurate sentences. Their spelling and articulation usually develops earlier, and they acquire a richer vocabulary in the earlier phases of foreign language learning compared to male students. However, behavioural and psychological observations on foreign language classroom interactions show that male learners tend to dominate this domain. Unfortunately, this behaviour is sometimes reinforced by educators, by giving male students additional time and attention, allowing them more protagonism than to female learners. Female students, in their turn often display more 'politeness' during class interactions, losing opportunities to sharpen their skills (Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012, p. 4).

Differences in motivation to learn a foreign language were observed among male and female learners. While male students' objectives were mostly practical, such as the prospect of a good job or higher social status, female learners' motivation often focused on intellectual curiosity. Also, attitudes towards foreign language learning showed more positive approach by female students, having greater desire to learn foreign languages, and/or to improve their already existing knowledge (Feery, 2008, p. 38). However, Oxford (1993, p. 75) argues that instead of gender differences being the decisive factor in foreign language learning, there are communication misfits between students and instructors. She argues that whenever teaching style – learning style differences arise among educators and learners of different gender, frustration levels are higher than in a same-gender student-teacher interaction. Moreover, she suggests that for an optimal foreign language learning plan and ideal psychological classroom condition four strategies are needed:

- assessing and familiarising students with their own learning style
- encouraging acceptance of gender-based dissimilarities and emphasising cross gender learning style similitudes
- developing empirical-data based personalised instructional methodologies
- creating comfortable and anxiety-free learning environment to accommodate learning style diversity independently from the students' gender

*2.3 Teaching style and learning styles matches and mismatches*

Teaching style may be innocently viewed as nothing more than the educator's way of transmitting the material to be learned in the style that characterises his or her personality. Although unquestionably all individuals have some more or less established communication styles, in the field of foreign language education certain teaching strategies are needed to be negotiated. Ideally, teaching styles are flexibly adapted to students' learning styles and needs (Manning, 2007, p. 13, Felder & Henriques, 1995, p. 21). Oxford (1993, pp. 66–67) states that learning styles are not sharply divided into black and white concepts, they rather operate in a continuum. According to her, students may have different personality types, such as extrovert versus introvert, intuitive-random versus sensing-sequential, thinking versus feeling, closure-oriented/judging versus open/perceiving, global/holistic or analytic. Additionally, sensory preferences play an important role in learning. She states that visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (movement-oriented), and/or tactile (touch-oriented) predisposition of learners influences their perceptions and attitudes in the classroom. However, the mix of personality traits, sensory and learning styles preferences may vary from student to student; therefore, no learner should be strictly classified in one category. Considering and respecting the endless combination of learning styles (or the absence of them) may be a tremendous effort for the teacher. This might be a particularly challenging project in the foreign language classroom. Matching all psychological, emotional and intellectual needs between the educator and the students, while teaching a foreign language and its socio-cultural aspects might be an overwhelming task for all parties. However, Shrivastava (2012, pp. 63–64) identifies fifteen teaching approaches that may increase students' motivation and emotional and psychological well-being in the classroom:

- provide positive feedback and reinforce beliefs in the learners' future success
- ensure learning and interacting opportunities according to the students' level
- guide learners to find their learning style and to discover the practical value of the teaching material
- create a positive and welcoming milieu
- promote equality, dignity and self-confidence among students while paying attention to individual needs
- be enthusiastic (a bored or arrogant educator is highly discouraging)
- teach relevant material (irrelevant topics promote boredom and loss of motivation)
- prepare teaching material that is age, culture and language-knowledge appropriate
- involve students in tasks as much as it is culturally acceptable
- build a good rapport with students

- use clear, suitable and concrete examples
- have high, yet reasonable expectations from the learners
- be clear about learning strategies and expectations
- promote learning-autonomy and metacognition
- avoid creating fierce competition that causes anxiety and comparisons among students' capability

## 2.4 Native vs non-native English teachers

"Our capacity for reflexive thought means that we are able to think about how others see us and who we are... This consciousness of our own identity - our self - is possibly our most important possession" (Maclellan, 2013, p. 2).

In the dawn of the 21st century, an increased international mobility, and thus, contact with people of different background is taking place. Globalisation has an enormous effect on many aspects of social life, educational environments, inter-ethnic attitudes and communication styles. Dörnyei, Csizér & Németh (2006, pp. 17–18) argue that intercultural contact may alter individual or group attitudes toward each other and those changes have further impact on perceptions. Moreover, intercultural contact in itself does not ensure positive attitudes. For the development of positive disposition, three indispensable intergroup conditions must be present between the groups:

- shared common goals
- consciousness of common interests
- institutional encouragement and support for the contact

Chang (2004, p. 1) states that intercultural communication skills and cultural consciousness are vital in foreign language education. These skills enable learners to express themselves appropriately in intercultural settings to observe and internalise adequate communication patterns and to interpret others verbal and non-verbal message. Therefore, socio-linguistic competence is as important as the correct use of grammar and syntax. Also, intercultural awareness enables students to embrace their self-identity, while having a balanced comparison between their and the target language and culture.

In the case of teaching English as a foreign language in non-English-speaking countries, two groups and dilemmas are present. On the one hand, English language teaching institutions heavily rely on the expertise, perfect knowledge of English and naturally acquired socio-cultural competence of native English language teachers. However, there are some emerging concerns about the cultural sensibility, locally suitable teaching style and intercultural communication proficiency of such educators. On the other hand, while native speakers appear to have invincible advantage over their non-native English colleagues, it is acknowledged that non-native English teachers are believed to teach with more efficacy in certain situations and circumstances. This

phenomenon might be due to the accurate knowledge of students' socio-cultural-psychological needs, the correct assessment of the teacher-student power structure in the classroom and the ability to use learners' native language (Medgyes, 2001 pp. 429–430). Furthermore, Kahraman (2012, p. 2) states that native-speakers often display rather strong adherence to their speaking norm, their specific culture and even dialect, while this attitude may have no validity among students who wish to speak the target language as an international communication tool in cross-cultural settings. Also, this behaviour may appear particularly uninviting if students have native-English speakers from a variety of countries (even continents) all expecting their socio-cultural norms to be accepted.

In Xiao's (2006, pp. 2–5) study, Chinese students experienced distress while attending language courses in Ireland. Some of the students reported low motivation and loss of enjoyment during their study because they could not identify the educational value in the local teachers' teaching methods. Learners perceived that teachers spent too much time on games and brainstorming, leaving very little time for 'authentic knowledge acquisition'. Therefore, their methodology seemed ineffective and time consuming. Educators, in their turn, facing the negative feedback, declared that the class was only for very good learners. Native teachers often fail to assume that what is a natural form of communication for them, may not be that obvious to students with different cultural and educational background. Xiao explains that this mismatch may occur because Chinese students are not accustomed to communicative approach, which heavily contrasts with the 'transmission style' widely accepted in China. Chinese students are mostly passive recipients of knowledge, expected to display 'total obedience or submission to their teachers'. Although native teachers are not expected to be educational chameleons, taking into account certain groups' specific needs would considerably enhance successful language learning. As Al Darwish (2018 p. 2) points out, attitudes towards the English language and English-speaking cultures may often cause some friction and anxiety, a mindful and intelligent teacher will be able to reduce tensions and handling this issue with patience, humour and respect. Moreover, native teachers displaying positive attitudes towards the students' own culture are usually better received, accepted and successful in their efforts. This might be of critical importance in establishing the types of strategies to be used in the foreign-language classrooms. It is essential not to underestimate the importance of native teachers' positive attitudes and cultural sensibilities in cases when the country's cultural, religious and/or political view differ from the educator's. Therefore, a wisely chosen language instruction methodology may impact students' attitudes and motivation to develop successful learning strategies, without resentment towards the culture and values represented by the teacher.

## 3. The study

### 3.1 Hypotheses

According to the researcher's experience as a teacher and language researcher in several European and Asian countries, students often have preferences about teachers' nationality, age, gender, teaching, and assessment style. In most institutions, the 'unofficial stigma' labelled local teachers as the strict providers of solid grammar knowledge and learning structures in lower levels, while native or foreign teachers were regarded as synonyms of more relaxed teaching styles, more fun and outgoing personality for higher levels. However, observing students' attitudes towards teachers, these suggestions seemed not always to be accurate. The researcher's perception was that students' gender and teachers' personality (regardless nationality) were factors that enhanced or deterred motivation significantly. Therefore, decoding students' preferences and opinions about English language teachers' nationality and teaching style became the key goal. The main hypotheses are:

(1) Most students have no clear preferences about the teachers' nationality

(2) Students' gender plays a crucial role in their perceptions about teaching styles

(3) Students are seriously conditioned by the educators' teaching style

### 3.2 Methodology

This study surveyed the crucial factors in ESL classrooms on perceptions and motivation. Quantitative research methodology was used. In order to collect data, students participated in a survey by completing a questionnaire. The data were analysed by taking percentages on the students' answers marked on a Likert scale.

### 3.3 Participating institutions

The study was conducted in two universities in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. Students from the American University in Bulgaria and South-West University Neofit Rilski volunteered to share their opinions within this survey. Both institutions offer degrees related to English linguistics, have some foreign teachers and lecturers, and organise intensive or year-long English language courses.

*3.4 Participating students*

In total, 74 students' filled questionnaires were considered valid. Among the subjects, there were 23 male and 51 female students aged between 16 and 57 years old. By nationality, most participants were Bulgarians, but there were also Serbians, Turkish, Albanians, Russians and Macedonians. Convenience sampling method was used to gather the appropriate subjects. Learners attending English-content university courses, and/or intensive or preparatory language courses were the most convenient to select. At least hypothetically, all of them attended lessons voluntarily, motivated to succeed in their respective fields. By the time the research was carried out, most of the participating students were pursuing bachelor or master's degrees related to linguistics. Moreover, some were (additionally) attending English language courses studying in varied language levels (intermediate and advanced), while others were enrolled in specific EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses or programmes of English for general purposes. The wide age gap among the students was not considered a complication, since some scholars suggest that attitudes start to appear at the age of 10 and are clarified and consolidated during adolescence (Huguet & Llurda, 2001, p. 271). Therefore, the age of the subjects suggested that hypothetically they should have somewhat established opinions on the teachers' attitudes, teaching styles and whether the educators' nationality was a determining factor in the success of foreign language acquisition. Moreover, as Grimm (2004, p. 1) suggests '*generalizations about the whole population can be expanded when more people at different grade levels are studied*'. Before the questionnaires were distributed in the classroom, all participants learned the purpose of this study and the research objectives were made clear. The opportunity to participate or withdraw at any moment was guaranteed to all students.
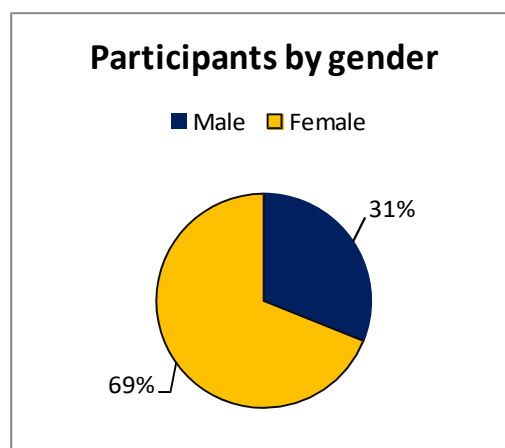


Figure 1. Participants by gender

The proportion of the genders in this study reflects in general the average percentage of male and female students attending university courses and specific English language courses in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria (see Figure 1).

*3.5 The data collection instrument*

The data were collected by a self-completed questionnaire developed by the researcher especially for this study. The selected quantitative research method aimed to obtain self-report data from the participants with the purpose of describing existing conditions or identifying points of reference to be used for comparing conditions or establishing the connection between specific events (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012, p. 74). The design of the questionnaire included some closed-ended questions and, in some other questions the answers had to be marked on a five-point Likert-scale (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree).

Although the survey was carried out in Bulgaria, the questionnaire was created, written and completed by the participants in English. This is due to two main reasons: 1) all participants were fluent English speakers, and 2) as specified above, not all participants understood Bulgarian. However, before administering the instrument, the students' comprehension on the wording and on the meaning of the questions was verified. Moreover, at any time, participants could ask, clarify and have translated the meaning of some particular words, expressions or questions within the questionnaire.

*3.6 Procedure*

A pilot study was conducted to assure the scientific validity and clarity of the questionnaire. Two Bulgarian and two foreign researchers on education and linguistics cooperated in the assessment of the final version of the questionnaire. They were asked to provide advice on the clarity, wording and content of all items. Moreover, a group of six students contributed with their opinion on the questionnaire. Having included some suggestions in the final version, paper-based questionnaires were administered to the participants by the teachers working in the respective institutions. All students were promptly informed by their English teachers about the nature and goal of the research. Moreover, all participants were instructed that no monetary compensation or better grades were offered as a recompense for participating. Students were also notified about the anonymous nature of the questionnaire and that their names would not appear in any article, study or statistics. Moreover, a short paragraph in the beginning of the questionnaire informed students about their rights to withdraw at any moment.

The filling of the questionnaire took place in the classroom at the universities. Upon request, no questions were discussed aloud, and a respectful attitude could be observed. The distribution of the questionnaire took place in May 2016, considering this date ideal, since students were not over-stressed or too busy with their final exams.

The answers to the questions were marked on five-point Likert scale, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Two main categories according to gender were separated, and percentages were taken for each group/question.

## 4. Results

The data collected via the questionnaire was analysed with the intention to shed light on students' perceptions, prejudice, and attitudes towards English language teachers in a non-English speaking country. The study emphasised possible variations in opinions according to the gender of the participants, the teachers' assessment and teaching style and whether the nationality of the teacher influenced learners' motivation to learn English.

### 4.1 Preferences on native versus local teachers

The students' answers suggest that they strongly prefer teachers who use English only in the classroom regardless whether the teacher is local or an English-native speaker (Q.1 & 2). However, male students expressed that local teachers who use only the students' native language such as Bulgarian, in the classroom were not welcome, while female students had more neutral views on this regard (Q.3). Finally, both genders agreed against local teachers using the local language during English class (Q.4), see Table 1.

*Table 1.* English teachers' nationality and language use in the classroom (percentages)

| Native versus non-native teachers | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I PREFER TEACHERS WHO ARE…** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **1)** foreigners who use English only in the classroom | 70 | 22 | 8 | 77 | 19 | 4 |
| **2)** Bulgarians who use English only in the classroom | 70 | 26 | 4 | 71 | 23 | 6 |
| **3)** Bulgarians who use English and some Bulgarian in the classroom | 30 | 39 | 31 | 50 | 19 | 31 |
| **4)** Bulgarians who use Bulgarian only in the classroom | 4 | 17 | 79 | 8 | 21 | 71 |

## 4.2 Teachers' age and gender

Between 42 and 48 percent of both, male and female students agreed they prefer younger teachers, although many expressed neutral view about the teachers' age as well (Q. 5). However, 37 percent of the female students were less pleased learning from older educators (Q. 6). The teachers' gender apparently provoked similar perceptions among both male and female students, both groups wanting the opposite sex teaching them English (Q. 7), see Table 2.

*Table 2.* Preferences for English teachers' age and gender (percentages)

| Teachers' age and gender | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I PREFER TEACHERS WHO ARE… | [Strongly] Agree | Neutral | [Strongly] Disagree | [Strongly] Agree | Neutral | [Strongly] Disagree |
| **5)** younger | 48 | 43 | 9 | 42 | 31 | 27 |
| **6)** older | 22 | 52 | 26 | 23 | 40 | 37 |
| **7)** of my own gender (male/female) | 9 | 35 | 56 | 19 | 23 | 58 |

## 4.3 Teaching style and feedback preferences

Perceptions on strict teachers varied. Male students declared to dislike them by 66 percent, while female students showed rather divided opinions (Q. 8). However, both genders highly preferred teachers teaching in a relaxed, communicative way (Q. 9). More than the half of the male students favoured teachers giving much time to complete tasks, while female learners' opinions were divided among positive and neutral on this matter (Q. 10). However, 58 percent of the female students found beneficial the material to be repeated several times by the teacher, while this aspect was not so much important for male learners (Q.11). Both, male and female students strongly favoured teachers who would consider their opinion during class, although female students showed slightly less interest on this topic (Q.12). Almost half of the female learners favoured teachers allowing them to display their work in front of others, while male students' opinions were moving mostly on the neutral and positive end of the spectrum (Q.13). Unanimously, both genders preferred teachers who would allow them to make interesting presentations for English class (Q.14), see Table 3.

*Table 3.* English teachers' teaching style and attitudes (percentages)

| Teaching style | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I PREFER TEACHERS WHO …** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **8)** teach in a strict atmosphere | 17 | 17 | 66 | 29 | 33 | 38 |
| **9)** teach in a relaxed, communicative way | 74 | 13 | 13 | 65 | 25 | 10 |
| **10)** give much time to complete my tasks | 56 | 26 | 18 | 43 | 40 | 17 |
| **11)** repeat the material several times | 43 | 30 | 27 | 58 | 33 | 9 |
| **12)** consider my opinion during the lessons | 70 | 30 | 0 | 63 | 26 | 11 |
| **13)** allow me to share or display my work for others in class | 39 | 43 | 18 | 46 | 40 | 14 |
| **14)** let students make interesting presentations | 61 | 30 | 9 | 60 | 25 | 15 |

Upon difficulty to understand the material taught, only half of the male learners declared that would ask the teacher during the lesson and 63 percent of the female students would use the same approach (Q.15). However, asking the teacher in private was not a favoured method by either of the gender groups (Q.16). About asking for clarification from other students, male students expressed neutral to negative opinions, while female learners were much more positive about it (Q.17). Viewpoints on asking a private teacher who will explain the difficult material in private were highly unpopular among both genders (Q.18). Finding answers on the Internet divided male students' opinions, but female learners viewed this approach as mostly positive and neutral (Q.19). Very diverse opinions were expressed on memorising rules as a tool to learn the language. Male students' attitudes moved mostly from neutral to negative, while females' from neutral to positive (Q.20), see Table 4

Table 4. Students' attitudes towards language acquisition and language-related problem solving (percentages)

| Learning feedback | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **IF I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE MATERIAL I PREFER…** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **15)** to ask from the teacher during the lesson | 52 | 38 | 10 | 63 | 27 | 10 |
| **16)** to ask from the teacher in private | 23 | 48 | 29 | 25 | 46 | 29 |
| **17)** to ask from another student | 19 | 57 | 24 | 43 | 34 | 23 |
| **18)** to ask from a private teacher who will explain it in Bulgarian | 0 | 17 | 83 | 8 | 20 | 72 |
| **19)** to find the answers on the Internet | 38 | 24 | 38 | 48 | 46 | 6 |
| **20)** to memorise the rules | 19 | 43 | 38 | 42 | 42 | 16 |

Being corrected immediately, during the activity was viewed as a positive approach by a little bit less than the half of the male students, while female learners expressed much more favourable opinions on this regard by 75 percent (Q.21). Male students agreed slightly more on being corrected at the end of the task, while female learners' viewpoints very divided (Q.22). Being corrected at the end of the lesson, was a subject of division among male learners, while female students were not so favourable about this procedure (Q.23). Finally, half of both gender groups rather disliked being corrected by other students, yet some positive and neutral viewpoints were expressed as well (Q.24), see Table 5.

<p style="text-align:center">*Table 5.* Students' preferences towards how to be corrected (percentages)</p>

| Learning feedback | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **WHEN YOU SPEAK, DO YOU WANT TO BE CORRECTED/ HELPED…** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **21)** immediately during the activity? | 48 | 26 | 26 | 75 | 18 | 7 |
| **22)** later, at the end of the activity? | 52 | 35 | 13 | 39 | 20 | 41 |
| **23)** at the end of the lesson, in private? | 43 | 13 | 44 | 27 | 12 | 61 |
| **24)** by other students? | 22 | 22 | 56 | 25 | 29 | 46 |

## 4.4 Assessment preferences

Considerable differences could be observed among male and female students regarding satisfaction of being their work graded by the teachers. Male students expressed mostly neutral views, while female learners favoured by 65 percent the idea of grades representing the value of their work (Q.25). However, opinions were unanimously more positive on encouraging and supportive oral feedback (Q.26). Positive viewpoints skyrocketed (particularly among male students) when increased self-confidence and more refined language knowledge improved their communication skills in situations that were perceived as challenging before (Q.27), see Table 6.

<p style="text-align:center">*Table 6.* Students' perception on improvement evaluation tools (percentages)</p>

| Learners' assessment preferences | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **DO YOU GET A SENSE OF SATISFACTION FROM…** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **25)** having your work graded? | 26 | 48 | 26 | 65 | 31 | 4 |
| **26)** being told that you have made progress? | 70 | 30 | 0 | 73 | 18 | 9 |
| **27)** feeling more confident in situations that you found difficult before? | 87 | 13 | 0 | 73 | 24 | 3 |

When inquired about how students like to find out whether their English is improving, half of the male students and 64 percent of the female learners favoured the traditional test-based methodology (Q.28). However, both gender groups highly agreed that using the language in real life scenarios was the best feedback system to prove real language development (Q.29). Yet, half of both male and female students stated that the marks they get mirrors accurately their advancement in learning English as well (Q.30), see Table 7.

*Table 7.* Students' assessment preferences (percentages)

| Learners' assessment preferences | MALE | | | FEMALE | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **HOW DO YOU LIKE TO FIND OUT HOW MUCH YOUR ENGLISH IS IMPROVING? BY...** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** | **[Strongly] Agree** | **Neutral** | **[Strongly] Disagree** |
| **28)** written tasks set by the teacher | 50 | 38 | 12 | 64 | 24 | 12 |
| **29)** seeing if you can use the language you have learnt in real-life situations | 87 | 13 | 0 | 84 | 10 | 6 |
| **30)** the marks you get | 48 | 26 | 26 | 53 | 37 | 10 |

## 5. Discussion

The data, in percentages, were analysed according to preferences on native versus local teachers, teachers' age and gender, teaching style and feedback and assessment preferences. Students' differences in perception according to their gender were a key factor in the examination of the results. The findings obtained from this research indicate that perceptions and attitudes among male and female students varied in certain educational aspects. It would be impossible – and discriminatory to describe or almost to 'design' a perfect teacher based on these results. Viewpoints among the representatives of each gender-group showed divergence in opinions in many questions. However, some conclusions can be drawn.

In students' opinions having a local or a native English-speaking teacher was not the most determining factor in the success of English language acquisition. Educators' preparedness and ability to clearly and understandably transmit the educational material in English was considerably more important than his/her nationality. These results mostly confirm the first hypothesis presented in this paper. Also, the age of the teacher was not perceived as a particular nuance, yet younger teachers were slightly preferred. The fact that half of both male and female students favoured teachers of the opposite

sex may suggest two very different facts. On the one hand, it may be perceived that students attribute the same teaching quality to younger educators that to older ones with the additional benefit of younger teachers having more 'modern' teaching and classroom management style. On the other hand, reasons may include simply aesthetic convenience and more flexibility in attitudes.

The second hypothesis drew attention to the possible gender differences in perceptions and attitudes. Female students' answers generally suggested some insecurity and need for reassurance in different areas. Although they preferred teachers with a relaxed teaching-style, educators with strict teaching styles were not noticeably unfavoured. Also, female students showed considerable wish for opportunities to exhibit their work, to have enough time to complete their tasks, to have continuous oral and written feedback and encouragement from the teacher. Moreover, perfectionism, detail-orientedness, willingness to do research and to discuss and ask advice from fellow students demonstrate female learners' consciousness and eagerness to succeed in learning English well and to use it not only in classroom-settings. These findings fit very well with previous data, suggesting that females' socially-mindedness has great impact on their classroom attitude and behaviour.

Male students' attitudes and preferences in this study give credit to earlier research results as well. Their responses portray an intriguing picture. According to the data, most male students preferred not to ask for clarification and not to engage in research about concepts that were difficult to understand during the lesson. Also, male learners displayed much more self-confidence and faith in their abilities to comprehend concepts later as part of the bigger picture. Their preference for empirical evidence of being able to use English in real-life settings suggests mostly a practical approach towards language acquisition. Therefore, not too strict teachers and mostly oral feedback seems a highly favoured combination for them.

The third hypothesis suggested that students are seriously conditioned by the educators' teaching style. This was only partly confirmed based on the findings. The amount of neutral answers formulated in the questionnaire may insinuate that students rather conform and try to adapt to the options given by the institutions. However, these behaviours do not suggest that taking students' preferences into account, much higher amount of motivation and positive classroom attitudes could be achieved. Generally, students attend English lessons with the goal of acquiring it well for a specific purpose, either being it for social, integrative, academic or for intellectual curiosity. Therefore, in most cases, the initial wish and impetus exists, and it depends much on the educators' (cultural) sensitivity, consciousness about gender differences in attitudes and a proper social-psychological approach to achieve the maximum success in the classroom.

## 6. Conclusion

Conclusions based on the results are mostly unambiguous. The findings suggest that gender-related variations in perceptions and attitudes are relevant in some aspects among university students in Eastern Europe. These findings' impact and relatedness may be transferable to other students' experiences in other regions and cultures as well, since gender-based behavioural differences exist worldwide. As results reveal, male students display more self-confidence, less dependence on the educator and preference for a relaxed style teacher-student rapport. However, female learners need continuous reassurance, positive feedback and language-learning strategies embedded in a social-communicative context. Moreover, as both gender groups declared, the nationality of the teachers is not seen as a determining success-factor for learning English as a second/foreign language. It would be nearly impossible to design new language-teaching policies to accommodate the needs of every student in the classroom. Ethnic, cultural, psychological-behavioural and gender differences make every student a unique mixture of traits and teachers have no super-powers to accommodate all emerging needs in the classroom. However, implications of the current study for language-pedagogy are that in language-teacher training institutions much emphasis should be given to gender-differences in motivating students. Language instructors should aim to be flexible, yet challenging and thought-provoking in structuring the lesson while considering the teaching strategies that have more effect on a specific gender-group. Also, a careful balance is needed when using gender-specific encouragement, in order to not to promote competition among the groups that may be particularly harmful for female learners' self-confidence. Moreover, institutions should not promote the idea of native English-speaking teachers being necessarily superior in all ways, but to instruct such teachers how to succeed in their teaching according to locally acceptable perspectives. Healthy, respectful and positive attitudes and reciprocal motivation in the classroom are contagious and much needed. Every teacher desires to see enthusiastic and devoted students in the classrooms. Therefore, to promote and nurture a stimulating and encouraging language learning environment, teachers should understand and acknowledge students' specific needs and beliefs about language learning and preferred teaching strategies. Although this study offers readers with practical data, the limitations are not to be overlooked. It would be beneficial to investigate teachers' viewpoints on possible strategies that students favour, yet their execution is not successful. Student-teacher motivation dynamics and gender-based bias towards students are to be studied as well.

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