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Reflection in Action: Strategies for Teacher Self-evaluation (EFL Teacher Preparedness to Work with Young Learners)

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Abstract. Given classroom complexity and uncertainty, teachers face with lots of challenges during their teaching repertoire. They face with specific problems they should respond to and manage so the world of the classroom demands that teachers have practical knowledge that enables them to negotiate the practical problems they face. The fact that reflection in action is a personal, spontaneous, tacit process it means that it limits teachers' opportunity to seek or receive feedback from others or from the reflective episode itself. Moreover, reflections in action focus on events and situations that arise spontaneously and unplanned (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). In a real sense, reflection in action is reactive, not proactive. This kind of evaluation has one problematic characteristic: the teacher is both evaluator and evaluatee (Airasian & Gullickson, 1994). Having in mind mentioned challenges for the teacher in the classroom, it would be useful for a teacher to be familiar with some strategies for teacher self-evaluation. The paper presents a study of an online survey to examine teachers': a) self-efficacy to work with multilingual students in the Serbian YLs classroom, b) received training in the area of teaching young learners, c) beliefs about knowledge, skills and resources needed to work with YLs, d) interest in receiving additional training. The research takes into consideration the specific aspects of students' L1, i.e. the Serbian language. Findings suggest that while a majority of the teachers has not received specific training on working with YLs, most of the teachers feel somewhat confident about their ability to work with such student populations.

Keywords. Teacher self-evaluation, reflection skills, strategies, assessment.

1. Introduction

In the field of teacher education self-evaluation and teacher autonomy are widely regarded as the 'capacity for potential self-directed learning behaviours' (Sinclair 1999: 311). In his article, McGrath (2000) points out two perspectives of teacher autonomy: 1) teacher autonomy as self-directed professional development where the teacher is a learner himself and 2) teacher

autonomy as freedom from control by others where subject teachers are expected to act within a triangular structure of syllabus, examination system and textbook. He then goes on to explain another aspect of teacher education which is preparing teachers to facilitate learner autonomy. Teachers facilitate learner autonomy while being learners at the same time. This aspect of teacher education is something that seems important for the self-evaluation process because being the reflective practitioner himself the teacher might better foster and better understand learners' needs in the language classroom.

Further, Brandt (2006: 362) suggest that teacher training concept needs to move away from a 'being told' transfer approach, which is expert-directed, towards an 'exploratory approach', which allows for different teaching and learning styles and encourages autonomy as well as critical reflection for the teacher. Wright (1987) and Cirkovic-Miladinovic (2016) echo Brandt's view by proposing that language teachers in a process of continual professional development should take the initiative themselves in pedagogic planning and put the emphasis on critical enquiry as a basis for effective action in their teaching practice (TP). Namely, the teacher who is willing to explore his/her teaching practice and the quality of the work he/she provides may contribute to his/her own professional improvement and learners' autonomy achievement. Thus, this point accounts for the fact that language teachers capable of exploring TP and helping their learners in the process of learning to focus on how to learn rather on what to learn are more likely to make learners' autonomy plausible (Ahmadi and Izadpanah, 2019). In this way, learners may become more motivated and independent in the process of learning while the teacher may become more motivated and willing for both exploration of the teaching practice and his own self-improvement (Dimitrijevic, 2013).

2. Reflection in/on action

Being an explorer in the language classroom is just one of the roles teachers adopt in their TP. According to Cohen (1998, 2017), teachers are actually taking on a series of roles in the classroom such as: diagnostician, researcher, coordinator, coach, learner trainer, language learner and reflective practitioner. Some of the in-service programmes provide an opportunity for trainees to explore these roles and to be teachers, reflective practitioners and researches at the same time. In Lake's (1997) and Dimitrijevic's (2014) view one of the teacher training objectives is to enable a teacher (now a trainee) to become more independent in the process of learning and to accept additional responsibility for making decisions in terms of self-directed teaching in the future. In order to do so, subject matter must make it possible for the trainee to see clearly the connection between theory and practical teaching work (Waters, 1988). After all, learner and teacher autonomy are interconnected.

According to McGrath (1997: viii) "we learn because we choose to participate in planned educational experiences and because we create opportunities for learning in the course of our own work". In this sense, being in the role of an evaluator and self-evaluator, the teacher experiences both teaching and learning problems and in that way he or she becomes more sensitive to their learners' needs and difficulties in language learning. The intention here is to help teachers to become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), and to subject their everyday professional practice to ongoing critical reflection and many roles they take each day. "These roles are numerous, from clearly defining and understanding educational goals, through designing and integrating teaching contents in collaboration, to self-regulation and self-reflection of all participants in the educational process" (Kopas-Vukasinovic and Savic, 2020: 261).

Schön (1983) draws attention to the distinction between two ways of teacher reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The former focuses on the spontaneous and tacit reflections and decisions teachers make when they ‘think on their feet’ during the process of teaching. Throughout reflection in action, the teacher reflects on an activity that is in progress and makes on the spot decision to modify or maintain the activity. The process of this kind is largely spontaneous and supports each professional’s own unique way of working. The task of the reflective practitioner seems to make this tacit or implicit knowledge explicit by reflection on action, by constantly making questions and generating ideas from out of practice reflection. Reflection on action takes place out of the activity of practice. It is considered of more conscious and reasoned process (Stronge, 2006: 190). However, given the differences between the two, for the purposes of this paper, the authors will focus on the reflection in action as the process which demands self-knowledge from in-practice reflection and the research will focus on teachers’ beliefs about how well they are prepared for the process of teaching English to young Serbian learners.

3. Teaching English to Young Learners

To analyse teacher preparedness to work with young learners, we draw on extensive literature on teacher education and teacher preparedness and quality, especially settings where English is thought as a foreign language (EFL). Recent research on teacher preparedness to work with young learners suggests that graduates of English language teacher education programs are not sufficiently trained in strategies to simultaneously support young learner’s needs and language development (Waxman & Téllez, 2002; Webster & Valeo, 2011). Some studies have found that pre-service teachers feel underprepared in terms of teaching young learners unable to write in their mother tongue (Dimitrijevic, 2013), language learning and teaching strategies, theoretical foundations, practical implementation of theory, alternative assessment methods, and understanding of language acquisition processes (Barnes, 2006; Téllez & Waxman, 2006; Valentine, 2006).

Similarly, studies that explored how well prepared recent teaching graduates feel to work with young English language learners (YELs) in EFL settings suggest a lack of in-depth training in the use of strategies to support YELs, a superficial coverage of topics related to diversity, and insufficient focus on the significance of L1 development (Webster & Valeo, 2011). Studies on teachers’ perceptions of self-efficacy, defined as teachers’ beliefs about their ability to implement their knowledge about teaching in the classroom or “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1977), report varying levels of teachers’ confidence in their skills and abilities. For instance, Webster and Valeo (2011), Faez (2012) and Faez and Valeo (2012) found that recent graduates from teacher training programs had low confidence in their abilities to successfully support YELs in their classes. Specifically, the teachers felt underprepared in their ability to support foreign language literacy skills and ability to select appropriate strategies to support EFL. Likewise, Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) and Kee (2012) reported that teachers who have gone through an alternative route of certification (passed Cambridge tests such as B2, C1 or C2) feel less well prepared than teachers certified through traditional teacher education programs. On the other hand, class teachers who teach students from 7 to 11 and who have received focused instruction in pedagogy, psychology and didactics have been found to be better prepared to work with YLs than graduated English language teachers who did not receive such instruction (Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2014). It is especially difficult, according to teachers’

reports, to teach first graders and second graders because in their L1 (Serbian) they start learning Cyrillic alphabet and only when they are in the third grade they start using Latin alphabet (Dimitrijevic, 2011).

At the same time, research suggests a correlation between teachers' self-efficacy and their classroom practices. For example, teachers' perceived ability to teach can affect the classroom environment and learning experiences they create for their students (Bandura, 1997), their attitudes towards teaching and effectiveness in the classroom (Guskey, 1984), and the use of time and amount of criticism directed at the students (Gibson & Dembo, 1984). Overall, self-efficacy is a complex construct shaped by a range of factors such as expertise, former experience, and existing obstacles and expectations, and low self-efficacy may affect teachers' ability to find stable employment and even continue in the field.

Findings from EFL contexts show that teachers' self-efficacy depends on their English proficiency levels (Chacón, 2005). These studies also provide evidence that the levels of self-perceived preparedness may affect task selection and delivery, the environment teachers create in the classroom, and motivational teacher behaviours (Chacón, 2005; Huangfu, 2012). The Teaching and Learning International Survey 2013 (TALIS) conducted by the European Commission suggests that experienced teachers have higher levels of self-efficacy, and that higher self-confidence and feeling of preparedness lead teachers to create positive classroom environment. Research on EFL teachers' preparedness to work with YELLs is in need. Nonetheless, the participants in the study thought it was important for them to develop skills and knowledge relevant to work with YELLs.

Overall, while research on teacher preparedness to work with YELLs is fairly extensive, to date little is known about teacher self-efficacy and their own preparedness in terms of teaching strategies to work with young language learners in EFL settings. The present study aims to address this gap, focusing specifically on elementary school teachers who teach young learners.

4. Research design and rationale

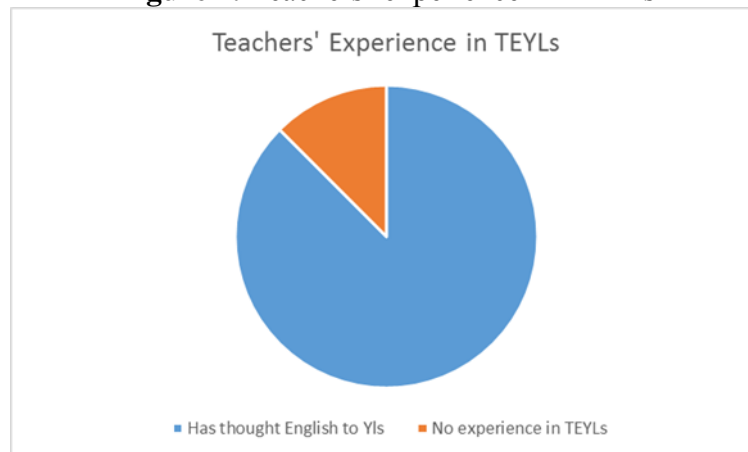
Data for this study were collected in January and February 2020 using an online survey addressed to EFL teachers. The survey was administered in English. Randomly selected teachers from about 50 elementary schools in five major cities in Serbia, namely Belgrade, Nis, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Jagodina were invited via email to participate. In total, 192 teachers responded. A self-report was chosen because even though there are limitations to self-report data, research suggests that teacher perceptions of their efficacy are a strong predictor of how they perform in the classroom (Darling-Hammod, L., Chung & Frelow, 2002).

After the exclusion of those respondents who did not teach English to young learners or taught at the high school level, 176 responses were included in the analysis. The cities included in the study were represented as follows: Belgrade (51), Nis (29), Kragujevac (25), Jagodina (18), Novi Sad (29), and other (24). The data were coded in Excel and analysed using the SPSS analytical software. In addition to descriptive statistics, chi-square tests were used to investigate whether there was a significant difference between reported training and the grade level taught, the current type of education and an interest in receiving additional training, self-efficacy (preparedness) and amount of training received, and self-efficacy and interest in receiving more training. Responses to open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively. The organization process consisted of identifying main themes and developing codes. Specific pieces and quotes were selected to illustrate the findings.

5. Results

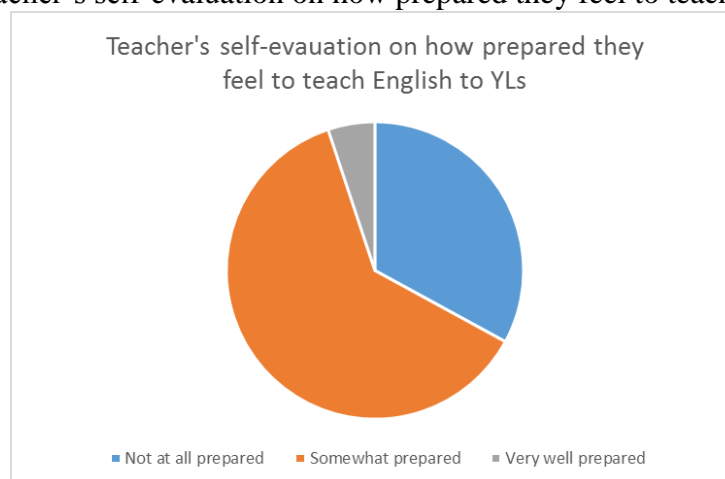
The first question was whether most of our participants had in fact worked with young learners.

Figure 1. Teachers' experience in TEYLs



As Figure 1. shows, this was the case, as 87.5% respondents reported to have taught young learners. The next question was related to the teachers' self-efficacy in working with young English language learners. Teachers in this study reported fairly strong confidence in their abilities to work with young learners, as illustrated in Figure 2, which shows that the majority of teachers classify themselves as somewhat prepared to work with young learners. Nevertheless, only 5% of the teachers indicated that they feel very well prepared, and 33% stated that they do not feel prepared at all.

Figure 2. Teacher's self-evaluation on how prepared they feel to teach English to YLs

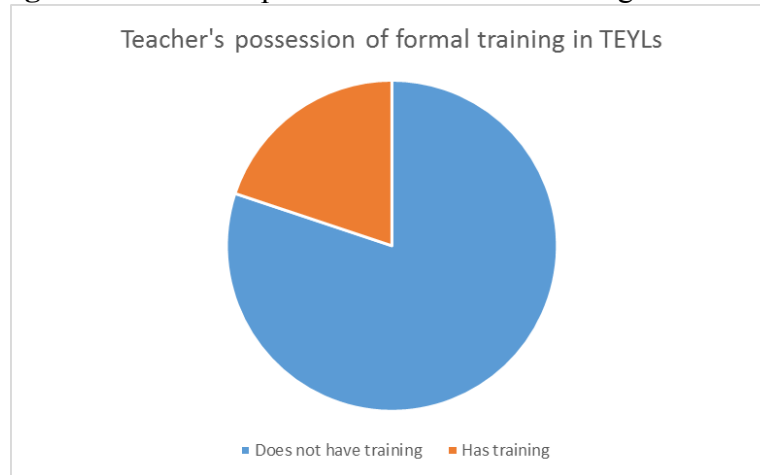


Twelve of the participants included open-ended comments following this question. They expressed concerns about diverse needs and proficiency level of students' mother tongue, their own lack of experience and training in TEYL, and the challenges caused by the fact that teachers often do not possess the pedagogical and psychological knowledge in teaching young learners as well as difficulties associated with learning foreign language without previously

mastering writing skills in mother tongue (Cirkovic-Miladinovic, 2017). One of the respondents commented that it is particularly challenging to work with first graders who are not very well adapted to school obligations and have very short attention spans.

In regards to formal training in working with YLs, our data show that only a minority of the participants (20%) has such training, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Teacher's possession of formal training in TEYLs



A chi-square test found a significant association between whether teachers had training and how prepared they felt to work with YLs. Namely, figures $\chi^2(2) = 23.832, p < .001$ show that teachers with training in working with such student populations were more likely to feel somewhat prepared or very well prepared than teachers without training. Those teachers who responded 'yes' to the question about formal training in working with young learners populations were also asked to describe the type of training they had received. Eight teachers stated that they were trained in teaching foreign language methodology at their BA studies. Training in special education were listed by four teachers each. Three of the teachers reported that they had received other, unspecified in-service training, and two mentioned experience working at a school with a diverse student population. Other types of training mentioned included courses or a degree in linguistics, a pre- or in-service English teaching endorsement, a graduate degree in English literature, a degree in some other foreign language teaching methodology, a bachelor's thesis on the topic, or a foreign degree. Since the formal competence requirements are different for teaching in different grades, we also investigated whether the highest grade in which teachers taught made a difference in whether they had training to work with young learners.

Figure 4. Distribution based on the highest grade which teachers thought in their teaching experience

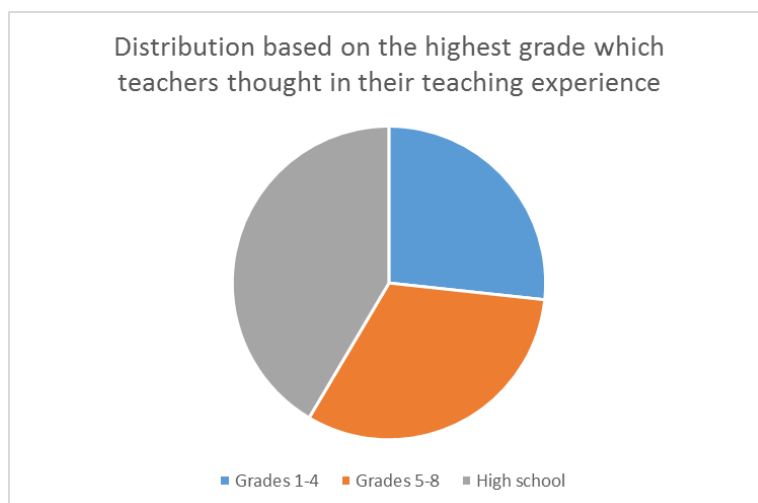
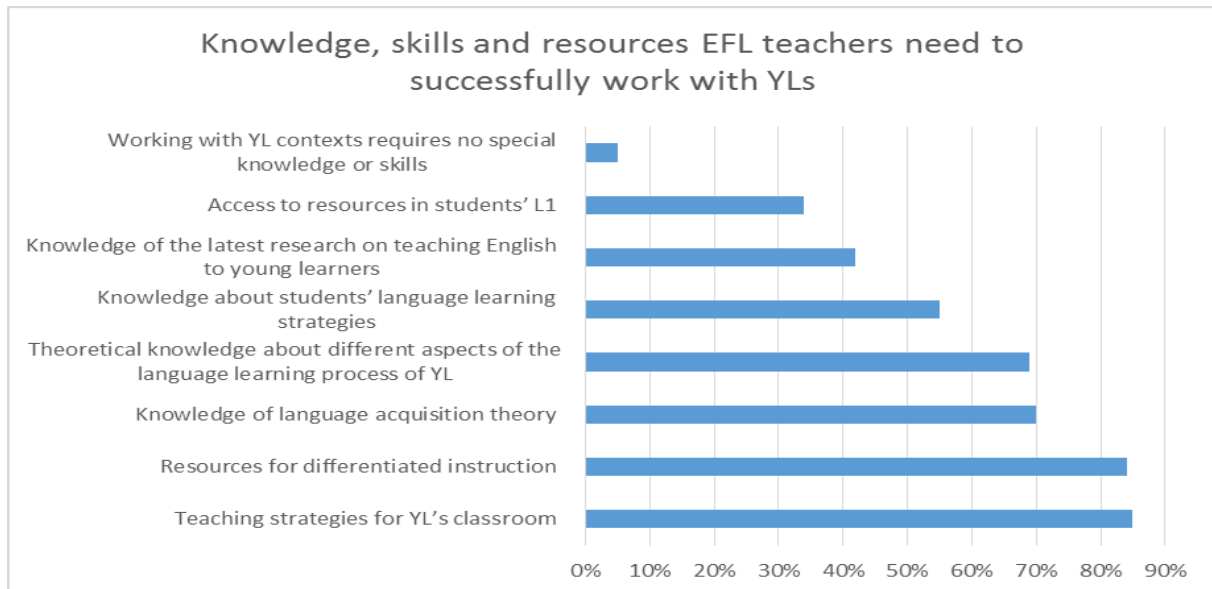


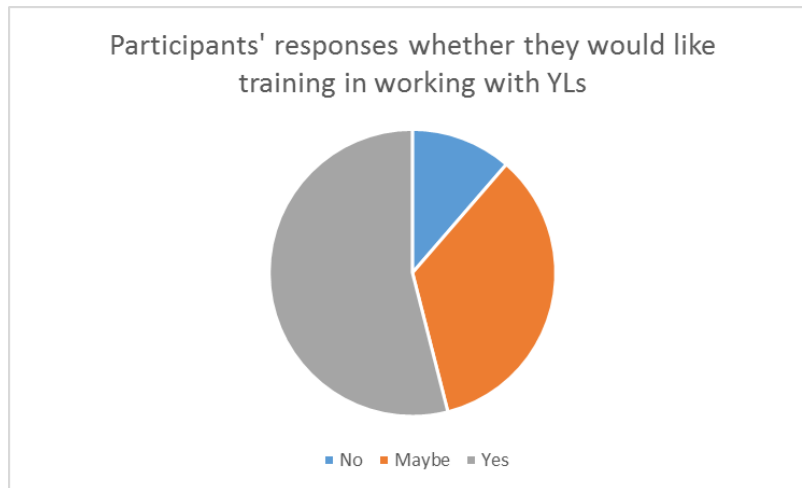
Figure 4, above, shows the distribution of participants based on their experience in the highest grade taught. A chi-square test was performed to examine whether there was a significant difference between whether teachers in the different grade categories reported having valuable experience in working with YL. No such difference was found, $\chi^2(2)=.222$, $p=.895$. The participants were also asked what knowledge, skills and resources they think English teachers need to successfully work with YLs. Multiple answer choices were possible. Figure 5. below summarizes these results. It can be seen that knowledge of teaching strategies for YL's classroom (85% of respondents), resources for differentiated (or adapted) instruction (84%), knowledge of language acquisition theory (70%), and theoretical knowledge about different aspects of the language learning process of young learners (69%) were perceived as very important. Many of the teachers also selected knowledge about students' language learning strategies (55%), knowledge of the latest research on teaching English to young learners (42%), and access to resources in students' L1 (34%). The ability to speak students' first language in class was not indicated as crucial (most teachers in Serbia speak Serbian as L1), and very few teachers (5%) agreed that working with YL contexts requires no special knowledge or skills. The participants were invited to elaborate on their responses to this question by listing other areas of expertise needed to work with YL's populations. Twenty-seven of the teachers did so; however, many merely repeated the available answer choices.

Figure 5. Knowledge, skills and resources EFL teachers need to successfully work with YLs



The open-ended responses were coded and grouped into the following categories: speaking students' mother tongue in class; knowing students' cultural background; research on TEYL; second and multilingual acquisition theory; teaching strategies in a young learners' classroom; resources and materials for differentiated instruction; simply being a good teacher; and other. Five of the participants repeated the importance of the knowledge of the theory of foreign language acquisition, and four restated the necessity to either speak students' mother tongue or to have access to different materials in teaching English. The importance of expertise in strategies for YL's classroom, access to resources for differentiated instruction, familiarity with the current research on teaching English to young learners and no special knowledge or skills were each mentioned twice. Experience and willingness to improvise, as well as factors such as students' proficiency levels and mother tongue writing skills were also mentioned. On the other hand, one of the participants asserted that YLs are not unique in any way, and that all students in the classroom need individualized instruction.

Figure 6. Participants' responses whether they would like training in working with YLs



The majority of teachers indicated that they were interested in receiving training in working with YLs, as illustrated in Figure 6. Interestingly, a chi-square test found no relationship between whether they already had such training and whether they would be interested in (more) training, $\chi^2(2)=1.6$, $p=.4153$, nor between whether they felt prepared to work with YLs and whether they would like training, $\chi^2(2) = 5.340$, $p = .2564$. Following the question about the interest in receiving more training, the teachers were asked to elaborate on the specific type of training they are interested in. Forty-four participants submitted comments. These answers were classified and coded into the following categories: specific methods, strategies and activities; theory and research; classroom resources; cultural knowledge; and other. The majority of the respondents (28 teachers) expressed an interest in receiving more training related to the use of effective methods, strategies and activities in the classroom. This included activities and strategies aimed specifically at teaching English to young learners, differentiated instruction and methods for teaching grammar. One of the respondents specifically expressed a wish to become better prepared to work with YLs in small country schools. Ten of the respondents stated a need for a better background in language acquisition theory and familiarity with recent research in the area of TEYL. For instance, one teacher expressed an interest in learning about “how the young learners’ brain functions when they learn a foreign language”. The respondents were also interested in acquiring more background in cultural knowledge and tips on where to find useful classroom resources. Overall, the results suggest that the teachers have a strong interest in receiving in-service training, and they are able to specify what type of training would best suit their needs. To quote one of the participant’s, if teachers receive solid training “we can ensure that all [students] will receive the necessary support to succeed in school”.

6. Discussion

The most important finding of this study is that while most of the teachers reported relatively high levels of self-efficacy, with 62% reporting that they feel somewhat prepared to teach English to young learners, 89% of the teachers stated that they either are or may be interested in receiving more training in this field. At the same time, 33% of the participants stated that they felt not at all prepared, a finding which has important implications for all parties involved:

young language learners, parents, teachers, administrators and teacher training institutions in Serbia. Furthermore, the results also showed that the majority of the participants (80%) actually do not have specific training in working with YLs. However, whether teachers had such education or not was not correlated with their interest in receiving additional training. Thus, it is important to note that a lack of professional preparation does not necessarily cause teachers to be interested in receiving in-service training (Lin, 2020). At the same time, and not surprisingly, teachers with training on issues related to teaching English to young learners felt more confident about their ability to work with diverse needs of YLs.

Based on the comments regarding the type of training teachers would like to receive, it is clear that, most importantly, training in specific classroom methods, strategies and activities is needed. Some teachers expressed an interest in learning about the foundations of language acquisition theory and specifically methodology of teaching English to young learners, but the majority felt a need for practically-oriented training in teaching methods that are tailored to the individual needs of their students. One of the participants specifically submitted the following comment: “I have participated in seminars... but they always give an example of a broad group of students and some general methodological ideas... That is not my world and it is a waste of time!” Other participants as well noted the importance of more preparation and practice with differentiated instruction.

Following Reinhardt (2001), Téllez and Waxman (2006) propose four areas of opportunity for improved teacher quality: pre-service, recruitment and selection, in-service and retention. It is suggested that pre-service candidates can receive incentives such as scholarships, loans, and loan forgiveness, as well as be presented with models of exemplary practices and programmes. At the same time, teacher education programmes should be required to help trainees meet specific accreditation criteria and certification requirements. Recent graduates entering the teaching profession should have access to induction and teacher support programs. In-service teachers should be offered opportunities for continued learning and compensation to encourage professional development. Recertification requirements to support high-quality professional learning should be in place to ensure continuous professional growth and new developments in curricula (ibid.). It is also essential to ensure effective communication with applicants during the recruitment and selection process, as well as to offer alternative routes to certification and teaching mobility policies. Specifically, based on the results of this study, we would like to point out to the importance of providing models of exemplary practices and programs, compensation for gaining new skills, and recertification requirements for the in-service EFL teachers. In Serbia, some efforts to improve teacher qualifications to work with diverse student populations are already under way, such as the Theme Based Instruction – TBI Seminars (designed by Kang Shin and Savic, 2014)¹. These seminars constitute the first important step in increasing teacher awareness and providing teachers with much needed in-service training especially in the area of TEYLs.

7. Conclusion

Our intention in this paper was to explore Serbian EFL teachers’ preparedness to work with young learners from 7 to 11. Our findings are consistent with the research conducted in North America and Canada, which shows that while most teachers have some experience and

¹ Theme-Based Instruction in Teaching English to Young Learners. Continuing Professional Development Programme for Primary EFL Teachers in Serbia, 2014-2016 and 2016-2018.

background in working with diverse student populations, they are eager to participate in professional development to advance their professional knowledge and skills, especially in the area of TEYL (Enever et.al, 2009). A further finding is that Serbian English teachers generally do not have specific training to work in YLs' contexts, and the participants in this study pointed to several areas in which they would like to receive more training, including specific strategies and activities, as well as theoretical and research foundations of teaching English to young learners. A statistically significant relationship was found between the training received by teachers and their feeling of preparedness to work with multilingual students, but no relationship was found between the received training and interest in receiving further education. This last finding indicates that continuing education with a focus on TEYL is needed for all EFL teachers – those who already have some related training and those who do not. As most EFL teachers have received little formal preparation in how to work in YLs' diverse classrooms, teacher educators need to start implementing changes now. In this context, it is relevant to remember that at primary level, many EFL teachers in Serbia may have no formal training in teaching English as a foreign language to young learners.

Since we believe that the continued professional development of teachers in the classroom should be a possibility in the search for innovative teaching methods and ways of online communication that helps both teachers and students to overcome problems during the Coronavirus Pandemic, we consider these results relevant. In addition, learner and teacher autonomy, are not a simple part of the educational process, but are its basis and essence. Relying on the previously said, we also hope that these results have the capacity to launch some new research in the future.

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