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L2 Learning Environment in a Foreign Language Learning Setting: What Lies Beneath it?

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L2 learning environment (L_2LE) is a complex construct that very likely influences learners' attitudes to L2 and L2 learning, thus consequently making an impact on their linguistic behaviour. The ECPS model of L2 learning attitude formation proposes that educational, cultural, personality and social dimensions play an important role in L2 attitude formation. The *educational* dimension encompasses language-related factors, the componential structure of which we set out to test empirically in an English as a foreign language setting. The main objective was to determine the underlying dimensions of the L_2LE theoretical construct. The sample comprised N=113 students, aged from 16 to 18, evenly distributed across two educational profiles (philology group and general group). To collect the data, we administered a test battery to measure the hypothesised components of the construct. The main finding, obtained via factor analysis, is that the *L2 learning context* (English lessons, teacher/teaching methods, textbooks, rapport) and *exposure to* L2 (in-class and out-of-class exposure, L2 as the language of instruction) constitute one factor (L_2LE), together explaining 70.86% of the variance. Higher-order factor analysis did not show *L2 learning background* (L_2LB) to be an integral part of the construct, most likely due to a narrow range of scores. To conclude, further research is needed to test the role of L_2LB, as well as a potential link between L_2LE and L2 attitudes to learning English.

Keywords: in-class exposure (IcE); L2 as the language of instruction (L_2LoI); L2 learning context (L_2LC); L2 learning environment (L_2LE); out-of-class exposure (OcE)

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Entorno de aprendizaje de L2 en el contexto de aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras: ¿Qué se esconde detrás?

El entorno de aprendizaje de L2 (L_2LE) es un constructo complejo que probablemente tiene influencia en las actitudes de los alumnos hacia la L2 y en el aprendizaje de L2, lo que por consiguiente tiene un efecto en su comportamiento lingüístico. Según el modelo de formación de la actitud propuesto por ECPS, con el cual los aspectos educativos, culturales, personales y sociales desempeñan un papel importante en la formación de actitud hacia L2, la dimensión *educativa* abarca factores lingüísticos, cuya estructura componencial pretendemos comprobar empíricamente en el contexto del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras. Así pues, el objetivo principal de este artículo es determinar los aspectos subyacentes del constructo teorético de L_2LE. La encuesta comprende un número de 113 estudiantes, de dieciséis a dieciocho años de edad, distribuidos equitativamente dentro de dos perfiles educativos (grupo filológico y general). Para recopilar los datos, hemos suministrado una encuesta para medir los componentes hipotéticos del constructo. El resultado clave, obtenido por análisis factorial, es el hecho de que *el entorno de aprendizaje de L2* (lecciones del inglés, metodología de la enseñanza/del profesor, manuales, relación) y *la exposición a la L2* (el input dentro y fuera del aula, L2 como lengua de enseñanza) constituyen un factor (L_2LE), explicando en total de 70,86% de la varianza. El análisis factorial de orden superior no mostró que los antecedentes de aprendizaje de L2 (L_2LB) fueran una parte integral del constructo, muy probablemente debido al estrecho rango de las puntuaciones. Para concluir, pensamos que una investigación adicional sería necesaria para examinar el papel de L_2LB, tanto como una relación posible entre L_2LE y L2 actitudes hacia el aprendizaje del inglés.

Palabras clave: input en el aula; L2 como lengua de enseñanza; contexto de aprendizaje de L2; entorno de aprendizaje de L2; input fuera del aula

1. L2 learning environment

The learning environment is of particular importance for second/foreign/additional language (L2) learners due to the specificity of language learning in contrast to other school subjects and types of learning (Dörnyei 1994; Ellis 1990; Gardner 2007; Grubor 2020a, 2021a; Tanaka 2022). An early view on language environment defines it as "everything the language learner hears and sees in a new language" (Dulay et al. 1982, 13). In terms of input, for example, it is important for cognitive approaches to second language acquisition (SLA), which deal with mental structures and processes (Atkinson 2011; Mitchell et al. 2019), but also for social approaches, which consider social factors and the context of L2 learning and/or use as crucial (Duff 2019; Grubor 2021b). A plethora of research has underlined the importance and explored the role of the cognitive mechanisms behind SLA, but many authors emphasise the significance of

the learning context in understanding it (e.g. Butler 2017; Duff 2017; Grubor 2021a, 2021b; Littlewood 2007). This is because learning cannot occur in a "contextual vacuum" (Duff 2019, 6) and is a result of the intrinsically social nature of humans, who learn in interactions with other people. Besides, the learning process is closely related to individuals' beliefs about and attitudes to the physical learning setting, the practical effects of using the L2, as well as concrete L2-related behaviours and behavioural patterns. In a word, acquiring an L2 must by definition include both dimensions, cognitive/individual and social/sociocultural, which is concordant with many different social perspectives (e.g. Atkinson 2011; Lantolf et al. 2018; Steffenson and Kramsch 2017; Storch 2017). In line with the subject matter of the current research, factors that may impact upon learners' affective states, cognitions and volition (attitudes), as well as affect their learning outcomes and/or achievement, are linked to where and how they learn an L2, who with and for how long, as well as who they are taught by. Thus, the main goal of the current study is to determine the componential structure of the L2 learning environment (L_2LE) in a foreign language learning setting.

As regards the layout of the article, first we will elaborate on the theoretical standpoint taken, whereby the L_2LE construct is part of a broader model of L2 attitude formation (ECPS),[1] but can also be used in its own right, as in this study. Then, we will present the methodology, followed by the most relevant findings, and finally conclude by focusing on their implications and further directions that future research may take so as to provide more valuable insights into the L_2LE construct.

2. Towards the L_2LE construct structure

L_2LE is a complex construct that in all likelihood influences learners' attitudes to L2 and L2 learning, and consequently makes an impact on their linguistic behaviour. In particular, prior research shows that a group work environment indirectly impacts upon learning outcomes via motivation (Tanaka 2022). In a similar vein, in line with the Reasoned Action Approach (Ajzen and Fishbein 2005), the L2 learning context was found to influence secondary school students' attitudes to L2 learning directly, and through intention, their L2 achievement (Grubor 2012). This is because L2 learners evaluate their own learning experiences and environmental components against their own value systems, formed in line with their cultural backgrounds (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011, 78), and their own personal experience with them.

According to the ECPS model, educational, cultural, personality and social dimensions play an important role in L2 learning attitude formation (Grubor 2018, 2025), since attitudes are sociocultural, cognitive and affective by nature (Grubor 2021a).[2]

[1] A conceptual model of L2 learning attitude formation comprising educational, cultural, personality and social dimensions (Grubor 2018, 2025).

[2] This is important because SLA research into L2 attitudes appears to lack any clear operationalisation of the attitude construct in its own right, independently of other constructs such as motivation (Grubor 2015).

The proposed dimensions/factors have been derived from the mechanisms for acquiring attitudes (see Bordens and Horowitz 2017), such as mere exposure (e.g. in-class input) to the attitude object (e.g. learning an L2), direct personal experience with it, groups and social networks (e.g. L2 communities of practice). The concrete dimension that is of interest to this study is the *educational* one, which encompasses language-related factors (e.g. the level of an L2 learner's exposure to the L2, their personal experience with the L2 and learning it). In line with the ECPS model, L_2LE encompasses the L2 learning context (L_2LC), L2 learning background (L_2LB) and exposure to L2 (L_2E).[3]

L2 learning context, as the instructional learning environment in which students come into contact with L2, must be at the heart of L_2LE (Grubor 2021a). Although we believe that the focus should primarily be on learners, teachers and teaching methods can also exert a significant influence on students' attitudes to L2 learning (Gardner 1985; Grubor 2021a), together with other factors that are intrinsically connected with L2 classrooms, such as positive rapport, which was found to make an impact on L2 learning and/or achievement (Edi-U 2015; Furrer et al. 2014; Joe et al. 2017). The L_2LC factor constitutes the external, physical environment (e.g. class materials/equipment) and individual-specific qualities (e.g. students' attitudes to teachers/their teaching, quality of classroom interaction). We therefore do not exclude a view on the L2 learning context referring to classroom settings that are locally shaped in accordance with wider socioeducational surroundings (Butler 2017), since the instructional learning environment results from socioculturally imposed beliefs and practices. Grubor (2021a) has found that the quality of English lessons and instructional materials, the English instructor/their teaching methods, and class ambience constitute the L_2LC construct, together explaining 54.54% of the total variance observed. Similarly, in his seminal work on motivation, Gardner found that the attitudes-towards-the-learning-situation variable, which approximates to the L_2LC construct herein, is significant for L2 motivation, and influences students' L2 grades indirectly (Gardner 2007).

L2 exposure is the second hypothetical constituent of L_2LE since the language environment primarily includes visual and aural stimuli. In addition, attitudes are formed in line with information and knowledge structures that individuals hold about a specific attitude object. Irrespective of the theoretical position, researchers agree that L_2E is of paramount importance for language learning (Brevik and Rindal 2020; Grubor 2018; Gu 2018; Miličević Petrović and Grubor 2019; Muñoz 2008; Rankin and Unsworth 2016). Many authors consider *input*, namely "the linguistic phenomena that are available for being taken in by means of aural [...] or visual systems" (Rast

[3] The L_2LC relates to the learner's instructional environment (physical: L2 classroom, social: social interactions among the members of specific L2 communities of practice, psychological: learners' perceptions, attitudes), whereas the L_2LE is a superordinate term, incorporating the L_2LC, but may also include "L2 learning in the wild" (see Eskildsen and Theodórsdóttir 2017).

2008, 100)[4] to be at the core of L2 learning since no language can be acquired without a sufficient quantity of input (Carroll 2001; Gass 1997; Miličević Petrović and Grubor 2019; Pearson 2007).

The samples of language that learners are exposed to in their L2 classrooms is what we term *in-class exposure* (IcE).[5] On the linguistic plane, IcE can take the form of reception (listening, reading) or production (speaking, writing),[6] and each contains some form of the language system (grammar, phonology, lexis, language functions, discourse). Although it might be true for certain educational settings that the instructional input is the only input learners are exposed to (Gass and Selinker 2008, 24), it is reasonable to assume that nowadays learners have ample opportunities for non-instructional exposure as well (Butler 2017; Grubor 2021a). All the data that learners are exposed to outside their L2 classrooms can be termed *out-of-class exposure* (OcE). While IcE may be connected with both explicit and implicit knowledge and induction of rules, OcE very likely entails only implicit learning. OcE may also involve both the receptive plane (listening to/reading articles, books, music, films, other speakers' discourse) and the productive one (writing to/having conversations with other speakers of English, mono- or bilingual).[7] As regards OcE, research suggests a connection between OcE and learners' attitudes to L2 learning (Grubor 2018). What is more, Flege et al. (2006) found length of residence in an L2 country, which corresponds to the amount of input a learner receives, to be the best predictor of pronunciation. Besides input frequency, many authors advocate input quality as being central to L2 output (Ellis and Shintani 2014; Gass and Selinker 2008; Kersten et al. 2021). Since L_2LCs vary considerably in quantity/quality of input, output and interaction, not surprisingly achievement levels of students also differ (Yu et al. 2021). Despite the fact that scholars agree on the central role of input in terms of L2 achievement, the greatest obstacle to researchers is the issue of input measurement/its extraction (see Grubor 2018; Miličević Petrović and Grubor 2019), which was the case in this study too.

Language of instruction (L_2LoI) can also be regarded as a source of input (and output) since learners are exposed to L2 through their interactions with their teacher(s) and peers, and it also plays its role in attitude formation especially through output. L_2LoI is understood as a basic means of communication within teacher-learner or learner-learner relations, regardless of where conversation takes place (in the classroom, corridors,

[4] For simplicity, we do not underline the distinction between *input* and *intake*, but rather broadly focus on "what reaches [the learners'] perceptual system", thereby using *exposure* as an umbrella term for all kinds of L2 data available to learners (Niżegorodcew 2007).

[5] In the SLA literature, a more common term is *formal education*, used to indicate studying at home in contrast to staying/studying abroad (e.g. Colentine 2004; Mora and Valls-Ferrer 2012; Segalowitz and Freed 2004; Yu et al. 2021). We have decided on using the term IcE since we are not comparing these two settings, but rather focusing on the formal, instructional home-country scenario.

[6] Besides the receptive plane, the productive plane can also serve as a source of input for other learners, on the one hand, but can also be instrumental in forming learners' attitudes to L2 learning in terms of feeling more self-confident, on the other.

[7] See Footnote 6.

online).[8] Accordingly, the intensity of L_2LoI use should be expected to exert significant effect on students' L2 attitudes as well as their L2 proficiency. There are researchers who contend that using L2 exclusively provides a rich and optimum learning environment (e.g. Crichton 2009; Grubor 2020b; Polio and Duff 1994), and a number of studies have shown intensity of L2 use to be a significant predictor of achievement (e.g. Harley and Hart 2002; Gradman and Hanania 1991; Marsh et al. 2002; Taguchi 2008). Since learning settings that provide ample opportunities for communication in L2 are likely to facilitate comprehension by offering plenty of practice (Taguchi 2008, 428), using "L2 only" in the classroom serves manifold functions. It may facilitate students' achievement by providing diverse samples of language that learners may further process and ultimately internalise. It may also strengthen learners' self-confidence in their L2 use. It may result in positive attitudes to L2 learning by creating regular patterns of constant L2 use, as some studies have suggested (Grubor 2020b; Yashima and Zenuk-Nishida 2008). It may simulate the ESL setting by making it "natural" to use L2 all the time, especially in small talk and (in)formal discussions. Nevertheless, the English-only principle cannot be taken literally, since the intensity of using English in class depends on many factors (students' language level, the efficacy of its use at a given moment, its purpose, desired outcomes), so the principle can be modified to "using English as much as possible".

Stays abroad (SA). Students may be constantly exposed to L2 through SA, either in an academic format (study-abroad) or more informal formats (visits and stays not necessarily involving any language classes). As a rule of thumb, studying in a target-language country offers plenty of L2 (native) input, as well as opportunities for L2 output and interaction (Flege and Liu 2001; Yu et al. 2021). In the USA, for example, an intensive and integrated SA experience was reported to be a sufficient prerequisite for mastering a foreign language at the university level (Commission on Language Learning 2017). SA, of course, offers no guarantee that the full potential of the opportunity will be exploited by L2 learners/users, because it may be the case that same-nationality students spend most of their time together rather than with people from the host country or other countries where the L2 would necessarily be the language of communication (Yu et al. 2021), thus mainly functioning within their L1 communities of practice (Grubor 2021a). As far as research dealing with the benefits of SAs is concerned, the results point to learners capitalising on constant exposure to the L2, especially in terms of fluency and pronunciation (Collentine 2004; Flege et al. 2006; Flege and Liu 2001; Mora and Valls-Ferrer 2012; Segalowitz and Freed, 2004).[9]

L2 learning background. Background variables can be presumed to affect learners' attitudes to L2 learning and/or achievement. These include the age of first exposure

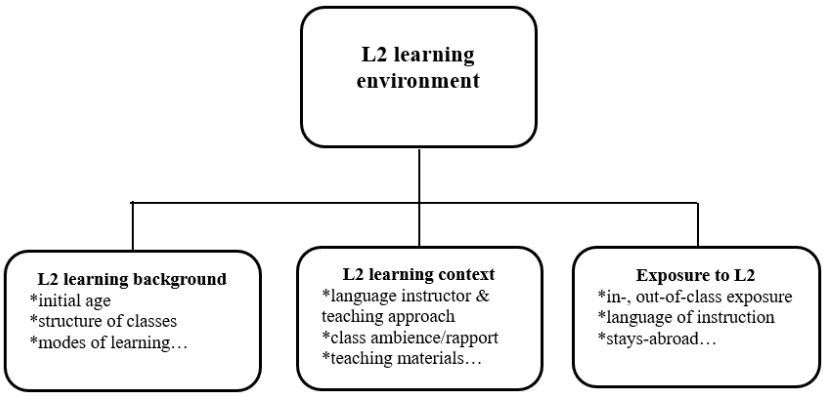
[8] For situations when L2 is used for teaching other school/academic subjects, we adopt the term *L2 as the medium of instruction* in order to avoid ambiguities.

[9] Varela (2017), in his meta-analysis of SA benefits, detected a large effect size in terms of the cognitive (d=0.97) and a medium effect size as regards attitude and behavioural dimensions on learning outcomes (d=0.46, d=0.65 respectively).

to English (initial age), which is primarily based on formal exposure since informal exposure is almost impossible to determine, length of L2 learning, the structure of L2 classes (e.g. number of classes weekly/annually, educational focus of school courses: general, mathematical, languages), and modes of learning English (private schools, one-to-one private lessons, online language courses). The starting hypothesis is that learners' attitudes to L2 and L2 learning will be influenced by length of L2 learning, the frequency and format of their L2 classes, L2 classes attendance outside of school (especially of one's free will). The rationale behind this is the theoretical assumption that the amount of knowledge a person has about the attitude object affects the relationship between attitudes and behaviours (Brooks and Warren 2019, 44) since prior knowledge moderates this relationship through the process of attitude accessibility and stability/strength. In attitude studies, the knowledge concept is taken to be either the amount of information about an attitude object available in memory (Davidson et al. 1985), or the amount of direct experience with it (working knowledge) (Wood et al. 1995). Both of these conceptual definitions of knowledge are likely to be at work in the present study, as a moderating variable between the available data on L2 and L2 learning, as well as subsequent linguistic behaviour(s).

Accordingly, the main goal of the study was to test the viability of the theoretical construct of L_2LE, which constitutes the educational dimension of the ECPS model, or more precisely, to determine its componential structure in a foreign language learning setting (see Figure 1). The main research question to answer is: *What factors constitute the L_2LE construct?* Based on attitudinal theory and previous research results, we hypothesise that the assumed factors will constitute the construct in question. The subsidiary research question to answer is: *Are there any differences in the hypothesised components depending on the educational profile and/or sex of the participants?* We hypothesise that there will be differences with respect to the educational profile criterion since the sample groups differ in the amount of input they receive and their motivation to learn English (see Footnote 10).

FIGURE 1. The theoretical construct of L_2LE



3. Methodology

The research was conducted towards the end of the school year in a grammar school located in the Central Serbia region with mostly same-nationality citizens, who share the same L1 (Serbian). Foreign languages are obligatory subjects in state schools, with English being the typical L2.[10]

Research was anonymous, participation in it voluntary, and informed consent was given by the school Head, form teachers, English language teachers, the participants themselves and/or their parents/legal guardians.

3.1. Sample

The study design employed two educational profiles of secondary school students: general-course (Gen) and language-gifted, i.e. philology-course students (Phil), all of whom attending a grammar school in Serbia (see Footnote 10). After removing incomplete and/or partly completed test batteries, the final sample comprised N=113 participants, aged 16–18 (M=16.86, StD=.70), unevenly distributed according to sex (m=38, f=75), but evenly distributed between the educational profiles: Phil (N=56) and Gen (N=57). In order to balance the subsamples size, Phil students included students from different years of study since the maximum number of students in this course is 25, as specified in state school regulations, although there are frequently fewer students than this. As a result, this group involved students at different language levels, namely intermediate (N=25), upper-intermediate (N=21) and advanced (N=10), while in the other group (Gen) all students were of intermediate level.[11]

The selection of these two profiles assumes a different level of students' motivation and their voluntary choice to learn English. Phil students voluntarily chose to follow a grammar course with almost double the number of English classes during the secondary education, while Gen students had English just as one of many subjects of equal status. Consequently, the Phil group is expected to have been exposed to greater amounts of input and to be more motivated to learn English, which may directly influence how they perceive primarily their L2 learning context.

[10] Grammar schools, which students attend for four years, are secondary schools of general orientation, which prepare students directly for university education. In terms of enrolment in a grammar school course (e.g. General, Languages and Social Sciences, Mathematics and Natural Sciences), all students are ranked only on the basis of their results in the primary school leaving examination taken in the following subjects: L1, Mathematics and Sciences. Unlike other courses enrolment, students who want to do the Philology course, aimed at "language-gifted students", also need to take entrance exams in the following subjects: English and Serbian Language and Literature, as well as meet at least the 50% threshold in each test to enrol this course.

[11] In a follow-up phase, the ANOVA test showed no statistically significant differences in either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Noels et al. 2000) between different years of study in the Phil group, which indicates that their motivation remained at the same level irrespective of their proficiency level.

3.2. Instruments and Procedures

Data were gathered via self-reports (various questionnaires and scales) and field work (close inspection of official school documents, as well as interviews and consultations with their English teachers).

To collect background information, we employed the *Sociodemographic questionnaire* (age, sex, educational profile, place of birth). To determine the students' L2 learning history, we used the *L2 learning background questionnaire* (initial age, information on learning English inside/outside of school) and the examination of official school records (e.g. weekly and annual structure of classes with and without testing and/or introductory/recap classes per class group).

The research instrument administered to measure the participants' attitudes to their L_2LC was the *L2 learning context scale* (AL_2LC) (Grubor 2021a). AL_2LC, a semantic differential scale, comprises ten items with bipolar adjectives (e.g. uninteresting v. interesting; energetic v. passive) that reflect students' attitudes to their English lessons (e.g. *My English lessons are futile ... educational*), teacher and teaching methods (e.g. *The teaching method of my English teacher is uncreative ... creative*), textbooks (e.g. *My English textbook is boring ... interesting*), class ambience/rapport (e.g. *The atmosphere in English lessons is negative ... positive*).[12] The seven-point Likert scale has displayed very good internal consistency in previous research, with Cronbach's alphas α=.897, α=.945 and α=.870 (Grubor 2021a, 2020b; Kočović Pajević 2024, respectively).[13]

As far as L_2E is concerned, OcE was measured via the *Extra-curricular-exposure scale* (ECEs) (Grubor 2018).[14] ECEs measures the degree of participants' exposure to English outside the classroom: watching films,[15] with/without the subtitles;[16] listening to music in English, with/without trying to understand the lyrics;[17] communication in English with other English speakers in the last year;[18] reading books/articles in English in the last year;[19] staying in English-speaking countries. As far as IcE was concerned, it was obtained through content analysis, which occurred in three steps. The number of different units of input was manually computed based on the textbook and other class materials used, in consultation with the participants' English teachers, in order

[12] Following Grubor (2021b), the points of the scale were taken as a frame of reference, thereby interpreting the mean scores as follows: *1* very negative, *2* negative, *3* mildly negative, *4* neutral, *5* mildly positive, *6* positive, *7* very positive attitudes.

[13] For the AL_2LC scale, see Grubor (2021a).

[14] For the ECEs scale, see Grubor (2018).

[15] *1* never, *2* rarely, *3* sometimes, *4* often, *5* very often.

[16] The answers were reverse coded upon entry (value *1* indicates that a learner never reads the subtitle, *2* indicates both reading the subtitles and listening to the film/series without them, whereas *3* indicates always reading them).

[17] *1* I never pay attention to the lyrics, *2* I sometimes try to understand the lyrics, *3* I always try to understand the lyrics.

[18] With NSs: *1* not at all, *2* rarely, *3* sometimes, *4* often, *5* very often; with NNSs: *1* not at all, *2* rarely, *3* a few times a month, *4* a few times a week, *5* on daily basis.

[19] *1* I have not read a single book in English, *2* I have read one, *3* two/three, *4* more than three books.

to determine the distribution of different L2 contents (grammar and all language skills apart from writing since its subtype writing-for-writing was least present in class). More specifically, the researcher collected the class material from the teachers and then conducted in-depth interviews with them to identify the exact language units that had been covered in class. Afterwards, the researcher manually calculated the number of language units (introduction) and respective exercises (practice and revision) covered in lessons in order to get an overall score for each type. Each of these was subsequently expressed in a scalar form (1–5 range) so as to draw level with OcE scores. The time span was the calendar year within which the study was conducted, again to enable comparisons with OcE. By way of illustration, the scores for grammar, listening, reading and speaking were calculated individually.[20] Subsequently, aggregate values were computed for OcE (total, receptive, productive), in the same way as for IcE.[21] Lastly, the factor that mediates between IcE and OcE is using English as the language of instruction (L_2LoI). As stated previously, L_2LoI refers to the language used in the classroom both by the teacher and learners (see teacher-learner, learner-leaner interactions). Although this factor may have its separate place and can stand in its own right (see simulation of an ESL setting), it is subsumed under L_2E in the proposed model since the amount of input and/or output is greater if L2 is used as the language of instruction. It was primarily measured through learners' estimates on a 1–5 scale (ranging from *1* never to *5* always) and then compared with the corresponding teachers' estimates since teachers and learners may have different perceptions of the use of English in school settings.

Due to limitations of space, in the following section, we will present the results of descriptive statistics (means, standard deviation, percent), scale reliability test (Cronbach's alpha α), independent-samples *t*-test and its effect size (Cohen's *d*), correlation (Pearson's *r*) and its effect size (R^2), and factor analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Hypothesised L_2LE Components

L2 learning background. As regards the first hypothesised constituent factor, the results indicate that the vast majority of our participants started learning English at a similar age (9: 23.9% and 11: 52.3%). The same was true for the initial age of learning English

[20] Reading/listening texts were classified according to the number of words they include: 50–100, 100–400, 400–700, >700 words, while the exercises were counted per task, and the overall scores of each were assigned a corresponding scalar value (1–5). Speaking included speaking tasks only (the researcher estimated the probable timing, in the following manner: 1–2 min, 2–10 min, >10 min), which was similarly expressed in a scalar form (1–5).

[21] The aggregate score for the receptive (listening and reading) and overall IcE were computed as the sum of their constituent parts. The productive plane was not separately computed since speaking was its only measure. On the assumption that lexis is present in each tested language subcategory, grammar was the only measure of the language system.

at school (9: 20.2% and 11: 70.6%). Only 34.5% of the participants learnt English outside school classes (language courses: 23%, private lessons: 11.5%). As for the structure of classes, the philology course had five classes a week, approximately 180 in the school year, and the general course two weekly, 74 per year.

L2 learning context. The AL_2LC scale showed very good internal consistency (α=.899), as in previous research. The participants' overall attitude to their L_2LC was positive, as was the case with teacher/teaching approaches and textbooks, while class ambience and English lessons were mildly positive (Table 1). According to the sex criterion, *t*-test showed a significant difference of a medium effect size in terms of textbooks and English lessons, and a borderline difference of a small effect size in terms of AL_2LC, all in favour of girls. Regarding differences between the educational profiles, the only difference, a borderline of a small effect size, was detected on the AL_2LC scale in favour of the Phil group (t(102.17)=2.016, p=.046; d=.38).[22]

Table 1. L_2LC

(Sub)factors	*entire sample*				*sex differences*			
	M	***StD***	***Min***	***Max***	***df***	***t***	***p***	***d***
AL_2LC[23]	55.84	10.65	26	70	97.89	-1.973	**.051**	.37
Lessons	16.17	3.93	5	21	91.22	-2.574	**.012**	.50
Textbooks	5.43	1.37	1	7	107	-3.176	**.002**	.64
Ambience	5.60	1.50	1	7	107	-1.570	.119	/
Teacher/Teaching	17.58	3.61	3	21	98.83	-1.288	.201	/

*Values **in bold** are statistically significant

Exposure to L2. Regarding OcE (Table 2), the participants reported watching films/series in English quite a lot, as expected. No difference was found between the educational profiles, but the girls stated they watched them more than boys (medium effect size). When it comes to reading the subtitles while watching films/series, a difference of a small-to-medium effect size was found in favour of girls, but there was no difference between the educational profiles. Similarly, the sample reported listening to music in English fairly often, with a difference of a medium effect size in favour of the Phil group (t(102.03)=2.528, p=.013; d=.48). As for making a concerted effort to understand the lyrics, there was a difference of small-to-medium effect size in favour of girls, and a medium effect size in favour of Phil (t(84.13)=2.641, p=.010; d=.50). In the year prior to testing, the participants had rarely communicated with native

[22] Cohen's *d* range is as follows: small .2, medium .5 and large effect size .8 (Larson-Hall 2010).

[23] *1–10* very negative, *11–20* negative, *21–30* mildly negative, *31–40* neutral, *41–50* mildly positive, *51–60* positive, *61–70* very positive.

speakers of English (NSs), with girls communicating with NSs more frequently, but the difference was small. Regarding communication with non-native speakers (NNSs), excluding English classes, a difference of a large effect size was detected in favour of Phil (t(107)=4.745, p=.000; d=1.24). When it comes to reading books in English, the score differed greatly by educational profile, in favour of the Phil group (t(90.89)=9.988, p=.000; d=1.87), and to a lesser extent by sex, with girls having read more books than boys (small effect size). The situation with reading articles (paper/online) was similar, again with a large difference in favour of Phil (t(107)=3.943, p=.000; d=1.17).

Table 2. L_2E: OcE

Items	*Phil*		*Gen*		*sex differences*			
	M	*StD*	*M*	*StD*	*df*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Films/series	4.50	.74	4.30	.87	**107**	**-2.739**	**.007**	**.55**
Subtitle	2.05	.48	1.87	.56	**60.03**	**-2.111**	**.039**	**.43**
Music	4.64	.82	4.21	.97	107	-.559	.577	/
Lyrics	2.83	.38	2.57	.64	**51.89**	**-2.155**	**.036**	**.46**
NSs talk	1.95	1.00	1.77	.93	107	1.044	.299	/
NNSs talk	3.55	1.13	2.51	1.17	**107**	**-2.960**	**.004**	**.21**
Books	2.86	1.05	1.21	.63	**95.33**	**-5.473**	**.000**	**.26**
Articles	3.68	1.15	2.74	1.35	107	-1.531	.129	/

*Values **in bold** are statistically significant

Since the frequency of our participants' stays in English-speaking countries was negligible, the data were not included in further analyses. As regards the overall OcE, a large difference was found in favour of Phil (t(105)=5.601, p=.000; d=1.41), as well as its constituent parts (receptive: (t(105)=6.286, p=.000; d=1.46), productive: (t(107)=3.572, p=.001; d=1.14)).

Concerning IcE, the data can be said to only roughly approximate to the input the participants were actually exposed to in class owing to the obstacle of in-class exposure extraction. It was impossible to measure the "amount" for each individual learner precisely, and IcE was instead calculated as a maximum possible measure within a certain class group.[24] The distribution of the average in-class exposure within the 1–5 range is given in Table 3.

[24] To alleviate the problem of having identical values, different class groups (both for the general and philology course) were included.

Table 3. L_2E: IcE

Items	*M*	*StD*	*M*	*StD*	*M*	*StD*	*M*	*StD*	*M*	*StD*
	50–100		*100–400*		*400–700*		*>700 words*		*Overall*	
Reading	.99	.74	3.26	1.53	2.01	1.91	2.15	2.24	11.34	6.64
Listening	.27	.25	2.59	1.42	1.21	1.28	.82	1.34	7.9	3.27
	1–2'				*2–10'*		*>10'*			
Speaking	3.50	1.30			1.87	1.71	.93	1.19		
	Units				*Exercises*				*Overall*	
Grammar	2.57	1.51			3.11	1.65			5.68	3.10

As regards L_2LoI, the participants were exposed to a considerable amount of English in this way (entire sample: M=3.81, StD=.77; Phil: M=4.16, StD=.85, Gen: M=3.49, StD=.50). Phil students had significantly more L_2LoI and t-test showed a large difference between the educational profiles in favour of the Phil group (t(90.47)=5.045, p=.000; d=.96). This variable significantly correlated with productive IcE (r=.740, p=.000; R^2=.55), L_2LC (r=.584, p=.000; R^2=.34), receptive OcE (r=.438, p=.000; R^2=.19), overall IcE (r=.437, p=.000; R^2=.19), overall OcE (r=.413, p=.000; R^2=.17), productive OcE (r=.258, p=.007; R^2=.07), which further underlines its importance as well its close connection with the input.[25] Significant correlations were also found with L_2LC individual components, all at the .001 level (English lessons: r=.515, R^2=.26; class ambience: r=.484, R^2=.23; English teacher/teaching methods: r=.436, R^2=.19; textbooks: r=.367, R^2=.13), which speaks in favour of its connection with how the participants evaluated their L2 learning context as well.

4.2. The L_2LE Construct

To test the proposed theoretical model and determine whether the hypothesised components constitute the L_2LE construct, we performed exploratory factor analysis (EFA), followed by higher-order factor analysis.[26]

In step 1, the hypothesised components were factor analysed, and the analysis yielded a three-factor solution. The extracted factors explained 69.58% of the total variance observed. Factor 1 subsumed all the components of the L_2LC, Factor 2 the components of L_2E and Factor 3 the components of L_2LB (Table 4).[27] All items displayed good factor loadings.

[25] R^2 range is as follows: small .01, medium .09 and large effect size .25 (Larson-Hall 2010).

[26] The main function of EFA is to group variables together in order to uncover the latent structure of a construct, that is, to reduce a set of variables to its underlying dimensions (factors) (Cohen et al. 2007; Dörnyei 2011).

[27] When all IcE components were entered, one component was extracted that explained 78.45% of the variance, with the following factor loadings: listening: .968, reading .789, grammar .985, speaking .941, L_2LoI .712.

Table 4. EFA: L_2LC, L_2E and L_2LB subcomponents

Rotated component matrix			
	Components		
Items	1	2	3
English classes	**.932**	.068	.006
Textbooks	**.712**	.243	.338
Class ambience	**.796**	.103	-.124
Teacher & teaching	**.882**	.089	.052
Out-of-class exposure	.249	**.684**	.156
In-class exposure	.003	**.846**	-.016
L2 as the language of instruction	.118	**.806**	.079
Initial age	.049	-.048	**.835**
Structure of classes (weekly)	.000	.209	**.758**

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis (Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalisation)
Factor Loadings >.60

In step 2, the aggregate L_2LE components, namely the means of the extracted components (L_2LC, L_2E and L_2LB) were calculated and then factor analysed. This time one component was extracted that explained 46.78% of the total variance observed. However, L_2LB had a low factor loading (Table 5a).

Table 5a. Higher-order FA: L_2LC, L_2E and L_2LB

Rotated component matrix	
Items (total)	Components
	1
L_2LC	**.799**
L_2E	**.808**
L_2LB	.336

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
Factor Loadings >.60

In step 3, when L_2LB was excluded, the remaining two factors displayed good factor loadings, and together explained 70.86% of the variance observed (Table 5b).

Table 5b. Higher-order FA: L_2LC and L_2E

Rotated component matrix	
Items (total)	Components
	1
L_2LC	**.842**
L_2E	**.842**

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis
Factor Loadings >.60

5. Discussion

In this section, we will briefly summarise the main findings of our study in line with the stated goals and/or research questions.

The main goal and research question was to determine the componential structure of the L2 learning environment. In line with the initial hypothesis, all the theoretical components were grouped under their individual hypothesised factors (L_2LC, L_2E L_2LB). Namely, EFA showed that English lessons, teacher and teaching approaches, textbooks, and rapport were grouped under Factor 1 (L_2LC), while IcE, OcE and L_2LoI were clustered around Factor 2 (L_2E), and initial age and structure of classes constituted Factor 3 (L_2LB). In addition, when EFA was conducted with the hypothesised components of IcE, it was found to include listening, reading, speaking, grammar and L_2LoI (with very high factor loadings and the factors explaining three quarters of the variance). Nevertheless, since we excluded the writing skill in this study, it would be desirable to incorporate it in future research.

On the other hand, higher-order factor analysis, performed on the aggregate factors (L_2LC, L_2E, L_2LB), indicated that only L_2LC and L_2E made up one composite factor (L_2LE). However, the fact remains that in this study L_2B had a narrow range of scores since the participants shared a similar background (initial age, structure of classes), thus it remains a challenge for future studies to include participants from diverse learning backgrounds.

The subsidiary research question was to check for differences depending on educational profiles and sex. As regards the individual components of the L_2LE construct, the participants reported overall positive attitudes to L2 learning context, and the AL_2LC scale showed good internal consistency, as in previous studies (Grubor 2021a, 2020b; Kočović Pajević 2024). L_2LC was similarly evaluated by girls and boys, as well as educational groups.

Concerning their exposure to L2, Phil students were exposed to English in classroom settings to a greater extent (both through in-class exposure and L2 as the language of instruction), as well as outside school. In terms of the latter, Phil students communicated with NNSs more frequently, and within a one-year period they had read significantly more books and articles in English. In addition, a difference of medium effect size was found in favour of the Phil group in terms of effort made to understand song lyrics while listening to music in English. Regarding the aggregate scores for OcE, as well as its constituent parts (receptive and productive planes), the differences between the educational profiles were large. As was the case with IcE, Phil students were exposed to English outside formal settings to a greater extent, they more readily engaged in linguistic behaviour and sought opportunities for further L2 exposure of their own free will. As research shows that a lack of input quantity can be compensated for by input quality (Paradis and Kirova 2014), it will be valuable to include some measure of input quality besides input quantity in further research. As for L_2LoI, in this study it was shown to serve as a source of input, since it positively correlated with IcE and OcE. Besides, L_2LoI positively correlated with the participants' attitudes to their learning context, which indicates that learners who are exposed to L2 to a greater extent

evaluate their learning context as well as its individual components more positively. Although the English-only principle has been recently criticised (e.g. Galante et al. 2020; Lightbown and Spada 2020; Li Wei and Wing Ho 2018), the results of our study suggest that the proposed modified principle "using English as much as possible" could be taken into consideration in future research and classroom practices. First, L_2LoI has been found beneficial for students' attitudes and performance (e.g. Gradman and Hanania 1991; Grubor 2021a, 2020b, 2014; Harley and Hart 2002; Marsh et al. 2002; Taguchi 2008). Second, it appears to be a useful tool for learning *as* participation (see Grubor 2020b; Zappa-Hollman and Duff 2015). Third, from the cognitive perspective, L2 learners need to have their knowledge accumulated and the efficiency of their knowledge processing improved in order to achieve automatisation (DeKeyser 2015; Hulstijn et al. 2009). Learners need a great amount of input and opportunities to interact communicatively in L2 so as to be able to capitalise on their L2 learning, and foreign language classrooms do not provide optimum conditions (Muñoz 2008). Accordingly, regular exposure to English, spontaneous practice and constant everyday use in L2 classes, which could be considered L2 communities of practice, may assist students in acquiring different aspects of L2 in "naturalistic" settings.

As far as L2 learning background is concerned, the participants shared a similar history of learning English, which means that its impact needs to be investigated more thoroughly in future studies.

Finally, we need to point out the *limitations* of the current study. First, the sample was not representative. Although it would have been possible to include all the grammar schools in the country and randomly choose schools and class groups for testing, the problem lies in the fact that not all grammar schools offer philology courses, which enrol language-gifted students who choose to learn English of their own free will. Nevertheless, it would be valuable to recruit a larger number of different class groups, from different schools in future studies. Another limitation is that girls outnumbered boys, as seems to be commonplace in SLA studies. The reason for this is that female students typically enrol Phil courses, although the distribution between males and females in the Gen group of the current study was balanced. The fact that the Phil group involved different years of study and thus had different levels of proficiency also constitutes a limitation. As previously noted, we also encountered an obstacle pertaining to input measurement/extraction (see section 4.1). Another issue is the reflective nature of any kind of L2 exposure measurement; therefore, a possible avenue that future research may pursue is to employ the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) which employs smartphone technology, as in Arndt et al. (2023).[28] Furthermore, many variables were measured by self-report. Although rating scales are valid and reliable measures of attitudes (Smith et al. 2015, 231), there is always the danger of participants

[28] Although this method is more accurate and may thus provide more reliable data than reflective self-reports, the negative side is that participants might find it time-consuming or distracting due to its repetitive nature, which may result in response fatigue and consequently sample attrition.

giving socially desirable answers, irrespective of research anonymity or study format (paper or electronic). Lastly, this study could not test whether L_2LB is an integral part of the L_2LE or simply a moderating variable.

6. Implications and further steps

L_2LE is important to investigate so as to further test its role and/or impact on the formation of L2 learning attitudes, both in its own right and within a broader conceptual model of L2 learning attitude formation (see Grubor 2018, 2025). Previous research has investigated individual components, such as different means of L2 exposure and attitudes towards the learning context, while this study attempted to offer insights into the overall construct of L_2LE.

Our main research task was to determine the componential structure of L_2LE and the results indicate that it subsumes the L2 learning context (English lessons, teacher and teaching approaches, textbooks, class ambience) and L2 exposure (IcE, OcE, L_2LoI). As regards the groups comprising the subsamples, the group that was more exposed to English in classroom settings (IcE) and English as the language of instruction (L_2LoI), and was in all likelihood more motivated to learn English, for the reasons already stated, was also significantly more exposed to English outside of the classroom setting (OcE). This finding may support the idea that motivation plays a role in learners' conscious intention to engage in linguistic behaviour via further exposure to L2 of their own free will.

On the practical side, the main challenge of L2 classes is to find ways of creating an environment conducive to learning. Once teachers are familiar with the key components, they can focus on their nurture and/or development (e.g. to work on good rapport, make the teaching materials more appealing, encourage learners to explore and seek other sources of L2 input). On the theoretical side, besides the fact that the hypothesised factors (L_2C, L_2E) have been found to make up the L_2LE construct, it has been shown that L_2LoI plays an important role within the L2 learning environment. While quantitative and mixed-method studies, such as this one, advocate L_2LoI use, qualitative studies question it. Judging from the inconsistent results of scholarly research and our personal practical experience in English teaching at all levels of education (primary, secondary, tertiary), we maintain that there is a need to elucidate its use in concrete L2 classes, as well as in research. This elucidation is reliant upon the purpose of L_2LoI use, its efficacy, students' language level and abilities, the setting where English is used (monolingual, bilingual, multilingual, in L2 classrooms only or as a medium of instruction).

As regards further steps, we intend to investigate the potential link between L_2LE and L2 attitudes to learning English, the position of L_2LE in the ECPS model of L2 learning attitude formation and, subsequently, whether L2 attitudes will be predictive of linguistic behaviour, or more specifically, achievement in English.

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