

Letters to the Editor
Писма до редакцията

THE CHALLENGE TO BECOME A YOUNG TEACHER

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to address the challenges one meets after entering the public school for the very first time and also to share first hand experiences from the classroom and the school. The main idea is to show how a young teacher is approaching the students and what methods are used in the classroom. Emphasis is also put on the drive one has to teach, and how the mindset provokes our actions and what impact it has on our students and their success.

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The decision to become a teacher in Bulgaria often comes unexpectedly, for me - as a choice made after three difficult, but exciting years as an Architecture student in London, UK. In order to become a successful architect, I believe, one has to broaden its horizons and have the life experiences that would boost the understanding of the world we live in first. It is recommended that in order to build all those skills we should temporarily change the field we are working in.

At the same time, I was feeling a strong drive to give back and contribute. Becoming a teacher had already crossed my mind, but I took the idea seriously after I found out about Teach for Bulgaria, and became acquainted with its vision about closing the achievement gap through educating the children in Bulgaria. After considering how this initiative would help me and my professional development, I took the decision to enter the classroom in the autumn of 2013. After a solid training and preparation I started teaching at two schools in Klisura, the Professional School of Economics and the Secondary School, protected by the Government for historical reasons. I teach ESL to students from 5th to 12th grade. All of them have different backgrounds, and come from different ethnic groups.

The difficulties

Teaching English to students whose Bulgarian language skills are not exceptional, since their mother tongue is not Bulgarian, might be a difficult task sometimes. Another challenge is the lack of motivation: even though children understand the importance of speaking a foreign language (especially English) in the 21st century, they are reluctant learners. Stereotypes like „I don't need to know foreign languages to go abroad“ or „I have been learning English since second grade and I still don't know it“ are dominant, and they are, in my view, a reflection of the prejudices that are rooted deeply in the community in general.

The fact that students find it difficult to learn a language at school is indisputable. Ambitious pupils with adequate family income choose to attend private language courses in order to obtain the knowledge and the qualification they need. Mainstream schools do not provide them with the same opportunities and skills, even though, according to the National Educational Standards the curriculum is absolutely sufficient.

What can I do about it?

Listing the challenges the Bulgarian educational system, or indeed any educational system, is easy enough. Taking ownership and coming up with ways to change the status quo is, the harder part, but it's the one I would consider most important. We should ask ourselves the question „What can I do about it?“ and accept the responsibility for driving the positive changes we want to see.

One could complain forever about the lack of funding and resources, lack of young teachers or any teachers in general, but instead of focusing on what is missing, we should pay attention to what is there. Our children are the best resource we have, and all of them can be motivated and achieve their goals if we show them that there is a way to do it, if we show them that they can. This is the most important thing I am trying to teach my students. I am not there to give them ready-made answers that will solve all their problems. Instead I am there to help them find their own way and most of all learn from each other.

For example, there was a period at the beginning of every week when one student had to bring a piece of paper with a written idiomatic phrase in English, explain it in front of the class and then stick it on the wall so that we can keep a visible record of all those interesting phrases that we have learned and we use. Sound simple enough, but it made the students develop and showcase a variety of skills. It made them search online and in dictionaries, it made them speak in front of an audience, it made them ask the question of whether there are similar phrases in Bulgarian, it made them show their different skills – drawing and illustrating the phrases with pictures, it made them responsible – to bring

the idioms every week. Best of all, the work is done entirely by the students themselves as it should be in every student-centered classroom. The opposite would be me just telling them: „ – Open your notebooks and write the idiom of the week:“, but that takes the focus away from what they can do and deprives them of a sense of ownership and involvement which enhances the learning process.

It seems that the school has lost its importance and prestige, thus many young graduates prefer to work in a different field. The same attitude is shared by students who seem to avoid or skip school. Students often tell me „I am not coming to school because I feel I am wasting my time“ or „I have to work, cannot attend all the classes“. I am not in a position to judge when exactly students were made to believe that attending school is a waste of time, but I feel it is my responsibility to prove them wrong. That won't happen with an hour-long lecture but, rather, via interesting, interactive lessons, which pupils find engaging and sensible. For example, once we did a cooking competition. Students cooked dishes at home, brought them to school and before we ate, there was a short presentation of every dish.

The goal of the lesson was for students to make sentences with food related vocabulary and create a convincing presentation about how did they cooked/baked/boiled it, and why their dish was the best. The lesson began with an opening that demonstrated why what we are studying is important and why one needs to know how to say and write “eggs”, “meat”, “aubergine” etc. Such an approach illustrates the importance rather than state it, which is the best part - students stay focused and work for the next 45 minutes.

The introduction of the vocabulary comes second, using different visual methods. The next step is the guided practice when the students work together and with my help interpret and use the related vocabulary in text and sentences. Before we actually eat the food, students will have time to individually prepare short text and a small presentation about what they have cooked. And finally, after we have found out what is inside Maria's cake, we can taste it. Cooking is not always easy, especially with younger students but that part can be skipped, and the lesson can be moderated – instead of real food students can use plastic, or even just pictures from supermarket flyers. The resources are endless and all around us. I have learned that everything can be used to support teaching and learning – from wooden pegs to bus tickets.

How important extracurricular activities are?

Spending time with students outside the scheduled time is always beneficial. Sometimes it's what's mandatory holds less importance for youngsters than anything that they are given the chance to choose. I run a weekly art studio that combines learning English with crafts. It's incredible what children can do

when given the freedom to create, and how much they can learn without even considering it that they are studying. Attitude is what matters, and I believe that the teacher is the one who builds that in students. What you show is what others will perceive.

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