

Bojana Nikić Vujić was studying at the University of Belgrade in the early 2000s and considering her career options. She liked art history, Latin, English, and Spanish. Outside of her studies, travel was a favorite thing, as was working with children. So becoming an English teacher made sense; it was the “perfect mixture.” There is a huge amount of variety and flexibility in English teaching, and Bojana—who says, “I like challenges”—has to this point already explored many paths.



Bojana Nikić Vujić: English teacher, teacher trainer, television personality, and textbook author are just some of the roles she has filled during her career as an educator.



Ivo Andrić Elementary School in suburban Belgrade, where Bojana teaches

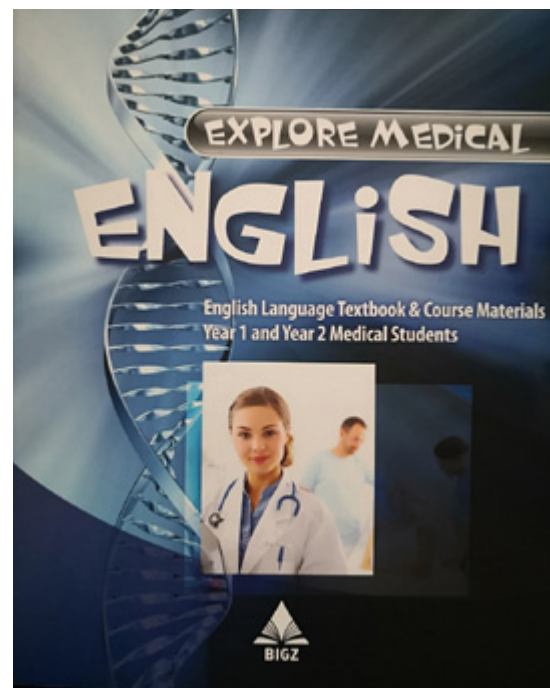
While still an undergraduate, Bojana worked part-time at kindergartens in Belgrade. She took home her master’s degree in English Teaching and Methodology in 2005 from the University of Belgrade and worked as an instructor at the Faculty of Foreign Languages until 2007. Afterwards, she taught at a vocational secondary school specializing in pharmacy and physiotherapy, and because her course did not have a textbook, she wrote *Explore Medical English*. She continues to design and lead teacher-development courses, certified by the Institute for the Improvement of Education in Serbia. In 2014, however, she landed her current job at Ivo Andrić Elementary School, and she has been there ever since.

But a surprising new challenge arrived in 2020: a TV show.

In March, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was forcing schools to close their doors, the principal at Ivo Andrić—knowing how Bojana liked challenges—volunteered her for a show where she would teach English to students nationwide. Within days, Bojana found herself in a TV studio, filming during the mornings and preparing the next day’s lesson in the afternoons.

“I was thinking how to do it,” she said, “and not just stand there and talk, because it’s too

monotonous for the children.” Incorporating interactivity was difficult, but she did her best, using games, quizzes, videos, songs, and movement tasks—anything to keep the kids’ interest. There was no live audience and no children to provide energy, which was a challenge in itself. Her solution was to imagine that she was teaching her own students.



Bojana wrote the *Explore Medical English* textbook to meet a resource need while teaching at a vocational secondary school.

After a few lessons in the studio, and with more-stringent lockdowns being enforced in the city, Bojana began to record lessons at home on her computer, via screencasts. These screencasts were then broadcast on national television. Through April and May 2020, she recorded 24 lessons for third- and fourth-graders. Sometimes when she was out for a walk, children she didn't know would say to her, "Hello, Teacher! Are you from television?"

Each TV lesson had a link to homework so that students could then send their work to their regular teachers. In this way, Bojana included teachers, an approach that brought appreciation from educators around the country. Her TV lessons not only served as a model for virtual lessons, they also bought time for teachers managing the transition from face-to-face to online instruction.

Bojana was thinking not only of children and teachers at this time, but also of parents. Parents were themselves struggling to balance jobs with the demands of home learning, where the digital infrastructure of households could not always support whole families working and studying online.

"It was very stressful for parents to get the equipment, to provide stable Internet,"

she said. The TV lessons helped relieve this pressure, and for the second half of 2020, she emphasized asynchronous learning, since that relied less on the uncertain prospect of all students having solid Internet connections at the same moment. She used Google Classroom and her own blog, which she had created in a stroke of prescient thinking eight months before the pandemic.

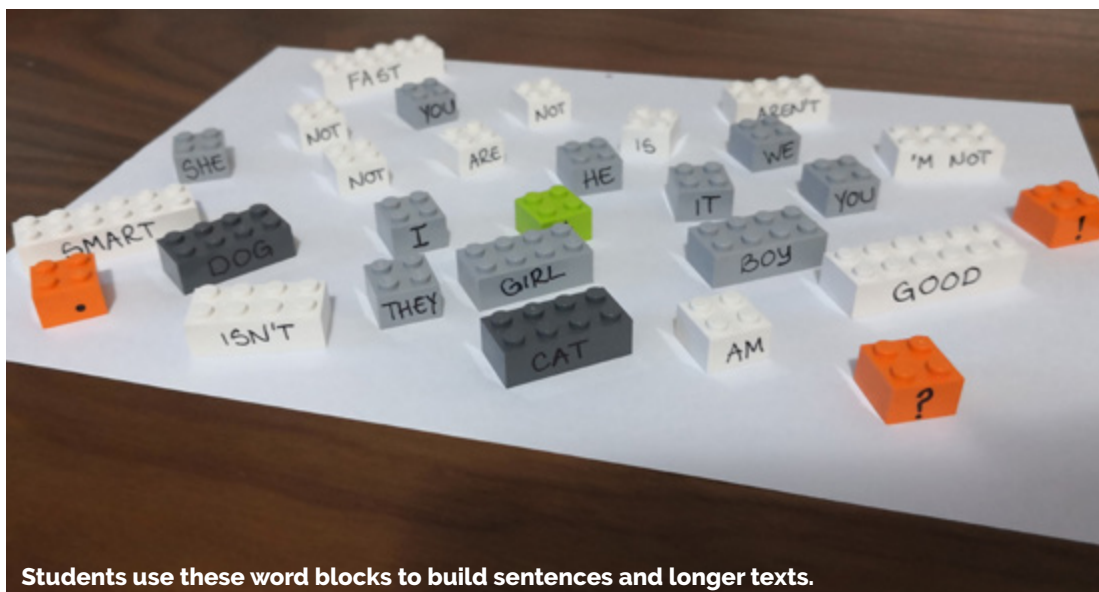
Now, in 2021, Bojana is preparing to return to face-to-face instruction at Ivo Andrić, in its leafy suburban Belgrade setting. It is a multistory building with two wings and 1100 students from grades one to eight, all of whom learn English from Bojana or one of her four English-teaching colleagues.

Bojana is glad to be back in the physical classroom. "When it's not face to face, I miss the energy and the interaction," she said, adding that it is difficult for a teacher to get a feel for students' level of interest when talking to a TV camera or even through video cameras online. But in the classroom, "It's a special state of mind." The moment she enters, even if she has a headache, she doesn't feel it at all.

Energy is a word that recurs often when Bojana talks about teaching. With young learners, it is essential to have an active class, to involve



Bojana taught English on national television during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.



Students use these word blocks to build sentences and longer texts.

Total Physical Response and Brain Breaks. In fact, the school administrators and the child psychologist who make regular observation visits to classes at Ivo Andrić have a word to describe Bojana’s lessons: *rollercoaster*. As she explained, that is “because they are full of energy and everything goes very quickly, so they got the impression you sit on a rollercoaster and you just rush”

A typical class includes three stages. Bojana and the students review content from the previous lesson. Next, she introduces new material. Then they practice that in some engaging way. Her classes take a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, and into them she weaves art, science, Serbian language, and fun. The young learners often work in groups or take on projects, and she especially likes to focus on themes of inclusion and the development of empathy. For example, her grade-four students read the book *The Short-necked Giraffe*, about a giraffe who doesn’t fit in, and they followed this with project work, making posters and giving presentations.

Her lessons always have a plan, but flexibility is the key: “You have to adapt. It depends on the mood when you enter the classroom, the energy the children have. It’s not the same when you teach the first and last lesson of the day.”

Bojana doesn’t alter the content of a lesson very often, but she always modifies her approach to suit what’s happening in the moment.

Bojana feels at home at Ivo Andrić because, like her, the administrators and her colleagues there are always pushing ahead, seeking to improve. Over the years, the school has participated in many national and international projects. Currently, the school is involved in joint programs with schools in neighboring countries, working together to advance learning for children with disabilities (“Mediation and Inclusion”) and to forward digital learning (“Digital Bridges”).

Whether teaching online, teaching in the classroom, or taking a hybrid approach, Bojana thinks that the aims and objectives remain the same. Her goal is not just to teach English grammar and vocabulary, but to develop in learners the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to face the complex problems of the future. Children should learn English “for life,” she said, “not for grades.”

Foreign-language learning is well accepted and well integrated into the national educational system. With its position as a crossroads in southern Europe, Serbia has long valued plurilingualism: the idea that citizens benefit from learning additional languages. Many



Bojana's students explore nature as they work on a lesson outdoors at their school.

foreign languages are taught in schools, but English remains the most established, with twice as many learners as all other languages combined (Vučo and Filipović 2013). In fact, English is compulsory from grade one, where students receive two hours of instruction per week. In fifth grade, students select a second foreign language.

Although English is compulsory, Bojana wants students to “fall in love” with the language, “because when you love something, it is much easier to learn it, to have fun, to enjoy, and to gain confidence.” When students get truly involved in the subject matter, “they don’t have fear of making a mistake, and that’s bliss.”

Getting students to that stage was more difficult when Bojana taught at secondary school and university, she said. The goal remains the same—“to make them comfortable making mistakes”—but it’s not an easy task. Teenagers are afraid to be wrong. This might be a universal trait, she acknowledged, but she has a suspicion that it is especially true for famously proud Serbians.

Luckily for language learners, Serbians are known to be open and direct, something they have in common with Americans. In fact, Bojana noted, “Sometimes they are *really* honest and not so tactful, but with the best intentions.” As a language teacher, seeing

“through the prism of language,” she offered an example. “In English you might say, ‘That’s not a very smart idea,’ whereas in Serbian, they will just bluntly say, ‘It’s stupid.’”

Embedded in the Serbian language is a cultural characteristic from which we can surmise the importance of the extended family: “We have separate words for every family member,” Bojana said. We can take the word *uncle* as one example. This could be your father’s brother (*stric*), your mother’s brother (*ujak*), or the spouse of your father’s or mother’s sister (*teća*).

Each family, too, has a special celebration day, and it is the quintessential Serbian celebration. This is Slava, a tradition that was inscribed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists in 2014 (UNESCO 2014). The majority of Serbians are Orthodox Christians, and for them, this is a day to honor the family’s patron saint, their ritual protector and provider of welfare. This means, as far as school goes, some students will be absent on their Slava days, while others will still attend class. The Nikić Vujić family’s saint is St. Nicholas, and this Slava occurs on December 19, so Bojana will be sure to arrange for other teachers to cover her lessons, just as she will do for others on *their* Slavass.

Bojana cited her upbringing as a root of her passion for education. Her parents came from “a very modest background” and had to join the workforce at a young age. They did not want this to happen to their daughters—Bojana and her sister. Her parents also understood the value of English study. At one point, in fact, the school near their home did not offer English, so they moved the two girls to a neighboring school. “Even during the nineties,” Bojana said, “when the situation was very difficult regarding finances, they always found a way to support us.” Later in life, both parents returned to their educations, completing a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. *That* is lifelong education.

Bojana does not actually have a classroom that she can call her own. Her *My Classroom*

is everywhere. Whether she is moving from room to room at Ivo Andrić to teach children of several grades, running a professional-development program for other English teachers, connecting with other schools in Europe for joint projects, or offering lessons on TV, Bojana is continually expanding her horizons and talents.

“I chose to teach,” Bojana said, “because I believe in lifelong learning and exploring the world around us, not just the language but everything around us, and that’s something I try to encourage among my students.”

REFERENCES

- UNESCO. 2014. “Slava, celebration of family saint patron’s day.” UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/slava-celebration-of-family-saint-patrons-day-01010>
- Vučo, J., and J. Filipović, J. 2013. Serbian roadmap toward European plurilingualism. *Actualizaciones en Comunicación Social Centro de Lingüística Aplicada: Santiago de Cuba*. https://www.academia.edu/4024929/Serbian_roadmap_toward_European_plurilingualism

This article was written by **Ivana Banković** and **Kevin McCaughey**, who work with the Regional English Language Office at the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade. RELO Belgrade supports English teaching in 13 countries of Central Europe and the Balkans.

Ivana has previously worked as an English language teacher, teacher trainer, and project officer for different educational programs in Serbia. Her areas of interests are project-based learning, teaching English to young learners, using technology in ELT, drama, and storytelling. Ivana has published articles in peer-reviewed journals and presented at numerous international conferences.

Before becoming a Regional English Language Officer, Kevin delivered newspapers, played in rock bands, and taught English in many countries, including as a Department of State English Language Fellow, Fulbright Scholar, and English Language Specialist. Even after 2020, he is not tired of virtual or hybrid learning.

Photos by Bojana Nikić Vujić