



## Developing Students' Language and Intercultural Competence for Future Employability: a Comparative Analysis of Latvia and Lithuania

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### Session Information

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### Contribution

#### Developing Students' Language and Intercultural Competence for Future Employability: a Comparative Analysis of Latvia and Lithuania

Contemporary world shows changes in employability patterns and skills needed in the future. Several large-scale projects and researches (e.g., *OECD Education 2030 Framework*; *World Economic Forum, 2015*; *enGauge 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, 2003*; *Cedefop, 2016*; *Scott, 2015*) have been conducted worldwide to define the skills and competences required in the future. Analyzing the concepts and findings of those researches, it is evident that all of them alongside with other competences and skills find problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, cultural awareness and an ability to communicate in several languages crucial for future life.

Moreover, "A European Roadmap for Linguistic Diversity" (2015) emphasizes the dominant role of languages in social cohesion, personal, social and economic development and mobility; ICT for enhancing language learning, promotion and vitality of all languages; holistic multilingualism in Europe.

This coincides with the priorities for European cooperation set in ET (Riga Conclusions, 2015) stressing the need for "more active use of innovative pedagogies and digital skills and tools" to develop VET learners' employability skills for the changing labour market and contribute to cohesive society.

In order to contribute to the skills development and increasing VET learners' intercultural and language competence, an

Erasmus+ project „Language skills and intercultural issues in the hospitality industry: Unity in diversity in the EU labour market” (Project No:2016-1-HR01-KA202-022160; 2016-2018) was launched. Nine countries (Latvia, Croatia, UK, Italy, Slovenia, Romania, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Turkey) have been collaborating on the project addressing the specific objectives in the field of education and training: 1) improve the level of key competences and skills (employability skills, language and intercultural competences), with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market (tourism and hospitality industry) and their contribution to cohesive society (providing better cultural awareness and increased language competence); 2) improve teaching/learning of languages and promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness (language teaching/learning courses integrating culture of European countries developed), and foster creativity in language learning. The project targets 16 languages: English, Italian, Croatian, Latvian, Slovenian, Romanian, Hungarian, German, French, Russian, Spanish, Greek, Lithuanian, Swedish, Czech, Turkish.

Based on a comprehensive needs analysis involving language teachers and employers of tourism and hospitality industry enterprises in five countries (Luka, 2015; Komarovska, 2015), an online language learning course in 12 languages was created, piloted and assessed (Ajtony, 2016; Luka, 2016). Following that, an extended interactive intercultural blended-learning course for 16 languages has been created paying special attention to the use of authentic language teaching/learning materials (Lu, Chang, 2016), which is especially significant for Languages for Special Purposes (Dudley-Evans, 2001, Kavaliauskiene, 2012), ensuring its content correspondence to the learners' needs, task differentiation, interaction between the learners and the learners and the teacher, providing an encouraging learning environment (Zohoorian, 2015), applying socio-constructivist approach in language learning (Colpaert, 2006). As creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, communication are important skills required in tourism and hospitality industry (Millar, Park, 2013; Donina, Luka, 2014; Wang, Tsai, 2014; Sisson, Adams, 2013), special attention has been placed on the face-to-face part of the blended-learning course incorporating creativity and problem-solving tasks, such as case studies, webquests, simulations, etc. As those are the tasks that place a learner in a real and/or imaginary professional setting and situation and the learners are exposed to a certain problem situation they have to solve in a foreign language thus not only developing their language skills but enhancing their creativity, problem-solving, teamworking, etc.

*The purpose of the study* is by conducting summative/outcome evaluation research evaluate the intercultural interactive blended-learning English language course (B2/C1 level) and the A2/B1 level language courses created and their application for developing students' language and intercultural competences required in future work in their field.

## Method

The current study presents the results of the research conducted within the previously-mentioned Erasmus+ project in 2017, focussing on a comparative analysis of the evaluation research results obtained in Latvia and Lithuania. The results concern the project first stage - the A2/B1 interactive language learning course in 16 languages and intercultural B2/C1 English course. The course piloting and evaluation was done in all partner countries, but this research focuses on the results of Latvia and Lithuania, since the teaching/learning context and the profile of the HEIs is similar.

Two medium-sized HEIs founded by legal persons offering Bachelor level professional education in management related positions in the fields of tourism and hospitality, communication and languages, business, IT, etc. were selected. Both HEIs have strong internationalization strategies and 30-40% of their fulltime Bachelor students are international students. The languages of instruction are the national language (Latvian; Lithuanian) and English.

In order to evaluate the efficiency of the courses created summative/outcome evaluation research was conducted (O'Leary, 2010) applying a students' survey and analysing students' essays.

200 students (97 in Latvia, 103 in Lithuania) were involved in the evaluation research. Students' profile: 119 studied Tourism Management, 24 Events Management, 7 Business Administration, 19 International Communication, 31 IT; 125 were local LV&LT students, 75 international students; 90 students piloted A2/B1 English course, 13 - A2/B1 Spanish course and 165 - B2/C1 English course. Some students piloted several courses.

The course piloting lasted for 3 months. The students had an introductory workshop to learn the interactive learning platform, then they did online tasks independently, in parallel they had regular group meetings to do face-to-face tasks and case studies. After the course piloting the students filled in evaluation questionnaires and wrote feedback essays.

The questionnaire comprised 97 questions including attribute and 38 Likert scale type opinion variables (Dillman, 2007). The questionnaire covered the evaluation of the learning platform, course content, methodologies, skills development.

Quantitative data analysis was done applying descriptive and inferential statistics methods by SPSS – frequencies, means, modes; to find significant differences between the groups due to not-normal empirical distribution Mann-Whitney test (for 2 groups) and Kruskal-Wallis Test (for <2 groups) (Walliman, 2016), qualitative data analysis – applying discourse analysis (Fawcett, Pockett, 2015).

The reliability coefficient shown in Reliability Statistics table displayed as a simple Cronbach's Alpha indicates very good internal consistency reliability for the scales with the given sample ( $\alpha=0.918$ ).

## Expected Outcomes

In the conference detailed findings will be provided. Here the main ones.

Students highly evaluated the interactive learning platform - the means:3.0400-3.5000 (max=4.0000), modes 4.00-3.00. Students found the platform useful (mean=3.5000), visually appealing (mean=3.0400), interesting (mean=3.3650), interactive, creative (mean=3.3200), well-structured (mean=3.0150), and they will suggest it to other learners (mean=3.2050).

In general, no significant differences were found between the answers of the students of both HEIs (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.053-0.763).

International students evaluated the platform higher than the local ones and they will more likely suggest it to other learners (MeanRank=111.46 vs.93.92, Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.024).

No significant differences were discovered by the course piloted, which indicates: the learning platform is suitable for creating any language course (Asymp.Sig.2-tailed=0.102-0.981).

Students' essays validate the quantitative data. Students appreciated 'creativity of the tasks', 'liked an interface of this quiz', and found the platform easy to use, e.g., 'I liked this project, it is easy to understand...' and 'everything was clear, easy to understand and really useful'.

The intercultural B2/C1 English course was evaluated slightly higher than A2/B1 courses.

Students admitted having learnt specific vocabulary (65%; mean=3.1030, modes=3.00-4.00), developed reading skills (60%; mean=2.9636, mode=3.00), gained general and intercultural knowledge (69%; mean=3.1758, modes=3.00-4.00) which is a dual aim of any English for Special Purposes course - provide language learners with an opportunity to learn new facts, information and increase their field knowledge simultaneously developing learners' English language competence. To sum up, the intercultural B2/C1 course is useful for students of any nationality studying in the fields connected with service industries and businesses, but students' learning outcomes largely depend on the HEI. A2/B1 courses may be applied for developing the language skills for any specialization as all topics include information and phrases useful for everyday communication, texts and listening tasks are less content-specific than for B2/C1 course.

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