



FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION AT TERTIARY LEVEL: A CASE STUDY WITH STUDENTS OF HUMANITIES

MELITA LEMUT BAJEC

University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities, Koper, Slovenia

Potrjeno/Accepted

9. 7. 2024

Objavljeno/Published

23. 8. 2024

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR/KOESPONDENČNI AVTOR

melita.lemut.bajec@fhs.upr.si

Abstract/Izveček

Intercultural education fosters respect, understanding, and solidarity, empowering individuals to become social agents in today's culturally diverse world. The paper presents a 10-week case study involving 24 students enrolled in humanities disciplines. It explored students' views on intercultural education, their progress in attitudes, knowledge, and skills related to intercultural competence, and effective instructional modes for intercultural education. Data collected using a questionnaire reveal that students value intercultural education for fostering understanding, appreciation of cultures, and intercultural dialogue. Effective instructional modes include active teaching methods. Challenges in overcoming well-established beliefs and a limited willingness to acquire new knowledge suggest that developing intercultural competence also depends on factors beyond education.

Keywords:

instructional modes, intercultural competence, intercultural education, English, tertiary education.

Ključne besede:

učne strategije, medkulturna zmožnost, medkulturna vzgoja in izobraževanje, angleščina, terciarno izobraževanje.

UDK/UDC:

37.015.31:81'246.3

Razvijanje medkulturne vzgoje in izobraževanja na terciarni ravni: študija primera s študenti humanističnih ved

Medkulturna vzgoja in izobraževanje spodbujata razvoj spoštovanja, razumevanja in solidarnosti ter posameznike opolnomočata, da postanejo pomembni družbeni akterji v današnjem kulturno raznolikem svetu. V prispevku je predstavljena študija primera, v kateri je sodelovalo 24 študentov humanističnih ved in je trajala 10 tednov. Raziskovali smo stališča študentov do medkulturnega izobraževanja, njihov napredek v stališčih, znanju in spretnostih, povezanih z medkulturno zmožnostjo, ter učne strategije, učinkovite za poučevanje medkulturnosti. Podatki, zbrani z vprašalnikom, razkrivajo, da študentje cenijo medkulturno izobraževanje, saj spodbuja razumevanje in spoštovanje kultur ter razvoj medkulturnega dialoga. Učinkoviti načini poučevanja vključujejo aktivne učne strategije. Izzivi pri premagovanju ustaljenih prepričanj in omejena pripravljenost za pridobivanje novega znanja nakazujejo, da razvoj medkulturnih zmožnosti zavisi tudi od dejavnikov zunaj izobraževanja.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.18690/rei.17.Sp.Iss.4578>

Besedilo / Text © 2024 Avtor(ji) / The Author(s)

To delo je objavljeno pod licenco Creative Commons CC BY Priznanje avtorstva 4.0 Mednarodna.

Uporabnikom je dovoljeno tako nekomercialno kot tudi komercialno reproduciranje, distribuiranje, dajanje v najem, javna priobčitev in predelava avtorskega dela, pod pogojem, da navedejo avtorja izvirnega dela. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



University of Maribor Press

Introduction

Intercultural education fosters respect, understanding, and solidarity among ethnically, socially, culturally, and religiously diverse groups (UNESCO, 2006). It promotes empathy, prevents stereotypes (Dervin & Jacobsson, 2021a, 2021b; Stan, 2020; Welikala, 2021), encourages openness to new cultural experiences, and enhances the ability for further language acquisition (Council of Europe, 2001a, p. 43). Additionally, it equips individuals with the skills and knowledge to experience, understand, analyse, and benefit from cultural diversity, thus developing interculturally competent individuals (Banks, 2015), a necessity in today's multilingual and multicultural world (Council of Europe, 2001a, 2018a, 2020; Tibaut & Lipavic Oštir, 2021). Moreover, it enables individuals to establish cognitive and affective links between past and new experiences of otherness, mediate between members of two (or more) social groups and their cultures, and critically question the assumptions of their cultural group and environment (Council of Europe, 2020). Yet intercultural competence is not a standalone skill but a broad spectrum of abilities that, when combined, enable actions to address issues and strive to create and maintain a positive and inclusive intercultural environment (Council of Europe, 2023). Possessing a well-developed intercultural competence transforms individuals into social agents (Council of Europe, 2001a, p. 168) able to identify potential sources of ambiguity and misunderstanding and find ways to resolve them (Beacco et al., 2016). This is why a well-developed intercultural competence is a crucial and desired educational outcome (Strasser & Reissner, 2022), compelling teachers to integrate intercultural elements into their educational practices (Beacco et al., 2016; Obilișteanu & Niculescu, 2018).

Tertiary education institutions have the potential to serve as hubs for fostering intercultural dialogue, embodying universality through their commitment to open-mindedness and enlightenment values; they possess the capacity to nurture intercultural intellectuals who can actively contribute to society (Council of Europe, 2008). The internationalization and merging of universities into larger alliances offer opportunities to foster intercultural dialogue across all educational activities and to address it through scholarly research (Strasser & Reissner, 2022).

Our study was motivated by a desire to examine whether the postulates presented in European Union language policies and their corresponding documents on intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2001a, 2008, 2018b, 2020, 2023; Unesco, 2006) resonate when practically applied in everyday tertiary educational settings.

Therefore, the primary objective was to examine university students' views on intercultural education. Further, the study aimed to assess students' self-reported progress in a selected set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to intercultural competence. Finally, we investigated the efficacy of different instructional modes for delivering intercultural education. Overall, the importance and relevance of this study lie in its potential to promote intercultural education at the tertiary level, which aligns with the goals set by leading European institutions (Council of Europe, UNESCO) that underscore the importance of fostering cultural awareness, empathy, tolerance, and an appreciation of cultural diversity, helping learners develop a sense of belonging in multicultural societies.

Intercultural education and foreign language teaching

Contemporary language educational paradigms rely on social constructivism, neuro- and psycholinguistics, viewing learners as active, motivated, and responsible co-creators of the educational setting with unique abilities, and cultural characteristics, able to use their previous experiences to influence their future acquisition of knowledge (Petrenko et al., 2020, p. 299). Educators seeking to utilize all learners' potential strategically plan educational process by incorporating interactive instructional modes and integrating languages across the curriculum (Lemut Bajec, 2022). This approach includes culturally responsive teaching (Pižorn et. al., 2022), experiential learning, heuristic approaches, and critical dialogue (Čok, 2008), fostering independent and creative thinking. By incorporating critical and comparison pedagogy (Yue & Ning, 2015), educators cultivate students' curiosity and openness to other cultures, develop sensitivity to social norms and beliefs (Obilișteanu & Niculescu, 2018), and foster understanding and appreciation of diverse values, mentalities, and facets of life (Eržen et al., 2008).

First acknowledged in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) (Unesco, 2006), the concept of intercultural education has since significantly influenced language teaching methodologies (Strasser & Reissner, 2022) and reinforced the emergence of several framework documents that could be of help to educators when preparing materials on intercultural education. Notable examples include the *European language portfolio (ELP)* (Council of Europe, 2001b), *Guidelines on intercultural education* (Unesco, 2006), *White paper on intercultural dialogue* (Council of Europe, 2008), *Autobiography of intercultural encounters* (Barret et al., 2009), *Intercultural competence for all: Preparation for living in a heterogeneous world* (Huber, 2012), *Guide for the development and*

implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education (Beacco et al., 2016), *The common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001a, 2020), *Framework for intercomprehension* (Strasser & Reissner, 2022) and *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures (FREPA)* (Candelier, 2013). These documents were used as reference and resource materials for the present study. For example, the questionnaire was developed using *FREPA* (Candelier, 2013) descriptors related to skills, knowledge, and attitudes of the intercultural competence, while the materials that the students used were compiled according to guidelines on how to foster intercultural education. The discussion section of this paper will further seek to justify the results by drawing upon these foundational documents.

Methodology

Research focus

The objectives of the study were to explore students' views on intercultural education, identify the most effective instructional modes in intercultural education, and assess students' self-reported progress in a selected set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to intercultural competencies.

To achieve this, the following research questions and a hypothesis were established:

RQ1: How do students perceive intercultural education?

RQ2: Which instructional modes do students perceive as most effective in intercultural education?

H1: Pre- and post-intervention results show a statistically significant improvement in the selected descriptors related to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes of the intercultural competence.

Participants

The study involved a group of 24 students, selected conveniently, enrolled in the undergraduate programme Intercultural Linguistic Mediation. The group was culturally and linguistically heterogeneous, consisting of Slovenians, Serbs, Macedonians, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, and Montenegrins, with most possessing a C1 level of English proficiency. All participants were females except for one male student. Nineteen students (80%) were aged between 19 and 21, and 5 students (21%) were between 22 and 25. The language of instruction was English. Factors,

such as prior experience with the English language, exchanges, linguistic backgrounds, study-abroad experiences, and gender were considered irrelevant, treating the participants as a unified group.

Intervention

The intervention lasted ten weeks, starting mid-February and finishing in late April. It was held twice a week, consisting of four 45-minute sessions. The overarching objective of the intervention was to foster intercultural competence, thereby promoting a more inclusive and tolerant perspective among students in navigating cultural diversity. The materials, compiled by the language educational expert, were obtained from the World Wide Web following postulates presented in the overarching European documents on intercultural education. These materials were authentic and written in English, although the authors came from diverse backgrounds.

The topics were explored through reading and discussing research papers and other written materials, watching clips or parts of documentaries, and listening to podcasts. Home assignments were diverse: ranging from analysing research papers, charts, and graphs to discussing video clips, preparing seminar papers, and delivering oral presentations to writing essays where students reflected on their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Each task was designed to promote holistic and comprehensive learning aligned with the objective of the intervention.

The topics included: the significance of norms, folkways, taboos, and values in shaping cultural identities, cultural practices, beliefs, and societal behaviours; cultural diversity; Americanization and the emergence of a global culture; the role of culture and language in fostering prejudice, stereotypes, and other forms of intolerance.

The study explored intercultural competence through various instructional modes, including lectures, discussions, debates, brainstorming sessions, case-based, problem-solving, and research projects. We hosted guest speakers, utilized interactive multimedia, and facilitated self-reflection through metacognitive activities.

Type of research and research methods

To get an in-depth examination and understanding of the studied situation we opted for a case study, which is an empirical study that combines qualitative and quantitative paradigms (Sandars, 2021). Our study employed descriptive, causal, and

experimental methods to ensure the validity, reliability, objectivity, applicability, and overall quality of the research activities.

Research instruments and data collection techniques

To collect the qualitative and the quantitative data, we used a questionnaire. The pre-intervention questionnaire focused solely on the hypothesis. It investigated the selected descriptors pertaining to skills, knowledge, and attitudes among participating students. In the post-intervention phase, two additional questions were included to align with the research questions (Appendix 1). Overall, it is important to emphasize that all student responses were self-reported, and therefore subjective. First, drawing upon the FREPA document (Candelier, 2013), we designed an online questionnaire in an open-source application 1KA. Due to the extensiveness of the FREPA descriptors, the language educational expert decided to investigate only those assumed to be the least developed among students and most challenging for them. This decision was based on the language educational expert's experience and familiarity with the classroom settings, influenced by the specifics of the study program and its participants.

The statements followed a 5-point attitudes scale and a 5-point rating scale. Five statements examined participants' critical questioning approach and their views on language and culture. Three statements focused on the students' willingness to suspend judgement, and another two assessed their willingness to construct informed knowledge. Next, 18 statements focused on skills, gauging students' abilities to analyse (3 statements), recognize (3 statements), compare (2 statements), and explain various linguistic and cultural elements and phenomena (2 statements) and their capacity to argue about cultural diversity (2 statements) and monitor their learning (4 statements). Lastly, two statements examined students' knowledge about various cultures and four statements explored the role of culture in intercultural relations.

The two added questions in the post-intervention phase aimed to investigate students' perceptions of intercultural education and their views on the effectiveness of instructional modes in delivering intercultural education. The former question was open-ended, whereas the latter provided students with a list of ten instructional modes. They were asked to select five they considered most effective based on their personal experiences. To ensure students were familiar with each method, these instructional modes were incorporated within the intervention process whenever applicable.

Data collection process and data processing

The questionnaire was filled out twice: in February 2023, before the beginning of the intervention, and in April 2023, at the end of the intervention. Qualitative and quantitative data were processed in different ways, depending on their characteristics, requirements, and regularities.

Qualitative data, aimed at exploring students' perceptions of intercultural education and its impact on their personal development, were analysed by applying coding, which is a qualitative analysis involving the systemic categorisation of units based on the qualitative material under scrutiny (Kordeš & Smrdu, 2015, p. 53). The entire dataset was carefully examined and first segmented into individual lower-order categories, which were later organised into broader higher-order categories (Vogrinc, 2008). The resulting categories included: importance, respect, appreciation, lack of knowledge, and shift in views, totalling five categories.

The quantitative data analysis helped us identify the instructional modes and revealed significant differences among the selected descriptors among participating students, as evidenced by pre- and post-intervention assessment results. The quantitative data were processed at descriptive and inferential levels, involving bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses.

To ensure objectivity, the questionnaire included clear assessment scales. At the time of collecting the data, objectivity was additionally assured with non-guided data collection. The reliability of the questionnaire pertaining to the selected descriptors was assessed using the internal consistency method by calculating the Cronbach's α coefficient for each construct separately before and after the intervention. We aimed for at least moderate ($0.60 \leq \alpha \leq 0.80$), or even better, exemplary reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.80$) (Ferligoj et al., 1995, p. 159). Overall, the Cronbach α coefficient values for each construct demonstrated a high reliability of the questionnaire.

Construct validity was assessed using principal component analysis, with the conditions for its use verified beforehand. Factoriability, the most important condition, was checked using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett test of sphericity. Since the KMO measure was at least mediocre everywhere (0.5 or above) and the Bartlett test results were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$ before and after), we proceeded with the principal component analysis. We then looked at the screen plot diagrams for the individual constructs. Based on these diagrams and their points of inflexion, we adjusted the constructs where necessary so that they now indicate one prominent component in all cases, thus confirming the assumption that the constructs have a single dimension. The

basic criterion for validity testing was if the eigenvalues of factors were greater than 1, representing a substantial amount of variation. Finally, we examined the component matrix, which displays the component loadings, indicating the influence of the total components on how the individual variables correlate with the components. Based on internal consistency and validity analyses, we decided to remove some statements from the calculations to obtain reliable and homogeneous categories. Consequently, three categories with 11 constructs were created (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of categories

Category	Construct	No. of statements in a construct
Attitudes	An attitude of critical questioning towards language/culture	5
	The will to construct “informed” knowledge	2
	The will to suspend one’s judgement	3
Skills	Can analyse linguistic and cultural elements	3
	Can recognise cultural phenomena in languages and cultures	3
	Can compare cultural features of different cultures	2
	Can explain aspects of one’s own language and culture	2
	Can monitor one’s learning	4
	Can holistically talk about cultural diversity	2
Knowledge	Possesses knowledge about cultures	2
	Knows the role of culture in intercultural relations	4

In the next step, we tested the statistical significance of the differences between the constructs (sum of variables) before and after the intervention. For each pair, we first created a new variable (from the difference between before and after) and checked the normality of its distribution using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. In seven cases, normality was confirmed ($p > 0.05$). Here, we performed a t-test for the two dependent samples (Tables 3 and 5). In four cases, normality was not confirmed ($p < 0.05$) or was borderline. Here, we performed a non-parametric Wilcoxon signed ranks test for the two dependent samples (Tables 2, 4, and 6).

Results

Knowledge

In the category of knowledge (Table 2), the construct ‘Knows the role of culture in intercultural relations’ shows statistically significant differences ($p = 0.001$) following the intervention. This suggests that students have developed an understanding of the stereotypes that other cultures hold about their own culture, and familiarity with

the origins of cultural stereotypes. Based on the acquired knowledge they now recognize that cultures influence particular ways in which each language expresses the world and are aware of some cultural elements that they have borrowed from others, along with the history of these elements.

Conversely, the construct ‘Knowledge about cultures’ ($p = 0.051$) did not exhibit statistically significant differences. Based on self-reported statements, this result indicates that students may not have acquired a substantial knowledge of cultural norms that encompass taboos and the arbitrary nature of certain social practices within each culture.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and construct differences in the knowledge category (Wilcoxon signed ranks test)

Construct	M	N	σ	z-value	P
Knowledge about cultures_before	7.42	24	1.586	-1.915	0.056
Knowledge about cultures_after	8.42	24	1.316		
Knows the role of culture in intercultural relations_before	14.42	24	3.538	-3.441	0.001
Knows the role of culture in intercultural relations_after	17.33	24	1.880		

Skills

In the category of skills, all six constructs show statistically significant results ($p < 0.05$) after the intervention (Table 3). This suggests that participants have developed the ability to critically analyse misunderstandings arising from cultural differences. They can identify the cultural origins of certain behaviours and explain specific social phenomena as consequences of cultural differences. Students also reported an increased capability to recognise cultural prejudice and identify behaviours linked to cultural differences. They are aware of the risks of misunderstanding that stem from differences between cultures. Additionally, they can compare differences and similarities in various aspects of social life and cultural practices. Furthermore, they feel confident explaining the features of their own culture to foreigners and engaging in discussions about cultural prejudices. They can also adopt a critical perspective on their learning, employ diverse strategies to enhance their learning experience, identify their learning objectives, and critically reflect on their learning process.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and construct differences in the skills category (T-test)

Construct	M	N	σ	t-value	P
Can analyse linguistic/cultural elements_before	10.67	24	2.408	-3.711	0.001
Can analyse linguistic/cultural elements_after	12.38	24	1.884		
Can recognise linguistic and cultural phenomena_before	11.96	24	2.236	-3.391	0.003
Can recognise linguistic and cultural phenomena_after	13.29	24	2.136		
Can compare cultural features_before	8.00	24	1.504	-2.502	0.020
Can compare cultural features_after	8.96	24	1.459		
Can argue about cultural diversity_before	7.21	24	1.587	-4.394	0.000
Can argue about cultural diversity_after	8.75	24	1.152		
Can monitor one's learning_before	16.29	24	3.483	-3.397	0.002
Can monitor one's learning_after	18.04	24	2.404		

Table 4: Descriptive statistics and construct differences in the skills category (Wilcoxon signed ranks test)

Construct	M	N	σ	z-value	P
Can explain aspects of one's own language and culture_before	7.92	24	1.742	-2.864	0.004
Can explain aspects of one's own language and culture_after	8.96	24	1.334		

Attitudes

Within the attitudes category, only one construct, i.e. 'An attitude of critical questioning towards language/culture' ($p < 0.05$), demonstrated statistically significant differences (Table 5). Based on students' self-reports, this finding suggests that the intervention had a meaningful impact on fostering an attitude of critical questioning towards languages and cultures. After completing the intervention, participants reported maintaining a critical attitude toward media representations and opinions concerning their own and other communities. They also developed attitudes that urge them to take a critical stance when assessing the values and norms of others and recognizing language as a tool for manipulation. Furthermore, participants demonstrated a critical attitude towards the socio-political aspects linked to the functions and statuses of languages.

On the other hand, the construct 'The will to suspend one's judgement' falls short of the commonly accepted threshold for statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) (Table 5), possibly suggesting that the intervention may not have significantly influenced participants' attitudes towards avoiding generalizations. Additionally, the construct 'the will to construct informed knowledge' is not statistically confirmed ($p < 0.05$) (Table 6), indicating no substantial changes in their attitudes to critically examine

their language, address their negative reactions towards cultural or linguistic differences or dispel prejudices concerning the languages of migrant learners.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics and construct differences in the attitudes category (T-test)

Construct	M	N	σ	t-value	P
An attitude of critical questioning towards language/culture_before	18.50	24	3.502	-3.498	0.002
An attitude of critical questioning towards language/culture_after	21	24	3.203		
The will to suspend one's judgement_before	12.46	24	2.245	-2.061	0.051
The will to suspend one's judgement_after	13.46	24	1.503		

Table 6: Descriptive statistics and construct differences in the attitudes category (Wilcoxon signed ranks test)

Construct	M	N	σ	z-value	P
The will to construct informed knowledge_before	8.25	24	2.245	-1.170	0.242
The will to construct informed knowledge_after	8.67	24	1.503		

Students' perceptions of intercultural education

Students' perceptions of intercultural education were grouped into four categories: importance, respect, appreciation, lack of knowledge, and shift in views.

Most of the students talked about recognising the importance of intercultural education. They stressed that "Now I see that intercultural education is of vital importance in today's culturally and linguistically intertwined world" as "knowing about different cultures forces us to accept the differences we come across when meeting different people, their habits and beliefs" and "it's important so that we can avoid forming prejudices". One student emphasized that "it taught me that there is more to culture than I had previously learned in primary and high school. It made me realise just how important culture is". They claimed that the topics "helped me become a better critical thinker", and "made me formulate my own opinion which might have been different from my schoolmates".

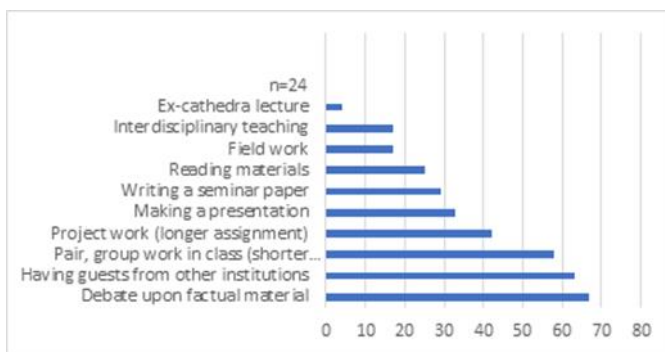
Four students expressed the appreciation and respect they developed as they immersed themselves in intercultural topics. They said: "I feel obliged to take care of preserving my own culture, but I also strongly feel we should treat others the way we want to be treated ourselves". And "We need to appreciate and respect not only our own culture but other cultures too" and "I feel we should embrace who we are." As well as "The fact that some cultures have it worse makes me appreciate having everything that I have."

Four students pointed out that the intervention made them realize they possess "many blanks in my knowledge". Another student emphasized that "it gave me a

push to think about cultures on a deeper level and to learn about them. It also made me more curious and more eager to learn about cultures” and “I gained more knowledge about the influence that culture can have on our society and individual identity”. Some students admitted that they “changed their views on some important cultural topics due to the knowledge we gained”. They said they became “more tolerant, empathetic, sensitive and willing to adapt”, “the topics we discussed gave me a much broader view of life”; “I see the influence that stereotypes have on our thinking and try to consciously avoid them”. Moreover, a few discussed “the shift in views, which was more intense because of the culturally and linguistically diverse group”, further explaining that “this enabled hearing different perspectives and learning about other cultures firsthand” and “having classmates from other nations and cultures really made me see the bigger picture” and “forced me to acknowledge the cultural differences”. One student said: “I previously paid very little attention to different aspects of my own culture, but now, I really had to”, which was “important and necessary as we come from different cultures and saw how that affects our perception of things and we learned how to navigate through communication”.

Students’ perceptions of instructional modes

Lastly, we were interested in students’ perceptions regarding the most effective ways of delivering intercultural education (Graph 1). The results suggest that students think that *debating upon factual material* is the most effective way, followed by *having guests from other institutions* (63%) and *pair/group work in class* (58%). The least effective instructional mode, according to students’ answers, was *ex-cathedra lecture* (4%). However, the fact that *interdisciplinary teaching* (17%) and *fieldwork* (17%) were rated so low raises questions if the students have limited or negative experience with the two.



Graph 1: Most effective ways of delivering intercultural education

Discussion

In light of the results, it appears that intercultural education resonated with students, as evidenced by the awareness of how cultures highly affect people's lives, influence language and shape, and even determine, our understanding of everyday dynamics. This outcome leads us to presuppose that the intervention employed a holistic approach to intercultural education, consistent with guidelines on careful curriculum planning that addresses various aspects of education, including aims, content, approaches, activities, materials, resources, etc., thus ensuring overall coherence and responsiveness to learners' needs (Baecco et al., 2016; Council of Europe, 2016). Additionally, it aligns with Lemut Bajec (2020) who stresses that intercultural education is most effective when integrated across all disciplines, enabling a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of its numerous nuances.

In particular, it can be concluded that the topics discussed within the intervention importantly enhanced students' understanding of intercultural dialogue's value in establishing an inclusive society. This was evidenced by the students' self-reports regarding their abilities to explain their own culture, discuss cultural prejudices and stereotypes. This aligns with postulates presented in the *White paper on intercultural dialogue* (2008), which regard intercultural dialogue as crucial in combating prejudice and stereotypes, preventing marginalization, and fostering integration and social cohesion. The findings are also consistent with research conducted by Lemut Bajec (2022) among upper-secondary students, which underscores the development of a multicultural identity through fostering intercultural dialogue and developing recognition and appreciation of the specifics of one's own and other cultures.

Furthermore, drawing from the results, the intervention substantially improved students' skills. Their self-reports demonstrated enhanced abilities in critically analysing culturally-driven misunderstandings and explaining the impact of cultural diversity on social situations. This outcome underscores the vital role of intercultural education in strengthening an individual's cultural identity and fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of others in a world marked by constant exposure to diverse cultures (Leo, 2010; Pižorn et al., 2022).

The findings also suggest that students developed a critical approach to learning, enabling them to recognize various strategies to improve their educational experience, set learning goals, and reflect on their learning process. This is consistent with several studies conducted among tertiary students (Gonzales Rodriguez & Puyal, 2012; Spies, 2012; Zhyrun, 2016) which show that learners link interactive

teaching strategies (e.g., teaching intercultural competence through literary texts, creative tasks, reflective essays, multimodal text analysis, project work assignments, problem-based tasks) with a heightened understanding of the world around them, thereby meeting the goals of intercultural education, which aims to prepare learners for participatory citizenship and educates them in understanding and appreciating diversity (Beacco et al., 2016; Tibaut & Lipavic Oštir, 2021).

On the other hand, despite the carefully designed intervention, it is evident that some students struggled to understand, potentially even declined to inform themselves about the reasons behind certain social practices observed in cultures, insisting on their opinions and judgements. This observation highlights the notion that cultures are complex and challenging to fully comprehend. While visible aspects like language, art, attire, and cuisine are easy to notice, there is a substantial subconscious realm encompassing deeply ingrained concepts resistant to change (Huber, 2012). Additionally, as underscored by Jokikokko (2021) there might be institutional racism, discrimination, lack of intercultural competence among students and staff, as well as difficulties in acknowledging intercultural perspectives in curricula and pedagogy. These factors impede the development of truly equitable intercultural education, preventing the formation of learning communities where interculturalism is the norm.

Conclusion

Intercultural education is essential in today's culturally and linguistically diverse world (Bratož et al., 2022). It aims to develop individuals who are interculturally competent, capable of understanding and navigating cultural diversity. The study involving a group of tertiary-level students highlighted the benefits of intercultural education, promoting a critical approach to learning about and understanding the role of culture in intercultural relations. It positively influenced students' attitudes and skills regarding intercultural competence. Overall, it appears that intercultural education importantly resonated with students' lives. The study also highlighted the importance of instructional modes, forcing educators to carefully consider ways of delivering intercultural topics.

However, despite a carefully prepared and executed intervention, the will to construct informed knowledge, withhold judgement, and understand specific cultural norms and practices remains limited. This finding underscores the importance of recognizing the limitations of the education system and calls for the

understanding that educational interventions must be part of larger efforts to achieve lasting progress.

The main limitation of this study is its non-representative sample. Nonetheless, the study could serve as a valuable pilot study and starting point for future research with a larger cohort or for monitoring students' progress in a selected set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge of intercultural competence over their academic years. Additionally, a future study involving a culturally and linguistically homogenous group could provide comparative results, or one involving students from other disciplines. Lastly, adopting a cross-curricular approach through an integrative curriculum offers another opportunity to explore the development of intercultural competencies at the tertiary level.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2015). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Routledge.
- Barret, M., Byram, M., Ippgrave, J., Jackson, R., & Méndez García, M. (2009). *Autobiography of intercultural encounters*. Council of Europe.
- Beacco, J. C., Byram, M., Cavalli, M., Coste, D., Cuenat, E., M., Goullier, F., & Panthier, J. (2016). *Guide for the development and implementation of curricula for plurilingual and intercultural education*. Council of Europe.
- Bratož, S., Štemberger, T., & Pirih, A. (2022). Slovenian children's perceptions of and attitudes towards foreign languages. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 1–18.
- Candelier, M. (Ed). (2013). *Frepa: A framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and culture; competences and resources*. Council of Europe.
- Council of Europe. (2001a). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2001b). *European language portfolio (ELP): Principles and guidelines*.
- Council of Europe. (2008). *White paper on intercultural dialogue – Living together as equals in dignity*.
- Council of Europe. (2018a). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture. Volume 1. Context, concepts and model*.
- Council of Europe. (2018b). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*.
- Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*.
- Council of Europe. (2023). *Manual for the design of a training course on intercultural competence Part 1 – The core principles of the Council of Europe intercultural integration model*.
- Čok, L. (2008). Medkulturna vzgoja kot družbena vrednota in osebnostna rast [Intercultural education as a social value and personal growth]. In M. Ivšek (Ed.), *Jeziški v izobraževanju* [Languages in education] (pp. 71–76). Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo.
- Dervin, F., & Jacobsson, A. (2021a). Teaching about interculturality. In F. Dervin & A. Jacobsson (Eds.), *Teacher education for critical and reflexive interculturality* (pp. 41–49). Springer International Publishing.
- Dervin, F., & Jacobsson, A. (2021b). What to do with our intercultural experiences? In F. Dervin & A. Jacobsson (Eds.), *Teacher education for critical and reflexive interculturality* (pp. 51–55). Springer International Publishing.
- Eržen, V., Budihna, A., Kogoj, B., Klopučar, B., Zupanc Brečko, I., Pižorn, K., & Pevec Semec, K. (2008). *Učni načrt. Angleščina gimnazija: splošna, klasična, strokovna gimnazija : obvezni ali izbirni*

- predmet in matura*. [Curriculum. English upper-secondary school]. Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport : Zavod RS za šolstvo.
- Ferligoj, A., Leskošek, K., & Kogovšek, T. (1995). *Zanesljivost in veljavnost merjenja* [Reliability and validity of measurement]. Fakulteta za družbene vede.
- Gonzalez Rodriguez, L. M., & Borham Puyal, M. (2012). Promoting Intercultural Competence through Literature in CLIL Contexts. *Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 34(2), 105–124.
- Huber, J. (Ed.) (2012). *Intercultural competence for all: preparation for living in a heterogeneous world*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Jokikokko, K. (2021). Challenges and possibilities for creating genuinely intercultural higher education learning communities. *Journal of Praxis in Higher Education*, 3(2), 26–51.
- Kordeš, U., & Smrdur, M. (2015). *Osnove kvalitativnega raziskovanja* [The basics of qualitative research]. Založba Univerze na Primorskem.
- Lemut Bajec M. (2020). Suitability of Coursebook Materials for Teaching English Through CLIL. In S. Bratož, A. Pirih in A. Kocbek (Eds.), *Pathways to Plurilingual Education* (pp. 267–286). University of Primorska Press.
- Lemut Bejac, M. (2022). *Pristop CLIL skozi vsebine kulturne dediščine v splošni gimnaziji* [doktorska disertacija, UP] [CLIL approach through cultural heritage content in a general upper secondary school, Doctoral thesis, University of Primorska]. RUP: dLib.si. Retrieved from <https://repozitorij.upr.si/IzpisGradiva.php?id=17905&lang=slv> [2024, June 20]
- Leo, de J. (2010). *Reorienting teacher education to address sustainable development: guidelines and tools education for intercultural understanding*. UNESCO Office Bangkok.
- Obilišteanu, G., & Niculescu, B. O. (2018). Intercultural competence in teaching and learning foreign languages. *Knowledge-Based Organization*, 24(2), 345–350.
- Pižorn, K., Oštir, A. L., & Žmavc, J. (2022). Obrazi več-/in raznojezičnosti The faces of multi-/plurilingualism. *Obrazi več-/raznojezičnosti*. Pedagoški inštitut.
- Petrenko, O. V., Andriushchenko, I. E., Truba, H. M., Shcherbytska, V. V., & Syniavska, L. I. (2020). Special features of foreign-languages teaching at higher education institution. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(7), 298–302.
- Sandars, J. (2021). Case study research. In M. Akman, V. Wass, & F. Goodyear-Smith (Eds.), *How to do primary care educational research* (pp. 121–124). CRC Press.
- Spies, K. (2012). Intercultural studies within a CLIL approach. *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, 5(1), 55–45
- Stan, S. (2020). Multiculturality and interculturality in the educational system. *Education*, 21(19), 148–153.
- Strasser, M., & Reissner, C. (2022). Plurilingual and pluricultural competence. *Aila Review*, 35(1), 38–59.
- Tibaut K., & Lipavic Oštir A. (2021). »Jaz sem 16 % Madžar in 50 % Slovenec in 80 % Anglež.« Jezikovni portreti petošolcev na narodnostno mešanih območjih. [I'm 16% Hungarian, 50% Slovenian and 80% English." Language portraits of fifth-graders in ethnically mixed areas]. *Journal of Elementary Education*, 14(2), 217-238.
- UNESCO. (2006). *UNESCO Guidelines on intercultural education*.
- Vogrinc, J. (2008). *Kvalitativno raziskovanje na pedagoškem področju* [Qualitative research in education]. Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Welikala, T. (2021). Self, other and interculturality: An epistemic shift towards intersensoriality. In M. Kumar & T. Welikala (Eds.), *Teaching and learning in higher education: the context of being, interculturality and new knowledge systems* (pp. 171–182). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Yue, J., & Ning, P. (2015). The cultivation of critical thinking skills in intercultural communication course. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11(3), 47–51.
- Zhyrun, I. (2016). Culture through Comparison: Creating Audio-visual Listening Materials for a CLIL Course. *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, 9(2), 345–373.

Appendix 1: A QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STUDENTS

Dear student!

You are kindly asked to fill out the questionnaire as sincerely and comprehensively as possible. The questionnaire checks if any significant changes have happened in the level of your intercultural knowledge, skills, and competences. Participation in the study is voluntary. All responses are anonymous. They will be used for research purposes only. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

*This questionnaire was formed with the help of the document *Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures* (FREPA) (Candelier, 2013).

Age: _____ Gender: _____ Nationality: _____ Study programme: _____

1. **Read the following statements and indicate the number that best relates to you.**
1 – I have no knowledge at all of the mentioned topics.; 2 – I have insufficient knowledge to answer that statement correctly.; 3 – I feel it's true but cannot provide evidence.; 4 – I know it's true but would struggle to provide evidence.; 5 – I know it's true and can easily provide evidence for the statement.
 - I feel that I can take a critical distance from information and opinions produced by media about my own community.
 - I feel that I can take a critical distance from information and opinions produced by media about other communities
 - I feel that I can take a critical attitude to the values and norms of others.
 - I feel that I have a critical attitude to the use of language as an instrument of manipulation.
 - I feel that I have a critical attitude in respect of the socio-political aspects linked to the functions and statuses of languages.

2. **Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true.** Consider the following scale of measurement: *1 - not true at all; 2 - not true; 3 - neither true nor false; 4 - mostly true; 5 - completely true*
 - I'm willing to take complexity into account.
 - I'm willing to avoid generalisations
 - I'm inclined to look at my own language from the outside.
 - I'm attentive to my own negative reactions towards cultural or linguistic differences {fears, contempt, disgust, superiority ...}.
 - I am ready to discard my prejudices about the languages of migrant learners.
 - I'm familiar with the stereotypes other cultures have about my own culture.
 - I'm familiar with the origin of cultural stereotypes.
 - Culture influences particular ways in which each language expresses the world.
 - I'm familiar with some cultural elements which we have borrowed from others, as well as the history of these elements.

3. **Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true.** Consider the following scale of measurement: *1 - not true at all; 2 - not true; 3 - neither true nor false; 4 - mostly true; 5 - completely true*
 - I can recognise cultural prejudice.
 - I can recognise specific forms of behaviour linked to cultural differences.
 - I can recognise the risks of misunderstanding due to differences between communicative cultures.
 - I can analyse misunderstandings due to cultural differences.
 - I can analyse the cultural origins of certain behaviours.
 - I can analyse specific social phenomena as being the consequence of cultural differences.
 - I can perceive differences or similarities in different aspects of social life {living conditions, working life, participation in activities of charities, respect for the environment ...}.
 - I can compare different cultural practices.
 - I can explain to foreigners certain features of my own culture.
 - I can talk about cultural prejudices.

4. **Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true.** Consider the following scale of measurement: 1 - *not true at all*; 2 - *not true*; 3 - *neither true nor false*; 4 - *mostly true*; 5 - *completely true*.
- I can take a critical stance towards my own learning.
 - I can use different strategies to enhance my learning.
 - I can identify my own learning objectives.
 - I can critically observe my own learning process.
 - I have sufficient knowledge about cultural diversity {advantages, disadvantages, difficulties ...}.
 - I have my own reasoned opinion about cultural diversity.
 - Some of the cultural norms may constitute taboos.
 - Certain social practices in each culture are arbitrary.
5. **What are your thoughts on intercultural education (learning about different cultures)? Please base your answers on your own experiences as obtained in this study.**
-
-

6. **Tick 5 of the ways you consider most effective, most beneficial for studying intercultural education?**
- debating upon factual material
 - having guests from other institutions
 - reading materials
 - pair/group work
 - writing a seminar paper
 - ex-cathedra lecture
 - making a presentation
 - interdisciplinary teaching
 - project work
 - fieldwork

Author:

Melita Lemut Bajec, PhD

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities, University of Primorska, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenia,
e-mail: melita.lemut.bajec@fhs.upr.si

Docentka, Fakulteta za humanistične študije, Univerza na Primorskem, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, e-pošta: melita.lemut.bajec@fhs.upr.si