



ONE STEP AHEAD: Language students and graduates on the way to successful careers

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the concept underlying an innovative employability module: *Crafting Employability Strategies for HE Students of Languages in Europe* (2015) and to supply it with theoretical background. The focus is put on one of the workshops dealing with intercultural problems: *One Step Ahead: Intercultural awareness and residence abroad* (Workshop J; CES & L, 2015, p. 136-162) – its concept, theoretical sources, methodology, and potential. All workshops in the publication are developed by adopting constructivist and experiential approach inspired by D. A. Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). The activities in the workshop in question are based on three models of culture: Iceberg Model of Culture (Brake et al., 1995); Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (1993) and Intercultural Competence Model (Deardorff, 2006). An important aspect is the application of G. Hofstede’s Theory of Cultural Dimensions (2001). The results of the testing undoubtedly proved that the module meets language students’ and graduates’ expectations / needs with regard to employability training and development. The paper shows how the discussed workshop puts the learners one step ahead in the multicultural job market by broadening their cognitive perspectives in terms of overcoming prejudices and dealing with stereotypes; moving through different stages from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism and developing cultural sensitivity and empathy toward people from other cultures.

Keywords: HE students in languages, learner’s cognitive processes, intercultural competence, pro-active career choices, employability

Introduction

Current trends in education, including higher education, put a new accent on the academic curricula and learning outcomes. Today more than ever requirements are focused on preparing graduates for the increasingly competitive job market. To that end, universities are seeking effective ways and developing new strategies in order to optimize the educational process and meet the expectations of business and society. In this quest, academe joins efforts with government agencies, non-profit bodies (NGOs) and commerce organizations.

A good and inspiring example of this trend is the result of the 2-year international project *Crafting Employability Strategies for HE³ Students of Languages in Europe (CES & L)* funded by the European Union Program Erasmus+ (KA2 – Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices; Strategic Partnerships for higher education) in which the University of Plovdiv “Paisii Hilendarski”, Bulgaria, was a partner. The publication under the above-mentioned name was finalized in 2015. The aim of the project was to develop further the existing employability module “Crafting the present for future employability” originally created by AHECS (Association of Higher Education Career Services in Ireland), adapt it for language students and graduates and transfer the material into numerous EU

³ Abbreviation for *Higher Education*.

languages. It focuses on raising awareness of these target groups about the wide range of opportunities open to them (since they often don't know what set of competences employers are interested in and how valuable their skills are for the employers). Another important goal was seeking effective ways to optimize the possibilities open to students in languages so that they discover new practices of gaining control of their own successful future by making pro-active career choices.

The module is a new employability resource consisting of **10 workshops** (available in English as well as in Bulgarian, German, Italian, and Polish). 8 workshops from the original module were adopted for the relevant target groups by Holger Bienzle (die Berater Unternehmensberatungs GmbH) and Dave Kilmartin (Dublin Institute of Technology – AHECS). In addition to that, 2 new workshops were developed that the partnership thought were of great significance for modern language students and/or graduates (these are focused on entrepreneurship and developing specific set of skills that are vital in the new world we live in, namely – intercultural competence). The module has a potential to be implemented into the academic curriculum or taught independently as a (part of) qualification course. The structure is flexible and allows each workshop to be delivered as stand-alone or as a series of sessions.

The **purpose of this paper** is to offer an overview of the concept underlying the module and to supply it with theoretical background thus justifying the scholarly-based approach of this teaching material. The focus will be put on one of the workshops that deals with intercultural problems, developed by the author of the paper (in collaboration with Dr. Kristin Brogan from the Institute of Technology, Tralee, Ireland): *One Step Ahead: Intercultural Awareness and Residence Abroad* (Workshop J; CES & L, 2015, p. 136-162) – its concept, theoretical sources, and methodology. My goal will be to discuss the adequacy and the potential of offering the module and this particular workshop to language students against the theoretical frameworks used to build the units and against the analysis of the results from their testing / piloting.

It is common knowledge that today's workplace is becoming more culturally diverse. In the context of the increased demand of employers and recruiters for candidates who not only possess the necessary hard skills but can also offer a wide range of soft skills, the ability to work in multicultural environment is highly valued and sought for – both globally and within the EU. In 2012, a massive survey of HR managers at 367 large employers in nine countries around the world, conducted by the British Council, Ipsos Public Affairs and Booz Allen Hamilton, undoubtedly confirmed: “[...] employers say that they are looking for candidates who can navigate a workplace that transcends national and cultural borders” (Culture at Work, 2013, p. 4). Employers value intercultural skills even more than hard skills because the former provides efficiency of the team work, brings in new clients, builds trust and improves brand reputation. While serious risks have been identified in cases when workers lack those skills, most employers report that they are not satisfied with their national education system's ability to develop strong intercultural skills in graduates (ibid., p. 19).

The same holds true for language graduates. While the importance of developing intercultural competence and yet insufficient attention to culture in foreign language teaching has been determined long ago and reminded about multiple times in studies over the years (e.g. Mughanq 1999; Atay et al. 2009; Bickley, Rossister, and Abbott, 2014, to name just a few sources), university curricula (including those at the University of Plovdiv) still mostly focus on theoretical courses and explaining models rather than *applying* them in practice. Unlike that, the workshop offers ways for application of established reputable models aimed at providing the desired knowledge and developing this vital competence.

Focusing on culture and seeking effective ways for educating European citizens in this field is fully in line with current EU policies. Culture and learning are perceived as drivers for the much-sought unity in our mobile and multicultural society (Future of Europe, 2017). Promoting culture and cultural

diversity in *all* EU policies is considered one of the initiatives with a 2025 perspective (Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture, 2017: 3). Encouraging solidarity and intercultural understanding is part of EU Commission's *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030* (2019) plan: "A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity" (p. 53).

Theoretical framework

The paper has a few up-to-date theoretical pillars.

For the most general context, it adopts the **constructivist and experiential approach** inspired by D. A. Kolb's (1984) **Experiential Learning Theory** (ELT). Not only is this theory popular today, but also has undergone many revisions and improvements (to the best of my knowledge, based on available information, the latest revision was offered in 2011, see Kolb & Kolb 2011) which accumulate more and more data from thousands of respondents proving the validity of its core idea: "Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41)⁴. Based on the main idea of the theory about different learning styles (they vary from four in earlier versions to nine in the latest version) – with different approaches prevailing: more sensitive and emotional, or intuitive, or logical, etc., the module in question offers exercises aimed at developing each of the learning styles. This way, it has a potential to contribute to strengthening the weaker or less preferred learning styles of the students and consequently, to more effective learning.

The design of each workshop is influenced by the **concept mapping** technique (CMT) – integrating and connecting new knowledge to the existing one (Amundsen, Saroyan and Donald, 2004), which highlights the relationships among concepts and allows to see the workshop as a whole. This approach is fully in line with the previously mentioned theory. It considers existing knowledge as basis for building new one by creating clusters, organizing data, finding links between concepts, etc. My own teaching experience over the years has undoubtedly proven that students succeed much better in learning when they understand relationships between concepts and build upon already possessed knowledge.

Workshop J aims to raise participants' awareness of the importance of **intercultural competence (ICC)** in any aspect of their activities which can make them more competitive on the job market. In building it we followed the above-mentioned general methodological principles (ELT and CMT). The workshop takes on board the definitions of **culture** provided by one of the most influential researchers in the field: cultural anthropologist Edward Tylor, psychologist Edgar Shein, social psychologist Geert Hofstede. The activities in the workshop are based on three models of culture: **Iceberg Model of Culture** (Brake et al., 1995); Bennett's **Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity** (DMIS) (1993) and **Intercultural Competence Model** (Deardorff, 2006). An important aspect is the application of G. Hofstede's **Theory of Cultural Dimensions** (2001).

⁴ Unlike another framework that has lately drawn the attention of numerous educators and researchers (because it conveniently justifies their obsession with *competence* and marginalization of Knowledge) – Bloom's taxonomy of learning (Bloom ed. 1956), this theory is based on the constructivist's (such as Piaget and Vygotsky) ideas about creating knowledge on the basis of previous experience. I entirely support understanding of knowledge not only as a factual entity; instead, it includes "organization of these facts and ideas in a conceptual framework and the ability to retrieve knowledge for application and transfer to different contexts" (Kolb & Kolb 2011: 22); see also my arguments in Chakarova 2018. It's promising that more researchers noticed the weak aspects of Bloom's taxonomy, including its revised version (Berger 2018).

Structure of Workshop J

Intercultural Communication and Residence Abroad (125 mins & 145 mins)

The workshop is planned as two sessions (that could be divided into sub-sessions) and could be delivered as half-a-day seminar or series of classes. It includes 6 exercises, each supported with Information sheets, Activity sheets and numerous links to sources for further reading. As all other workshops, it starts with a 15-minute Introduction (Introduce Self and Session) and ends with a 15-minute Debrief.

Exercise 1 (Culture, workplace culture, intercultural communication) (30 mins) sets the context by focusing on *definitions on culture* and the concept of *intercultural communication*. After asking students to offer their own definition of culture and come up with a definition in the whole group (for that, Activity Sheet J1 is provided), definitions by well known researchers and practitioners, such as E. Tylor (1920), E. Shein (1985 / 1992), and G. Hofstede (1991); some highlights of Workspace culture, adopted from A. Koosner, Intercultural communication (Kramsch, 1998; Bennett, 1997) (all of that provided in Information Sheet J1); and Intercultural Communication skills (with explanations provided in Information Sheet J2) are discussed. A fresh contemporary approach of introducing IC to learners is offered by an alternative: students can test their own ICC online (links are provided) and discuss the results. The conclusion is focusing on the importance of intercultural competence at today's workplace.

Exercise 2 (Cultural Model: The Iceberg) (40 mins) introduces one of the most popular models of culture – the *Iceberg Model*⁵. Students are presented with a picture of blank iceberg and asked to complete it by listing the two types of cultural aspects in the two fields – those we are conscious about, or visible (above the waterline) and those we are unconscious about, or invisible, but presented in our behavior and worldviews (under the waterline)⁶. Again, the focus of discussion is placed on how each of the aspects is important when working/studying abroad and/or working in multicultural teams.

Exercise 3 (Stereotypes) (40 mins) is planned to provide some basic information about the concept (available for the teacher in Facilitator notes), after which it offers reflection on important issues such as: what stereotypes are more common and well known; why can stereotypes have a negative impact and how might they have a positive one; how do other people perceive your cultural background when abroad; learners' experience of dealing with stereotypes and why is this relevant to ICC.

Exercise 4 (Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism) (50 mins) concentrates on providing a brief overview of M. Bennett's DMIS (1993) both by teachers explanation (information provided in Facilitator notes) and a 9.51 mins YouTube video⁷ that can be played in class (Information Sheet J3 provides a transcript to the video). Participants are asked to jot down the stages while watching it, after which a discussion is offered. Its main goal is to help students realize their own stage. An important aspect is discussing it in the light of the current immigrant situation. The exercise offers an additional

⁵ The Cultural Iceberg Model offered in Brake et al (1995: 34-39) is based on E. Hall's concept *Triad of Culture* (1959). This correspondence is clearly shown in Katan, 1999/2004: 43). The verbal explanations from these sources have been adapted to visual models throughout the years and widely used (e.g. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/338966309443686584/>, <https://culturalconflict.wordpress.com/2013/11/09/what-is-culture-and-how-is-it-defined/>, both accessed on 03.10.2019). Unfortunately, the source cited in Facilitator notes of the workshop with brief explanation of the idea is no longer available. Its content could now be found here:

https://www.spps.org/cms/lib/MN01910242/Centricity/Domain/125/iceberg_model_3.pdf (accessed on 03.10.2019).

⁶ Both graphics are adapted from *PluriMobile teaching resources* provided by the European Center for Modern Languages at the Council of Europe, Lesson Plan 1 for Vocational Upper Secondary School (The Visible, the less visible, the invisible, pp. 4-10): https://plurimobil.ecml.at/Portals/37/LP_UPPER%20SECONDARY%20VOCATIONAL%20%20FINAL.pdf, pp. 8-9 (accessed on 03.10.2019).

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vKRFH2Wm6Y> (accessed on 03.10.2019).

Activity Sheet J4 with different statements/attitudes toward culture. Learners are asked to match them to one of the six stages (their titles could be written on posters and put around the classroom; to make the exercise more interactive, students are asked to physically approach the stage they think certain statement refers to).

Exercise 5 (Cultural dimensions) (40 mins) is devoted to the notable theory by the same name introduced by the famous Dutch anthropologist G. Hofstede (2001). The theory gained a lot of popularity because it provides a systematic framework for orientation across various cultures and assessing the differences between cultures (in terms of their worldview, values and beliefs). Information Sheet J4 is provided – it gives a brief overview of the idea and the six dimensions. Activity Sheet J5 raises awareness of self and the other in a multicultural team by asking the participants to indicate certain behavior (such as conforming to group decisions, decision making power of the leader of the group, long vs. short term objectives, etc.).

Exercise 6 (Working & studying abroad) (40 mins) goes deeper into the elements of intercultural competence by introducing D. Deardorff's *Process Model/Framework of Intercultural Competence* (2006). Participants are first asked to reflect on aspects of ICC and then to compare them to the model for a fuller picture. It's important to underline the idea of the model that ICC is a lifelong process. The goal is to show how vital this competence is when working/studying abroad. The exercise also offers two short tests on non-verbal communication (Activity Sheet J7) that can be done in class or as self study.

Findings

Findings of the Needs Analysis

In order to decide the strategy for enlarging and adapting the AHECS module a needs analysis was carried out in all of the partner countries in Spring of 2016⁸. A total of 117 participants took part in it and provided valuable ideas and suggestions. Along with showing similarities, the needs analysis also revealed some differences from country to country that informed the localization process.

According to the answers, English, German, French and Spanish (listed by importance) are the most required foreign languages by recruiters and business owners across Europe.

One very important finding was that soft skills are regarded by employers as equally if not even more important than hard skills. This fact is still highly underestimated by both teachers and students including our target field – intercultural competence. Another relevant finding that sounds quite encouraging is the expectation of key actors in the field – employers and recruiters – for a rise in job position suited for language graduates.

Findings of the piloting/testing phase

The workshops were tested in all of the partner countries with the relevant target groups: teachers in foreign languages, HE students in languages, language graduates – already successful in their careers or still looking for the right job position, policy makers in HE institutions, etc. A total of about 100 replies were received. The overall impression of the respondents was very good. The highlights are as follows:

⁸ Results available for downloading on the opening page of CES&L.

Nearly 80% of the respondents rated the overall workshop program as “very positive” and “excellent”; they provided input that the skills the certain workshop was aiming at developing were relevant and that they would recommend the workshop to others.

About 93% agreed (“strongly” or “somewhat strongly”) that the outcomes in workshops were clearly stated and met.

96 to 100% of students confirmed that they would be interested in a follow-up workshop.

Highlights of the findings regarding Workshop J

All of the answers were in the first two fields of the positive statements about relevance, usefulness, effectiveness of the workshop, etc.: “strongly agree” or “somewhat strongly agree”.

Nearly 80% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that the workshop was consistent with the description.

Almost 96% strongly agreed that information and/or skills presented were relevant.

75% strongly supported the statement that information and/or skills presented were useful.

Over 52% strongly agreed and over 45% somewhat agreed that they would recommend the workshop to others.

Although this workshop is longer than the others in the module (the authors thought that “one cannot cover the theme of ICC in a shorter session if the content should remain meaningful” (CES&L, the page of Workshop J), over 62% of the participants thought that it is the right length.

Over 45% of the respondents answered that the program overall was excellent, and over 54% answered that it was very good.

50% of the participants thought that the structure was excellent, and over 45% thought that it was very good.

Things in the workshop that participants mostly appreciated/enjoyed: examples of similarities and differences in business and workers needs and actions; group discussions; development of empathy; focus on different concepts of time, different stereotypes and values, and different stages of sensitivity to the other culture environment; sharing the Working and studying abroad experience; and the Iceberg model.

To the question: Were your personal learning goals for the workshop met, they answered: Strongly yes.

Some of the most relevant suggestions were included in the publication’s introduction and in the introduction of each workshop as notes to the facilitator.

Specific tips for Workshop J: it’s important to share individual experience and examples of good practices; our respondents mostly appreciated applied approach to intercultural issues.

All of the findings give clear indication that the developed module was adequate and would be useful for language students with its strong theoretical base and practical application.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper offers an overview of the AHECS employability module adapted for language students and graduates and localized into Bulgarian, German, Italian, and Polish. Providing theoretical framework for the whole module, the study focuses on Workshop J developed by the author in collaboration with Dr. Kristin Brogan, Institute of Technology, Tralee, Ireland. The workshop aims at raising intercultural awareness through building upon the most popular theories in the field. Offered exercises have practical orientation.

The above-described results prove that the adapted module meets language students’ and graduates’ expectations / needs with regard to employability training and development.

The idea that language and culture are deeply entwined is centuries-old and became explicit again with the establishment of the new – poststructuralist, anthropological paradigm of humanities. However, its implications – during the process of foreign language teaching – usually don't go further than teaching/learning some facts about the foreign culture rather than focusing learners attention on understanding it and being tolerant about it and its members. This is extremely important in the context of the European union where by definition tens of languages and cultures coexist.

The common knowledge that culture matters turns out to be only the first step to successful and effective relationships in intercultural environment. Workshop J provides the much-needed further steps for broadening learners' cognitive perspectives: overcoming prejudices and dealing with stereotypes; moving through different stages from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism and developing cultural sensitivity and empathy toward people from other cultures – all of this plays a vital role in the globalized world we live in.

Realizing their own strengths and paying adequate attention to developing the needed soft skills would empower language graduates to take control and make well informed career decisions.

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